

# KNOWING GOD THROUGH ACTS

Change. Sometimes it's good. Sometimes it's bad. Unfortunately, the bad kind of change is often easier. It follows the path of our natural instincts. Good change, however, forces us to rise above our own desires.

It is the story of good change that is recorded in the book of Acts. Following the spiritual deterioration of Israel, God gave birth to a new entity called the church. Its purpose: to bring people of all nations to a knowledge of God through Christ. Its challenge: to grow from infancy to maturity.

It is our prayer that this booklet written by Herb Vander Lugt will lead you to a new knowledge of this God who reveals Himself through the early history of His church in the book of Acts. *Martin R. De Haan II*

<b>A Well-Researched Record Of God's New People .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>A New Name For God's People .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chart Of The Book Of Acts .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Ongoing Events Of God's New Program .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Its Birth .....	7
Its Childhood .....	13
Its Adolescence .....	15
Its Young Adulthood .....	21
<b>Maps Of Paul's Missionary Journeys .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>The Miracles Of God In Acts .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Parallels Of Peter And Paul: God's Sovereignty .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Reception Of God's Holy Spirit In Acts .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>The Story Goes On .....</b>	<b>32</b>

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# A WELL-RESEARCHED RECORD OF GOD'S NEW PEOPLE

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In 1963, when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, the public was barraged with rumors, gossip, hearsay, and opinions. So the Warren Commission was appointed to investigate and report its findings. They produced a well-researched written record that answered key questions, putting to rest many of the wild rumors that were floating around at the time.

Following a sensational event, word-of-mouth reports often become distorted and exaggerated. Rumors begin, and opinion becomes confused with fact. That's why there's a need for a well-investigated, carefully documented report.

The book of Acts is just that kind of document. The story about God's arrival on earth in the person of His Son and His life, death, and resurrection had been circulated by word of mouth for about 30 years. Thousands had believed these reports, responded to the good news of Christ, and found salvation. Early believers wanted everybody to know the good news. They talked about Christ wherever they went. And they met together in the temple and in house groups to support one another in their new knowledge of God.

At some point it became clear that someone needed to compile a written history of what God had been doing through His people since Christ returned to heaven. Because God was still confirming the message of the apostles with supernatural signs and miracles, and because the emphasis was shifting from Israel to a coalition of Jewish and Gentile believers in

Christ, there was a need to document these events and transitions.

Luke was led by the Holy Spirit to undertake such an effort. In the opening words of the book we now call *The Acts of the Apostles*, he told his friend Theophilus that he was writing a continuation of what he had started in his gospel. Acts is the story of what the risen and exalted Christ continued to do through His people during the first 30 years of church history.

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**“The book of Acts is far more than church history. It is a record of God’s plan to call people of all nations to Himself.”**

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Sir William Ramsay, a respected authority on Asia Minor, found Acts to be an accurate, detailed, reliable historical document. He came to this conclusion reluctantly. When he began his study, he saw Acts as “a highly imaginative and carefully colored account of primitive Christianity.” But he changed his mind. This is recorded in his book *The Bearing Of Recent Discovery On The Trustworthiness Of The New Testament*.

The book of Acts, however, is far more than a valuable historical document. It is a record of the unfolding of God’s plan to bring people of all nations to Himself. It enables us to understand how the early believers made the transition from Judaism to Christianity, from a primarily Jewish constituency to a Gentile one, and from an expectation that Jesus would return very soon to the realization that His coming could be much later. The book of Acts therefore sets the stage for the epistles that follow it in the New Testament.

# A NEW NAME FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

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As God began doing something new, the way His people referred to themselves also began to change. They no longer saw themselves merely in terms of their national origins. Now, both Jew and Gentile locked arms and hearts in the form of a bold new coalition of believers in Jesus Christ. Before long they were known as “Christians.” They met together in homes, and they were called the “church.”

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**“The church was the ultimate support group—sinners helping one another in the knowledge of God.”**

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Why “church”? The word came from the Greek word *ecclesia* meaning “called-out group or assembly.” It was an appropriate word. This church was not “a building” as we often refer to it today. Neither was it “a program.” Rather, the church was made up of all individuals called out from all nations to come together in the name and mission of Christ. In one sense, the word *church* came to be used of local, regional assemblies. In another sense, it referred to the called-out body of all believers in Christ, whether in heaven or on earth.

The church was the ultimate support group—sinners helping one another in the knowledge and Spirit of God. It was the body of Christ on earth, a physical and spiritual organism, a people separated to God for the purpose of showing the love of Christ to the world. The book of Acts presents the story of this church.

# CHART OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

<b>BIRTH OF THE CHURCH</b>	<b>GROWTH OF THE CHURCH</b>	<b>SCATTERING OF THE CHURCH</b>	<b>EXTENSION OF THE CHURCH</b>	<b>PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY</b>	<b>PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY</b>	<b>PAUL'S THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY</b>	<b>PAUL'S ARREST IN JERUSALEM</b>	<b>PAUL'S TRIALS IN CAESAREA</b>	<b>PAUL'S ARRIVAL IN ROME</b>
1	3 2	8 7	10 9 12	13 15:35	15:36 18:22	18:23 21:26	21:27 23	24 26	27 28
<b>Triumph</b>		<b>Transition</b>		<b>Travels</b>			<b>Trials</b>		
<b>Witnessing in the City</b>		<b>Witnessing in the Provinces</b>		<b>Witnessing in the World</b>					
<b>Jews</b>		<b>Jews &amp; Samaritans</b>		<b>Gentiles</b>					
<b>Peter</b>		<b>Philip, Peter, Paul</b>		<b>Paul</b>					
<b>Jerusalem</b>		<b>Judea &amp; Samaria</b>		<b>All the World</b>					
<b>2 Years (AD 30-32)</b>		<b>14 Years (AD 32-47)</b>		<b>14 Years (AD 47-61)</b>					

**“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).**

# THE ONGOING EVENTS OF GOD'S NEW PROGRAM

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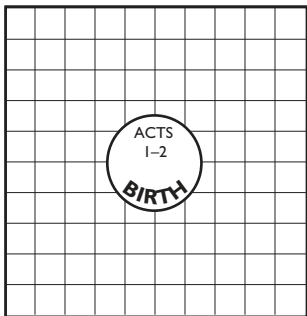
The book of Acts is the record of the ongoing life of Christ. The Son of God had died. He had been buried. But He had risen from the grave. He had appeared to His disciples—not once, not twice, but repeatedly. He had even taught them truths about His kingdom, although they wouldn't understand some elements about it until later. They were somewhat bewildered by the turn of events, but they were absolutely sure about some things. Christ had conquered death and had reconciled them to God. And just before ascending to heaven, He had promised He would send the Holy Spirit to guide and empower them in their mission of leading people of all nations to the same life-saving knowledge of God that they had found in Him.

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**“Through the supernatural events of Pentecost, the first Christians came to know their God as a powerful, indwelling Spirit.”**

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On the tenth day after Jesus' public ascension, about 120 of His followers were together in a room near the temple. The day began as the Jewish harvest festival called Pentecost. Thousands of Jews had gathered to celebrate it. The followers of Jesus expected to participate in the festivities, but their plans changed. Suddenly it happened! The Holy Spirit came to form the church. It was born on that day, and during the next 30 years it grew all the way from infancy to adulthood.



## THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH (ACTS 2)

The church was probably born in late May of AD 30. The birth took place in Jerusalem, where thousands of people witnessed “the delivery.” It was a spectacular event, marked by supernatural signs, a powerful sermon, and an

overwhelming response.

**A Supernatural Event (2:1-13).** As the disciples were waiting and praying, they suddenly became aware of a Presence. It was eerie, almost frightening. We read:

*When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).*

Sound like wind! Tongues like fire! Miraculous speech! Exciting? Yes indeed! Can we reproduce it today? No, we can't. This combination of miraculous signs was a once-for-all occurrence. Each outward phenomenon, however, has lasting significance for all who have come to know God.

The *sound of the wind* symbolized the mysterious presence of the Holy Spirit, whose coming and going is like the wind which can be felt but not explained.

He came in fulfillment of the promise made by John the Baptist (Mt. 3:11) and by Jesus (Acts 1:4-5) that the disciples would be baptized into one body—the baptism which all believers now experience at the moment of their salvation (1 Cor. 12:13-14).

The *tongues of fire* symbolized the purifying and cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. Through His indwelling and infilling, He gives them power for godly living and effective witnessing (Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 5:18-21; 1 Cor. 6:19).

The *miraculous speech* symbolized the worldwide flow of the gospel from Jerusalem to people of every language group, breaking down all previous barriers (Gal. 3:28-29).

**A Powerful Sermon (2:14-39).** Pentecost not only featured three supernatural occurrences, it also highlighted a powerful sermon by an unlikely preacher—Peter the fisherman. Three elements were included: a careful explanation, an illuminating proclamation, and a challenging invitation to receive the Spirit of God.

**A Careful Explanation.** Peter declared that these events were a fulfillment of prophecy (2:14-21). Joel had predicted the coming of the age of the Spirit, an era that would culminate in the great endtime signs. The age of the Spirit began that day!

**An Illuminating Proclamation.** Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and Christ (2:22-35). This is proven in four ways. First, God had shown through miracles that Jesus was the Christ (v.22). Second, God's predestination was obvious: Christ suffered and died in a manner that not only fulfilled Old Testament prophecy but that was followed by God's power in resurrection (vv.23-24). Third, the psalmist had written words



that could only apply to Jesus Christ (vv.25-31). Fourth, the great experiences of that wonderful Pentecost day were the evidence that the living Christ was fulfilling His promises (vv.32-35).

***A Challenging Invitation.*** The people were told to repent and be baptized (2:37-39). The Greek word for *repent* means “to change one’s mind.” That call to repentance has caused some people to think God’s method of salvation has changed from a works-system that included repentance and baptism to one of faith only (Acts 8:12-17; 10:34-38; 19:1-10).

But that’s not a problem. Repenting and believing are two sides of the same coin. These Jewish people had to “change their minds” about the One they had rejected. That reversal of their thinking went hand-in-hand with their new belief.

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**“The need for repentance reminds us  
that no one comes to God without  
a change of heart.”**

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Today a person repents when he acknowledges his need of God’s forgiveness through Christ. He believes when he places his trust in the Lord Jesus. You can’t really believe without repenting and you can’t truly repent without believing.

In the same way, Peter’s call to “be baptized . . . for the remission of sins” (2:38-39) is not, as some suppose, a contradiction of “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (16:31). Peter did not say that your sins won’t be washed away if you aren’t baptized. He said, “Repent and be baptized for [with a view toward or in relation to] the remission of sins.”

The preposition translated “for” is *eis* and it seldom means “in order to.” It is found, for example, in Luke 11:32, where it says that the people of Nineveh “repented at [*eis*] the preaching of Jonah.” They couldn’t repent “in order to” or “for” the preaching of Jonah. It was “in relation to” or “with a view toward” it.

The Jewish people who asked the question “What shall we do?” believed Peter’s testimony concerning Jesus of Nazareth—that He is Lord and Christ. They demonstrated their faith through a symbolic, open identification of themselves with the Lord Jesus in baptism. This shows faith and repentance to be two sides of the same coin. Baptism pictures the normal procedure in salvation as individuals come to a knowledge of God in Christ.

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**“God used baptism to enable His children  
to make a radical, public statement  
of their new life in Him.”**

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Belief, repentance, baptism, reception of the Holy Spirit, and identification with the church were and are a package. The 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost were saved by faith. They demonstrated the reality of their faith by their baptism. They received the Holy Spirit and became involved in the church. They “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (2:42). The New Testament does not record one instance of a person believing and refusing to be baptized or refusing to identify himself with a local church.

**An Overwhelming Response (2:40-47).** Three thousand Jewish people repented, were baptized, and re-

ceived the Holy Spirit. They immediately began meeting together, experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit's presence, and displaying a beautiful sense of oneness.

**Meeting Together For Worship.** The new converts were not left on their own. Acts 2:42 tells us:

*They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.*

This verse gives us insight into their worship:

- They met for apostolic teaching. How important to know God's truth!
- They met for fellowship. We can't be healthy Christians if we try to live in isolation.
- They met for the breaking of bread, the Lord's Supper. We are strengthened by commemorating Christ's death for our sins and expressing our oneness.
- They met for united praying. A special blessing still occurs when people pray together.

**Experiencing The Holy Spirit's Power.** A fear of God fell upon these believers as they witnessed apostolic signs and wonders. Acts 2:43 reads:

*Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.*

From the very beginning, the Lord showed that He wants us to have a healthy fear of Him—to be afraid of displeasing Him. God saw that these new Christians in the infant church needed reminders of His awesome power so that they wouldn't misinterpret His grace and conclude that obeying Him was not important.

**Sharing With One Another.** These first Christians sold their possessions and shared everything equally (vv.44-47). We may assume from Acts 4:32-37 that they did so voluntarily. It was a beautiful expression of

oneness in Christ, although God probably did not intend for it to be permanent. It was designed for these new believers. Many of them would normally have returned to their distant homes immediately after the Pentecost celebration. These people could now stay in Jerusalem for a while so that they might grow strong in their faith before returning to face hostility at home.

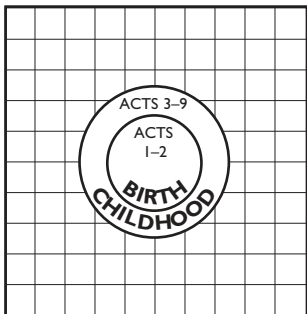
### SEEING GOD

The events at Pentecost highlight some of God's wonderful qualities. For example:

- **God is wise**—He knew that the disciples needed courage and power, and He knew how to give them these blessings.
- **God is patient**—He didn't give up on Jerusalem and the Jewish people even though they had rejected and crucified their Messiah.
- **God is faithful**—He always fulfills His promises.
- **God is loving**—He whose love led Him to create us and to provide redemption made sure that it would reach us by sending the Holy Spirit to draw us, to win us, to change us, and to live in us.

### SEEING OURSELVES

- Believing on Jesus Christ is not mere mental assent; it is a radical, revolutionary decision that involves a turning away from previously held notions about salvation and a turning to Christ.
- A person who says he believes but refuses baptism and identification with a local church may be giving evidence that his faith is not real.
- God equipped Peter, a fisherman who had demonstrated a tendency to speak without thinking and who had failed the Lord miserably during the hours just before the crucifixion. This shows us that the Lord will enable us to do anything He calls us to do.



## THE CHILDHOOD OF THE CHURCH (ACTS 3-9)

The infant church in Jerusalem grew rapidly. The people who had come to know God through Christ were a joyful and united group. In the beginning they experienced little if any persecution. Ideal circumstances for an infant! Infancy, however, doesn't last very long. And as the infant becomes a child, he inevitably experiences pain, disappointment, and discipline. These elements are not enjoyable, but they are an essential part of growing up. This is exactly what God permitted for the church as it grew out of infancy into childhood. The early church had a variety of experiences ranging from the very exciting to the very unpleasant.

**The Agony And The Ecstasy (chs.3-4).** These triumphs and trials were experienced early by the church:

- The healing of a paralyzed man and the resulting opportunity to witness.
- The arrest and imprisonment of Peter and John.
- The release of Peter and John.
- The thrill of Christian praise and unity.

### **A Frightening Event And Its Aftermath (ch.5).**

Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead because they lied about a gift they were giving to the church. The results: (1) *A healthy fear of God.* People within the church were afraid to sin, and those outside were afraid to join unless they were truly repentant (vv.11-13). (2) *A dynamic power.* A pure church is a pow-

erful church—repelling the hypocrite and drawing the truly repentant. (3) *An awakening of hostility*. The enemies of the apostles opposed but could not destroy the church nor repress the gospel. It is folly to lie to God and hopeless to fight against Him.

**A Killing And Its Impact (chs.6–7)**. The Sanhedrin officially rejected Christ by authorizing the stoning death of Stephen. This bloody act triggered a persecution of rank-and-file believers, causing them to flee Jerusalem and carry the gospel throughout Judea. Stephen's noble death also must have made a profound impression upon the young Jewish zealot—Saul of Tarsus.

**An Unlikely Occurrence (ch.8)**. Philip, a Jewish Christian, evangelized Samaria, the center of a half-Jewish religion detested by every Israelite. His success may have been partially due to the conversion of the Samaritan woman mentioned in John 4. The church was founded at Jerusalem, extended throughout Judea, and broadened to include these despised Samaritans.

**An Unexpected Conversion (ch.9)**. Saul of Tarsus, a zealous Pharisee who had approvingly observed Stephen's death, couldn't forget what he had seen and heard. His first response to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit was resistance in the form of intensified persecution. But Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, where he wholeheartedly surrendered to Christ and became the greatest of all the apostles.

### SEEING GOD

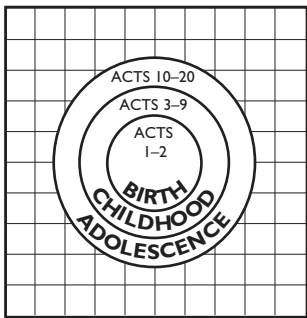
- In the death of Stephen, we see God's ability to provide courage and overflowing love, even in the midst of the worst circumstances.
- In the death of Ananias and Sapphira, we see God

as deserving not only to be loved but also feared.

- In the conversion of Saul, we see God's ability to change the heart of even the most hostile, antagonistic enemy of Christ.

### SEEING OURSELVES

- In the dramatic change of Saul, we can see the kind of changes that God can also produce in our hearts.
- In the anger of the Jews against Stephen, we can see our natural tendency to hate and destroy anything that exposes our own wrong.
- In Stephen, we see the kind of courage that the Lord can give to us when we face difficult life circumstances or even if we face death for Him.



### THE ADOLESCENCE OF THE CHURCH (ACTS 10-20)

Adolescence is that time in life between late childhood and young adulthood. It is a difficult period because it is a time of dramatic transition and change. Boys are becoming men and girls are becoming women.

A new identity emerges, and with it come new roles and new expectations.

In Acts 10-20 we see the church in her adolescence making a number of transitions. The conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household, who spoke in tongues when they received the Holy Spirit and then were baptized (ch.10), was a significant turning point in the story of the church. The fact that God showed His full acceptance of Gen-

tiles in this way became the basis for a church council decision that Gentile converts did not need to place themselves under the Mosaic law and submit to circumcision (ch.15).

During this period of change, Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey (chs.13-14). Paul replaced Peter as the central figure. Antioch gradually replaced Jerusalem as the center of ministry. Paul and Silas made the second missionary journey while Barnabas and Mark worked in Cyprus (15:36–18:22). Paul wrote the books of Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. All the while the Jewish believers were being forced to make some major adjustments in their thinking. Deeply ingrained ideas had to be changed.

**Transition One: *From Judaism To Christianity.*** Right up until the time that Jesus Christ died on the cross, God's way of revealing Himself and walking with His people was through Judaism. Jesus Himself had been a part of the old system. He had come as Messiah in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He lived under the law of Moses. He went to the temple to celebrate the festivals. He quoted from the Old Testament, referring to it as the Word of God. What Jesus attacked was a perverted form of Judaism as taught by the Pharisees. He didn't attack the Old Testament faith of the many devout Jews who worshiped the true and living God. He didn't come to destroy that faith, but to fulfill it (Mt. 5:17).

When Jesus died on the cross, the way to know and worship God changed. To symbolize this, God ripped from top to bottom the temple veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. This marked the end of the sacrificial system. Yet it ap-



pears that the apostles expected the temple to continue to be the Lord's special house. They were probably in the temple courts when they received the Holy Spirit. They held their first services in the temple (Acts 2:46). Peter and John went there for one of the stated prayer times (3:1-10). And it was in Solomon's portico of this temple that Peter preached to a Jewish audience (3:11-26).

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**“A torn veil marked the end of an age and the beginning of a bold, new, previously unheard of access to God.”**

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The Lord's followers undoubtedly believed that the Jewish nation would soon repent, and that when this occurred Christ would return to establish the kingdom age. The killing of Stephen, carried out by the very men who controlled the temple, modified these expectations. These leaders then led in persecuting Jerusalem Christians. It gradually became apparent that the temple could not be the central place for Christians to meet, organize, and worship their God.

The fact that Paul had Timothy circumcised (16:3), and as late as AD 58 placed himself under Jewish ritual law by sponsoring four men who had taken a Nazirite vow (21:16-26), is not to be seen as an indication that he was moving back toward Judaism. He undoubtedly made these concessions to demonstrate publicly that his mission to the Gentiles had not destroyed his Jewish loyalties. He told Christians in Corinth that he was a Jew among Jews that he might “win those who are under the law” (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

As the church became increasingly Gentile, Jewish

Christians who wanted to keep a link between themselves and the temple were discouraged. Little by little, the followers of Jesus separated themselves from the temple and all Jewish religious observances. This transition from Judaism to Christianity was completed before the temple was destroyed in AD 70.

**Transition Two: *From Law To Grace.*** The second transition the early Jewish Christians had to make was from law to grace. This wasn't easy for the Palestinian Jews—the group that had resisted cultural changes and used the Aramaic language rather than Greek. They were undoubtedly willing to abandon the sacrifices, but they could not easily forsake the laws of what was clean and unclean with respect to certain customs and eating habits. Nor could they accept the idea that circumcision of males was not mandatory.

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**“Jewish Christians gradually came to see that God had not called them to law but to a relationship with Christ.”**

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This created a crisis in the church and made necessary the council held at Jerusalem (Acts 15). After hearing from Peter, the church leaders at this meeting recognized what God was doing in the lives of Gentile converts. So they made and distributed their verdict: Gentile believers were not to be placed under the clean and unclean rules, and male converts did not need to be circumcised. These church leaders, however, did not run roughshod over the sensitivities of these Palestinian Jews. They instructed Gentile believers to avoid needless offense by abstaining “from things offered to idols, from blood, from things stran-

gled” (15:29). They were also to respect God’s unchanging moral law by abstaining from sexual immorality—an evil that permeated pagan worship.

The Jewish Christians gradually came to see that the whole law-system came to an end with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Sadly, however, throughout church history the same error appears again and again. People like to think that they can do something to save themselves. They find receiving salvation by grace either too simple or too great a blow to their pride.

**Transition Three: *From The Immediate Kingdom To The Imminent Return.*** The third major transition had to do with the concept of the kingdom of God. The earliest Christians were Jews. They had been nourished on the Old Testament Scriptures. They knew that passages like Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-16; 35:1-10; Jeremiah 23:5-6; and Ezekiel 36:16-38 promised an earthly kingdom of universal peace, righteousness, and prosperity. They associated the establishment of this kingdom with their Messiah.

These early Christians were right in what they expected. Their problem had to do with the matter of timing. During His time on earth, Jesus had told them that the cross had to come before the kingdom. After His death, burial, and resurrection, He had instructed His disciples about the “kingdom of God” (1:3). But the disciples were still thinking of an immediate earthly kingdom, as indicated by their question, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). He told them that instead of being concerned about the time the kingdom would come, they were to concentrate on getting out the good news of how God had revealed Himself in Christ. So the disciples went out to proclaim the gospel message.

Peter, however, was led by the Holy Spirit to give the Jewish nation one more opportunity to receive Christ and welcome His return. Shortly after Pentecost, Peter made the following statement to his people:

*Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began (Acts 3:19-21).*

The Greek text is clear: “Repent in order that God may send Jesus.” He will return in glory to bring “times of refreshing” and restoration to Israel when that nation repents and turns to Him.

The majority of the first-century Jews, however, did not repent. In fact, the nation’s official response to the gospel was the stoning of Stephen and persecution of Jerusalem Christians (Acts 7:4–8:3). The followers of Jesus gradually came to realize that the Jewish nation might not repent during their generation and that the Lord might not come back immediately to establish His earthly kingdom. They began to see the church age as an interim. They continued to preach Jesus Christ as the Messiah of the Old Testament Scriptures. They also continued to proclaim “the kingdom of God” (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:31). But they no longer thought of this term as referring exclusively to the earthly kingdom. They realized that it included the wider concept of the rule of God in the lives of those who had placed their trust in Jesus Christ. They still anticipated the coming earthly kingdom, but they were occupied with winning people to Christ that all

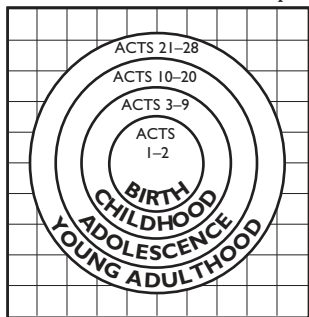
who believed might be “delivered . . . from the power of darkness and translated . . . into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col. 1:13).

### SEEING GOD

- God’s patient love can be seen in the fact that all the apostles, even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, went first to the Jews in every community.
- God’s consideration for the Jewish Christians as they struggled with the transition can be seen in the concessions made to them in Acts 15:28-29.

### SEEING OURSELVES

- In the Jewish Christians’ repeated criticism of Peter and Paul for their openness toward the Gentiles (Acts 11:1-3; 15:1-35), we can see our own reluctance to abandon old prejudices.
- In the quarrel between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark (Acts 15:36-41), we can see our own lack of love toward people who fail us.



### THE YOUNG ADULTHOOD OF THE CHURCH (ACTS 21-28)

About the time that Paul made his decision to return to Jerusalem (c. AD 57), the growing church had reached young adulthood. God had led the church through a significant period of transitions. Believers

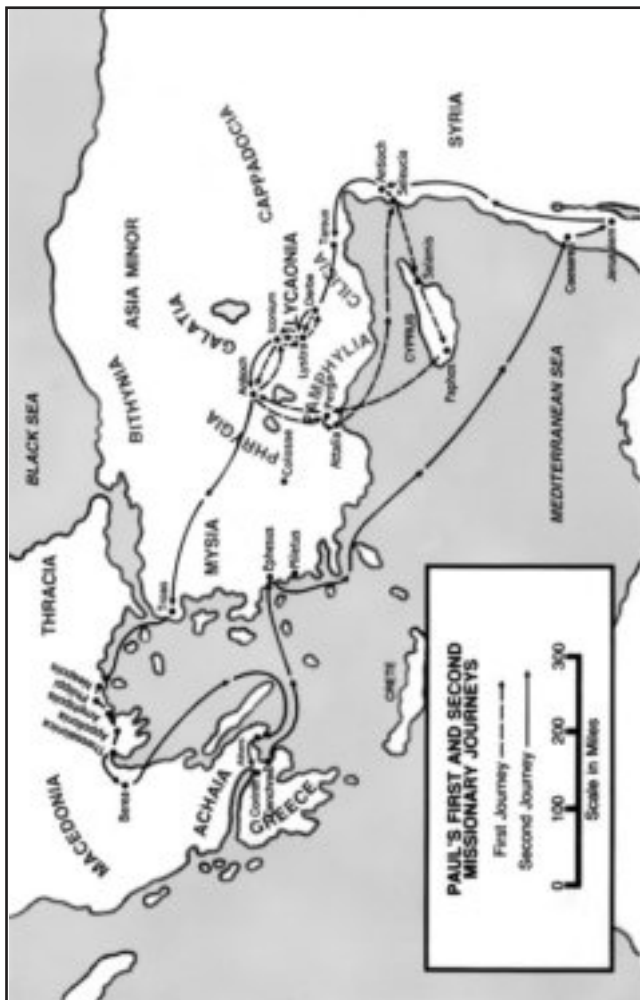
had developed much strength and had matured in the face of persecution. The churches, however, had to function without Paul’s personal visits because he was arrested in Jerusalem and spent 3 years as a prisoner before being tried at Rome. Paul, not the churches, is

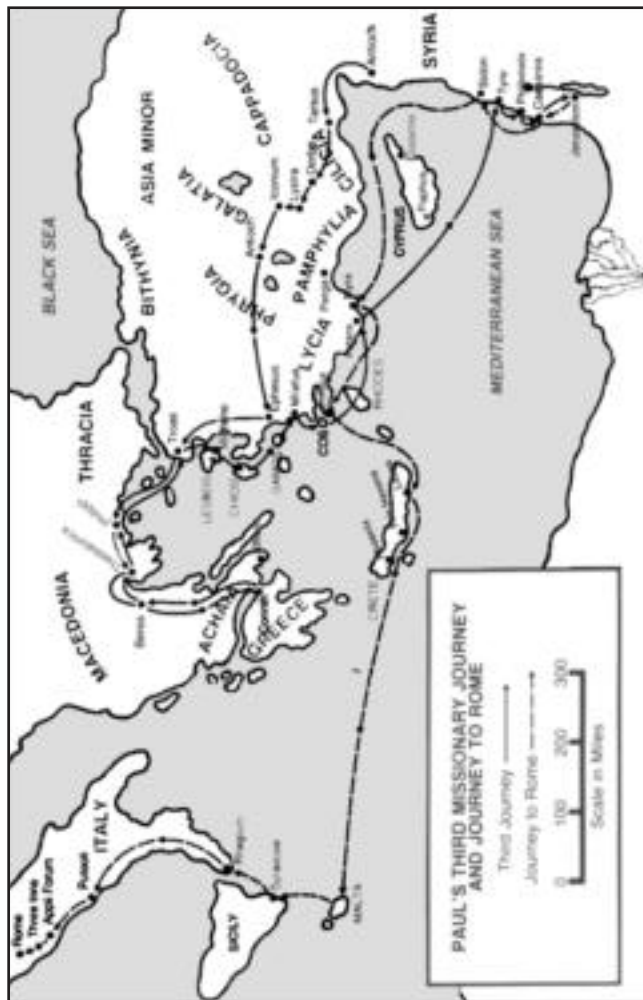
at the center of the narrative. It was during this time that he wrote his personal letter to Philemon, and the epistles to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians. The three church letters were suited for mature believers at this stage in the history of the church. In addition to writing these letters, Paul had enough freedom while awaiting trial to visit with Christian leaders and to witness to Jewish people who came to visit him.

Luke's account ends with Paul still a prisoner in Rome. From other sources we learn that Paul was released in about AD 63 or 64 and resumed his evangelistic ministry. During this period, he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus. Then he was arrested again and imprisoned in a dungeon, where he wrote 2 Timothy. He was beheaded in either AD 66 or 67.

### **THE CHRONOLOGY OF ACTS**

AD 30	Birth of the church
AD 32	Martyrdom of Stephen; believers scattered
AD 33	Conversion of Saul/Paul
AD 34	Conversion of Cornelius
AD 47	First missionary journey
AD 48	Church Council in Jerusalem; Galatians written
AD 48-53	Second missionary journey; 1 & 2 Thessalonians written
AD 53-58	Third missionary journey; 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans written
AD 58-60	Paul's arrest in Jerusalem; Paul's imprisonment and trial in Caesarea
AD 61-63	Paul's voyage to Rome and confinement; Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians written







# THE MIRACLES OF GOD IN ACTS

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Some people say they don't believe Christians should expect God to do the kind of miracles that are recorded in the book of Acts. Other people are continually talking about experiencing miracles of healing. The literature of faith healers abounds with amazing claims. Interestingly, Eve Simson, a university professor of sociology, made the following statement:

Over the years, while conducting my investigation of deliverance evangelism, I met many individuals who testified that they had received a miraculous cure, and I witnessed many claims to instantaneous cures at the revival meetings. But I was not able to obtain enough proof for any of them to convince me that they were true miracles of healing. At no time did I encounter anyone who even testified to something like the regrowth of a severed arm or leg (*The Faith Healer*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1977, p.197.)

Let's take a look at the miracles in Acts, considering their frequency and their purpose.

**The Frequency Of Miracles.** The book of Acts records at least 20 specific miracles and tells of 9 times when clusters of them occurred.

## **SPECIFIC MIRACLES**

1. Sound of rushing wind (2:2).
2. Tongues of fire (2:3).
3. Miraculous speech (2:4).
4. Lame man healed (3:1-10).
5. Building shaken (4:31).
6. Sudden death of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11).

7. Imprisoned apostles freed by angel (5:17-21).
8. Philip transported from desert to Azotus (8:40).
9. Light and voice at Saul's conversion (9:1-9).
10. Saul blinded and healed (9:8-19).
11. Aeneas healed of paralysis (9:32-35).
12. Dorcas restored to life (9:36-41).
13. Herod's violent death (12:20-23).
14. Elymas the sorcerer blinded (13:6-11).
15. Cripple at Lystra healed (14:8-10).
16. Demons cast out of a slave girl (16:16-18).
17. Paul freed from prison by earthquake (16:25-27).
18. Eutychus raised from death (20:7-12).
19. Paul unaffected by viper's bite (28:3-5).
20. Father of Publius healed (28:8).

### **CLUSTERS OF MIRACLES**

1. "Many wonders and signs" (2:43).
2. "Many signs and wonders" (5:12).
3. "The shadow of Peter" apparently healed some, and "a multitude gathered . . . and they were all healed" (5:15-16).
4. "Stephen . . . did great wonders and signs" (6:8).
5. "The multitudes . . . heeded . . . , hearing and seeing the miracles which [Philip] did" (8:6).
6. "The Lord . . . [granted] signs and wonders to be done by their hands" (14:3).
7. "Barnabas and Paul [declared] how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them" (15:12).
8. "God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul . . . even handkerchiefs or aprons" (19:11-12).
9. "The rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed" (28:9).

**A Wrong Assumption About Miracles.** The fact that many miracles occurred does not mean that every believer should always expect one whenever he faces a problem. God didn't always bring miraculous deliverance from danger and suffering to His children.

- Peter and John arrested, imprisoned, and scourged (4:1-8; 5:22-41).
- Stephen stoned to death (6:8–7:60).
- Christians scattered through persecution (8:1-3).
- James executed (12:1-2).
- Paul stoned (14:19-20).
- Paul and Silas arrested, scourged, placed in stocks (16:22-28).
- Paul arrested and tried (chs.21–28).
- Paul (during the Acts period) was whipped with 39 lashes 5 times, beaten with rods 3 times, shipwrecked 3 times, adrift on the sea for 24 hours, often sleepless, hungry, thirsty, and cold (2 Cor. 11:22-27).
- Paul (during the Acts period) was afflicted with a “thorn in the flesh” from which he was not delivered (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

It is obvious that God did not perform miracles just to make life easy and pleasant for His children.

**The Purpose Of Miracles In Acts.** God's primary purpose in performing miracles was to authenticate the ministry of the apostles, just as Jesus' miracles verified His claim to be the Son of God.

This authenticating purpose of miracles is further indicated in the fact that they tended to occur in clusters. The Old Testament records three occasions when a number of miracles occurred:

1. At the beginning of Israel's history from the Exodus through the rule of Judges.

2. At the beginning of the prophetic era with Elijah and Elisha.

3. At the beginning of Israel's exile.

As noted earlier, the gospels and the book of Acts record many miracles. But by AD 64-68 they were no longer prevalent. The writer of Hebrews acknowledged this when he wrote:

*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will? (Heb. 2:3-4).*

These verses tell us a great deal about the nature of first-century miracles and their purpose. They were not quiet miracles, they were spectacular. Using the past tense, the writer of Hebrews described them by the use of three significant terms:

- He called them “signs” (*semeion*)—visible pointers to God's supernatural activity.
- He called them “wonders” (*teras*)—works intended to create a sense of awe and amazement.
- He called them “miracles” (*dunamis*)—mighty acts that reveal God's power.

Do miracles occur today? Yes. God answers prayer, but these answers are not so open, obvious, and spectacular that unbelievers admit their occurrence. We see very few “signs” and “wonders” today. When God answers our petitions for healing or deliverance, He usually works in such a way that the skeptic can easily deny that a miracle happened.

# PARALLELS OF PETER AND PAUL

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Peter is prominent in Acts 1–12; Paul in 13–28. This reflects the change in the makeup of the church from a primarily Jewish to a largely Gentile body. Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, was uniquely chosen to be God's leading ambassador to the Jews. Paul, the highly educated Pharisee and Roman citizen, was chosen to be the leading apostle to the Gentiles.

Why these two men? Were there no others available to fill these roles? Men like Stephen and James (the brother of Jesus) were highly capable. But God chose Peter and Paul, equipped them, and directed them. You can't read the Bible and observe God's work without seeing His absolute sovereignty. He offers salvation to all, yet He chooses some to serve in places of prominence while allowing others with equal ability and spirituality to die, as He did with Stephen.

God's sovereignty over the events in the lives of Peter and Paul can be seen in seven striking parallels:

1. Both brought miraculous healing to a lame man (3:1-10; 14:8-18).
2. Both confronted evil sorcerers (8:9-25; 13:4-12).
3. Both performed a flurry of miracles in a unique manner (5:12-16; 19:11-12).
4. Both conferred the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands (8:14-25; 19:1-10).
5. Both raised someone from death (9:36-42; 20:7-12).
6. Both were imprisoned and miraculously released (12:1-19; 16:16-34).
7. Both, according to tradition, died as martyrs.

# THE RECEPTION OF GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTS

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Should a Christian seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit? Is this baptism always accompanied by speaking in tongues? Some Bible students say yes to both questions; others say no.

Those who say yes cite the following facts:

- The 120 were waiting (perhaps praying) for the Spirit's baptism, and they spoke in tongues when He came (2:1-4).
- The Samaritans received the Holy Spirit after they were saved, and His coming was accompanied by signs (8:12-17).
- The Roman centurion's family spoke in tongues when they received the Holy Spirit (10:34-48).
- The disciples who had been given John's baptism spoke in tongues when they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7).

Those who say no give the following evidence:

- The 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost received the Holy Spirit without tongues or any other signs (2:38-47).
- Lydia and her household and the Philippian jailer's family were saved and baptized; yet they were not instructed to seek Spirit-baptism or tongues (16:11-34).

**Analysis.** The instances in which the Holy Spirit's coming was accompanied by signs all had the element of uniqueness. Three great signs accompanied the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the forming of the church. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans was also the initial fulfillment of our

Lord's command that the gospel was to be preached in Samaria. The salvation of the Gentile Cornelius was also initial in that he was the first true Gentile (not a proselyte to the Jewish faith like the Ethiopian eunuch) to be converted and brought into the church. The disciples who had received John's baptism, but were not fully instructed, were baptized again to indicate the initiation of a new era. From this point on, there is no further reference to any baptism other than that done in the name of Jesus.

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**“The book of Acts does not support the idea that the people of God should seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit.”**

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It follows that the norm is represented by the 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost, by Lydia, and by the Philippian jailer. In the light of passages like 1 Corinthians 6:19 and 12:13 (written by Paul during his third missionary journey), we have every right to assume that the 3,000, Lydia's household, and the jailer's family received the Holy Spirit as the divine tenant in their bodies and were baptized into the church. This incorporation into the body of Christ is Spirit baptism, and it occurs at the moment of salvation. The book of Acts does not support the idea that we should seek the baptism of the Spirit. Why ask for something we already have? Nor should we expect to speak in tongues as a sign of Spirit baptism.

# THE STORY GOES ON

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The story of the church didn't end with the book of Acts. It continued in spite of fierce persecution. It continued in spite of division and strife within. It continued in spite of bad leaders and wrong doctrine. It has continued to this very day. Christ's promise is being fulfilled: "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18).

The story of the church goes on because God does. God the Father, who in infinite love gave His Son to the terrible death of the cross, still desires the salvation of all. God the Son, who willingly left His place in heaven to become a member of the human family to pay the price for our sin, still makes Himself real to those who obey Him. God the Holy Spirit, who began a new era when He gave birth to the church on the Day of Pentecost, still empowers our witness, brings conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and transforms the lives of all believers who submit to Him. What a wonderful triune God!

Everybody who hears the good news is part of the story of the church. Many, like the men to whom Stephen spoke, resist the Holy Spirit and reject the Lord Jesus. Some, like Simon the sorcerer, say they believe but don't show it. Some believe it but are so apathetic that they never experience the reality of the Holy Spirit's presence and power. But thank God, there are also many who believe the gospel, commit themselves to Jesus Christ, submit to the Holy Spirit, and are Spirit-filled witnesses.

What part are you playing in this ongoing story?





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