

# THE BIG JOURNEY

## *from Creation to New Creation*



*Idealized View of the Acropolis and the Areopagus in Athens* painted by Leo von Klenze (1784-1864) and held by the Neue Pinakothek, Munich. The artist depicts an idealised view in the city's 'golden age' in the 5th century BC. The building to the right on the summit is the Parthenon. In the foreground is the Areopagus, where Paul preached (Acts 17.18-33). Though not entirely accurate historically, the painting vividly depicts the architectural grandeur (and paganism) that Paul saw when he visited that city.

## twelve ► The Acts of the Apostles

### Introduction and Questions

#### The Day of Pentecost

Between His resurrection and ascension, Jesus explains the Old Testament Scriptures to His disciples and tells them about the Kingdom of God. Finally, He says to them “. . . *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*” (Acts 1.8). These words set the scene for the Book of Acts. We read how God’s gospel goes out, like a great wave, from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, and on through the Roman Empire.

Jesus’s disciples and many others wait and pray in Jerusalem. Then, ten days after Jesus’s ascension (in **AD30** or **AD33**), on the festival called the Day of Pentecost, *“suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues . . . .”* (Acts 2.1-4). Jesus, exalted at God’s right hand, sends the promised Holy Spirit. A crowd gathers; *“those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls”* (Acts 2.41).

On that day, God opens a new chapter in the establishment of His Kingdom on Earth. Jesus’s great commission (Matthew 28.19-20) begins to be fulfilled. The disciples declare the word of God with astonishing power and fluency; God confirms the message by wonderful miracles.

#### In Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria . . .

For the next two or three years, the Church grows and consolidates in Jerusalem. The believers are a dynamic community, devoted *“to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”* (Act 2.42). They’re *“of one heart and soul”* and had *“everything in common”* (Acts 4.32).

But opposition hardens. Soon, the religious leaders’ unyielding resistance to God vents itself in murder. Charges of blasphemy bring Stephen face to face

with the Jewish leadership. He defends himself with eloquent authority. But, the enraged leadership kill him. Persecution explodes. Many believers leave Jerusalem for Judea and Samaria and preach the gospel. This is the next phase of gospel outreach that Jesus promised “. . . *you will be my witnesses . . . in all Judea and Samaria, . . .*” (Acts 1.8). God does for the Samaritans what He’s done in Jerusalem. Philip proclaims Christ in the city of Samaria; Peter and John pray for them, and they receive the Holy Spirit. It’s their Day of Pentecost.



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The setting of Acts (around AD30-60). The book of Acts records the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, thus fulfilling the risen Christ’s words to His apostles in Acts 1.8.

### ... and to the end of the earth

Then Acts records three conversions - an Ethiopian, Paul, and Cornelius. Noah’s three sons – Ham, Shem, and Japheth - colonised the world after the Flood (Genesis 9.18-19). These conversions seem to represent the gospel travelling out to all branches of mankind. The Ethiopian represents Ham’s family; Paul (then called Saul) is a Semitic man; Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian regiment, represents Japheth’s descendants. They’re all converted on a route to a region colonised by their branch of mankind - the Ethiopian on a road to Egypt, a place settled by Ham’s branch; Paul on the road to Damascus, a place settled by Shem’s descendants; Cornelius in Caesarea, a major port for travel to Europe, an area settled by Japheth’s branch. What’s all this telling us? The gospel is going out from Jerusalem *to every branch of mankind!*

Cornelius’s conversion is specially significant. Peter preached the Gospel to him. But before he did so, God showed Peter that He had repealed the Jewish dietary law of Leviticus 11. Now *all* food was fit to eat. The dietary law was a key barrier separating Jews from Gentiles. God has now dismantled that barrier. As Paul writes, “*through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 3.6 NIV). So Peter preaches to Cornelius the Gentile and his household. During his sermon, the Holy Spirit falls on his audience. It’s the Gentiles’ Day of Pentecost.

Those who flee Jerusalem after Stephen’s martyrdom disperse, preaching only to Jews. But some people, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, take a momentous step forward. They preach the gospel to Greek-speaking Gentiles in **Antioch**, a great city 300 miles north of Jerusalem. A great number believe and turn to God.

The Antioch church grows apace. The apostles send big-hearted Barnabas there. This multicultural church continues to expand, and Barnabas enlists Paul’s help. For a year he and Barnabas teach the church (around **AD47/48**).

David Peterson points out: “Luke regularly shows the importance of teaching as an essential aspect of evangelism . . . and as a vital means of growing a church to maturity and keeping believers faithful to the Lord . . .” It’s here in Antioch that believers are first called ‘Christians’. And it’s from the Antioch church that Paul’s first missionary journey is launched.

### Salvation – God’s free gift to everyone through faith in Jesus

Then trouble comes. By then Peter is in Antioch, too. Some Jewish believers from Jerusalem arrive in Antioch. They’re very unhappy at the way Jewish Christians are sharing meals with Gentile believers. But that’s not all. Strict Jewish believers come from Jerusalem and say, *“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”* Such believers (called Judaisers) also infect the Galatian churches with this crippling legalism.

These strict Jewish believers think that Christians also have to become Jewish proselytes, and be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. But salvation is now God’s gift to all who repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Circumcision, laws about leprosy, dietary rules, and observing the Sabbath and the feasts - all these had been God’s picture of something real and permanent that He has now brought into being. The truth that these laws pictured remains, but the laws themselves are now obsolete.

So Paul and Barnabas and others have a summit meeting with the leaders of the Jerusalem church to hammer out a solution (around **AD49**). After much debate, they conclude that Gentile believers don’t have to be circumcised or to keep the Law. They just ask Gentile believers to observe a few basic rules that seem to relate primarily to idolatry in pagan temples.

But the decision relates to Gentiles. Would Jewish believers relax their *own* commitment to the ritual laws? The conference didn’t address that. For years afterwards there were many Jewish believers in Jerusalem (and doubtless elsewhere) who were *“zealous for the law”*. Their observance of the Law put a barrier between themselves and Gentile believers. In the end, the church in Jerusalem is dispersed. The First Jewish-Roman War climaxes in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Romans in **AD70**.



Image from Wikimedia  
Detail from *The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans Under the Command of Titus, A.D. 70*  
painted by David Roberts (1796-1864).

### Paul – God’s chosen servant

What is God’s next step? We now go back to around **AD48**, before the summit in Jerusalem. Leaders in the Antioch church are worshipping God and fasting; they’re open to the Spirit’s leading. God speaks. Paul and Barnabas are to spearhead a new gospel mission. So, from Antioch, Paul’s three great missionary journeys are launched. Within 30 years, churches are established through the Eastern Roman empire as far as Rome itself.

- Paul’s first journey (around **AD48**) takes him through Cyprus, through the region of Pamphylia to the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia.
- His second journey (around **AD49-52**) takes him through Syria and Cilicia, and on to the cities of Derbe, Lystra, through Phrygia and Galatia and on to Troas, and over the Aegean Sea to Europe – visiting such cities as Philippi,

Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. He returns to Antioch via Ephesus and Jerusalem. **Corinth** is the key city on this trip – it was a wealthy, worldly, trading centre with huge strategic value for the spread of the gospel. Paul stayed there for 18 months.

- Paul's third journey (around **AD53-57**) takes him through Galatia and Phrygia and then to **Ephesus**, a large and strategic trade centre. Ephesus was the key city on this mission. Paul stayed here for over two years. He then travelled to Macedonia and Greece before returning (via Macedonia, and the cities of Troas and Miletus) to Caesarea and Jerusalem.



The Appian Way within the ancient city of Minturno, about 80 miles south-east of Rome – Paul may well have walked on this stretch of road on his way to Rome. Image from Wikipedia

And so Paul arrives in Jerusalem. He had told the elders at Ephesus: *“the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me”* (Acts 20.23). The Jerusalem church leaders praise God at Paul's news of what God was doing among the Gentiles. But they tell Paul about Jewish believers *“zealous for the law”*, who think that Paul has been teaching Jewish Christians to abandon the Law of Moses. To dispel the rumours, Paul undertakes a Jewish purification rite and helps four other Jewish Christians discharge a vow.

But one day, Paul is accused of defiling the Temple. A riot ensues; Paul is rescued by the Roman military and brought before the Jewish leaders. He then defends himself before the Roman governor Felix in Caesarea. After two years' custody there (around **AD57-59**) he defends himself before Felix's successor Festus, and King Herod Agrippa II. Paul appeals to be judged by Caesar. So he travels under Roman escort to Rome and is shipwrecked en route. Two years' house arrest in Rome follow (around **AD60-62**). The Book of Acts ends here. But Paul is later freed and may have travelled to various places, including Crete, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia Minor, and perhaps Spain. Another period of imprisonment in Rome ends in his execution (in around **AD65-67**).

The early Church grew at astonishing speed. How? Firstly and fundamentally, through the unstoppable power of God's Spirit. But God had also worked in history. Political unity, peace, easy travel, and a common language (*koiné* Greek) gave wings to the gospel. That Gospel advance continues to this day.

## Bible passages and questions

- ? Read Acts 2.1-47. What did Peter emphasise in his first sermon, and why?
- ? Read Exodus 40.34-38. How does what happened when the Spirit came relate to what happened when the Tabernacle was finished?
- ? Read Genesis 11.1-9. How does what happened on the Day of Pentecost relate to the building of the Tower of Babel?
- ? Read Acts 8.1, 11.19-26, 13.1-3, 15.30-35. Antioch took over from Jerusalem as the key city for gospel outreach. Why?
- ? Read Acts 19.1-10. What's Paul's key strategy for gospel advance?
- ? Read Acts 28.16-31. How does the Book of Acts end, and where's the location of the final episode? What is the significance of these points?

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● **VERSION DATE** 2018 February 22