

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 24 Acts — Part 2

I. BACKGROUND

We will not repeat the background given last week behind the book. We will, however, reproduce the timeline for convenience's sake.

II. TIMELINE

A reasonable timetable of key New Testament events relevant to Acts¹ is:

Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost	April-May 30
Conversion of Saul of Tarsus	c. 33
Paul's first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem	c. 35
Death of James, son of Zebedee; imprisonment and escape of Peter; death of Herod Agrippa I	Spring 44
Famine in Judea; Paul and Barnabas sent with relief from Antioch	c. 46
First Missionary Journey (Paul and Anabas to Cyprus and Asia Minor)	47-48
Paul writes Galatians	c. 48
Apostolic Council at Jerusalem	c. 49
Second Missionary Journey (Lystra, Derbe, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth)	c. 49-50
Paul writes Thessalonian Epistles	late 50
Paul in Corinth	Fall 50-Spring 52
Gallio becomes proconsul of Achaia	July 51
Paul's hasty visit to Palestine	Spring-Summer 52
Paul at Ephesus	Fall 52-Summer 55
Paul writes First Corinthians	Spring 54
Paul's sorrowful visit to Corinth	Spring or Fall 54
Murder of Silanus, proconsul of Asia	late 54
Paul writes Philippians	late 54 or early 55
Paul sends Titus to Corinth and Timothy to Macedonia	early 55
Paul in Troas	Fall 55
Paul in Macedonia and Illyricum	Winter 55-Fall 56

¹ The timeline is derived with modification from that given by F.F. Bruce in his commentary, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1951.

Paul writes Second Corinthians	56
Paul in Corinth	Winter 56-57
Paul writes Romans	Early 57
Paul's arrival and arrest in Jerusalem	May 57
Paul detained at Caesarea	57-59
Paul sails for Rome	Sept.-Oct. 59
Paul in Malta	Winter 59-60
Paul arrives in Rome	February 60
Paul writes Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians	c. 60-61
Death of James the Just in Jerusalem	61
End of Paul's Roman detention	Late 61 or early 62
Destruction of Jerusalem	70

Our approach to Acts is following major sections in the following order:

1. The Birth of the Church (1:1 — 5:42)
2. Persecution and the churches' expansion (6:1 - 9:31)
3. Actions of Peter and the entrance of Gentiles (9:32 — 12:24)
4. Paul's first missionary journey and the Apostolic Decree (12:25 — 16:5)
5. The Church grows around the Aegean Sea (16:6 — 19:20)
6. Paul's unexpected route to Rome (19:21 — 28:31)

Last week, we covered the Birth of the Church. This week, we start with Acts 6 and the church's persecution.

III. PERSECUTION AND THE CHURCH'S EXPANSION (ACTS 6:1 — 9:31)

As Acts 5 ended, the religious rulers in Jerusalem were debating the merits of having the Disciples of Christ killed. A doctor of the law named Gamaliel spoke out against the killing noting that others had raised public followings before but were little more than fads. Assuming this new Jesus movement was also a fad, Gamaliel noted it would also die out on its own. Gamaliel added that if in fact the movement was from God, then all the efforts of everyone would not stop it.

We know a bit about Gamaliel from both the Bible and from other sources. In the Bible, we find that Paul was a student of Gamaliel's (Acts 22:3). With Paul being a major source for Luke in writing Acts, it makes sense that Paul would have received the information about this private meeting and passed it on to Luke. Outside of the Bible, we find from near contemporary Jewish writings that Gamaliel was the greatest Hebrew teacher of the day. Called "Gamaliel the Elder" (sometimes confused with

Gamaliel II who was active 50 years later), he is referenced in the Mishna, a collection of rabbinic teachings on the law compiled around 220 AD. In the portion called "Sotah" 9.15, it reads:

"When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and holiness died."

Acts 6 begins with the phrase "In those days" which removes us a bit from the exact time period. We will get further more specific time indications later in Acts, but at this point, we do not know if Luke is writing of weeks later, months later, or even a year or so later. At this point, Luke explains that the church has continued its growth ("the number of disciples was increasing"). The Grecian Jews were complaining against the Hebraic Jews that some widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.²

The Apostles met for a solution to the problem and decided that the people should choose seven men who were to administer the food. These men were to be "full of the Spirit and wisdom." Interestingly, it was not enough that the men were full of the Spirit — competence was a consideration as well. Also of note is that the people were told to pick the seven. These seven were to handle the chores so that the apostles could continue to devote themselves to "the ministry of the word." The seven chosen all have Greek names, leading some scholars to believe the seven were themselves "Grecian Jews." Among the seven are several that will become noteworthy later in the Acts narrative, Stephen and Philip.³

These seven continued the service of food while the apostles continued the service of teaching, and "the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (6:7).

² The N.I.V. does a good job translating "Grecian Jews." The actual term is "Hellenists" which references Greeks. Scholars have held some discussion on this point as to whether the Hellenists were in fact Jews. The contextual flow of Acts makes it clear that this narrative moment precedes the conversion of Gentiles. The evidence indicates that there were Jews in Jerusalem that were Hebrew/Aramaic speakers as well as Jews that were Greek speakers. Similarly, there were synagogues in Jerusalem that held services in both Hebrew/Aramaic as well as others that held services in Greek.

³ A third of the seven is Nicolas. Some church history ascribes to his followers the Nicolaition teaching referenced by John in Revelation 2:15. While the Revelation passage clearly reflects those following something associated with the name Nicolas, there is nothing that specifies it was the Nicolas of Acts 6.

Stephen, one of the seven, was specified as a man "full of God's grace and power" who did great wonders and signs among the people. Members of a certain synagogue were arguing with Stephen somewhat unsuccessfully. The arguers could not stand up against either his "wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke" (6:10). Unable to confront him in truth, the troublemakers made up charges that Stephen had blasphemed. Stephen was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin on the charges.

The high priest asked Stephen if in fact he had spoken against the temple and Moses in favor of Jesus of Nazareth. Stephen replied with an incredible defense of the faith that is worth reading word by word! Within the flow and purpose of this class, we will highlight certain parts as we review the defense.

Stephen began with reminding the people that God had called Abraham to leave his home and go to another land. God promised the land to the descendants of Abraham who were then detailed. God also gave the rite of circumcision to Abraham and his descendants.

Through God's hand in the life of Joseph, the Jews wound up in Egypt for several hundred years. This was not solely by the hand of God, however. Stephen points out that the forefathers of the Jews ("the Patriarchs") had their role in the Egyptian sojourn as well. They were the ones who sold Joseph into slavery. God fulfilled this promise, however, and brought the people out of Egypt back to the land promised to Abraham. This was done through divine intervention and through Moses. The story of the Mosaic deliverance is told in some detail. In fact, Stephen reminds the rulers that the people themselves were not really good at following the directions of Moses. "Our fathers refused to obey him. Instead they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt" (7:39).

Stephen walked briefly through the history of the tabernacle and Solomon's construction of the temple. Stephen then points out that the Jewish history has been one of killing the prophets and persecuting those sent by God. Stephen ends with a stinging and blunt indictment on the listeners as ones who murdered the Messiah himself. Stephen says the ones who have blasphemed, at least in deed, are those charging him. The jury has killed the Messiah and flaunted the Law of Moses.

This does not go over well. The people hearing it "were furious" (7:54). Stephen "full of the Holy Spirit" then looks up toward heaven and has a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. When Stephen tells the people what he is seeing, they "covered their

ears and yelling at the top of their voices" rushed Stephen, dragged him out of the city and stoned him.

Two noteworthy items are in the narrative at the stoning. First, Stephen, the first Christian among history's many who is martyred for his faith, dies in prayer that God will not hold the sin against his murderers. Second, a "young man named Saul" stands watch over the stoning as well as the clothes of those throwing rocks, giving approval to both the deed and the death.

Acts 8 tells us that on that day "a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem" (8:1). The result of the persecution was the exact opposite of the intention behind it. The persecution was meant to end the faith. Instead, "all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." Just as we saw in the gospel of Luke, the rejection and persecution leads to greater and greater things as the church expands beyond the confines of Jerusalem itself.

Jerusalem persecution continues at the hands of Paul who was having men and women dragged off to prison by going house to house in an effort to destroy the church.

But, those who are scattered preached the word wherever they went. The message begins to spread! Philip goes into Samaria and begins healing and teaching about Jesus. He brought Jesus into the area and with Jesus came "great joy in that city" (8:8). The Samaritan city had a man named Simon who had quite a following apart from Philip. Simon was a sorcerer who had amazed many and gathered a number of followers through his magic. Simon, like everyone else, was amazed at the miraculous acts Philip worked among the people. As the number of Samaritans accepted the word of God and were baptized, Simon joined the ranks as well. Meanwhile, the apostles in Jerusalem heard of the Samaritan's acceptance of the message about Jesus, and Peter and John came and prayed for the converts placing hands on them and praying for their reception of the Holy Spirit.

When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was received by the laying on of hands, he tried to buy the ability from the apostles. This did not go over well! Peter answered:

May your money perish with you...you have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you...you are full of bitterness and captive to sin. (8:20-23)

Simon then asks for prayer.

Peter and John returned to Jerusalem preaching in the villages along the way.

IV. A DIVINE APPOINTMENT

Meanwhile an angel instructed Philip to go south, which he does. Along the way, Philip meets up with an Ethiopian eunuch who was returning home from a trip to Jerusalem to worship. The man was sitting in his chariot reading from Isaiah. Philip ran up to the man and asked whether he understood what he was reading. The man had the Isaiah passage from 53:7-8 where it is written:

He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.

The eunuch asked Philip whom Isaiah was talking about, and Philip began with that passage of scripture and "told him the good news about Jesus" (8:35). Receiving the message with faith, the eunuch saw water as they were going and they stopped so Philip could baptize him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit took Philip away, never to be seen again by the eunuch. The eunuch went on his way rejoicing while Philip went preaching elsewhere.

V. SAUL

Meanwhile, Saul was continuing his strong persecution against "the Way" (9:2) heading to Damascus to see if there were any followers there that he could imprison. While on the road to Damascus, a light from heaven flashes and Saul falls to the ground. A voice said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul asked for identification and the voice says, "I am Jesus, whom you are

persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Those traveling with Paul were speechless. They heard the voice but saw nothing. When Paul arose, he was blinded. He was led by hand into Damascus blinded for three days, eating and drinking nothing.

In Damascus, there was a disciple named Ananias. In a vision. God tells Ananias to go to a certain house where a man named Saul of Tarsus would be found praying. Ananias was to lay hands on Saul so he could see again.

Ananias answered that Saul has a reputation of harming the saints in Jerusalem. Rumor was that Saul was in Damascus on the same mission of malevolence. But, the Lord says that Saul is a chosen instrument to go among the Gentiles and Ananias is to do as instructed. Ananias goes and lays hands on Saul saying. "Brother Saul, the Lord — Jesus...has sent me so you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (9:18).

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. Saul arose, was baptized, and then took some food to regain his strength.

Saul stayed in Damascus several days and "at once" began preaching about Jesus. Saul's message and teaching were powerful and baffling to those who heard him. The Jews conspired to kill Saul to shut him up, but Saul learned of the plans and his followers lowered him out of the city in a basket through an opening in the wall.

Saul went to Jerusalem where his welcome was not overwhelming. Many thought he was seeking to infiltrate the church for the purpose of further destroying it. Barnabas brought Saul before the apostles who heard the conversion story and received him. Saul then had the chance to move throughout Jerusalem teaching the message he had previously sought to destroy. After receiving threats on Saul's life in Jerusalem, the church sent Saul to his homeland of Tarsus. Luke tells the story of Saul's conversion three times in Acts. This is the first account. The second and third are from Paul's words as he describes the conversion during his defenses given later in the book. We will look at the conversion in later detail at the passages when we meet them.

At this point, the church enjoyed a time of peace. "It was strengthened: and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord (9:31).

VI. POINTS FOR HOME

1. God's hand moves in history.
2. God's hand moves in your life and mine.
3. Thank God we hear his message.
4. God's not for sale.
5. Accept God and give your heart to his purposes.