

Peter and Paul

They are the two great characters of the stories in Acts. Peter as a leader in the early Church confronts those who oppose Jesus and starts the Church on a journey to include the Gentiles. Paul takes up the baton and heads out taking the Gospel into the known world. Within a few years of the death of Jesus the message is spreading throughout the known world. The Roman Empire is the first continent spanning empire in European history. Without the "Pax Romana" (literally "Roman Peace") the gospel could not have spread as rapidly across the continent.

Paul's End

Luke's account ends abruptly. Given all the previous detail about trials and charges this seems strange. Most commentators believe that the case against Paul was dropped and even that between 62-65AD Paul was a free man and may even have made a fourth journey as far as Spain (He said he wanted to in Romans 15). However by 66AD he is in prison again in Rome and not just house arrest. Christian tradition states he was beheaded in 67AD in Rome. His tomb is believed to be located some 3 miles south east of the Vatican in Rome.

The Holy Spirit

The main character in this book is definitely the Holy Spirit. Where he was given on a special basis in the Old Testament and through the physical presence of Jesus in the Gospels he is now present with every believer. In fact the visible working of the Holy Spirit is enough to convince Peter and Paul that Gentiles can be believers in Jesus. He has several roles:

Motivator – he guides the church in mission, sending them out and even telling them where to go.

Empowerer – the Spirit enables the church to be what it ought to be and the strength to follow Jesus.

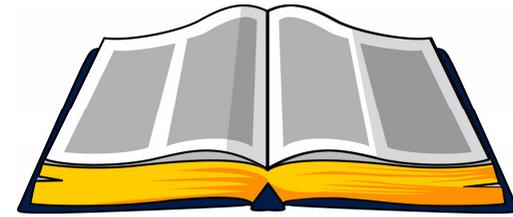
Giver – the Spirit gives gifts, healing, prophecy, administration, hospitality and many more.

Trainer – the Spirit teaches us more about God and brings us wisdom and insight.

Communicator – The Spirit gives messages from God.

Encourager – the Spirit is the companion, the enthuser, the helper, the friend.

Without the Spirit Christianity would become a set of ideals. The Spirit is God's presence with the early Church and with us too. All that they had is available to us.



A YEAR WITH THE BIBLE

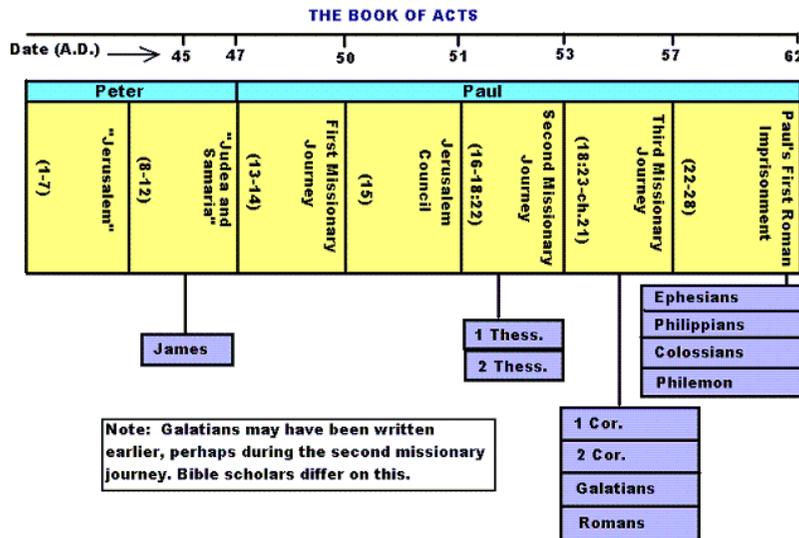
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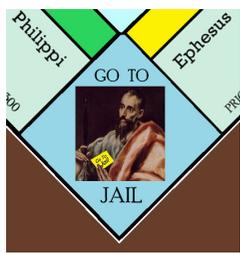
ACTS

The book of Acts, sometimes called the Acts of the Apostles is an amazing story of conversion, faith, hardship and struggle. The story starts with the disciples having been left by Jesus and then filled with the Holy Spirit. 3,000 believers are added to the church on day 1 and the Church grows. The authorities aren't happy and try to stop Peter and John but even putting them in jail doesn't work as the Holy Spirit breaks them out, gaining a few converts on the way. Saul leads the opposition to the Jesus followers – called "The Way" and then Stephen preaches his first sermon and is stoned to death (not because the sermon was bad!!) The church is scattered but God uses this to reach more people. Gentiles (non-Jews) start to hear the Good news and believe. God, then Peter, then the early Church include them as followers of "The Way". Persecution continues and Saul goes up to Damascus with a warrant to arrest believers, but on the way God stops him in his tracks. He becomes a follower himself and begins speaking to Gentiles about Jesus. Barnabas believes Saul, now called Paul, is genuine and brings him back to Jerusalem. They are both sent on a missionary journey to the Gentiles but they fall out and separate. Paul carries on into what is modern day Turkey and preaches despite opposition. It is at Antioch that believers in Jesus are first called "Christians". His second journey takes him to those churches again but also on into Greece where he continues preaching. A third journey sees the Churches strengthened but still more opposition. Eventually Paul is arrested and imprisoned in Caesarea in Palestine for over a year before Paul appeals to the Roman Emperor (Paul is a Roman citizen having been born in Tarsus (a city in modern day Turkey). He is taken by ship to Rome but the journey is perilous. After a stop at Crete they are shipwrecked off Malta and nearly die. Paul eventually reaches Rome but is imprisoned.

Acts is full of amazing encounters and astounding miracles. The Holy Spirit is at work in the early Church in an amazing way – some have suggested the book should be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. From the day of Pentecost to the miracles in Jerusalem; Phillip's preaching and miraculous journeys to the death of Stephen and the conversion of Saul it is an amazing account of faith and a growing sense of the universal nature of the message of Jesus. The accounts of Paul's preaching and journeys are an incredible account of faith in the face of adversity. We get a fascinating glimpse of Luke's journeys with Paul in several passages where he says "we" went and did. The sense of being with Paul, and Luke on their journeys is inescapable. The book ends with Paul in prison, what we know of his fate we learn from other sources; Luke leaves us with Paul in jail but preaching Jesus.



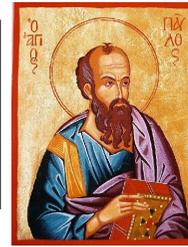
Paul reaches Rome and is placed under house arrest. He continues to write to Churches and preach the Good News



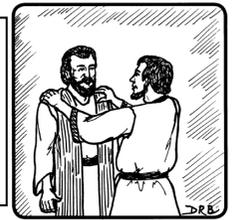
Paul is arrested in Jerusalem and is sent to Rome. He is shipwrecked in Malta.



Paul makes a second journey through Asia minor and into Greece. Churches start in Phillipi, Thesalonica, Corinth and Athens. His third journey visits Asia Minor and Greece.



Paul and Barnabas are called to Jerusalem to face the council over preaching to the Jews. They are sent on a missionary journey. They fall out and Paul continues to Asia Minor (Turkey)



Church is scattered north towards Syria and south towards Egypt. Peter has a vision which overrules the Jewish food laws and Holy Spirit reaches Gentiles



Saul meets Jesus on the way to Damascus and becomes a follower called Paul.

Stephen is stoned to death for preaching Jesus. Saul of Tarsus oversees the execution



Key events in Acts

Starting at Pentecost ->



Pentecost - The disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit - 120 believers become over 3,000 in one day.



Peter and John cause a stir in Jerusalem by preaching and healing in Jesus' name. Holy Spirit organises jail break!