

Session 7

The early church

The first believers met together to share in fellowship with one another. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the New Testament tell us of the growth of the early church, from a handful of frightened people to a movement involving thousands throughout the Roman empire. A key person in this rapid growth was the Apostle Paul who wrote most of the letters in the New Testament.

7.1 The preaching of the apostles

Acts 2: Pentecost

After Jesus had ascended to heaven, the apostles were meeting together on the day of Pentecost, one of the feasts in the Law of Moses. They received gifts of the Holy Spirit to assist them in preaching the gospel. Read Acts 2.

1. What did the apostles see and hear when the Spirit came upon them? Why do you think Jesus caused these phenomena to occur?
2. What gifts did the apostles show after receiving the Holy Spirit?
3. Were they speaking in other known languages, or some new language?
4. What was Peter's message to the people?
5. Why were the people "cut to the heart" (v37)?
6. What did Peter tell them to do?
7. What were the four things to which they each devoted themselves?
8. What lessons are there for us in these events?

The book of Acts is the record of the work of the apostles after Jesus went to heaven. It is the record of men who had been transformed from frightened, disillusioned people to a group who fearlessly proclaimed what they knew to be true—the resurrection of their Lord.

For many of them it would eventually cost them their lives, but perhaps their attitude is best summed up in the words Peter spoke to the Jewish rulers who demanded they stop their preaching. He said simply “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard”. Acts 4:20

Jesus’ physical resurrection from the grave was the focus of the apostles’ preaching. They and other believers were witnesses of the miracle of his resurrection. This became the witnesses’ message of hope—they preached the Gospel, the good news concerning the name of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. Acts 2:22–32; 3:15; 4:10; 1 Corinthians 15:3–6,12–26

Many people believed, repented of their sins and were baptised into Jesus Christ. Believers identified with Christ’s sacrifice by being completely immersed in water. They rose from the water to begin a new life in Christ. Acts 8:5,12,14,25
Romans 6:1–8

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of their preaching efforts, the establishment of the groups of believers and the difficulties these believers faced.

Holy Spirit gifts

God gave the early believers the Holy Spirit gifts. These were for:

1. the writing of the New Testament (2 Timothy 3:16);
2. the testing of writings to see if they were inspired of God (1 John 4:1);
3. establishing the believers in sound doctrine and practices (John 16:13);
4. opposing error (Ephesians 4:7–14).

The Holy Spirit gifts appear to have ceased with the death of the apostles. The completion of the New Testament writings brought to an end the necessity of these gifts.

7.2 Saul the Pharisee

Acts 9: On the road to Damascus

Saul was a Pharisee and a violent enemy of the first believers. He strongly opposed the new Christian movement because he saw it as a threat to the Jewish faith which he upheld vigorously. Read Acts 9:1–31.

1. How was Saul persecuting Jesus?
2. How would Ananias feel going to see Saul?
3. Why do you think Jesus wanted Saul to be his apostle?
4. How was Saul able to start preaching immediately that Jesus was the Son of God and the Christ?
5. How would you have reacted if you were a believer in Jerusalem and Saul was claiming to be converted (v26)?
6. Why did the Jews want to kill Saul (v23,29)?
7. What does it mean to “live in the fear of the Lord” (v31)?

Saul became a leader in the early church. Later, his name was changed to Paul. He is known as the “apostle to the gentiles” and is famous as writer of the majority of the New Testament letters.

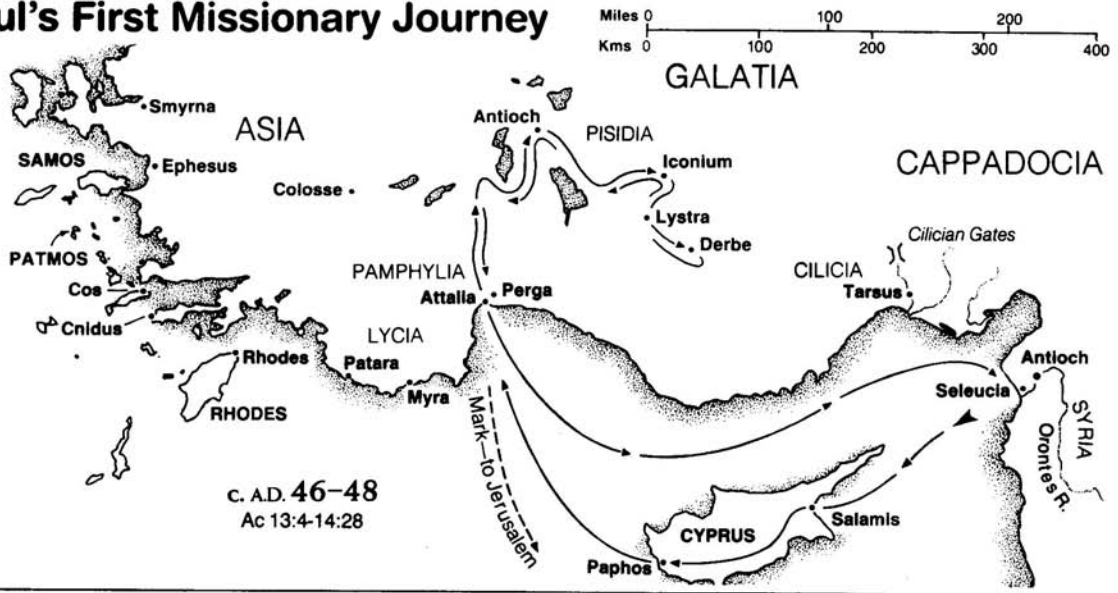
Paul spent much of his later life travelling around the Roman empire preaching the gospel and establishing new churches. He made at least three major missionary journeys which are recorded in Acts. These are shown on the maps on the following pages.

Many of Paul’s letters were written to churches he had established and were intended to educate, encourage and when necessary, to correct, when he wasn’t able to be there in person. His letters to churches are listed below.

Letter	Church
Romans	Rome
1&2 Corinthians	Corinth
Galatians	Various in Galatia
Ephesians	Ephesus
Philippians	Philippi
Colossians	Colosse
1&2 Thessalonians	Thessalonica

He also wrote letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon to advise and assist them in their Christian life.

Paul's First Missionary Journey

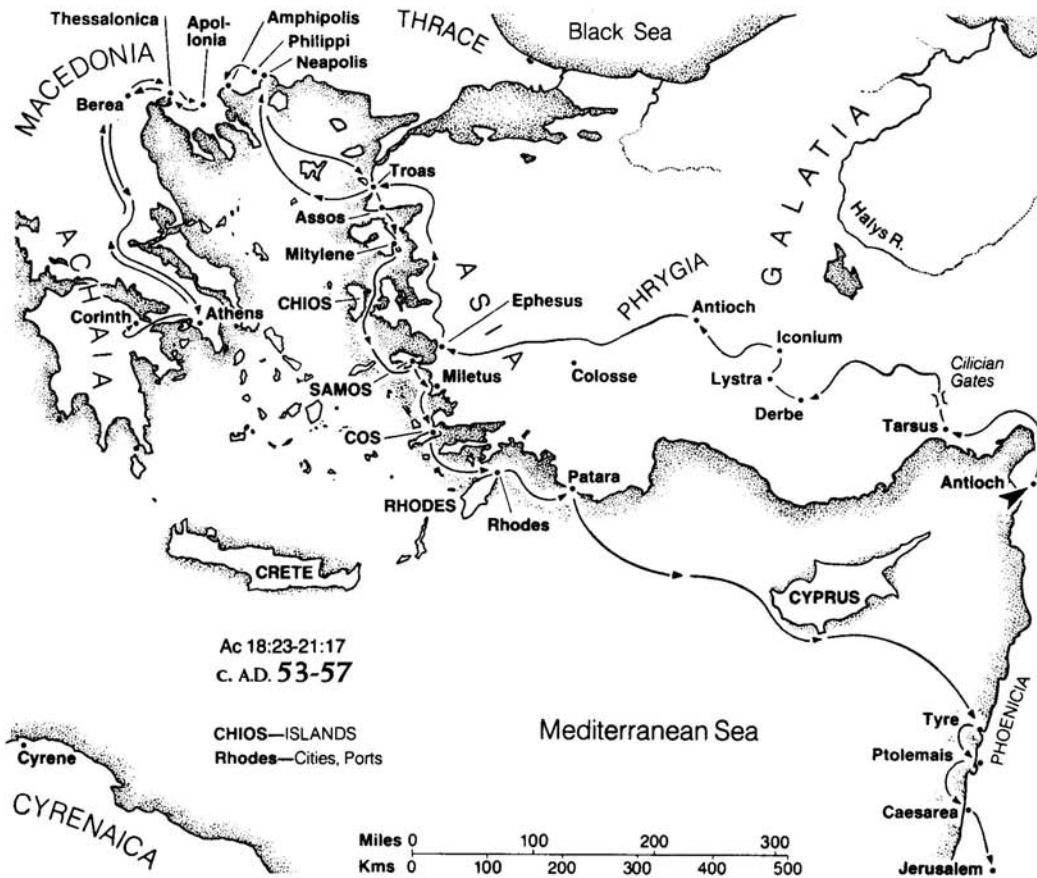


Paul's Second Missionary Journey

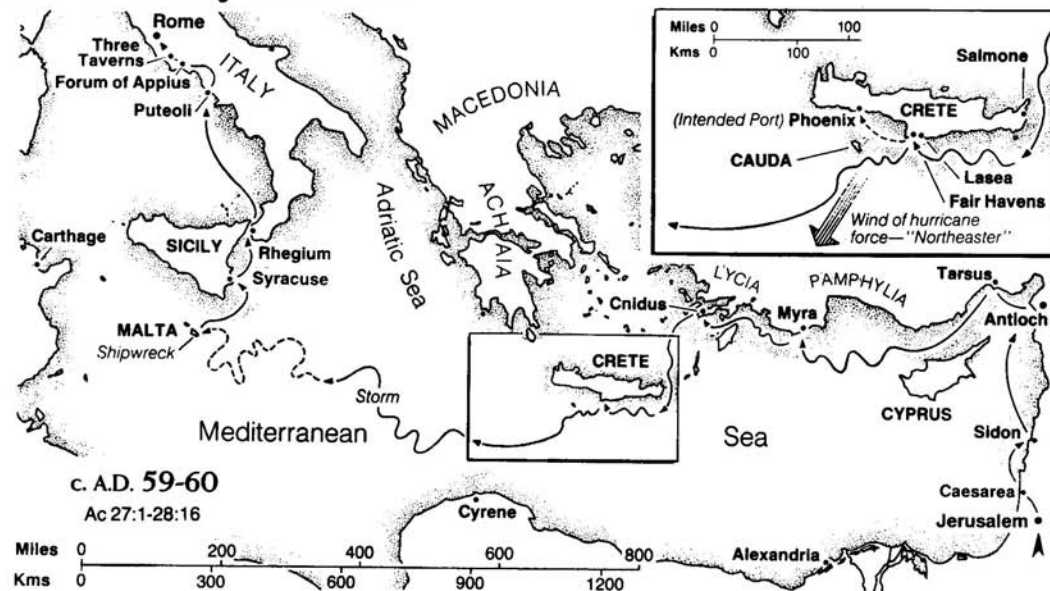


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Paul's Third Missionary Journey



Paul's Journey to Rome



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1 Corinthians 13: essay on love

This is one of the most famous chapters in the Bible, written by Paul to the church in Corinth (Greece). He is arguing that spiritual gifts are of no benefit unless exercised in love. Read 1 Corinthians 13.

1. What did Paul mean by “the tongues of angels” (v1)?
2. Why is love so all-important? How is it greater than all other gifts?
3. In verses 4–7, there are fifteen ways of describing love. Find a single word summarizing each of them. How can you show each of these attributes of love in your own life?
4. In verses 8–10, Paul implies that the spirit gifts would disappear when “perfection comes”. What time does he mean?

Eventually Paul was arrested for his preaching and taken to Rome where he stayed in prison for two years (Acts 28). It appears he was then released and was able to further his missionary work before he was arrested again. There is a tradition that he was beheaded, on command of the emperor Nero, just outside Rome in AD 67.

7.3 The first century church

The early believers faced stiff and sometimes violent opposition from the Jewish leaders. Later, the Romans also strongly opposed the new movement. Many people were killed. The most notorious slaughter of Christians was at the hand of Nero in AD 66. They became scapegoats for the fire of Rome and many were killed fighting wild animals.

Wrong ideas from within the groups of believers was also a problem. People found it difficult to totally give up their old Jewish and pagan beliefs. They therefore tried to blend these ideas with their new beliefs in Christ Jesus. The most difficult problem came from Jews who insisted that all believers, Jew or Gentile, had to keep certain parts of the law. In particular, circumcision became a contentious issue.

Homework

1. Read Acts 1:1–11.
 - (a) What did Jesus teach his apostles about their future work before he ascended to heaven. Does this still apply today?
 - (b) What do the verses teach about the return of Jesus?

2. Read Acts 4:32 – 5:16.
 - (a) What essentials of fellowship are demonstrated in 4:32–37? See one result of them in v33.
 - (b) What made the sin of Ananias and Sapphira so grave and what led to it? Why was such a divine judgement necessary? What result did it produce?
 - (c) What example can you follow from the action of Barnabas and what danger can you avoid from the attitude of Ananias and Sapphira?

3. Read Colossians 3–4
 - (a) What results, positive and negative, should follow from being “raised with Christ”. In other words, what should the experience make us (i) do and (ii) stop doing?
 - (b) Make a list from 3:12–17 of the divinely intended characteristics of active Christian living. Prayerfully examine your own living in the light of these standards.
 - (c) In 4:7–18, several people are mentioned. Find out where else these people are mentioned in the New Testament. What do we know about each of them?