

## CHAPTER 61

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### The Book of Acts Provides the Context for Many of Paul's Letters

**T**he book of Acts picks up the New Testament story after the resurrection of Jesus. The book opens with the resurrected Christ giving his disciples instructions on spreading the good news of the cross and his resurrection “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Jesus promises to send the Spirit after he ascends, something that happens on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13).

The events of Pentecost mark the birth of the early apostolic church in Jerusalem. The book of Acts follows the triumphs and travails of the followers of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit to advance the kingdom of God. The central characters through the first twelve chapters are Stephen, Peter, and James. That changes in Acts 13, when the Jerusalem church sends Paul and Barnabas to preach to the gentiles.

Paul's conversion had been recorded earlier (Acts 9), but Acts 13 changes the focus of the early Jesus-movement to the journeys of Paul. While Acts includes other figures who traveled with Paul (e.g., Barnabas, Silas, John Mark, Luke, Timothy), Paul is the central figure of the book from that point on.

Anyone who reads through Acts will know that Paul traveled widely, preaching the gospel of Israel's Messiah to people of all

nations. Acts tells us Paul went on three “missionary journeys” to gentile nations. Acts 13:1–14:28 chronicles the first trek, during which Paul visited places like Antioch, Perga, Pisidian Antioch (which is in Phrygia), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. His second journey is the focus of Acts 15:36–18:22. His itinerary included Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. His third and final trip, one that ended in Jerusalem with his imprisonment, is described in Acts 18:23–21:14. Paul revisited places he’d previously ventured as well as new locales; Macedonia, Philippi, Troas, Rhodes, Tyre, and Ephesus are among them. Paul spent three years in this last city.

Experts in Paul’s life and ministry have been able to determine that these missionary trips spanned roughly ten years. If we restrict ourselves to the churches named in Acts 13–21, Paul started just over a dozen churches. Chances are good he started more since he visited regions during his journeys on which Acts offers no additional details. Many of the churches that are named received letters from Paul, a good number of which we possess in our New Testament. Understanding those letters (referred to as “epistles”) requires paying careful attention to Paul’s travels in the book of Acts. Every letter Paul wrote was prompted by a specific occasion. Without keeping the original circumstances that led to his correspondences, we’ll fail to grasp the meaning of Paul’s words in many places.



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