

Men's Group 19th November 2013

We have five weeks to go before Christmas, and fourteen chapters to do. That averages almost 3 chapters a week.

What I've provisionally scheduled for this week is both the Council of Jerusalem (**Acts 15**) and Paul's Second Missionary Journey (**Acts 16 to 18.22**). This is quite a lot, so we'll see how we get on. If we can get through this section there should be no trouble finishing the book on schedule.

Acts 15 The Council of Jerusalem

This was around AD 50. It was a major event, obviously. It starts with a speech by Peter, then testimony from Paul and Barnabas, then a summing up and judgment by James (the brother of Jesus). **Who, on this evidence, is now the de facto head of the Jerusalem church?**

The judgment here is about the behaviour of Gentile Christians, but what about the Jewish Christians? **Does the judgment apply to all, or is this a step along the road of 'two-track' Christianity?** How does it accord with subsequent practice in Paul's churches?

15.1 *"you cannot be saved . . ."* In this context what does *saved* mean?

15.8 NIV says *"showed that he accepted them by giving them the Holy Spirit . . ."* – does this mean you need the Holy Spirit to be accepted by God? (the literal Greek is slightly different, 'God bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit')

15.28 *"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."* This is an interesting juxtaposition. What do we make of it?

15.36 – 41 Paul's bust-up with Barnabas. They'd been through so much together, for so long, such a decisive split is extraordinary, and must have been extremely painful on both sides. These things happen . . . These were not spiritual supermen, just ordinary men like you and I, right?

The Second Missionary Journey

The itinerary was:

1. Overland to Turkey to revisit the previous sites
2. They are diverted away from Bithynia (on the northern, Black Sea coast of Turkey) where by implication they had intended to go, to Troas on the western coast
3. Northern Greece—Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea etc.
4. Southern Greece—Athens, then Corinth for 18 months
5. Home again via Cenchrae, Ephesus (west Turkey), Caesarea (Palestine), to Antioch.

Chronology

The key fixed point here is Paul's presence in Corinth during the proconsulship of Gallio. For those interested in the historical aspects, I've attached a PDF discussing the evidence that places Paul in Corinth in 51 – 52 AD.

16.3 Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised has been much debated over the years without any firm conclusion. Slightly ironic if one purpose of the journey (v.4) was to deliver the letter which said that circumcision was unnecessary...



Asia province (v. 6) is not our Asia, but the western coast of Turkey, including Troas.

16.10 Here the first use of 'we' in the narrative, to indicate that Luke is now travelling with Paul. He will be with him for much of the next 8 years, including his final journey to Rome around 60 AD.

Acts 17 Paul is still preaching in the synagogues. Another mention here of the '**God-fearers**'—Gentile converts to Judaism. It seems likely that this group played a key and often understated role in the birth of the Christian church. The inscription at Aphrodisias was found in 1976 by the way. I've attached the first page of an academic paper discussing the Aphrodisias find.

WHAT NOW HAPPENS IS THAT due to the trouble stirred up in Berea, Paul is shipped down to Athens, leaving Timothy and Silas to take care of unfinished business in the north, with instructions to follow. Timothy and Silas take longer than expected, and by the time they come south Paul has already moved on to Corinth.

This is the point when Paul starts writing letters. **1 and 2 Thessalonians were written during this Athens-Corinth period**, 51 – 52 AD; and 1 Thessalonians was carried north by Timothy who seems to have been running back and forth as a courier.

Acts 17. 16 – 34 Paul preaches on Mars Hill

This is the first time Paul has found himself in a major preaching situation to Gentiles with no Jewish background at all. **How does he approach it?**

17.33 *"God proved the gospel by raising Jesus from the dead."* For Paul, it's not about blind faith, but about hard facts. History is important!

18.17 It seems probable that this Sosthenes is the same as the Sosthenes mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1.1.—presumably he would have gone with Paul and his party to Ephesus, which is where 1 Corinthians was written from.

18.22 via Ephesus to Caesarea and then home to Antioch. When it says "he went up and greeted the church" presumably that means the church in Jerusalem. He would have no other reason to go to Caesarea, which would be the seaport for Jerusalem access. Paul always bends over backwards to try and maintain good relations with the Jerusalem people, though it's not always easy.