

Acts Ch. 8–12

STUDY NOTES



SECTION 1: THE JESUS MOVEMENT

00:00–01:29

Jon: During the first century when the Romans ruled the known world, a grassroots, counter-cultural movement was born in the eastern end of the empire.

Tim: Yeah. It started among the Jewish people.

Jon: Who for centuries now, have been scattered around the known world.

Tim: But no matter where they lived, or what language they spoke, they kept their identity as the family of Abraham, devoted to the one true God.

Jon: And every year, they would travel to Jerusalem for sacred festivals. And during one of these, the feast of Pentecost, the visitors encountered a group of Jews who could somehow speak in everyone's native dialect.

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Tim: Yeah. They were telling stories about a man named Jesus, who had been executed by the Romans. They claimed he had risen from the dead and was now exalted as the true King of Israel and the whole world! And this Jesus was now calling people to adopt his upside-down set of values and live under his rule, called The Kingdom of God.

Jon: Thousands of Jews decided to stay in Jerusalem and join the movement. It grew in size and in influence and gained favor with people.

Tim: But not with the Jerusalem temple leaders. They viewed this whole thing as a dangerous religious sect, and they even executed one of its leaders, named Stephen.¹

Jon: It's no longer safe in Jerusalem, and so most of the followers flee for the outlying land called Judea.

Tim: And you might think that's the end of the story, but actually, this tragedy became the way the movement spread outside Jerusalem. That's where the second part of the book of Acts begins.

SECTION 2: THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

01:30–02:01

Jon: The scattered followers end up in surprising places, like Samaria, where their ancient enemies live.

Tim: Yeah, and Luke shows us how all of these unexpected people start following Jesus, like a sorcerer from Samaria, who has to learn that the way of Jesus isn't about gaining power but giving it up to serve others.

1. Note that Stephen's death is a tragedy that becomes a redemptive turning point that furthers the next stage of the

Kingdom of God spreading outward to the next horizon: Judea and Samaria, following the map of Acts 1:8.



Jon: There's also a story about an Ethiopian delegate, who after discussing the scroll of the prophet Isaiah with Phillip, decides to join the movement.²

Tim: Yeah. Jesus is expanding his movement out into Judea and Samaria, just like he said he would.

Jon: Which is great!

SECTION 3: THE TRANSFORMATION OF SAUL

02:02–02:56

Tim: But back in Jerusalem, we meet Saul of Tarsus.³ He's part of the religious elite who oppose the new movement, and he's finding and arresting Jesus' followers anywhere he can.

Jon: This is a cruel guy.

2. You can read this account in Acts 8:26-40.

3. Saul/Paul is introduced in 8:1-3 in the execution of Stephen, but then his story is told in stages that interweave with the story of the growing Jesus movement in chapters 8-12.

Tim: But think about it from his perspective. In the past, Israel had turned away to other gods and to false prophets, leading to disaster. He believed he was protecting Israel and God's honor by getting rid of these people.

Jon: And then Saul hears that the movement's spread north to Damascus, so he sets out there to find and arrest more followers.

Tim: And on the way, Saul has this sudden encounter with the risen Jesus himself. Jesus asks Saul why he's fighting against him, and then Jesus commissions Saul to now represent him to Israel and to the nations.⁴

Jon: Saul is stunned and speechless.

Tim: And so he ends up in Damascus, but now he's announcing the good news about the Jesus he had just been attacking.

Jon: And no one saw this coming.

SECTION 4: THE ROMAN CENTURION

02:57-04:16

Tim: Totally, and the same goes for what happened next. Over in the port city of Caesarea, there was a Roman centurion named Cornelius. And he represents everything the Jewish people would hate about the Roman occupation.⁵

Jon: An angel appears to him, and he tells him to call for a man named Peter. So Peter comes, and he finds Cornelius and his friends and his family all gathered together in his home.

Tim: Yeah, and this is scandalous. Jewish people don't enter a non-Jewish home to avoid ritual impurity.

Jon: So what's Peter going to do?

4. You can read this account in Acts 9:1-9. 5. The conversion of the Roman centurion can be found in Acts 10:1-48.

Tim: Well, right before this, Peter had a vision. God brought to him a collection of animals that his people were forbidden to eat, and then God said to Peter, "eat these."

Jon: And this is shocking to Peter. He says, "I've never eaten anything impure."

Tim: And God responds, "Don't call impure what I have made pure." And then that's it; the vision was over.

Jon: So Peter is going to start a new diet?

Tim: No! He's an Israelite, and he's honored these customary food laws his entire life. The vision was preparing him for this moment, of him standing among "impure" non-Israelites. And he realizes that God is declaring these people are a part of the family of Abraham.

Jon: And so Peter decides to stay and tell them about Jesus.

Tim: And the Holy Spirit shows up just as he did at Pentecost, but now it's for a Roman centurion and his non-Jewish family!

Jon: The movement has broken out.⁶

SECTION 5: THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH

04:17–05:28

Tim: And so back in Jerusalem, Peter is now telling the other apostles about what happened. And they start getting reports about even more non-Jewish people following Jesus up in the big, trade city north called Antioch.⁷ So they send a man there, named Barnabas, to check things out.

6. Luke has offered multiple portraits of Jewish and non-Jewish converts to demonstrate the cultural diversity of the early Jesus movement.

7. Antioch was the largest Roman, cosmopolitan city in that part of the empire (near modern Antakya, Turkey). At its largest, it had a population of 500,000, second in size only to Rome and Alexandria.

Jon: Barnabas finds the Jesus movement alive and well in Antioch, and he finds it's made up of people from all over the world!

Tim: And so Barnabas recruits Saul to come and work with him in Antioch for a year. They're teaching, living among the people there, watching the movement grow.⁸

Jon: The church in Antioch was the first international Jesus community, and it is where Jesus' followers were first called "Christians," the Christ-ones.

Tim: And so the way of Jesus was transformed from a group of Messianic Jews in Jerusalem into the multi-ethnic Jesus movement spreading through the world. Their faith was the same; it was centered on the good news about the crucified Jesus who is the King of all nations.

Jon: But that message and their new way of life was confusing, even threatening, to the average Roman citizens living around them.

Tim: And the resulting conflict is what we'll explore next as this movement goes global, or as Jesus said, "to the ends of the earth."

8. The transition of Peter as the leader of the movement to Paul as leader, highlights Jesus' mission to include all people in his Kingdom. During the Jerusalem (chs. 1-8) and Judea and Samaria (chs. 8-12) phases of the Jesus

movement, Peter is the representative leader/disciple. However, chs. 8-12 also create the transition into the "to the ends of the earth" phase (chs. 13-28), in which Paul will become the representative leader/disciple.