

# LifeChange

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing  
encounter with God's Word*

# ACTS

*From tiny beginnings among Jesus' disciples,  
the church exploded into a worldwide  
force in just a few years.*

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NAVPRESS 

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*Acts*

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24 23 22 21 20 19 18  
38 37 36 35 34 33 32

# CONTENTS

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How to Use This Study	5
One—What Is Acts? (Overview)	9
Timeline of Acts	19
Map of the Roman Empire	20
Two—Preparation (1:1-26)	21
Themes in Acts	32
Three—Pentecost (2:1-41)	35
Four—Miracle (3:1-26)	47
Five—Confrontation (4:1-31; 5:12-42)	55
Six—Community (2:42-47; 4:32-5:11; 6:1-7)	65
Seven—First Martyr (6:8-8:3)	75
Eight—Philip’s Journeys (8:4-40)	85
Nine—Saul Appointed (9:1-31; 11:19-30)	95
Ten—Peter Moves Out (9:32-11:18)	105
Eleven—To Asia Minor (12:1-13:52)	113
Twelve—Gentile Christians? (14:1-15:35)	125
Thirteen—Paul and Silas (15:36-17:15)	133
Fourteen—Athens and Corinth (17:16-18:23)	147
Fifteen—Ephesus (18:24-19:41)	161
Sixteen—Paul’s Farewells (20:1-21:16)	173
Seventeen—Arrest in Jerusalem (21:17-23:11)	181
Eighteen—Prisoner in Caesarea (23:11-26:32)	191
Nineteen—Journey to Rome (27:1-28:31)	201
Twenty—Review	211
Study Aids	217

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*SERIES EDITOR: KAREN LEE-THORP*

# HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

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## Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book
  2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides
  3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible
  4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole
  5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image
- Each lesson in this study is designed to take sixty to ninety minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

## Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

*Optional Application.* Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

*For Thought and Discussion.* Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These

questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

*For Further Study.* These include (a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses and (b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

(Note: At the end of lessons 2 through 19, you are given the option of outlining the passage just studied. Although the outline is optional, you will probably find it worthwhile.)

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

## Overview and details

The study begins with an overview of Acts. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lesson 1, you will lay the foundation for your study of Acts by asking yourself, *Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?*

Then, in lesson 2, you will begin analyzing successive passages of James in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you to see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

Finally, in the last lesson, you will review the whole book, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

## Kinds of questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray,

“Lord, what do You want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Meditating on verses is an option in several lessons. Its purpose is to let biblical truth sink into your inner convictions so that you will increasingly be able to act on this truth as a natural way of life. You may want to find a quiet place to spend five minutes each day repeating the verse(s) to yourself. Think about what each word, phrase, and sentence means to you. At intervals throughout the rest of the day, remind yourself of the verse(s).

## Study aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 217. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

## Scripture versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the King James Version (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as The Living Bible is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

## Memorizing and meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.



## For group study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen's studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly, or omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called "For the Group." This section gives advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each "For the Group" at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Page 220 lists some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

# OVERVIEW

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## What Is Acts?

The Holy Spirit has given us in the New Testament four accounts of Jesus' ministry but only one book on the early years of the church. It is called the Acts of the Apostles, but in fact it tells us only selected things about a few of the apostles. What about John, who gave us five of the New Testament books? What about Matthew, who wrote one gospel? What about Andrew, Thomas, Bartholemew, James the Younger, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Matthias? Acts is even silent on the last fifteen years or so of Peter's ministry. Clearly, just as God has not chosen to give us a complete biography of Jesus, so He has determined not to inspire a thorough history of the church's beginnings.<sup>1</sup>

## What is Acts?

If Acts is not a complete history of the church's first three decades, then what is it? Our first clue is that it is the second of a two-volume work. An early convert to Christianity named Luke wrote a gospel and Acts for a Roman aristocrat named Theophilus (see Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). Luke was the "beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14, NASB) of the apostle Paul. He traveled with Paul on part of his second missionary journey. Some years later, Luke went from Philippi to Jerusalem with Paul, and when Paul was arrested there, Luke accompanied him on his harrowing journey to Rome. We surmise these facts from the way Luke changed from the third person ("they") to the first ("we") in parts of Acts (see 16:10-17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16).

We don't know whether Luke was a Gentile, a Gentile convert to Judaism, or a Jew before he became a Christian. His writings show that he was steeped in the urban, Gentile, Greek-speaking culture of the Roman Empire; Luke 1:1-4 is written in the literary Greek of the educated elite, and Acts describes Gentile kings, philosophers, and legal details accurately. On the other hand, Luke was also well versed in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Jews all over the Empire used.

About Theophilus we can only speculate. His name means “lover of God,” but it was a common Greek name and was probably not made up by Luke. In Luke’s day, people often wrote for and dedicated their works to wealthy patrons, who helped pay for publishing the books. Theophilus was probably an educated Gentile aristocrat, either a new convert or an interested pagan. Luke may have wanted to help confirm this man and others like him in the faith by showing that it rested on firm historical foundations and the power of God.

When was Acts written? The earliest would be about AD 62, where chapter 28 leaves off abruptly. However, Luke seems to be looking back on those events from at least some distance. On the other hand, the book gives no hint of the deaths of Paul, Peter, or James, nor of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, nor even of Paul’s letters. Would a book written after AD 90 partly about Paul have ignored his letters, which were so influential by then? Most scholars who think Acts is an accurate account by Luke (as opposed to fiction) guess that the book was written over some time and finished “towards AD 70.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Look at Luke’s prologue to his whole work (see Luke 1:1-4). What does he say Luke-Acts is meant to be?

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2. In Acts 1:1-2, Luke summarizes volume 1 (Luke’s gospel) as an introduction to volume 2 (Acts). He says the gospel is about “all that Jesus began to do and to teach” until His ascension into heaven forty days after the resurrection. If Luke’s gospel is about what Jesus began to do and to teach, what is Acts probably about?

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3. What does Acts 1:8 tell you about the purpose of the book?

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4. Read 1:15, 2:41, 4:4, 5:14, 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, and 28:31.

a. What do these verses have in common, and what progression do you see?

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b. What does this pattern tell you about Acts?

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Acts does not tell us *all* that Jesus did through the apostles, but only some of what He did through some of them. We learn nothing about the spread of the gospel to “Crete (Titus 1:5), Illyricum (Romans 15:19—modern Yugoslavia), or Pontus, Cappadocia and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1), not to mention the church’s expansion eastward toward Mesopotamia or southward toward Egypt.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, Luke focuses on one line of geographical expansion: from Jerusalem to Rome. Therefore, Acts 1:8 is only a partial clue to the book’s theme.

Also, Luke is not concerned to give us the apostles’ biographies. He begins with the apostles in Jerusalem, then ignores most of them to focus on Peter and two non-apostles. Then he turns from Peter to Paul, and he ends the book at last with Paul a prisoner in Rome probably destined to live several more years.

Moreover, Luke does not tell us all we might like to know about organization, lifestyle, and worship in the early church. He gives us glimpses of details, but these are incidental to the focus of the story.

What is the main focus? The best way to find this out (indeed, the best way to begin studying any book) is to read it several times, noting first impressions and the major sections. If possible, you should stop now and read through Acts once. Then, get a piece of paper, go back through the book, and write down what each of the following sections is about:

1:1–6:7  
6:8–9:31  
9:32–12:24  
12:25–16:5  
16:6–19:20  
19:21–28:31

This whole procedure should take you four to five hours, but Acts is a terrific story so it should be fun. However, if you don't have time for this kind of preparation, you can look at the following outlines before you read the book.

Acts can be outlined in several ways. We can divide chapters 1–12 (which focus on Peter and the Jewish mission) from chapters 13–28 (which focus on Paul and the Gentile mission). Or we can use 1:8 as a framework, like this:

Jerusalem (1:1–7:60)  
Samaria and Judea (8:1–10:48)  
The ends of the earth (11:1–28:31)

Third, we can combine these two views, like this:<sup>4</sup>

- I. Peter and the Beginnings of the Church in Palestine (chapters 1–12)
  - A. “Throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria” (1:1–9:31; see 9:31)
  - B. “As far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch” (9:32–12:25; see 11:19)
- II. Paul and the Expansion of the Church from Antioch to Rome (chapters 13–28)
  - A. “Throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (13:1–15:35; see 16:6)
  - B. “Over to Macedonia” (15:36–21:16; see 16:9)
  - C. “To Rome” (21:17–28:31; see 28:14)

Finally, we can use those “progress reports” you observed in question 4, like this:

(1:1–6:7) *The earliest church in Jerusalem*: Preaching for Jews, common life among Jewish Christians, worship at the temple and synagogues, opposition from other Jews. Concludes with a resolved disagreement between Greek- and Aramaic-speaking believers.

(6:8–9:31) *The first geographical expansion*: Greek-speaking Jewish Christians (“Hellenists”) bring the gospel to Jews, Samaritans (semi-Jews), and a convert to Judaism. The martyrdom of Stephen (a Hellenist) causes the expansion, and the conversion of Paul (a Jew from outside Palestine) partly results from the expansion.

(9:32–12:24) *The first expansion to the Gentiles*: To make this breakthrough, God uses Peter (an Aramaic-speaking Jew, a “Hebrew”) rather than the Hellenists. The Hellenists begin evangelizing Gentiles in Antioch.

(12:25–16:5) *The first geographical expansion into the Gentile world*: Paul leads. When the church decides that Gentile Christians need not live as Jews, the Gentile mission is free to explode. Opposition is still mainly Jewish.

(16:6–19:20) *Paul's westward expansion reaches Europe*. Jews continue to reject the gospel, and Gentiles continue to accept it. However, success

with some Gentiles produces opposition from others.

(19:21–28:31) *Paul reaches Rome with the gospel*. Paul suffers many trials patiently while innocent of wrongdoing.<sup>5</sup>

5. If you have not already done so, read the whole book of Acts, at one sitting if possible. It is one of the finest examples of the kind of history written in the ancient world. You will notice that it is not like the history written today; you'll see few dates but a great concern for the reader's enjoyment. The pace is fast, so you'll scarcely notice that the events of chapter 12 occurred some ten to thirteen years after those of chapter 2.

Use the outlines on page 12, the timeline on page 19, and the map of the Roman Empire on page 20 to guide your reading. If you want to remember any observations or questions, jot them in the space below. In particular, look for repeated words and patterns of events.

6. One main character dominates the whole of Acts. Who is that character, and what are some of his effects? (See, for instance, 1:8; 2:4; 4:8,31; 8:39; 9:31; 13:4; 15:28; 16:6-10; 20:22-24; 21:10-11.)

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7. From your observations so far, what seem to be the central themes, messages, or purposes of Acts?

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## Your response

### Study Skill—Application

Second Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that “all Scripture . . . is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” James 1:22 urges us to do what the Word says, not merely hear it. Therefore, the last step of Bible study is asking ourselves, “What difference should this passage make to my life? How should it make me want to think or act?” Application will require time, thought, prayer, and perhaps even discussion with another person.

If you sometimes have trouble finding a truth in a passage that is relevant to you, consider the following five questions:

- Is there a *sin* for me to avoid?
- Is there a *promise* for me to trust?
- Is there an *example* for me to follow?
- Is there a *command* for me to obey?
- How can this passage increase my *knowledge* of the Lord (not just knowledge about Him?)

You can recall these five questions by remembering the acronym SPECK—Sin, Promise, Example, Command, Knowledge.

Look for something specific you can do or pray about in response to the truth (the sin, promise, and so on) that is relevant to you. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in choosing and empower you in fulfilling your application. If your application is a change of attitude rather than an action, plan to pray about it daily for awhile, and ask God to show you circumstances in which you can act on your change of attitude.

8. The book of Acts is largely about how the church fulfilled its mission during its first thirty years (from Jesus' ascension to about AD 62). Why is it important for us to study this story? How is it relevant to us?

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9. a. Did you notice anything in your first reading of Acts that you want to remember and apply? If so, what is the truth you want to take to heart?

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- b. Ask God to show you how you can apply this truth, and write your thoughts and plans here.

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## For the group

This “For the Group” section and the ones in later lessons are intended to suggest ways of structuring your discussions. Feel free to select what suits your group.

The main goals of an introductory lesson are to get to know Acts in general and the people with whom you are going to study it. The group will benefit from having time to read the “How to Use This Study” section, the whole book of Acts, and the background in this lesson before diving into detailed study.

Later lessons will give more background as necessary on Luke, Jerusalem, the Roman Empire, and so on. You might make a list of group members’ questions and decide if they need to be answered right away. If so, see some sources of information. If not, watch for answers later in the study guide.

Some people may not be able to read all of Acts at one time. Encourage everyone to get through it at some point, even if some people need several sittings. (You can plan two meetings for this overview lesson—see suggestions under “Warm-up” below.)

**Worship.** Some groups like to begin meetings with prayer and/or singing. Some prefer to share requests for prayer at the beginning, but leave the actual prayer until after the study. Others prefer just to chat and have refreshments and then move to the study, leaving worship until the end. It is generally good to begin with at least a brief prayer for God’s guidance in the study.

**Warm-up.** The beginning of a new study is a good time to lay a foundation for honest sharing of ideas, for getting comfortable with each other, and for encouraging a sense of common purpose. One way to establish common ground is to talk about what each group member hopes to get out of your group—out of your study of Acts, and out of any prayer, singing, sharing, outreach, or anything else you might do together. You can include what you hope to give the group as well. Why are you studying the Bible, and Acts in particular? If you have someone write down each member’s hopes and expectations, then you can look back at these goals later to see if they are being met. You can then make changes in your meetings if necessary, such as planning more time for prayer or deciding to cover Acts more slowly.

You can take about fifteen minutes before discussing lesson 1 to discuss these goals. Or you can take a whole meeting to introduce the study, discuss the “How to Use This Study” section, and share your goals. In a second meeting, you can discuss questions 1–9. Doing this will allow the group more time to read Acts and complete lesson 1.

**Overview.** You can structure your discussion like this:

1. *How to Use This Study.* The group should have read this section at home. The leader can remind everyone of the main points and ask if anyone has questions about what to do. For example, point out the optional questions in the margins. These are available as group discussion questions,

ideas for application, and suggestions for further study. It is unlikely that anyone will have either the time or desire to answer all the optional questions and do all the applications. It is reasonable to expect a person to do *one* “Optional Application” for any given lesson. You might choose *two* “For Thought and Discussions” for your group discussion. If someone wants to write answers to the optional questions, suggest that he use a separate notebook. It will also be helpful for discussion notes, prayer requests, answers to prayer, application plans, and so on.

Note the observation-interpretation-application pattern in each lesson. Many of the numbered questions are observations and basic interpretations that lay the groundwork for deeper study. The meaty questions are sometimes in the margins. In your group discussion, you may prefer to move quickly through the observation questions in order to concentrate on questions that interest you. Or you may want to spend more time learning to observe details and leave deeper questions for future years.

Point out the study aids. If you own any, bring them in to show the group.

2. *First Impressions.* Ask questions to draw out the group’s impressions of Acts after one reading. Some possibilities are: “What is Acts about? What are your first impressions of the book? Who are some of the important characters? Tell something about each of those people. Did you enjoy reading the book? Why or why not? What kinds of things happen over and over in the book? What aspects of early church history do and don’t seem to have interested Luke? What did you learn about Luke, the gospel he wrote, and Acts from the background in lesson 1?”

If you let several people answer questions like these, you should put together a good picture of the book. Then, let some people answer questions 1–7.

3. *Questions.* Don’t forget to keep a list of the group’s questions as you discuss. You can try to answer them as you go through later lessons.
4. *Application.* If your group is not already familiar with how to apply Scripture to your lives, think of some sample ways you could apply something in Acts. Use the Study Skill—Application on pages 14–15. If the group already understands how to apply, give everyone a chance to share one truth that he or she would like to put into practice this week.

**Wrap-up.** This is a time to bring the discussion to a focused end and to make any announcements about the next lesson or meeting.

Some people tend to prepare for group discussions only one or two days before the meetings and then feel that it is too late to start an application. Tell the group that it is fine to be applying an insight from the previous lesson during the week when you are preparing the next lesson for discussion.

**Worship.** Thank God for the book of Acts and the people described in it. Praise Him for some particular things He has revealed to you about Himself through this book. Ask Him to enable you each to understand and apply what He says to you through Acts.

1. Other books called the Acts of John, the Acts of Peter and Paul, the Acts of Thomas, and so on were written during the church's first two centuries, but the church as a whole judged these to be largely fictional and not inspired by God.
2. F. F. Bruce, "The Acts of the Apostles," *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, ed. Donald Guthrie, et al. (London: InterVarsity, 1970), 968–969; I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 46–48.
3. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 92.
4. Adapted from the outline of Acts by Lewis Foster in Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 1643.
5. Adapted from the outline in Fee and Stuart, 90–91.

## Timeline of Acts

(All dates are approximate, based on F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 475.)

Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection; Pentecost	AD 30
Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:8–8:1)	33
Conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-19)	33
Paul visits Jerusalem to see Peter (Galatians 1:18)	35
Paul in Cilicia and Syria (Galatians 1:21; Acts 9:30)	35–46
Herod Agrippa I dies (Acts 12:19-23)	44
Paul visits Jerusalem to clarify the mission to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-10)	46
Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13–14)	47–48
Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)	49
Paul and Silas travel from Antioch to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (Acts 16–17)	49–50
Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18)	50–52
Paul visits Jerusalem	52
Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19)	52–55
Paul travels to Macedonia, Dalmatia, and Achaia (Acts 20)	55–57
Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 21:1–23:22)	May 57
Paul imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 23:23–26:32)	57–59
Paul sent to house arrest in Rome (Acts 27:1–28:31)	59–62

# Map of the Roman Empire

