

A Record Of Failures

Acts reveals many successes, but it does not overlook some failures that also teach eternal lessons about redemption. This book contains so many wonderful events that sometimes one is prone to forget that disappointments—even dismal failures—are recorded there too.

Every event in the previous books of the Bible looks forward to the events of Acts. The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, when read together, certainly leave expectations: God made promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3; 22:17, 18); He promised Moses and the Israelites that He would raise up a prophet like unto Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15); and He promised to put one of David’s sons upon the Messiah’s throne (2 Samuel 7:12, 13). In addition, predictions were made by the latter-day prophets Isaiah, Joel, Micah, and Daniel. The “mountain of the house of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:2) with its new ways of teaching, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh, and the establishment of a kingdom never to be destroyed were yet to be known or experienced.

The message of the first four books of the New Testament kept pointing forward to something that was yet to happen. Jesus said, “I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). He promised that some of those then living would not die in any sense until they saw the kingdom come with power (Mark 9:1). Just prior to His ascension, He told the apostles to “stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

In the books of the New Testament that fol-

low Acts, it is easy to see that great changes had already taken place. “Churches” existed in Galatia (Galatians 1:2) and Asia (Revelation 1:4). New and different worship practices—such as the “Lord’s Supper” (1 Corinthians 11:17–34), weekly contributions (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2), and praying in the name of Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:17, 18; 1 Timothy 2:5; Ephesians 5:20)—were being observed. Hebrews 8:6, 7 even mentions a change in covenants with God.

Acts, therefore, is central to the revelation process of God. It is the “hub” of the Bible, the center for all the grand scheme of God’s redemptive plans. It contains the core events activating the Father’s salvation by grace, purchased with the precious blood of His Son (Acts 20:28).

Acts is no more important than any of the other sixty-five inspired books, yet it is the key to understanding all the others. Failure to understand what took place in Acts would make it impossible to understand correctly all the other books. Think for a moment what it would be like if Acts were not in the Bible. The unbridgeable gap left there could only lead to confusion. A mysterious void would block any progress in understanding God’s design for the ages.

SUCCESSSES

About three thousand members were added to the church on the first day of the Lord’s invitation (Acts 2:41). This number quickly grew to above five thousand men, not counting women and children (Acts 4:4). Multitudes con-

tinued to respond in the ensuing days (Acts 5:14). Great revivals and responses began to be seen elsewhere, such as Samaria (Acts 8:4–8). The continent of Africa was even touched by this fervor in the “one-man revival” of the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26–39).¹

Saul of Tarsus moved aggressively against these early triumphs for Jesus; but soon, he himself was one of those triumphs (Acts 9:1–22). His historic, unprecedented, and unparalleled missionary journeys helped to spread the gospel into other continents across the entire known world of the first century. Truly, Acts records stimulating successes and triumphs.

MORE FAILURES THAN SUCCESSES

At first, when over one million visitors² were gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish feasts, *only about three thousand* heeded Peter’s call to penitence and baptism. “Those who had [gladly; KJV] received [Peter’s] word” were the ones baptized (Acts 2:41). What about those who *did not receive the Word*? The ratio of response was not very high, considering the multitude who heard the gospel preached on that momentous day. Since the law of Moses was given to lead the Jewish nation to accept the Christ when He came (Galatians 3:24), and since this training and culture had been nurturing the Jews for nearly fifteen hundred years, it is somewhat disappointing to see only .003 percent accepting these truths!

More failures than successes occurred in Jerusalem that first day, in terms of the numbers of people responding versus those not responding. Visitors from fifteen nations were present (Acts 2:9–11), and Jerusalem was a virtual “tent city.” Every house and building must have bulged with visitors, and every open place in the streets and market areas must have been filled with tents. Looking at the surrounding hillsides and valleys, one would have seen a landscape covered with families from all across the world

¹History indicates that during the second and third centuries, congregations of the Lord’s church thrived throughout Ethiopia and other nearby African nations. One wonders if perhaps they were the result of this “one-day, one-man revival”!

²Some historians gauge the crowd at between 1.5 to 2 million visitors!

camping in their tents.

Surely it was exciting and wonderful to see three thousand plus baptized that day, but *what about those who heard the Word but did not receive it*? Luke recorded nothing about them, but Bible students must read between the lines and realize that vast multitudes did not respond.

Luke wrote that later “many of those who had heard the message believed” (Acts 4:4), but what about those who were not among the “many”? Luke did not say “most”; he only said “many.” “Many” also heard and did *not* believe.

Further, who stoned Stephen? Were those Jews not among the ones who had heard the truth of the gospel? If they had not heard it previously, they surely heard it from Stephen that day (Acts 7:1–54). Acts records that terrible persecutions arose against the church in Jerusalem, so much so that the disciples were scattered away from their homes, jobs, and families (Acts 8:1–4). Obviously, the majority of the Jews in Palestine did not accept the gospel.

Later, who sought to kill Saul of Tarsus when he was baptized in Damascus? He became aware of a plot by dissident Jews to kill him, and he escaped from the city by being let down through the wall in a basket (Acts 9:23–25). Although Paul returned to Jerusalem, his arguments with the Hellenistic Jews resulted in other attempts to kill him, so the disciples sent him to Tarsus (Acts 9:29, 30).

Even where Luke stated that “many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized” (Acts 18:8), he said nothing about those who did not believe. He recorded that Paul’s reasoning with the Jews on the Sabbath days brought about so much blasphemy and resistance that Paul ceased going to the synagogue and taught in the house of Titius Justus nearby (Acts 18:4–7). One must wonder about all the citizens of Corinth (at this time the population was said to be nearly 0.25 million people) who were not among the “many.”

A FAILURE DETAILED

Felix was governor in Palestine at the time Paul was arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 23:24). Paul had been arrested on a trumped-up charge of taking a Gentile named Trophimus with him when he went into the temple to assist four young men in fulfilling a vow (Acts 21:17–24, 27–

29). Paul was innocent of the charge, but he was arrested anyway. He was given time for a defense before the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:30; 23:1–10), but a continuing uproar plus a plot by more than forty men to kill Paul caused Claudius Lysias, the commander of the Roman guard in Jerusalem, to send him to Caesarea (Acts 23:9–13, 31–33).

Felix and his Jewish wife, Drusilla (Acts 24:24), gave Paul a special audience some days afterward. Paul used this occasion to preach of “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:24, 25). Luke stated that Felix, upon hearing this kind of preaching, was terrified. Hoping that Paul might give him money, however, he delayed any decision for “a convenient season” (Acts 24:25, 26). If such a “season” ever came, Luke did not record it! Within two years, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus and passed out of inspired historical records.

Felix displays a sad paradox. His background and training were so ungodly that it is surprising that he would show any interest at all in the spiritual challenges presented by Paul. He was born as a slave, grew up as a courtier among the palaces, and quickly learned the guile it took to ingratiate himself to those who could grant him favors. He was willing to perform many cruel and savage acts to gain favors, even killing Jonathan, the High Priest of the Jews, and involving himself in the slaughter of over four hundred Jewish priests. Josephus, a renowned Jewish historian, did not describe the man with much adulation. Another early historian, Tacitus, appraised Felix as having “the soul of a slave and the power of a sovereign.” Felix finally rose to power as the governor, and he was famous for his reprisals against the Jews.

The greed and treachery of Felix are seen also in the fact that he had stolen the wife of Aziz, king of Emesa, a woman of the Herodian family, Drusilla. Her great-grandfather, Herod the Great, had ordered the murder of the babies in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth (Matthew 2:16–18). Her great-uncle, Herod Antipas, had ordered the execution of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1–12). Her father, Herod Agrippa, had killed the apostle James, the brother of John, and had desired to kill Peter also (Acts 12:1, 2). One can hardly imagine a couple who were more

selfish, greedy, mean, and treacherous. If ever an ungodly couple needed the gospel, Felix and Drusilla were that couple.

How the Jews must have hated Paul to put him on trial before this man! They despised Felix, but they evidently despised Paul even more.

The Preaching He Heard

Paul preached “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25). He did not hesitate to confront these famous fornicators. He did not avoid adulterers who needed God’s warnings. He did not omit instructions about their obvious sins. He did not dodge destructive situations in their lives.

He spoke of “righteousness,” the right kind of life, to a couple who were as unrighteous as any. He spoke of “self-control” to two people who rampaged through anyone who got in the way of their selfish desires. He told them of the “judgment to come,” not omitting the tragic consequences that awaited them if they did not turn to God.

Paul’s courage as a gospel preacher shines here; he told Felix and Drusilla not only about God’s will for people’s lives, but also about what would happen to them in the afterlife if they did not repent. He did not circle around their sins; he spoke directly to them about their sins and the consequences to come. Paul could have preached about dozens of other good and holy topics, but he “preached to the problem.” Knowing Felix’ background as the slayer of hundreds of Jews, Paul also knew that with a flick of Felix’ hand his own life could be snuffed out. He did not waver or dodge the issue; *he preached the gospel to sinners!* Oh, that preachers in the pulpits today would return to preaching God’s truth to sinners about their sins! How else can sins be forgiven?

The Response He Gave

Felix was terrified. Perhaps he heard the steps of eternal doom behind him, coming fast and catching up with his ungodly life. He could not stand any more of this straight talk about sin, so he sent Paul away, lamely speaking about a time when he might call Paul to him again. Luke recorded that Felix hoped to “make a deal” with Paul for money. Even yet Felix was open to a

bribe!

Drusilla was altogether different! Nothing at all is said about the effect of Paul's sermon on her. Having been reared in the Jewish culture and having been well acquainted with the law of Moses, she had evidently made her choice years ago. She intended to go on her selfish way, refusing to heed any spiritual warnings from a person she probably thought of as a religious fanatic. The gospel evidently bounced right off her heart, seemingly an example of "wayside soil" (Luke 8:5, 12).

Felix expressed a desire for "a more convenient season." Does conversion to Christ ever become convenient? One of Jesus' first instructions to people who would come to Him was that they must deny self (Matthew 16:24). Hardly ever does a convenient time come to deny one's own desires. The real reason for Felix' delay and refusal must have been his reluctance to put away sin and self. His heart, if it had truly been touched by the gospel of Jesus Christ, allowed the raging floods of lust, greed, pride, ambition, and selfishness to smother the burning sparks of truth.

When would it ever be convenient for Felix to give Drusilla back to King Aziz and apologize for stealing his wife and living in adultery with her? It is doubtful that Felix would ever have found that convenient. Rather, it would have been humiliation of the highest order. When would it ever have been convenient to apolo-

gize to the Jewish nation for murdering their priests? No convenient time would ever have come for that either.

Conversion to Christ does not come by convenience—not for anyone! Conversion to Christ is costly. It costs everything about a person: It costs everything a person has; it costs everything a person will ever do or be. Its highest priority is self-denial. To be converted to Christ is to stop living by one's own ideas and desires. To be converted to Christ means conviction, consecration, commitment, and courage. Convenience never leads anyone to Christ!

CONCLUSION

Acts is a book of thrilling conversions to Christ, yet it also hints of many failures and records cases of sinful people who refused the gospel. One prominent refusal was that of Felix. He has gone down in eternal history as a sad seeker of compromise—and God has never offered compromise.

The wages of sin is still death (Romans 6:23). On the other hand, the free gift of God is still eternal life in Christ. The choice has ever been left to each individual. God continues to offer salvation. Christ continues to stand at the door of every hearer's heart, knocking and seeking entrance (Revelation 3:20–22). Compared to the awful burdens and consequences of sin, Christ's yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:28–30). ♦

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