

The Book of The Acts of the Apostles

Pull up a deck chair for Month #16 in our cruise through what surely is the world's *least-read best-seller!*

In 1992 1,000 adult Americans were asked about their personal Bible reading habits. Here's how they responded.

45% read the Bible for *enjoyment*.

9% read it out of *habit*.

4% read it because they *have* to, perhaps looking for loopholes!

3% don't know *why* they read it. (It's the only book in their cell -- or hotel room or the only software on their laptop that's not locked up.)

In a typical week 50% of American men do not open this Book -- with men in the West leading in this stat.

Why's this best-seller closed to so many? A year and a half ago these respondents said they simply didn't know their way around the Bible. It was a mystery to them.

Charles Steinmetz was a brilliant electrical engineer. Either out of boredom during retirement or the need to pad his Social Security check, he accepted an invitation from a major appliance maker to identify a mysterious malfunction in their electrical system.

Steinmetz strolled through the plant, did a little testing here and there, then chalk-marked a small X on one particular part, finding the culprit with pinpoint accuracy. Soon his bill arrived:

Making one chalk mark	\$ 1.00
Knowing where to place it	\$ 9,999.00
TOTAL PAYABLE	\$10,000.00

Trying to read the Bible without chalk marks can be as puzzling as crossing Death Valley blindfolded. However, having a few keys can transform the Bible into your best resource for making sense out of life and eternity. In this series we're acquiring keys to help us in our individual, lifetime study of this amazing Book.

Eugene Peterson, author of the easy-to-read New Testament version called *The Message*, and a resident of Vancouver, B.C., writes:

"The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure, stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas.

"The basic, biblical Christian conviction is that the two are intricately related. If we want to deal with *God* the right way, we have to learn to *love* the right way. If we want to *love*

the right way, we have to deal with *God* the right way. God and love can't be separated. ...In Jesus, God and love are linked accurately, intricately, indissolubly.

“But there are always people around who don't want to be pinned down to the God Jesus reveals, to the love Jesus reveals. They want to make up their own idea of God, make up their own style of love.”

In *The Man in the Mirror* author Patrick Morley observes that many, if not most, of us “worship” “the God we *want*,” not “the God who *is*.”

The-God-who-is still speaks to us today through this venerable old Book, written by some 37 different men who were led by God to commit to parchment their observations, research and visions. The 39 books of the Old Testament (O.T.) cover the creation of the cosmos and the human race, the entrance of sin and the story of the Jewish people up 'til the birth of God's only Son, Jesus Christ.

The New Testament (N.T.) spans less than a hundred years, from Christ's birth, life, crucifixion, resurrection, His return to heaven and the early multiplication of His believers who, in Antioch on the Mediterranean near modern Turkey, were first called “Christians.”

The O.T. is divided into historical, poetical and prophetic books. In it we're introduced to Adam and Eve, Abraham (Jew #1), Moses (who delivered the Jews from slavery in Egypt), Joshua (who led the Jewish conquest of Canaan (now Palestine), Samson (one of the judges God chose to govern the Jews during a rebellious, 400-year period of their history), David (Israel's second and most famous king) -- and God's prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and 13 more.

The entire land area covered by the O.T. is about the size of Texas -- while the N.T. -- except for Paul's trips across the northern Mediterranean as far as Rome -- zeroes in on Israel, about the size of Massachusetts -- minus the Kennedy compound.

The N.T. is also composed of three types of books: historical, letters (“epistles” is its churchy synonym) and prophecy (The Revelation). These “letters” were written to certain individuals or groups of individuals called churches. The first five books of the N.T. (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts) are historical in nature. They focus on the brief 33-year-life on earth of Jesus of Nazareth -- and on how, after His death, His followers spread the good news (the Gospel) of what His life means for us.

In its simplest form, the Bible is about relationships: how we can be properly related to God, to ourselves and to others.

In John (14:6), last month's focus, while having His last supper on earth with His disciples, Jesus said plainly for all of history to hear, “*I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can get to the Father (i.e., to “heaven” -- where His Father is) except by means of me.*”

The Bible gives us **4 keys** to understand how we can be personally related to God. They are **love, mercy, grace and faith**. The position stated in this Book is that God *loves* the world to such an unimaginable extent that He sent His only Son from heaven to earth to live and then to give His life as the eternal, once-and-for-all payment for your sins and mine. His *mercy* constrained God from letting every person pay his/her own individual price for sin by going from life to death and spending eternity separated from God in a place the Bible calls hell. His *grace* moved God to forgive you and me of all of our sin -- past, present and future -- when Christ said on the cross, "It is finished." And *faith* is the gift God offers each of us to **believe** that His offer of eternal forgiveness is true, and believing it, to invite Christ to become the center of our lives.

ACTS

This fifth book of the N.T., written by Luke who also authored The Gospel According to Luke (the N.T.'s third book), concentrates basically on the activities of Peter and Paul, barely mentioning the other apostles.

An apostle was a disciple, or committed follower of Christ, to whom Jesus entrusted the administration of His church and the communication of His message. Each apostle was required to have seen Jesus and be able to speak from personal knowledge of Him and His resurrection. Thus, apostles had no successors. So, none is alive today. Now that's *serious* term limits!

Scholars say this book was written between A.D. 60 and 62 because if it had been written later, surely Luke would've referred to:

- Nero's persecution of Christians after Rome burned in A.D. 64
- Paul's death in prison in Rome, about A.D. 66-68
- Or the A.D. 70 decimation of Jerusalem by Titus' Roman soldiers

Luke's believed to have died shortly after Paul was beheaded in Rome -- but not before he'd chronicled the Gospel's advance throughout Palestine, Turkey, Greece and Rome.

In Acts Luke describes what Christ had promised His disciples the night before He was executed, i.e., that He would send them His Holy Spirit (as in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit).

That occurred at the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem 50 days after Christ returned to heaven where, as John writes, He's now preparing a home for all of us who, by faith, accept His gift of forgiveness.

Now the disciples, fired up like a quadruple mocha grande' with a jigger of Jolt Cola, begin preaching that Jesus, whom the Jews had just crucified, was the Son of God, the Messiah, and that He longs to have a personal relationship with all people, Jew and Gentile alike, and that He promised He'd return to earth some day -- just as He'd left.

As our scene opens, Luke, a Gentile doc, is again writing to his bud Theophilus, perhaps a friend who financed his writing of both the books of Luke and Acts. **Let's read 1:1-11.**

The fireworks begin in chapter 2 as Jews jam Jerusalem from throughout the world to celebrate these holy days. But they were not prepared for what was about to happen. **Let's read 2:1-42.**

Starring in the original release of "The Apostle," Peter hits the road, preaching and performing miracles. Wowed by wholesale healings and people rising from the dead, thousands of stunned listeners turned to this Christ of whom Peter so persuasively spoke.

New converts huddled in homes, the prototype of today's church. This ticked off Jewish religious power brokers who wanted no rivals, certainly nobody who'd claimed to be their Messiah. They'd created enough stink to intimidate the local Roman puppet government to beat, imprison and muzzle these fishermen-turned-evangelists.

One of the first church deacons was Stephen, a Grecian Jew who, because he preached the Gospel, was arrested for blasphemy, stood trial and became the first Christian martyr. His landmark testimony was the first public address on the fact that the Gospel was for both Jews and Gentiles. **Let's read 7:1-8:1.**

Stephen's stoners threw their lettermen's jackets at the feet of a young Pharisee named Saul from Tarsus, a city now in shambles in southeastern Turkey. Smelling blood, Saul led a ferocious rampage of persecution, wreaking havoc, dragging these upstart Jesus wackos from their homes into jail. Unwittingly, forcing Christians to flee Jerusalem actually sent the Gospel out to new audiences. **Let's follow this man on a mission in 9:1-31.**

The rest of Acts is basically Saul-now-Paul's adventures as the first Christian missionary, taking the story of God's love and forgiveness from Jerusalem to Rome. During A.D. 45-47 Paul embarked from his hometown on a two-year tour of Galatia (today's central Turkey). **Let's read 13:13-39 and 44-52.**

Paul's second tour, A.D. 51-54, was a three-year gig in Greece. **Pass the feta and olives, and let's read 17:1-9 and 17:16-18:6.**

Paul's final missionary trip, A.D. 54-58, was a four-year stay in the "country of Asia" (western Turkey). His farewell speech there is worth a few moments. **Let's read 20:16-38.**

Back in Jerusalem Paul is spotted by some Jews from up Turkey way who trigger a riot to kill him. Across town, the local Roman military C.O. gets word of this rabble. (Those darn news leaks!) The soldiers arrest Paul in chains. Facing this hallucinating horde, Paul tells the commander that he too is a Jewish citizen and requests an opportunity to speak to his accusers. **Let's read this dramatic passage in 22:1-30.**

The rest of Acts is well worth reading, too.

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