

44 – Acts: The Early Church in Action

- The book of Acts, written by Luke, is **sometimes called the “fifth Gospel”** as it is a natural continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Between these two books, Luke has earned a reputation as an exceptional historian, one considered great by any standard, then or now. It was written first in the scholarly Greek that Luke excelled at, and some evidence indicates it was also later available in Hebrew.
- Luke acts as a **bridge between the Gospel accounts and the letters** (epistles). The first few chapters of Acts bring the Gospels to their logical completion, with the ascension of Jesus and the start of the new Christian Church with the coming of the Holy Spirit.
- Luke wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as he drew on his own **personal eye witness experiences** of many of these records. Luke traveled with both Peter and Paul on many occasions.
- Since Luke does not mention some very noteworthy events (the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the death of Paul [66-68 AD], or the persecution under Nero [after 64 AD]) many believe this book was written before these times (probably around 60 AD).
- The name of this book has often been in contention. The KJV, Codex Vaticanus and revised versions call it the “Acts of the Apostles.” Others have called it “The Acts of the Ascended and Glorified Lord.” Others say things like “Words Concerning Deeds.” Either way, it is **the account of the Spirit-empowered early church in action**, a journal of the activities of the first disciples of Jesus, after His ascension to heaven. This book provides insights into the early church, including its tensions and problems, persecutions, theology and early doctrine, and **how to serve and minister together as a functioning, empowered Church**.
- The letters, or epistles, in the New Testament are letters written to specific churches to deal with certain issues the churches faced then. **The book of Acts helps us have a place to give context to these letters.** One commentator (Bruce) wrote: **“...it is Luke that we have to thank for the coherent record of Paul’s apostolic activity.”** Acts can be divided into two main sections: Chapters 1-7 give us information about the work of the Holy Spirit in the disciples and early converts in and around Jerusalem. From chapter 8 through the end of the book, we hear of the work of the church going beyond Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. This is consistent with a **key verse in Acts: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** (1:8) The work of the Church is continuing, ongoing to the “end of the earth” today. In many ways, the book of Acts has no ending...yet. It’s focus and story continue in the work of all believers on earth today.
- There is **great excitement in this book about what these people believe, and what they are doing.** Faith, commitment and obedience are at the center of all they do, and serve as an example to us. While seeming on the surface to be merely a history book, Acts should be seen as a manual for Christian activity with which all Christians are familiar.
- Luke had **two main purposes** in writing this book, beyond the Gospel he penned. His first purpose was historical, as Luke is probably the best prepared (educated) to present us the details of the early church. His other main purpose was to provide a sort of “apologetics” or a basic written defense for what the early church believers did, and for the Gospel, the “Good News” of Jesus itself. His writing also shows the universal application and availability of this Good News. Luke shows how the Gospel was spread beyond the confines of Jerusalem into the “end of the earth.” Christianity had its start in the Old Testament and Judaism set in the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem, but now it is spreading to become a worldwide faith. Luke shows how this began.



Highlights

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| PETER'S Ministry | In Jerusalem Ch 1-7 | Introduction, 1:1-2; 40 days post-resurrection ministry of Jesus, 1:3-8; ascension and promise of return of Jesus, 1:9-11; waiting for the Spirit, 1:12-14; new apostle appointed, 1:15-26; coming of the Holy Spirit (Feast of Weeks), 2:1-13; Peter's 1st sermon (3000 saved), 2:14-47; healing of lame man, 3:1-11; Peter's 2nd sermon, 3:12-26; Peter and John arrested, but 5,000 believe, 4:1-4; 1st persecution of the Church; power of the Holy Spirit, disciples share everything, Ch 4; death of Ananias and Sapphira; 2nd Persecution, Ch 5; appointment of deacons; Witness of Stephen, Ch 6; Stephen's address and martyrdom (1st Martyr), Ch 7 |
| | In Judea and Samaria Ch 8-12 | Conversion of Ethiopian eunuch, Ch 8; conversion of Saul of Tarsus, Ch 9; conversion of Cornelius, Roman centurion, Ch 10; Peter defends his ministry; Gospel goes to Antioch, Ch 11; death of James; Peter arrested again, Ch 12 |
| PAUL'S Ministry | "Uttermost Part" (Ends of Earth) Ch 13-28 | <u>1st missionary journey</u> of Paul, Ch 13-14; Council at Jerusalem, Ch 15; <u>2nd missionary journey</u> of Paul, 15:36-16:40; 2nd missionary journey (<i>continued</i>) Paul in Thessalonica, Athens, Ch 17; 2nd missionary journey (concluded) Paul in Corinth; Apollos in Ephesus, Ch 18; <u>3rd missionary journey</u> , 18:23-21:14 Paul in Ephesus, Ch 19; 3rd missionary journey of Paul (<i>continued</i>), Ch 20; Paul goes to Jerusalem, is arrested, Ch 21; Paul's defense before mob at Jerusalem, Ch 22; Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin, Ch 23; Paul before Felix, Ch 24; Paul before Festus, Ch 25; Paul before Agrippa, Ch 26; Paul goes to Rome (storm and shipwreck), Ch 27; Paul arrives in Rome, Ch 28 (<i>Last seen preaching to Gentiles</i>) |

- Acts **begins with the ascension of Jesus**, continuing from the Gospels before it, and moves to the imprisonment of Paul in Rome. It covers a history of about 30 years.
 - Peter is prominent in the first part of the book**, as the action is centered in Jerusalem. **Paul is prominent in the 2nd part of the book**, as the action moves beyond Jerusalem. Luke does not provide too much information about the other disciples. He relates very similar miracles done by Peter and Paul on separate occasions.
- | Who | Passage | What |
|-------|----------|---|
| PETER | 3:1-11 | Healed a man born lame |
| | 5:15-16 | Peter's shadow actually healed some people |
| | 5:17 | Peter's healings caused jealousy among the Jews |
| | 8:9-24 | Dealings with a sorcerer (Simon) |
| PAUL | 9:36-41 | Raised Dorcas back to life |
| | 14:8-18 | Healed a lame man |
| | 19:11-12 | Bits of cloth from Paul healed others |
| | 13:45 | More jealousy of Jews after Paul's miracles |
| | 13:6-11 | Dealings with sorcerer (Bar-Jesus) |
| | 20:9-12 | Raised a young man back to life (Eutychus) |
- Luke provides status reports for the spreading of the Gospel (key verse 1:8). In verse 2:47 he states: ***"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*** Various other reports are provided throughout to show how the Gospel spread to the ends of the earth.
 - All of the cities mentioned in Acts have been thoroughly checked and found to be accurate.** The book begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome, as the church expands taking the good news of Jesus out from its epicenter into the rest of the world.
 - Luke **mentions 110 persons, by name** in this book. He also references many multitudes and crowds of people who gathered to hear the good news.
 - The **resurrection of Jesus is the central theme of the Gospels**, and is indeed the central focus of the good news and the spread of the Church in Acts. It is at the very heart of this book. This early church celebrated the Feast of First Fruits and the Resurrection of Jesus every Sunday. The victorious phrase "He is risen!" was well known in the churches then.
 - Even though Jesus has ascended, returned to His Throne with His Father in heaven, He is **very prominent in the book of Acts**. He has moved His presence from the physical human incarnation to the spiritual indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, very much at work in this book. **The beginning of the Church age is marked by the coming and continuing indwelling presence, guidance and leadership of the Holy Spirit**, throughout this book, and continuing throughout history. This new "church" (*or assembly of believers as it is literally called*) is portrayed as powerful and working the will of God with the power bestowed by the Holy Spirit, doing things that man cannot do alone. The Church is a new revelation of a former mystery, as Paul reveals in Ephesians 3.

