

TO BE CONTINUED...
a study of ACTS

Genesis Church Study of Acts Beginning February, 2022

A Study Guide and Introduction of the New
Testament book of Acts

We often hear the phrase, "God has a plan for your life," and this is true. But that plan fits in God's global plan and story. This story is the primary message of the entire Bible, God's purpose to display His glory through creation, the amazing redemptive work of Jesus, and the salvation of His people from every nation and people group reaching to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts in the New Testament is a key chapter in that grand story of God, revealing His work in redeeming diverse people all over the Roman world resulting in the birth of the church.

Acts is not a stand alone book, rather it is a sequel. Part one was the Gospel of Luke. In that work the physician Luke sought to convince his skeptical friend Theophilus that the stories and claims he had already heard about Jesus were in fact true. So Luke wrote a historically accurate and detailed account of Jesus' mission and life, death, and resurrection. But the story does not end there, so Acts tells the amazing story of the explosion of the Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit resulting in the birth and spread of the church all over the Roman Empire and to the ends of the earth. Furthermore, Luke and Acts are two books in a 66 book collection telling the story of the mission of the Triune God and the story of His Kingdom. Jesus' coming into the world is the climactic moment of this story, but the story continued as the Spirit sent the church as an extension of this mission. And, so, Acts is the story of this mission, but the story also comes with an invitation to join the mission and become part of the story.

So, Acts is the continuation of Jesus' redemption story. In fact, Luke starts this work addressing the recipient with, "In the first book (The Gospel of Luke), O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day He was taking up..." Jesus completed the work of His earthly life, but that did not end Jesus' work in the world. As Scripture, Acts shares the amazing story of how the Gospel spread from a small group of 120 people in Jerusalem to every major city in the Roman Empire and growing every single day. But the book of Acts ends with a comma, not a period. In other words, the story as holy Scripture ends with chapter 28. Yet, the story itself ends with a cliff hanger that goes unanswered in the book (specifically, what happened to the Apostle Peter, and will Paul be found guilty and sentenced to death by Rome). But while the story ends as Scripture, the ultimate story being revealed in Acts did not end with the final page, but continued, and continues. The Gospel continues to be preached around the world and reaching new places. And the church keeps growing. This happens as the Holy Spirit empowers followers of Jesus and Jesus builds His church. And as with the entire story of God, Acts is more than just a narrative revealing history, it comes with an invitation to join the story of the mission of God and His people. So while Acts ends as a book of the Bible, it is a story that is to be continued until Jesus comes again. And He has invited us to join the story!

How to Read the Bible

Any time we jump into a new book of the Bible it is helpful to be reminded what the Bible actually is and how we are to read it. So, what is the Bible? Simply put, is the revelation of the One True God as He tells the story of His glory in history. We are told in 2 Peter 1:21, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In other words, every word in Scripture has 2 authors at work. First, there is a human author who is writing from his life situation and story and for an audience with an intended goal for his communication. As we read and interpret Scripture we should seek to understand the intended message conveyed from the original author to the intended audience, and therein understand the intended meaning of any text or book. This means we need to pay attention, first, to the genre of literature, even applying those wonderful principles of interpretation you learned (and I am sure have since forgotten) in your high school or college literature classes. We also have to discover from the life situation and words of the author their overarching purpose and meaning for the whole work. It is way too easy to pull a text out of a larger work, quote it and even give meaning to the text, only to discover that the meaning we have attached is actually the opposite of the overall purpose of the human author. If you have been at Genesis for very long you have heard us address the danger of what we call “proof texting.” So the goal is to interpret any portion of a book through the lens of understanding the overall purpose of the human author as he or she communicates to the intended audience. In discovering this we come to understand the ultimate meaning God intended.

But this leads us to the second, and greater Author, God Himself. It is miraculous that God chose to condescend Himself to make Himself known to us through the gift of revelation through a diverse group of human authors. God did not just drop a book from the sky or put a single individual into a trance and move that poor chap's hand miraculously. Rather, the Holy Spirit spoke to and through the mouths and pens of humans to communicate every word we find in the Scriptures. While they are truly human words, God is able to protect every word they use so that they truthfully and faithfully communicated exactly what He intended to say to us. Furthermore, so much of the Bible is in narrative form, or in other words, the authors are writing about real events in history and interpreting God's work through those events. This helps us see that the Bible as a whole is actually one grand story, telling the story of the glory of God, and each book takes its place in that great narrative, even though the authors themselves did not realize this truth as they were writing.

The outcome is a wholly divine and wholly human book. We hold to a view of inspiration called the *plenary-verbal view of inspiration*. Simply put, we believe that God perfectly inspired the human authors to write down without mistake or error the very words that are in the original manuscripts of the holy Scriptures, and that every single word in the 66 books of the Bible are fully inspired. In other words, God inspired not just the ideas passed on by the authors, but the very words they used. We here believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, meaning that we believe that the Bible, in its original manuscripts is without any error and because it is inspired by God is not able to fail in the purpose for which God intended.

So we read the Bible seeking to understand the core meaning from the author knowing that this meaning conveyed through inspired words is the Divine Word of God.

Author

While the book itself is anonymous (no where in Luke or Acts does the author state his own name), there are clues both in the book and from early church history ascribing the authorship of Luke and Acts to Luke. His name does appear in three passages in the New Testament, all written by the Apostle Paul. In Colossians 4:14, Paul mentions that, "Luke, the beloved physician greets you," a sentiment echoed in Philemon 1:24. 2 Timothy is a letter Paul wrote near the end of his life as he is facing execution, and in this book he declared that everyone else had deserted him, yet, "Luke alone is with me." More importantly though, the author of this book is actually part of the story told in the pages of Acts. While never mentioning himself by name, there are several passages where the author joins the story. We know this because there are several places where the voice of the text changes from third person plural to first person plural. In other words, as the story goes along and shares what "they" were doing and what was happening to "them", subtly the story changes to what "we" were doing and what was happening to "us" (see Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–37; 28:1-16). These sections surround the ministry, missionary journeys, and Roman imprisonment of Paul, meaning that the author of Luke and Acts is one of Paul's traveling companions, part of the missionary and church planting entourage with Paul. Added to this are some subtle clues in Luke and Acts. One of those is the added interest in medical phenomena Luke reveals as he shares healing and miracle stories, possibly an interest that would be held by a physician. Second is the emphasis on Jesus' love for the outcast and marginalized, and more specifically those who are Gentile. Luke was most likely a Gentile (non-Jew) probably meaning that he was the only Gentile to pen inspired Scripture. Luke's authorship of these two works is confirmed by early and consistent testimony from the early church.

As mentioned, Luke was a Gentile, possibly from the metropolis of Antioch. He demonstrates a knowledge of the Old Testament, so he may have become what is known as a God-fearer. These are Gentile people who rejected the polytheism of the Roman gods and embraced the One True and Living God worshiped by the Jews, yet not fully embracing all of the Laws and rituals (especially circumcision). More than likely he was disciplined by the Apostle Paul and joined Paul's mission around the world, possibly serving as Paul's personal physician in his travels. This would be needed, as significant to the story is the reality that Paul is continually beaten and persecuted during his mission. He is highly educated, writing with excellent Greek style, and is also a detailed historian. Over the last century there have been several archeological discoveries confirming the accuracy of Luke's reporting and history.

Audience

Both Luke and Acts open with a short introduction as Luke addresses his recipient and shares his purpose. In both books the intended reader is a person named Theophilus. While nothing more is known about this person other than these two mentions, these introductions do give us a few clues to this person's identity. First, the name itself may be a clue. The name *Theophilus* is actually a compound word from the two Greek words meaning God (theos) and friend (philus). So his name basically means God's friend. Now, this may have been his actual name, and everyone called him Theo. Or Luke may have been using a pseudonym to protect the person's true identity. But Luke also uses the title "Most Excellent (Luke 1:3)", a way of addressing people who are nobles in the Roman government. So it is likely that this person was a Roman official of some sort, maybe even someone involved in Paul's trial detailed at

the end of Acts. Luke's introduction shares that Theo had been exposed to the story of Jesus, but probably was still a skeptic, so Luke wrote a detailed, orderly, and accurate account of the life of Jesus so, "That you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:4). In Acts, Luke is continuing the information for Theophilus so that he has an understanding of what happened in history after the resurrection, even as these believers were under threat from the Roman government which this man was likely representing.

There are multiple possibilities, but the bottom line is that the relationship between Luke and Paul and this man led to the Spirit's inspiration of Luke to write these two amazing books that are in our New Testament and so important to understanding the whole story of God.

Luke & Acts - Prequel and Sequel

The books of Acts is part 2 of the story Luke shared with his reader, with the Gospel of Luke being the prequel. As a result, to fully understand Acts the reader should read it as a continuation of the previous story. The focus in both books is the saving purpose of the Trinitarian God and His plan to save a people for Himself from all peoples and nations. The Gospel's focus is on the incarnation, as God the Son became a man, died, and then rose again. Luke's perspective on the Gospel helps us see the beautiful humanity of Jesus from eyewitness perspective and reveals the love of God for all people, especially the marginalized, outcast, and poor. Furthermore, Luke points out that Jesus' ultimate mission is to be a light for all nations, not just the savior for the Jews (Luke 2:32). Yet, in the Gospel of Luke we see this purpose initiated by God the Father and also see the work of the Holy Spirit who fills people all through Luke, including Elizabeth and her son John the Baptist, among others. Furthermore we also see Jesus' power for coming from His being filled with and led by the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1). Luke, therefore is the story of the saving work of the Trinitarian God through the life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of the Son of God.

Acts, then, is the continuation of that story, and therefore the true focus is on the work or acts of God. The purpose of the Father will be accomplished in the advance of the Gospel to all nations even as enemies do all they can to stop it. The story is headed to Revelation 21 and the throng of redeemed people from all over this planet representing every tribe, nation, language, ethnicity, and culture lifting their voices and laying down their lives in praise of Jesus their King. While Jesus' earthly ministry comes to an end at His ascension, His rule as King on the earth continues as the Holy Spirit is poured out on the church, demonstrated with signs and wonders. But more importantly this leads to the miraculous spread of the Gospel and the planting of new churches in every major city in the Roman Empire, even the seat of power, Rome itself. This is a phenomena that is historically true, yet can only be explained as a miracle in the ancient world. In other words, the advance of the Gospel and early growth of Christianity happens at a pace that is impossible in an era that did not have the printing press or internet. And no attempts to stop it will prosper. This is the saving purpose of the Trinitarian God and the story of the sending of the Spirit to the church is in view. The church, filled with the Spirit is now included in this mission and sent to their cities and to the ends of the earth. Acts is the continuation of the sovereign purpose of God the Father. It is the continuation of the saving purpose of Christ our Lord and Savior. And it is the continuation of the sending and empowering purpose of the Holy Spirit who dwells in and empowers the people of God.

What we end up with in Luke and Acts is two significant works that makes up the most material from any single New Testament author. While Paul wrote more books, Luke writes the most pages and words in our New Testament. And when we realize that Luke and Paul are so closely connected we can realize that the influence of these two men gives us half of the words contained in our New Testament.

Date

This, I believe is a fairly easy question to answer. If you go on a search you may find other opinions, but I hold to the majority opinion by conservative Bible scholars that Acts was written in about 62 AD. The selection of this date actually comes from the abrupt ending of the book. The story follows the Apostle Paul as he is arrested in Jerusalem, has preliminary hearings in front of two Roman governors in Caesarea, and then is shipped to Rome for his actual trial as a Roman citizen. You would expect the author to at least carry the story through the outcome of Paul's trial in Rome, telling us of either his release or execution. But what we get is an unsatisfying ending with the cliff hanger of Paul under house arrest awaiting this trial. Why would Luke end here? Simply, because his story telling caught up with his history. Acts 28 are, in a sense, Luke writing the events of "this afternoon" and ending the book at what was for them the present moment in history, and then handing this work off to Theophilus for his read.

The Importance of Acts in the Story

Of course, Acts is sacred Scripture, so it is inspired and important (2 Timothy 3:16-17). But we should be incredibly thankful that God chose to speak through Luke in the giving of this book for four significant reasons.

First, without Acts we would have little information about the history of the early church and the spread of the Gospel. The narrative of God's story would end with the resurrection of Jesus, and we would be left guessing as to what happened next. Luke gives us descriptive history of the first three centuries of Christianity, helping us understand how the mission of God was accomplished and still is to go forward. He also gives us details about early conflicts that arise that threatened the unity of the church and we learn how they found solutions that honored Christ and maintained unity and mission.

Second, we see in story form the implications of the Great Commission. At the end of Jesus' life He commissioned His followers to go to all the world, preach the Gospel, and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 1:8, John 20:21, Mark 16:15). Acts shows us in historical form how these followers understood and carried out this commission and the task of making disciples. Acts therefore becomes so helpful for us because it puts skin and bones on our marching orders from Christ our King and commander.

Third, without Acts we would not really know what happened to with the Apostles, and we would have no idea of the identity of the Apostle Paul. The ministry of the 12 begins on Pentecost and we see their work in the early church in Jerusalem. We also learn about their involvement in the spread of the Gospel and the gift of the Holy Spirit to people in other regions, Samaritans, and also to the Gentiles. The story also tells us about the brothers of Jesus, who did not believe in Him during His earthly life and ministry, but who then believed after the resurrection. We are told they are with the band of people in the upper room in chapter 1, and then we are shown the

importance of James and his leadership in the mother church in Jerusalem. Acts tells us about the conversion of one of the key persecutors of Christianity, a man named Saul and then tells the glorious story of His transformation into the Apostle Paul who becomes the greatest missionary the church has ever known. Without Acts we would have no idea about the identity of the author of all of Paul's letters, nor of the book of James. Our knowledge of God's work in the world would have this gigantic hole that would actually threaten the authenticity of the Gospel.

Fourth, Acts gives us context for understanding the majority of the letters written in the New Testament. Everything from Romans to Jude is a genre called an epistle, which is a letter. These letters are written from specific authors to individuals and churches in the ancient world. Thirteen of those letters are from the Apostle Paul and most of them are written to churches he planted, and whose story is told in the narrative found in Acts. In other words, the material from the letters to the Corinthians, Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Philippians (among others) are tied to real followers of Jesus who are involved in churches planted by Paul and the events of the story in Acts are connected to the information in these letters, and often contains keys to unlocking some of the meaning. So it is a good idea to read some of these letters in conjunction to reading the sections of Acts telling the story of the planting of that church. Beyond this, the history of Acts gives us a framework to understand the world into which the other New Testament authors wrote their letters and works. John writes from the city of Ephesus to the region surrounding, but the church in Ephesus was initially planted by Paul. As already mentioned, we know about the author of the Epistle from James because of his story from Acts. And Acts tell us about Peter's life and ministry and gives some explanation of how he ends up in Rome and writes from there.

For these reasons, it is important that we know and study this grand book and the narrative it contains, as it will not only lead to our knowing the story, but it will also help us understand the rest of the New Testament.

*Note - for a time line of the events in Acts and the rest of the New Testament see the chart on the last page of this document.

Key Themes

Here are a few of the key themes found in the story of Acts. A reminder, Acts is story, so these themes are developed in the way Luke, inspired by the Spirit writes the story.

1. The mission of the Trinitarian God - Already wrote some on this, but Acts is the story of God. Acts was the title given to this book early in church history, and they often called it the Acts of the Apostles. But the Apostles are not the primary characters in the story. This is the story of God accomplishing His purpose through the Gospel of the Son in the power of the Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is front and central in Acts, but we are reminded over and over again that the work of the Spirit is to make much of Jesus and accomplish the will of the Father.

2. The resurrection of Jesus as a real and life changing event that defines all of history - Acts begins with the 40 day ministry of Jesus as he appears to his followers and offers them "many proofs" (Acts 1:3) and giving a post resurrection definition of the Kingdom of God. From this point the resurrection of Jesus is central to all of the preaching in Acts. There are around 20 sermons included in the story of Acts making up about 30% of the content of the book. The central theme in these sermons is the resurrection of

Jesus. Yet, these sermons are preached in different contexts to different crowds, so the sermons preach the same Gospel without change but in different contextualized ways in order to reach people from different backgrounds, cultures, and belief systems.

3. The miraculous spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth - Acts begins with a promise from the lips of Jesus to the band of 120 people who are with him that they will receive power, and they will be witnesses to the four geographical categories above. Jerusalem is the central city in Israel, Judea represents the surrounding area. For us this is like saying the city of St. Louis and the metro area including Metro East, STL County, Jeff Co, etc. Samaria is the home location of people hated by the Jews, yet the promise is that these followers will take the Gospel there. The ends of the earth means just what it says, the advance of the Gospel and the growth of the church all over the world. The Spirit comes, the Gospel spreads, and in 30 short years the Gospel has exploded in Jerusalem as in just a year or two it becomes a church of 10-20K people. Persecution drives many of these people from the city and the story follows the advance of this Good News to Judea and Samaria, and the mission to the ends of the earth is well on its way. From this band of 120, by 30 years after the death of Jesus the church has spread to every major city in the Roman Empire and is established in the capitol city as well, with multiplied thousands of people believing. By the way, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth is actually the outline of Acts as well, more on that later.

4. The birth of the church and church planting - Central to the mission of God is the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus told His disciples that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18) and in Acts Jesus does just that. The church is born on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, as the Holy Spirit comes upon the people in the upper room, they go into Jerusalem and preach Christ and 3,000 people are baptized and they are now a community of believers on mission together. Jerusalem becomes the mother church, but throughout the story the goal of the mission is two fold. Preach the Gospel and plant churches in these cities. Gospel proclamation is important, but when the missionaries leave they always leave behind a church with elders and a plan to make disciples in their city. Those churches become the outposts for Christ's Kingdom in cities such as Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and eventually even Rome.

5. The new community - Acts also gives us snapshots of the first church, a look at the faith, life, fellowship, prayers, and mission of the first church. The key passages for this are Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37, and 5:12-16. I won't go into detail here on this, we will have sufficient time to preach this, and this document is already long enough. But the key here is that these passages actually represent both descriptive and prescriptive truths. On one hand they are describing the church in Jerusalem at a point in time. But from this moment there are multiple churches that are planted and Luke wants us to see that the very rhythms, purposes, values, beliefs, and sense of mission expressed in these texts are what it means to be a church, and therefore are replicated everywhere we see a local community of faith in a given town that is called a church. Luke does not need to tell us about the activity for the church in Corinth and its mission in that city. We are to understand that they are doing the same things the first church did. So, in these passages we are to come to understand what it means for any local congregation to be a community of faith together in their city.

Outline of Acts - Witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth

1. Introduction of Acts (ch. 1)

- The ascension
 - *Jesus gives the promise of the Holy Spirit which includes a commission
 - *Jesus is taken into heaven before their eyes
 - *Angels tell the people to get their eyes out of the clouds and on to their mission.
- The selection of the twelfth disciple - restores integrity to the apostolic band
 - *Had to be a person who was with Jesus from the beginning.
 - *They wait in the upper room, as Jesus told them
 - *120 people.

2. Witness in Jerusalem (2:1-7:60)

- Pentecost
 - *Jewish festival, all Jews in Jerusalem
 - Acts 2:1-4 - Filled with the Holy Spirit
 - *Tongues - and those who heard
 - *The first Christian sermon - by Peter
 - *3,000 believe and are baptized.
- The first church's practice and power
 - *Community
 - *Preaching in the early church - about Jesus as the messiah, and in the Temple
- Conflicts with the Jewish leaders begins
- Growth -
 - *Acts 1 - 120
 - *Acts 2 - 3000 (50 days later)
 - *Acts 3 - 5,000 men
 - *Acts 6 - number multiplied greatly, and many priests became obedient to the faith
- The appointing of the seven - the first dispute, between Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews (language)
- Ministry and martyrdom of Steven
 - *One of the 7 - bold
 - *Preaches to the Sanhedrin
 - *They stone him - a man named Saul approves his death
 - *Saul leads a massive persecution

3. Witness in Judea and Samaria (8:1-11:18)

- The church scattered
- Philip's ministry
- Samaritan believers receive the Holy Spirit
- Saul's conversion and call - Road to Damascus
 - *This is one of the key turning points in the entire book
- Cornelius and Peter - the first Gentile believers

4. Witness to the ends of the earth (11:19-28:31)

- The church in Antioch - the center of the church moves
 - *Antioch is a key city north of Palestine,

- *Safe place for those fleeing Jerusalem
- *The church grew with Gentiles, leading Jerusalem church to send Barbasus where he met up with Paul.
- *The church at Antioch becomes the launchpad for Christian mission.
- Paul's first missionary journey
 - *Paul and Barbasus are the key players
 - *To Cypress and southern parts of the region of Galatia
- The Jerusalem Council
 - *The problem - Should Gentile converts be circumcised and take Jewish law as their religious experience.
 - *The process and people
 - *The outcome - favorable for the mission of Paul, only don't eat meat sacrificed to idols
- Paul's second missionary journey
 - *Timothy joins the group - he is a dynamic young man whose mother is Jewish and father is Greek.
 - *Key cities on this journey -
 1. Return through Galatia
 2. Philippi - Philippians Jailer, and Roman citizens being beaten
 3. Thessalonica
 4. Athens - and Mars Hill
 5. Corinth
- Paul's third missionary journey (p. 244 in the textbook)
 - *Key cities
 1. Ephesus
 2. Philippi
 3. Corinth
- Paul returns to Jerusalem - this section of Acts may be long because it is being used to as a defense of Paul at a trial!
 - *He is arrested in the Temple, and the Jewish leaders secretly plot to kill him
- Paul moved to Caesarea - Roman Capitol of Palestine
 - *The governor Felix in an attempt to keep Jews happy keeps Paul in prison for 2 years
 - *Festus becomes governor, and keeps Paul in Caesarea, where he interviews Paul
 - *Festus wants to try Paul in Jerusalem, basically to let him go in front of the Jews, bu Paul appeals to Caesar, and is taken to Rome
- The journey to Rome
 - *Includes an incredible shipwreck story
- Paul's ministry in Rome
 - *Under house arrest, Paul spends two years in a rented house, receiving any who would come to him, and writing.

Time Line for Acts & Events in New Testament

	A.D.	30	35	40	45	50	55	60	65	70	75	80
Death, resurrection of Christ (A.D. 33 [or 30]) [†]		█										
Pentecost (30/33)		█										
Stephen stoned (31/33)		█										
Paul converted (33/34*)		●										
Paul meets with Peter in Jerusalem (36/37*)			█									
Paul ministers in Syria/Cilicia (37–45)			█	█	█							
Peter witnesses to Cornelius (38*)				●								
James, brother of John, martyred (41–44)				█	█							
Peter rescued from prison, leaves Jerusalem (44)					●							
Paul's second Jerusalem visit (famine relief) (44–47*)				█	█							
Paul's first missionary journey (46–47)					●							
Peter and Paul at Jerusalem council (48–49*)						●						
Paul's second missionary journey (48/49–51*)					█	█						
Claudius expels Jews from Rome (49)						●						
Paul's third missionary journey (52–57*)						█	█					
Paul ministers in Ephesus (52–55)						█	█					
Claudius dies; Jews allowed back to Rome (54)							●					
Nero's reign (54–68)							█	█	█	█		
Paul arrested in Jerusalem (57*)							●					
Paul imprisoned in Caesarea (57–59)							█	█				
James, brother of the Lord, martyred (62)									●			
Paul under house arrest in Rome (62*)									●			
Luke writes Gospel of Luke and Acts (62*)									●			
Paul released, resumes ministry, rearrested (62–64)									█	█		
Paul and Peter martyred in Rome (64–67*)									█	█		

* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

*From the ESV Study Bible - *Introduction to Acts*