



Contents

Context and next steps to go with the weekly guide — jump to any section below.

How to Read Acts 2

A 7-day reading plan, plus tips for reading well.

The World of Acts 3

The historical and cultural world believers were writing into.

The Story of Acts 5

How the gospel moves from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria.

The Message of Acts 6

The book's core themes, traced through Acts 1–12.

Enjoying Jesus in Acts 7

The titles Acts gives Jesus, and why they mattered in Rome.

Cast of Characters 8

Who's who — from Peter and Paul to Rome's rulers.

Next Steps 9

Where to go after you close this guide.

How to Read Acts

We invite you to read Acts alongside the sermon. Read it fast, in a week. Read it slowly, over the span of a month. However you read it, go deep and celebrate the truth: **Jesus is for everyone, and—even from Heaven—He is still saving.**

Reading Acts in 7 Days

Day 1	Acts 1–4, The church is born
Day 2	Acts 5–7, The cost of witness (Stephen)
Day 3	Acts 8–12, The gospel breaks out (Samaria, Saul, Cornelius)
Day 4	Acts 13–15, Mission to the nations; the Jerusalem Council
Day 5	Acts 16–19, Deep into the empire (Philippi, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus)
Day 6	Acts 20–23, Paul's road to Jerusalem and arrest
Day 7	Acts 24–28, Paul's journey to Rome

Things to Watch Out For

- Acts is descriptive before it's prescriptive — meaning not everything in Acts is meant to be replicated today. Acts tells us what happened; it doesn't mean the same thing happens the same way now. For example, the Spirit's coming at Pentecost was visibly manifested, and God's people spoke in languages other nations could understand. But the ordinary work of the Spirit today looks different. He still fills, empowers, and sends His people — but we shouldn't assume the Spirit always works through the same visible signs as Pentecost today.
- Pay attention to the Spirit. What is the Spirit's role in the stories you read?
- Pay attention to the sermons and speeches in Acts. Roughly one-third of Acts is made up of speeches, and these speeches remind us what was most important to the early Christians: Jesus is the Lord of all, and He alone saves.
- Watch for the movement of the gospel. Places—regions and cities—are super important in Acts. With every new place, the gospel spreads to the nations as Jesus said it would.
- Notice who the Christians credit with the work. For example, in Acts 2:47, who adds to the church's numbers? In Acts 4:30, who stretches out their hand to heal? In Acts 5:31, who gives repentance and forgiveness of sins?
- Pay attention to what happens after a key figure suffers. What do you notice about the gospel after someone like Stephen or Paul suffer?

Welcome to the first-century Roman world. About forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem and decades before Vesuvius buried Pompeii beneath volcanic ash, God's promised Spirit filled the believers who were waiting in Jerusalem. The world would never be the same.

The first-century world was a place of deep spiritual confusion and darkness. Temples dedicated to Roman gods, goddesses, and emperors stood in every major city. Gymnasiums and theaters promoted Roman culture, values, and religion. It was a society built on self-promotion, the pursuit of pleasure, and the relentless search for honor, wealth, and status.

The World of Acts

That was the world into which the church was born—the world into which the apostles were sent. The result was the planting of new communities of disciples—churches—throughout Judea, Samaria, Asia Minor, and eventually parts of Europe.

Acts is the sequel to Luke's Gospel. In his first volume, Luke wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach. In Acts, he tells the story of what Jesus continued to do and teach through His Spirit-empowered church.

Most likely written in the early AD 60s, Acts records the spread of the gospel during the Roman Empire. The book ends before Paul's trial before Caesar and before the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, suggesting it was completed before those events.

“No matter who sits on the emperor's throne, no matter who opposes God's people, and no matter how dark the world becomes, the gospel will continue advancing to the ends of the earth.”

Pax Romana | How the Gospel Could Go Far Quickly

At its peak, the Roman Empire controlled nearly the entire known world — reaching from Spain in the west to the Middle East in the east, up into parts of modern Germany in the north, and down across much of North Africa in the south. Connecting this vast empire were a series of well-maintained roads and shipping routes that allowed travel and commerce. Though the empire was a conglomerate of different cultures and languages, *koine* Greek was the tongue that united the empire. All of this was referred to as “the *pax Romana*” — Roman peace, and it's what enabled the gospel to spread so quickly. God had sovereignly ordained it so the gospel came onto the scene at “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4), making it possible for the church to flourish, grow, and spread to the entire Roman empire.

Gods, Goddesses, and Caesars | How the Gospel Tells a Better Story



The Antonine Nymphaeum, Sagalassos

The Romans loved their gods and goddesses, their temples, and all the festivals that came with worshipping those deities. Cult prostitution, sacrifices, and elaborate rituals were a norm in most Roman cities.

Whether it was Zeus, Athena, Apollos, or a recently deceased emperor—like Augustus—the Romans had a god for every phenomenon of life—fertility, war, harvest, and even wine. We catch glimpses of the ancient world's devotion to the gods throughout Acts. In Acts 19, the Ephesians riot against Paul because they believe that his gospel will lead to the neglect of their goddess, Artemis. In Acts 17, Paul comments on the Athenian's religious fervor. They had built idols to every god and goddess imaginable—they had even built a memorial to the “unknown god” so as not to inadvertently offend a forgotten deity.

In Acts, the disciples tell a better story of a better God. Unlike the Roman gods, goddesses, and emperors, this God does not require sacrifices, rituals, or bribes to love His people. Instead, He made the ultimate sacrifice by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for the sins of the world. And even better, He proved that Jesus was truly the Son of God by raising Him from the dead and exalting Him above every name in Heaven and Earth. Jesus is the true and better Lord and Savior for all people. He is a God like no other.

Climbing the Social Ladder | How the Gospel Turns Culture Upside Down

In the Roman world, the goal of life was simple: to climb up the social ladder as fast and high as you possibly can. Power, prestige, and pleasure were the marks of a successful Roman life. Wherever one went, social hierarchy was everything—with a deep divide between slaves and free Romans. Wealth and status were often seen as signs of honor and success, while poverty brought shame and vulnerability. Sex was often treated as a matter of personal desire and social power rather than covenant faithfulness, with mistresses, extramarital relationships, and prostitution common throughout the Roman world.

In the words of Acts 17, the disciples and the gospel they preached “turned the world upside down” (v. 6). The message of King Jesus introduced a radically different way of doing life. Instead of exalting oneself over others, Christians were taught to humble themselves and serve those around them—the goal wasn’t to climb up, but to stoop low in love and service. Instead of hoarding wealth, they were taught to be generous with it. Instead of treating sex as a conquest over weaker people, sex was said to be enjoyed only in the context of a covenant marriage. The gospel was dramatically counter-culture, and it was so, because King Jesus proved to be an incredibly good Savior.

Intense Persecution | The Blood of the Martyrs Is the Seed of the Church

While Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire because of the Pax Romana, it

also spread in the soil of suffering and persecution. Christianity was anything but welcome. At first, many Romans assumed it was simply another Jewish sect. Since the Jews had long been permitted to worship Yahweh—as long as they prayed for Caesar and lived peacefully under Roman rule—Christianity initially received the same tolerance. It soon became clear, however, that Christians did not fit under the “Jewish” umbrella. Many of the Jews themselves rejected Christianity as blasphemous, while the Romans viewed Christians with deep suspicion. They worshiped a God they could not see, refused to make sacrifices to the emperor, and proclaimed that Jesus—not Caesar—was *Kurios* (“Lord”). To many Romans, Christianity was not only strange but dangerous, threatening both the favor of the gods and the stability of the empire.

As a result, Christians became easy targets whenever disaster struck. The second-century writer Tertullian observed that if the Tiber flooded, if famine came, or if an earthquake struck, the cry was always, “Away with the Christians to the lions!” Under emperors like Nero, Christians were imprisoned, burned alive, or thrown into the arena to die.

Yet persecution never accomplished what Rome intended. Instead of extinguishing the church, it caused the gospel to spread. After Stephen’s martyrdom, believers scattered from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, carrying the gospel wherever they went. Throughout the centuries, the same pattern has repeated itself. As Tertullian famously wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is seed.” Rome tried to stamp out the church like a grass fire, but every stomp only scattered the embers farther. The more the world persecuted the church, the more the gospel advanced.

The Story of Acts

Acts follows Jesus' plan, which he laid out in Acts 1:8, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

We see this plan unfold throughout the book:

- **Acts 1–7** | The Gospel Spreads Throughout Jerusalem
- **Acts 8–12** | The Gospel Spreads to Judea and Samaria
- **Acts 13–28** | The Gospel Spreads to the Ends of the Earth

Acts 1–7 | Jerusalem

It all begins in Jerusalem. As the Old Testament makes clear, it was to Israel that God entrusted His redemptive promises. Therefore, it was to the Jews that the gospel was first proclaimed. The first seven chapters of Acts focus on the dramatic events that unfold in Jerusalem as the gospel spreads. The Spirit is poured out on Jesus' waiting disciples, and throughout the city the message rings out that there is “salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Jesus—the one handed over to evil men according to God's definite plan, crucified, and then raised to life—is the long-awaited Messiah, the promised King through whom God's promised restoration has begun.

Acts 8–12 | Judea and Samaria

Acts 1–7 ends with the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen's death marked the beginning of an intense season of persecution that scattered the Christians in Jerusalem throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Jerusalem's leaders had hoped to stamp out the Christian movement, but the more they stamped, the more their persecution sent embers flying throughout the region. The fire they hoped to extinguish became an unstoppable force, spreading from household to household, city to city, and eventually throughout the region.

Philip's ministry sparked an incredible response in the city of Samaria, leading many to receive “the word of God”—the gospel. When Peter and John came to Samaria to see the response for themselves, they were astonished to see the Holy Spirit fall on those who had believed. Clearly, the gospel and the gift of the Holy Spirit were not just for the Jews

but for the Samaritans as well. By Acts 9, even some of the gospel's fiercest enemies were becoming Christians. Paul, the great persecutor of the church, was dramatically saved and transformed into one of Christianity's most zealous evangelists.

Jews, Samaritans, and former persecutors. Jesus' power to save was already on full display, but He was only beginning to reveal what He meant when He promised that the gospel would reach the ends of the earth. In Acts 10–11, Peter is sent to perhaps the least likely of people—a Gentile Roman centurion named Cornelius. Through the salvation of Cornelius and his household, Jesus makes it unmistakably clear that His salvation is for everyone: Jews, Samaritans, persecutors, and even Gentiles.

This series, Part 1, walks with Jesus' church through the first two movements — Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria (Acts 1–12). Part 2 carries us on to the ends of the earth.

Acts 13–28 | To the Ends of the Earth

Acts 13 shifts the spotlight away from Peter, Philip, and the disciples ministering in Judea and Samaria and shines it on Paul and Barnabas, who are sent out from Antioch (modern-day Syria). In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit sets apart Paul and Barnabas for the special mission of taking the gospel to the nations. This moment in Antioch launches a series of missionary journeys that bring the gospel to major cities throughout the Mediterranean and modern-day Türkiye—in regions such as Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia. Wherever Paul went, the pattern was the same: (1) Paul preached the gospel, (2) those who believed were gathered into communities called churches, and (3) Paul and his team appointed elders—church leaders—to shepherd God's people and safeguard the gospel entrusted to each church. Evangelism led to discipleship, which led to church planting.

Naturally, in a Roman world where Gentiles loved their idols and many Jews rejected Paul's Messiah, persecution was inevitable. Yet through stonings, riots, arrests, and even shipwrecks, the gospel continued to advance, eventually reaching Rome itself, where Paul longed to proclaim Christ at the very epicenter of the empire.

The Message of Acts

The message of Acts is simply this: **Jesus is for everyone, and—even from Heaven—He is still saving.**

Key Themes

Acts pushes this message forward by giving us key themes that show up throughout the book:

Jesus, the Exalted Lord and Savior

At the center of Acts stands the exalted Jesus. He is the promised Messiah, the risen Lord, the Savior who grants forgiveness of sins, the Judge of the living and the dead, and the true King over every nation. Everything in Acts points back to Him. In Acts: Jesus continues His mission, sends the Spirit, builds His church, and advances His Kingdom.

The Promised Spirit

One thing is clear in Acts: it's God's Spirit who fills and empowers His people for bold witness. In the Old Testament book of Joel, God promised to pour out His Spirit on His people (Joel 2:28-29). That promise is fulfilled in Acts 2, but in a surprising way. The Spirit is poured out not only on believing Jews but also on believing Gentiles, demonstrating that God is creating one new people from every nation.

The Good News Is for Everyone

Acts is all about the spread of the good news. The phrases “the word of God” or “the word of the Lord” show up more than twenty times throughout Acts. In Acts 6:7, for example, Luke

writes that “the word of God continued to increase” leading to the multiplication of disciples. In Acts, the good news goes out and disciples are made in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, rich and poor, men and women all came to hear the good news of Jesus, the exalted King.

The Church

In Acts, we find the origin story of the church. When the Spirit works, people come together under the name of Jesus and become a church—believers devoted to teaching, breaking bread, prayer, generosity (Acts 2:42–47). Again and again, we find the pattern: some one preaches, people believe and are baptized, and then churches are planted. The gospel's spread does not simply mean conversions. It means church plants, where believers will grow stronger and continue the mission together.

Suffering and Witness

The gospel's spread came at a cost. Believers suffered and died for their faith in Jesus. And yet, their suffering was never wasted. As Tertullian wrote to the Romans who persecuted the church, “The more you mow us down, the more we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.” Ironically, the more the church is persecuted in Acts, the more it spreads.

Enjoying Jesus in Acts

At first glance, it may seem as though Acts focuses more on Jesus' disciples than on Jesus Himself. After all, Jesus has ascended to the Father's throne and is no longer physically present among them. And yet, the Book of Acts reveals the exact opposite. Though Jesus is no longer physically present, He is still very much active, ruling from heaven and advancing His kingdom through His Spirit and His people.

In Acts, Jesus is the main character.

Throughout the book, Luke gives us a rich portrait of the risen Christ. The titles he attributes to Jesus make it clear why the spread of the gospel was perceived as such a threat to the Roman Empire. Jesus of Nazareth possesses a name above every name—even the name of Caesar.

Acts proclaims Jesus as the:

Christ, the promised
Messiah from
David's line (Acts
2:36; 5:42)

Lord of all
(Acts 10:36)

Son of God
(Acts 9:20)

Holy and Righteous
One (Acts 3:14)

Servant of God,
who suffered to
make us righteous
(Acts 3:13, 26;
4:27, 30)

Author of Life
(Acts 3:15)

Leader and Savior
(Acts 5:31)

Living One
(Acts 25:19)

Cornerstone upon
whom God's people
depend (Acts 4:11)

Exalted One, seated
at God's right hand
(Acts 2:33; 5:31)

Many of these titles—Lord, Son of God, Savior, Leader, and Exalted One—were also claimed by the Roman emperors as part of the imperial cult. To confess that these titles belonged to Jesus alone was to declare that Caesar was not the world's true king. In many ways, Acts is the story of the ultimate “god competition.” Who is the true Lord of the world? Is it the emperor? Is it the gods of Greece and Rome? Acts gives a resounding answer: **Jesus Christ is Lord, Savior, and King of all.** His gospel will spread to every nation, and no power on earth will be able to stop it.

Acts tells us who Jesus is so that we can understand what Jesus is doing. The exalted Lord is still at work from the Father's throne. He pours out His Spirit, builds His church, heals the broken, saves sinners, and directs the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. The risen King is not absent from His people. He is actively accomplishing His mission through them.

Cast of Characters

Main Players

The Trinity

The Father, who has promised and planned salvation; the Son, the exalted Lord and Savior; and the Spirit, “the promise of the Father,” sent to empower Jesus’ disciples for mission. The Trinity is the key player in the book of Acts.

The Church

The Spirit-filled community of Jesus’ followers who receive the gospel, endure persecution, care for one another, send missionaries, and carry the message of Jesus from Jerusalem to Rome.

Peter

One of Jesus’ original disciples who, in Acts, becomes an apostle entrusted to guide and influence the early church. Peter is the prominent church leader in Acts 1-12.

Paul

Once a zealous Pharisee who was commissioned to arrest Christians, Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and was appointed to become one of the leading Christian missionaries to the Gentiles of the Mediterranean and Asia Minor. In Acts 13, the focus shifts from Peter’s leadership to Paul’s missionary work.

Supporting Cast

Stephen

A Greek-speaking Jew and one of the seven men who were appointed in Acts 6 to serve widows of the church. He became the first martyr for preaching the gospel of Jesus.

John

Another original disciple who accompanies Peter on apostolic missions, like confirming the faith of the Samaritan Christians and praying for them to receive the Holy Spirit.

Philip the Evangelist

Originally appointed to serve widows, Philip went on to become one of the most effective evangelists in Samaria.

Barnabas

Known as the “son of encouragement,” Barnabas was a landowner who used his resources to advance the gospel mission. He vouched for Paul after his conversion and helped lead the growing church in Antioch.

Luke

A physician who traveled with Paul. Traditionally identified as the author of Acts, telling the whole story from Jerusalem onward.

Cornelius

A Roman officer who was among the first Gentile converts. He and his household receive the Holy Spirit in Acts 10.

Ananias of Damascus

The disciple whom Jesus sent to restore Paul’s sight after he met Jesus.

Ananias and Sapphira

A husband and wife who conspire to lie about their generosity and die as a result of their deception.

James, the son of Zebedee

One of Jesus’ original disciples who was executed by King Herod in Acts 12.

James (Jesus’ brother)

A leader in the Jerusalem church. After Peter’s escape from prison, he’s the first person word is sent to (Acts 12:17).

Rulers, Opponents & Persecutors

The Sanhedrin

The Jewish ruling council that sought to stamp out the gospel in Jerusalem.

Herod Agrippa I

The Jewish ruler who persecuted the church, killed James, and imprisoned Peter.

KEEP GOING

Next Steps

A guide is only useful if it leads somewhere. Here's where to go next — on your own, with your group, or as a family.

Watch or Listen Again

stonegate.church/sermons

▶ [Subscribe on YouTube](#)

youtube.com/@StonegateChurch

Community Groups

stonegate.church/groups

Every group is walking through Acts together this series — find yours and jump in this week.

GOING DEEPER

The Acts Bible Study

Studying Acts with your group? Grab a copy of the Acts Bible Study and go deeper together this series.

▶ [Go to the Acts Bible Study](#)

stonegate.church/episode/equip-acts



Scan for the Acts Bible Study · @stonegatechurch