

A SHORT GUIDE TO THE MISSION OF GOD THROUGH HIS PEOPLE



UNDERSTANDING THE
BOOK OF
ACTS

Jesse Welliver, PhD

INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts is unlike any other book in the Bible. Acts serves as a source of evangelistic energy for the church. If a church has lost its sense of identity and purpose, the church can turn to the book of Acts to be refreshed, renewed, and redirected.¹ When we read the “Acts of the Apostles,” as it is titled in most of our Bibles, we see the early followers of Jesus begin to *act* on the Great Commission that Jesus gave them in Gospel accounts. Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke, also wrote the book of Acts. Think of it like a two-volume work. Volume one deals with the beginning of Jesus’s ministry on earth, and volume two deals with Jesus’s work through his people to reach the world. Take note: the work of Jesus is central to both books. He does not intend for us to read the actions of the apostles and early church apart from the work of Jesus. Luke wants us to see that Jesus is still working, especially through the Holy Spirit, in the world after his ascension.² In fact, there are more references to the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts than any other book.

Acts was written sometime before AD 64, which was the year that Roman Emperor Nero began persecuting Christians and the year of the Great Fire in Rome, which he blamed on Christians. It is unlikely that it was written after AD 70, because if it were, we would expect to have some record of the fall of Jerusalem that occurred that year. Luke likely intended the book of Acts for Christian communities with mixed congregations of Jews and Gentiles.³ As the gospel began to spread across the known world and more and more Gentiles were turning to Jesus in faith, the Christian Jews would have needed to hear that this in fact was part of God’s plan from the beginning. Also, the Gentiles would need to hear that they were meant to be one family with the Jewish Christians. The fact that the Gentiles who trusted Jesus were added to the elect people of God was an act of God’s mercy and grace—they both needed to see that God’s mercy extends beyond ethnic barriers.

1 Patrick Schreiner, *The Mission of the Triune God: A Theology of Acts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 20.

2 A helpful little book is Patrick Schreiner’s work, *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020).

3 John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 20.

The main point of the book of, however, is centered on God's work through the church to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Schreiner says, "Acts recounts the struggle and success of the gospel message going forth, all under the plan of God, centered on King Jesus, and empowered by the Spirit."⁴ The gospel is seen as the powerful message of God that triumphs in the face of opposition. In the major cultural centers of the ancient world, the gospel confronts idolatry and human pride. In Philippi, the gospel overcomes demon possession. In Athens, the gospel is declared against philosophy and pantheism. In Rome, the gospel of King Jesus confronts the emperor cult that recognizes Caesar as Lord. In every case, the gospel goes forward—not because of the persuasiveness of the preachers, but because of the power of God in the message of Jesus Christ.

One unique feature of the book of Acts is the record of several speeches and sermons throughout the narrative. Acts 2 records the content of Peter's first gospel sermon about Jesus. Acts 4 records another sermon. Several of Paul's speeches and communication are recorded as well, such as his address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. In fact, almost one third of Acts is made up of speeches or sermons.⁵ Through these speeches, we are given a window into the gospel the apostles preached, which is the gospel that laid the foundation for the Church that we belong to today.

As Schreiner explains, the book of Acts is both a *transitional* book and a *programmatic* book.⁶ It is transitional in that the book records events at a unique point in providential and redemptive history. In this sense, much of the book is not repeatable, unable to be replicated today. The establishment of the twelve apostles as chosen, called, and commissioned by the resurrected Jesus is such an event. We do not have apostles today; this was a unique office that established the foundation for the church (See Ephesians 2:11–22). But the book of Acts is also programmatic, meaning that it is meant to provide direction, encouragement, and guidance for the church today.⁷

Today we live in a Western culture than has its own idols and proclaims its own ways of salvation. Like Athens, we're surrounded by philosophical speculation regarding the nature of reality. People make themselves their own gods, deciding what is acceptable. The individual has become the arbiter of what is true, not God. Like Ephesus, we live in a "spiritual" culture, but

4 Schreiner, *The Mission of the Triune God*, 21.

5 Polhill, *Acts*, 20.

6 Schreiner, *The Mission of the Triune God*, 21.

7 Schreiner, *The Mission of the Triune God*, 21.

that spirituality is devoid of the redeeming power of Jesus. Like Philippi and Rome, we live in a power that idolizes status and power. Yet, the book of Acts reminds the church that none of these paths are acceptable before God. None of these paths offer true salvation. Only the gospel of Jesus offers salvation and freedom. God's word reminds us of our course. In the power of the Spirit, the church proclaims the powerful gospel capable of confronting the idolatrous ways of the world. We have a gospel, a treasure in jars of clay, that offers salvation to any who will call on the name of Jesus.

CHRIST IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Jesus Christ is the focal point of the Gospel narratives. However, when we turn to the book of Acts, it might seem as if Jesus (not to mention God the Father and God the Holy Spirit) fades to the background and the apostles take center stage. This could not be further from the truth. In the opening pages of Acts, we see Jesus after the resurrection spending time with his disciples teaching them about the kingdom of God (1: 3). Jesus promised his disciples before his crucifixion and resurrection that at some point he would send them the Holy Spirit to be with them when he must return to the Father. That time what quickly approaching.

After commissioning them to be witnesses to the ends of the earth (1:8), Jesus ascended into heaven. The next time we see Jesus in the book of Acts, he appears to Saul of Tarsus (9:1ff), and we do not see Jesus again for the rest of the book. What are we to make of this? The worst mistake we could make is to think that Jesus is now not active in the life of the Church. The end of Jesus's ministry was not his ascension; it is his *session*. The heavenly session of Jesus Christ refers to his present rule as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, ruling over the Church primarily through Spirit of God and the preaching of the Word of God.

Though we do not see Jesus Christ physically to the extent we did in the gospels, Jesus is still the center of God's saving activity in the book of Acts. In the opening sentences of the book, we see that Jesus gave the apostles commands "through the Holy Spirit," (Acts 1:2). This sets the pattern for how Jesus establishes his kingdom through the apostles—through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We need to remember that we have entered into a new phase of the history of redemption. The disciples did not fully understand the work that Jesus Christ was coming to do before he ascended into heaven. They still thought Jesus had come to reestablish the national kingdom of Israel (**Acts 1:6**). However, the gospel of Jesus was not just for Israel—the gospel of Jesus is for the whole world. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news, must be preached. Jesus himself, the crucified and resurrection and reigning Son of God, is the content of what the apostles and later pastors and teachers must preach. Why? Because salvation on comes through repentance and faith in Jesus. As the Apostle Peter says, “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).

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book of Acts is written in a narrative format. Narratives have main characters, plots, dialogue, and a shape that convey a central message. This does not mean that Luke wrote the book in a “stream of consciousness.” He wrote intentionally, communicating the theological significance of the history he recorded. We should look to the beginning of the book for clues regarding how Luke might have intended to structure the story of the gospel’s expansion.

In Acts 1:8, Luke records Jesus’s commission to his disciples. The verse lays out a simple structure for the story that follows. Jesus says,

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.

At this point the disciples are still in Jerusalem. Jesus is going to ascend to be with the Father and reign over Church through his word and Spirit, and he is sending out his followers as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. They will begin first in Jerusalem, then extend their witness to all Judea and Samaria, and finally, they will take the gospel to the end of the known world. These geographical locations serve to provide a simple structure the book.

The Gospel’s power in Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)

The Gospel’s power in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12)

The Gospel's power to the ends of the earth, especially Rome (Acts 13–28)

While there are many ways to outline the book, this is a simple way to see Luke's intention in writing. We see that through God's people, the gospel has feet, and those feet carry the message that Jesus is Lord all the way to the doorstep of Rome, home of Caesar, who falsely claimed the title that only belongs to Jesus.

PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS

In the second part of the book, we see the persecutor turned proclaimer Paul take the gospel across the Mediterranean area, all the way to Rome on what have been called his missionary journeys. Paul had at least three missionary journeys that are recorded for us in Acts. Luke does not provide every detail of the missionary journeys, but that is not necessary to understand both the success of the gospel and the opposition that Paul and his companions faced from the Jews and Gentiles.

The First Missionary Journey (Acts 13–14)

Paul visits Seleucia, Cyprus, Salamis, Pamphylia, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Antioch in Syria.

Paul preaches the gospel, experiences opposition from the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia and is stoned at Lystra

The Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:36–18:22)

Paul visits Cilicia, Syria, Derbe, Lystra, Troas, Macedonia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Antioch, Galatia, Phrygia, Ephesus

Paul imprisoned in Philippi, but miraculously released.

The Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23–21:15)

Paul visits Galatia, Phrygia, Ephesus, Macedonia to Greece, Troas, Assos, Mitylene, Chios, Samos, Miletus, Caesarea, and Jerusalem.

Paul Arrested in Jerusalem, imprisoned at Caesarea and Rome (Acts 21:16–28:16)

MAIN THEMES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

The book of Acts has a number of central threads that weave the narrative together. These central themes are important to keep in mind while reading, because they keep us tied to the main points of the book and prevent us from becoming too subjective with our interpretation and application. This list of themes is not exhaustive, but they will help ground us as we read through Acts.

I. THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

God's providence speaks to his guiding hand over all events in the world, especially in regard to his people. God provides in many ways, but God's hand can be seen throughout the book of Acts. God delivered Peter from prison. Though Paul was arrested and imprisoned many times, he knew that his imprisonment would not go to waste. God would use his suffering for the benefit of the gospel advancing in the world.

II. THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The book of Acts records a new moment in redemptive history. The Holy Spirit now, through faith in Jesus, indwells all believers. The Spirit is mentioned more in Acts than any other book—over 50 times. The Holy Spirit is present with believers wherever they go, no matter what opposition they face as they spread the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth. The Holy Spirit is at work in the church and who makes the gospel effective and powerful.

III. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The Church was born for God's mission. God has always intended that his people be a blessing and light to the nations. The church is called to proclaim the excellencies of him who called us from darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). This mission involves carrying out the Great Commission, making disciples of all nations, baptizing into the name of the Triune God and teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:18–20). The book of Acts shows the initial stages of this mission, as the nations are reached with the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. This mission continues today as the church takes the gospel to people who have yet to hear the good news of the gospel.

IV. THE INCLUSION OF THE GENTILES

Up until the book of Acts, most of the story of God's people deals with the people of Israel. The Old Testament, however, anticipates a day when the

entire world will worship God. The hope was in a future messiah who would usher in the kingdom of God. The Messiah, Jesus, came and his own people rejected him. After the resurrection and ascension, the followers of Jesus are sent to proclaim the gospel to all nations, including the Gentiles. The inclusion of Gentiles into God's people is a major point of contention for the Jews throughout Acts. Even Peter himself struggled with the idea. But now, God's people are not defined by ethnicity or geographical barriers. God's people are defined by their common allegiance to and faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah of God.

V. THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Acts gives us a window into the early church. We see its birth and growth. We see the character of the early Christians that are bound to one another not by their own blood but by the blood of Jesus. A violent persecutor of the church, Saul, is converted to faith in Jesus. Jews, an Ethiopian eunuch, Gentiles, and the Philippian jailer are joined together by a common trust in Jesus alone for salvation. The church is a family, and we see how they gather together for worship, care for one another, support the mission through sending out Paul and Barnabas to preach the gospel, and suffer together. Acts is a crash course on how to be the people of God in the world.

VI. THE OPPOSITION OF THE NATIONS

Psalm 2 asks, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" This Psalm tells us that the nations rise up against the "Lord's Anointed?" In its specific context, it speaks of Israel's King. In the broader story of the Bible, it speaks about King Jesus, the Lord's Anointed. In the Gospels we see how his own people, the Jews, plotted against him. In Acts, we see people across the known world rising up against the gospel of Jesus and his followers. True, many do turn to the Lord. But ultimately, Paul and Peter and many others would lose their lives to those in powerful positions among the nations. Opposition to the gospel should be expected; Jesus promised us that believers should expect to experience suffering for being faithful, just as he did. But the good news in Acts is that suffering for the gospel only serves to extend the gospel, it cannot stop the gospel.

VII. THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Acts 4:12 says that there is no other name under heaven by which men must be saved than the name of Jesus Christ. Paul tells us in one of his letters that the gospel is the "power of God unto salvation" for all who believe. In scene after scene, the book of Acts shows us of the redeeming and reconciling pow-

er of the gospel in the church and the world. It is not the persuasiveness of the preacher, how Paul dressed, or any other external measure that possesses true power to save. Only the gospel of Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension possesses power to save. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God in the incarnation; Jesus now extends his kingdom through his body, the church. The gospel is unstoppable.

HOW TO READ THE BOOK OF ACTS

Because Acts is a narrative, it can greatly benefit you to read the whole book over a short amount of time to get the big picture of the book. According to some, reading the whole book of Acts might take an average time of 2–2.5 hours.

Read it after you read the Gospel of Luke. Since Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and Acts, you might pick up on some of the same major themes throughout both works, providing continuity to Luke's purposes in communicating the record of Jesus's life and work through the church.

Though it may seem that the apostles are the primary figures, remember that Jesus is empowering them by the Holy Spirit. God is the one who saves. He is the main character.

Read it with others. The book is about how God built the church through the proclamation of the gospel and the witness of believers.

Read it prayerfully. Pray for God to stir your heart for those far from God and ask how you might become more involved in the mission of the church. Pray for those who, like Paul, are missionaries to foreign lands.

GUIDELINES FOR CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

Remember: the goal is to determine what Luke is intending to communicate to those who read Acts. We accomplish this by focusing on the three areas of literature, history, and theology.

Have a basic understanding of the major theological themes and structure of the book. Remember that Luke-Acts are essentially a two-volume work that inform one another.

When studying a passage, determine the boundaries of the section of study. Not all chapter divisions in Acts present the best boundaries for study, but in some cases, they work well. For example: Acts 2 is fairly self-contained chapter. It begins by describing the setting, presenting the gospel, and concludes with the results of Peter's preaching.

Identify the major characters in the narrative and their role in the narrative. Some characters are protagonists (positive examples) and some are antagonists (negative examples).

Remember that Acts records the history of a unique, non-repeatable period in the history of redemption. Keep the big story of the Bible in mind as you read. For example, the specific role of the first apostles no longer exists. You and I do not possess the authority of Peter and Paul. The Church has been established on the foundation of the apostles (Ephesians 2), and its mission continues today.

Identify important words, phrases, or content. Phrases like "the name of Jesus," "The kingdom of God," etc. are important. Pay special attention to the speeches and sermons recorded in Acts.

You must determine if the narrative is *descriptive* or *prescriptive*. Some information in the book of Acts is descriptive, describing the events that took place. The healing of the beggar in Acts 3 is a descriptive event; it does not prescribe this event as a normative event that should characterize the life of the church today. Acts 2, however, both describes the devotion of the church to the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, and the breaking of bread and the prayers. These are descriptive and prescriptive, because they are meant to characterize the church today. This does not mean that Christians today are commanded to exemplify some kind of socialist group, selling everything they have. Acts 5 helps clarify this section. It does mean that the Church should be characterized by voluntary generosity to help each other. This is confirmed multiple times in Acts as well as the rest of Paul's epistles.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF ACTS

What words, phrases, or theological themes are present in this text?

What does this text tell me about God (Father, Son, and/or Holy Spirit)?

Who are the main characters, and do they function as positive or negative examples?

What does this text tell me about humanity?

How does this text relate to the main point of the book of Acts?

How does this text relate to the big story of the Bible?

How does Luke intend for this text to impact the reader? Encouragement? Action? Belief? Warning?

What do I/we need to do apply this text personally? within the Church? In our relationship to the community/world?

80 DAY ACTS READING PLAN

Day 1: Acts 1

Day 2: Acts 2

Day 3: Acts 3

Day 4: Acts 4

Day 5: Acts 5

Day 6: Acts 6:1-7

Day 7: Acts 6:8-7:53

Day 8: Acts 7:54-8:3

Day 9: Acts 8:4-40

Day 10: Acts 9

Day 11: Acts 10:1-16

Day 12: Acts 10:17-48

Day 13: Acts 11

Day 14: Acts 12

Day 15: Acts 13

Day 16: Acts 14

Day 17: Acts 15

Day 18: Acts 16

Day 19: Acts 17

Day 20 – Acts 18:1-23

Day 21: Acts 18:24-19:41

Day 22: Acts 20

Day 23: Acts 21:1-36

Day 24: Acts 21:37-22:29

Day 25: Acts 22:30-23:35

Day 26: Acts 24

Day 27: Acts 25

Day 28: Acts 26

Day 29: Acts 27

Day 30: Acts 28

RESOURCES TO CONSULT

John B. Polhill. *Acts*, The New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H, 1992.

Patrick Schreiner. *The Mission of the Triune God: A Theology of Acts*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2022.

Patrick Schreiner. *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine*. Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020.

Peter Walker. *In the Steps of Paul: An Illustrated Guide to the Apostle's Life and Journey's*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.

Appendix:
A Chronological Table of The Book of Acts⁸

THE BOOK OF ACTS	THE ROMAN EMPIRE
AD 30 The crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus (1:1–11); Pentecost (2:1–41)	AD 14–37 Tiberius is the Emperor
AD 32–36 Stephen is stoned (7:54–60) Saul is converted (9:1–19) Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem (9:26–28; Gal 1:18–20)	AD 26–36 Pontius Pilate is the procurator of Judea
AD 43–44 James the Apostle is executed (12:1–2)	AD 37–41 Caligula is the Emperor
AD 46–47 Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem (11:27–30; Gal 2:1–10)	AD 41–44 Herod Agrippa I, king of Judea
AD 47–48 Paul’s first Missionary Journey (13–14)	AD 41–54 Claudius is the Emperor
	AD 45–47 Famine in Judea
AD 49 The Council of Jerusalem (15:1–30) Paul’s second missionary journey begins (15:36ff)	AD 49 Claudius expels Jews from Rome
	AD 50–c. 93 Herod Agrippa II, tetrarch of Northern Territory

8 Based on the work of Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 159–75, 251–70, in John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today Series, ed. John R. W. Stott (Dowers Grove: IVP Academic, 1990).

Appendix:

A Chronological Table of The Book of Acts (continued)

THE BOOK OF ACTS	THE ROMAN EMPIRE
AD 50–52 Paul in Corinth (18:1–18a) AD 52 Paul returns to Syrian Antioch via Ephesus and Caesarea (18:18b–22) Paul’s third missionary journey begins (18:23ff)	AD 51–52 Gallio, proconsul of Achaia
AD 52–55 Paul in Ephesus (19:1–20:1a) AD 55–56 Paul in Macedonia (20:1b–2a) AD 56–57 Paul spends the winter in Corinth (20:2b–3a) AD 57 Paul’s voyage to Macedonia, Troas, and Miletus (20:3b–21:17) Paul is arrested in Jerusalem (21:27–36) and tried before Felix (24:1–22)	AD 52–59 Felix, procurator of Judea AD 54–68 Nero is the Emperor of Rome

Appendix:

A Chronological Table of The Book of Acts (continued)

THE BOOK OF ACTS	THE ROMAN EMPIRE
AD 57–59 Paul’s Caesarean imprisonment (23:23–24:27) AD 59 Paul is tried before Festus and Agrippa (25:626:32)	AD 59–61 Festus, procurator of Judea
AD 59–60 Paul’s voyage to Rome (27:1–28:16) AD 60–62 Paul’s Roman imprisonment (28:16ff)	
AD 64 Paul and Peter most likely martyred in Rome	AD 64 Great Fire in Rome; Nero perse- cutes Christians AD 70 The Fall of Jerusalem

