

THE BOOK OF —  
ACTS





# THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The fifth book of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, serves as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Both books were penned by the same author, Luke, who was a traveling companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14). In the opening lines of Acts, Luke provides a hint about the book's focus. While the first volume (Luke) details what Jesus *"began to do and teach,"* the second volume (Acts) continues this narrative, exploring what Jesus *"continued to do and teach"* through the Apostles.

This leads to an interesting point about the book's traditional, but not original, title, The Acts of the Apostles. While various apostles play significant roles throughout the stories, the central figure unifying the narrative from beginning to end is Jesus, who appears personally or acts through the Holy Spirit. The book, therefore, could be more aptly named ***"The Acts of Jesus and the Spirit."***

The book of Acts details how Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, guides His disciples to venture out into the world and invite all nations to live according to the principles of God's Kingdom. The main themes and design of the book flow right out of the opening chapter of Acts.

**Acts 1:8, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem**, and in all **Judea and Samaria**, and to the **ends of the earth**."***

# THE BIG IDEAS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

## ■ The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus

Luke affirms that Jesus did not merely appear to have risen from the dead; His resurrection was indeed a physical reality. Therefore, he documents the bodily resurrected appearances of Jesus with many convincing proofs (Acts 1:3; Luke 24:39-43). Luke's mention of Jesus eating with the disciples confirms His bodily resurrection, providing compelling proof of it (Acts 1:4).

Luke's foremost objective is to *"firmly root the church's beginnings in the certainty of Jesus' resurrection."* From this point forward, the conviction that God raised Jesus from the dead becomes the lynchpin of the experience and proclamation of Jesus' followers.

## ■ The Birth of the Church

Jesus promised His disciples

### A Historical perspective of how Christianity grew.

In the midst of numerous religions under the Roman Empire, how did Christianity gain the spotlight? Many secular historians conclude:

#### 1. Absolute Inclusivity

The pagan deities were often tied and confined to certain regions and nations. Christianity gloried in its appeal to Jews, Gentiles, and barbarians. The philosophers of Greece and Rome could appeal only to the educated and could never win the masses. In fact, one of the charges against Christianity was that it drew the lowly and uneducated multitude, that its essential teaching was so simple that anybody could understand it. Yet Christianity also developed a philosophy that transformed some of the greatest minds in society. **The early church was diverse and multi-ethnic in nature – rich or poor, man or woman, high or low, learned or unlearned all found their identity in Christ alone and shared in the Salvation made possible by Him.**

#### 2. A New Identity

Before Christianity, there was no distinct "religious identity," as religion



He would build His Church and nothing would ever prevail against it. The book of Acts unfolds that powerful building project. Luke gives us periodic updates on the rapid growth of the Church in Jerusalem (2:41; 4:4; 5: 14; 6: 7).

The early church was Spirit-formed, a new community with a new identity in Jesus. They did not fit into the surrounding culture; instead, they challenged it in love. The early Christians were living out the Mission of God to make things new – to free people from bondage through the presence and power of Jesus. A new pattern of ethics, life and community emerged through His teachings

When persecution was unleashed against the Church, it was scattered from Jerusalem; however, it did not fold. The Church expanded as those who were scattered went about preaching the gospel, reaching entire cities and villages (8:8, 25). In Acts 9, the risen Christ

was simply an aspect of ethnicity or national identity. Religion was essentially assigned to people.

**Christianity offered a choice to have a direct, personal love relationship with the Creator God who gives eternal life to all who believe.** Your faith in Christ becomes your most accepted identity. Race and class are irrelevant. This means that Christians whether slave or free, high or low, of any race or nationality were now equal in Christ.

### **3. Unique Values and Generosity**

The early Christians did not fit into the surrounding culture and the values of the Roman Empire. Their new identity in Christ derived values from the teachings of the Lord Jesus alone. They were counterculture in their approach to sexual practices and justice. **Despite suffering for the sake of Christ, they were caregivers and life-givers to many.**

Also, what attracted non-believers was Christians' concern for people in need and their sacrificial love, even for their enemies. In a culture that called for vengeance and retaliation, Christians were called to forgive and reconcile, and many were attracted to this new philosophy.

appears to Saul of Tarsus, the great persecutor of the Church. He is miraculously converted, filled with the Holy Spirit, and raised up as Jesus' chosen instrument to take the Gospel to the Gentile world (9:15-19). Paul's apostolic ministry, directed by Jesus, spread the Gospel and started churches all over the Greco-Roman world (16:6-10; 18:9-11).

*Jesus is still building His Church today through the preaching of the Gospel by Spirit-filled people who live with bold and unhindered faith.*

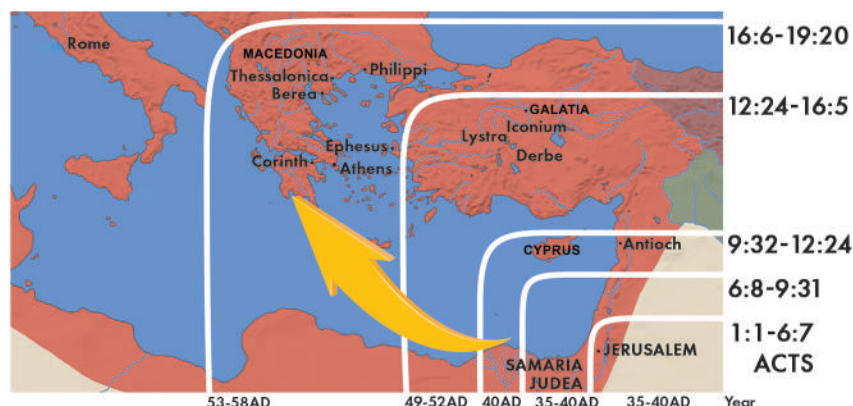
## ■ Paul's Election and Mission

Paul made his debut in the Bible as an intense persecutor of Christians. He was a passionately righteous Jew and a Pharisee, zealous to protect Judaism from any perpetrators. Interestingly, Paul was also a Roman citizen by birth. After his dramatic experience on the road to Damascus with the risen Lord Jesus, his identity as a Jew took a back seat to his identity as a follower of Christ.

Paul's background as a Pharisee and his intense devotion to the Law could have made him well-suited to preach to the Jews. But Paul had a different calling from the Lord – an apostle to the Gentiles. (**Acts 9:15**, *"This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel"*).

Luke records **three missionary journeys of Paul** that took him throughout Asia Minor, Syria, Cyprus, Greece, Macedonia, and finally Rome. Paul had expanded the church far and wide, flinging open the doors to Gentiles, while strenuously defending his

conviction that the gospel was for all people and that no barriers should be put in the way of Gentiles.



## ■ The Work of the Holy Spirit

A prominent theme in Acts is this timeless message: The mission of the Holy Spirit is to grow Christ's worldwide Church by gathering local congregations through empowering individuals.

*"Filled with the Holy Spirit"* and *"full of the Holy Spirit"* are Luke's favourite ways to describe believers' involvement with the Spirit. Such a filling is especially related to drawing near to Jesus and being filled or being full for doing the purposes of God. All service to God is ultimately dependent upon the gift of the Spirit.

The Spirit provides a foretaste of the future age, when God makes everything new (1 Cor. 2:9-10; 2 Cor. 5:17). Because we have tasted the life of the future, nothing in the present can ever be the same for us. As citizens of a new age, we must work like Jesus, to bring divine wholeness into the brokenness of the present age.

# CHAPTER SUMMARY

## Acts 1

### INTRODUCTION

**Resurrected Jesus  
Commissions His  
Disciples**

**Acts 1:8,**  
*"But you will  
receive power  
when the Holy  
Spirit comes on  
you; and you will  
be my witnesses  
in Jerusalem, and  
in all Judea and  
Samaria, and to  
the ends of the  
earth."*

## Acts 2-7

### IN JERUSALEM

**Arrival of the  
Spirit and Birth  
of the Church**

**Acts 2:41,**  
*"Those who  
accepted his  
message were  
baptized, and  
about three  
thousand were  
added to their  
number that day."*

## Acts 13-28

### TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

**The Mission  
of the Church**

**Acts 13:47,**  
*For this is what  
the Lord has  
commanded us:  
"I have made you  
a light for the  
Gentiles, that you  
may bring  
salvation to the  
ends of the earth.'*

## Acts 8-12

### IN JUDEA & SAMARIA

**The Life in Jesus  
movement**

**Acts 9:31,**  
*Then the church  
throughout Judea,  
Galilee and  
Samaria enjoyed  
a time of peace  
and was  
strengthened.  
Living in the fear  
of the Lord and  
encouraged by  
the Holy Spirit, it  
increased in  
numbers.*



# ACTS 1

## INTRODUCTION

### ■ Resurrected Jesus Commissions His Disciples

The book's introduction recounts how the risen Jesus spent around 40 days with His disciples teaching them about "the Kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3), connecting back to Luke's gospel. There, Jesus declared that He was restoring God's Kingdom, beginning with Israel and to the ends of the world.

The book of Acts is about Jesus leading His people through the Spirit to go out into the world and invite all nations to live under His reign. **Jesus promises that the Spirit will soon come and immerse them in His presence, fulfilling one of the key hopes in the Old Testament.** The prophets had promised that in the messianic Kingdom, God's presence, or His Spirit, would take up residence among His people in a new temple, transforming their hearts (Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-32).

From here, **Jesus ascends and fades away from their sight in a cloud.** This is an image from Daniel 7 showing that Jesus is now being enthroned as the Son of Man. He now shares in God's rule over the world, which He will bring fully here on Earth when He returns.

*Acts 1:9-11, "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*

## ACTS 2 - 7

### IN JERUSALEM

#### ■ Arrival of the Spirit and Birth of the Church

In chapters 2-7, the focus is on Jerusalem, where Jesus' followers were waiting in the city until the feast of Pentecost. Jewish pilgrims arrived on this day from all over the ancient world. **The Holy Spirit suddenly came upon the disciples as a great wind, and something like flames appeared over each person's head.** Together, the disciples started announcing and telling stories of "*God's mighty deeds*" (Acts 2:11), speaking in tongues (a new language) they did not know before. And remarkably, the people gathered nearby understood their words perfectly.

(In Genesis 11 at the tower of Babel, the language barrier thwarts humanity's prideful attempt to reach heaven by force, but in Acts chapter 2, the Holy Spirit unites different peoples in the common language of Christ's Gospel, for the benefit of the early church's explosive growth.)

To understand what Luke is emphasizing in this story, it is crucial to see the Old Testament roots in the key images. First of all, **the wind and fire are a direct allusion to the stories about God's glorious, fiery presence filling the tabernacle and temple** (Exodus 40:38; 2 Chronicles 7:1-3). These images also recall the prophetic promises that God would come and live, through His Spirit, in the new temple of the messianic Kingdom (Ezekiel 43, Haggai 2). Here in Acts, God's fiery presence comes to

dwell not in a building but in His people. Luke is saying that the new temple spoken of by the prophets is actually Jesus' new covenant family.

This connects to the second thing that Luke is trying to say. The prophets promised that when God came to dwell in His new temple, He would reunify the tribes of Israel under the messianic king. This is when the good news of God's reign would be announced to all nations (Isaiah 11; Ezek. 37). **Luke describes in detail the international, multi-tribe makeup of the Israelites who first responded to Peter's message at Pentecost.** The apostles began calling on Israelites to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah, and thousands did so, forming new communities of generosity, worship, and celebration.

*(Acts 2:9-11 gives a sample of the world represented at Jerusalem – “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”)*

## ■ Peter's Pentecost Sermon

On Pentecost, Peter preached to a large gathering of Jews who weren't believers. By the end of his first sermon, over 3,000 people had become followers of Jesus. **What did they hear that changed their life?**





The entire sermon linked recent events—the descent of the Spirit, Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection—with evidence from Old Testament scriptures (Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110). This demonstrated that Jesus, whom they had crucified, is the Anointed One, the Messiah.

The Holy Spirit convicted the hearers and they were pierced in their hearts. The events that followed caused revival in Jerusalem and to the ends of the world. **Acts 2:37-41**, *"When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'"* <sup>38</sup> Peter replied, *"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* <sup>39</sup>*The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."* <sup>40</sup>*With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'"* <sup>41</sup> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day"



Apostle Peter laid the first FIVE foundations of faith for the universal church – Repentance from sin, baptism as a sign of joining with Christ, doctrine of forgiveness – receive God’s forgiveness as well as be a forgiving person, relying on the indwelling and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit and continually saving yourself from the corrupt world.



A new community was birthed in Jerusalem that devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were united and they had everything in common. They met daily in the temple courts and in their homes to praise

God and the Lord added to their numbers daily.

### ■ Persecution from Jewish leaders

Luke also shows us how Jesus’ new family, or early church quickly faced hostility from the leaders of Jerusalem. With a beautifully symmetrical design in chapters 3-5, Luke tells a tale of two temples: God’s new temple, the community of Jesus’ followers who meet in the old Temple courts (Acts 2:46, 5:42), and the existing Temple structure with High Priests who were supposed to reflect God’s glory. There are two stories of Peter and other apostles healing people in the temple courts, only to

be arrested by the temple leaders. These arrests were followed each time by a speech from Peter, claiming that Jesus is the true King of Israel.



This conflict culminated with the first wave of persecution in chapters 6 and 7. Jesus' followers continued to multiply, requiring a new generation of leaders. One of them, Stephen, was a bold witness for Jesus in Jerusalem, but he was arrested and accused of speaking against and even threatening the temple (Acts 6:12-13). Stephen gave a long speech, showing how Israel's leaders had always rejected the messengers God sent them, including Jesus and now His disciples. Jerusalem's leaders were enraged, and they murdered Stephen, launching a wave of persecution against Jesus' followers, and driving most of them out of the city. The crisis had a paradoxical effect, however, as Luke shows how this tragedy becomes the means by which Jesus' people were now sent out into Judea and Samaria, just as Jesus had planned (remember **Acts 1:8**, "*you will be my witness in Jerusalem... Judea and Samaria... and the ends of the world*").

# ACTS 8-12

## IN JUDEA & SAMARIA

### ■ The New Jesus Movement

In the following section (Acts 8-12), Luke presents a diverse collection of stories illustrating the transformation of the primarily Jewish, Jerusalem-based community of Jesus into a multi-ethnic, global movement.

The first story is about **Philip's mission into Samaria**, the land of Israel's hated enemies, where many come to know and follow Jesus (**Acts 8**).

Next, we see the **conversion of Saul of Tarsus**, later and better known as **Paul** (**Acts 9**). He was a sworn enemy and even a persecutor of Jesus' followers until he personally met Jesus, the risen King. He went on to become a passionate advocate of Jesus



Next is a story about **Peter** (**Acts 10-11**), who has a vision in which he learns that God does not consider non-Jewish people ritually impure or unworthy of joining Jesus' family. Peter is led



by the Spirit to the house of a Roman soldier, with many non-Jews, who respond to the good news about Jesus. In this story, the Spirit shows up just as powerfully as He did for the Jewish disciples of Jesus in Acts 2.



These themes culminate in the founding of the church at Antioch (Acts 11), the largest, most cosmopolitan city in that part of the Roman Empire. Luke tells us that Barnabas, a Jewish leader from the Jerusalem church, went along with Paul to help lead this church community. During their time there, it also grew into the first large, multi-ethnic church and the place where Jesus' followers were first called **Christians** (Acts 11:26). From this church, the first international missionaries were sent out, and Jesus' commission was set into action.



# ACTS 13-28

## TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

### ■ The Mission of the Church

The Holy Spirit prompted **Barnabas and Paul** to travel around the Roman provinces and announce the good news that Jesus is the King (Acts 13:2).

**The first journey started in the interior of Asia Minor** (located in modern-day Turkey) and ended with an important meeting of the apostles back in Jerusalem (Acts 15). **The second trip was into ancient Greece** (Acts 16-18). **The third trip was through the same territory once again, concluding with Jerusalem** (18-20). In the end, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and brought to **Rome** for trial and imprisonment (21-28).

Paul's journeys played a crucial role in the formation and development of the early Christian church. Many of the communities he encountered on these missionary journeys were the same ones to which he wrote his pastoral epistles.

Through these missionary accounts, Luke highlighted a number of key themes through repetition, beginning with the continued mission to Israel. Upon entering a new city, Paul always visited the Jewish synagogue to share how Jesus is the risen King who is now forming a new multi-ethnic church of God. Many Jewish people came to recognize Jesus as their Messiah. Others, however, opposed Paul and sometimes even ran him out of their town as a dangerous rebel who opposed the Torah and Jewish

tradition. They set a pattern they would follow for many years: share the Gospel with the Jews first, then the Gentiles. This pattern also allowed them to address the God-fearers first and then those who were far away from God.

In Acts 15, Paul discovered that there were some Jewish followers of Jesus in Antioch claiming that unless non-Jewish people become Jewish by practicing circumcision, the Sabbath, and obeying kosher food laws, they couldn't be a part of Jesus' redeemed people. Paul and Barnabas radically disagreed with this claim. Hence they took the debate to a leadership council in Jerusalem. There, Peter, Paul, and James, the brother of Jesus, discussed and discerned from the Scriptures and from their experience that God's

## Parallelism between Jesus and Paul

There exist many similarities between Jesus and Paul especially from the perspective of Luke.

### Journey to Jerusalem

In Luke, Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, which ultimately ends with His crucifixion (Luke 9:31; 9:51; 12:50; 13:33; 18:31-33).

In Acts, Paul journeys to Jerusalem, which is also a kind of "*passion-journey*" which ends in arrest (Acts 20:3; 20:22-24; 20:37-38; 21:4; 21:10-11; 21:13)

### Opposed by Sadducees, Acknowledged by Scribes

The Sadducees, who do not believe in resurrection, oppose Jesus. Some scribes take a friendly attitude to Jesus (Luke 20:27-39).

The Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection, oppose Paul. Some scribes say they find nothing wrong with Paul's teaching (Acts 23:6-9).

### Healing of sick and demon possessed and raising the dead

Jesus's ministry included many healings of the sick (Luke 5), the demon possessed (Luke 8) and raising of the dead (Luke 8).

plan was always to include the nations within His covenant people. While that did require non-Jewish Christians to stop participating in pagan temple sacrifices, it didn't require them to adopt an ethnically Jewish identity or become Torah-observant.

**This decision was ground-breaking for the history of the Jesus movement. Jesus, who is the risen King of all nations, is an ethnically Jewish Messiah. However, a person's membership into His people is not based on ethnic identity or Torah observance. Instead, one must simply trust in Jesus and follow His teachings.**

It's this multi-ethnic reality of the Jesus movement that led to the next theme of Acts, namely, the clash of cultures between the early Christians and the

### ...continued

Paul's ministry also included healing of sick (Acts 14), casting out demons (Acts 16) and even raising the dead (Acts 20)

#### **The Four Trials of Jesus and Paul**

Jesus stands on "trial" four times (i.e., before the high priest and the council; Pilate; Herod; Pilate) (Luke 22:54; 23:1; 23:9; Luke 23:11).

In Acts, Paul stands on "trial" four times (Council of Sanhedrin; Felix; Festus; Agrippa) (Acts 23; 24; 25; 26).

#### **Thrice Declared Innocent by Gentile Authority**

Pilate declares Jesus' innocent three times (Luke 23:4, 14, 22).

Three times the pagan rulers (the king, the governor and Bernice; Festus; and Agrippa) declare Paul innocent (Acts 23:9; 25:25; 26:31).

#### **An angelic assistance**

In the garden of Gethsemane, in prayer and agony, Jesus received an angelic assistance to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43).

Paul, as a prisoner to Rome via a sea voyage, receives an angelic word to strengthen him about the ship's safety (Acts 27:23).



Greek and Roman world. Luke records multiple clashes in Philippi, Athens, and Ephesus (chapters 14, 16-17, 19) that led to severe suffering for Paul and his companions while sharing the gospel.

Multiple stories show Romans accusing Paul and the Christians of rebellion and treason against Caesar. And it's understandable. People were hearing Paul correctly when he announced that *"there was another king, Jesus"* (Acts 17:7), and correctly seeing the Christian way of life as a challenge to many Roman cultural values. However, every time Paul was arrested and interrogated by Roman officials, they couldn't see any threat, and were forced to release him.

## ■ Paul's Arrest and Trials

In the final section of the book of Acts (**Acts 21-28**), Paul is attacked by the Jewish people who think he has betrayed Israel, which attracts the attention of Roman soldiers. These soldiers, in turn, think that Paul is a terrorist from Egypt who is starting a rebellion, so they arrest him. Paul is put on trial before the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (Acts 23) as well as a series of Roman leaders in Caesarea. Governor Felix only transfers Paul to the next governor, Festus, who eventually brings him before King Agrippa (Acts 24-26). Paul ends up in prison for years even though each trial fails to declare him guilty. All he did was to announce that his hope in the resurrection had been fulfilled through King Jesus. It was hardly a crime, but at that point, the Roman legal machine didn't let



him go. So Paul appealed to Rome's highest court.

Now, all this prison time would seem like a setback for Paul, whose passion was to go on the road and start new Jesus communities. **But in this story, the Spirit orchestrates all things for good.** The prison time allowed Paul to write his most important apostolic letters—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These paved the way for his **missionary legacy**. Eventually, Paul was transferred as a prisoner to Rome and, after a terrifying and near-death voyage across the Mediterranean, he ended up under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his delayed trial. From there, he hosted regular meetings that reached both Jews and Gentiles. The book ends with Paul *“announcing the Kingdom of God and boldly teaching all about the Lord Jesus Messiah, totally unhindered”* (Acts 28:31)—right under Caesar’s nose in Rome.



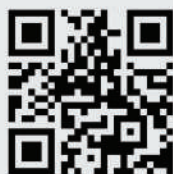
## CONCLUSION

The unified works of Luke and Acts do much more than detail the history of Jesus and the early Church. They tell the story of how God's Kingdom arrived here on Earth as it is in Heaven. It began with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and it continued through the coming of His Spirit to empower Jesus' followers to bear witness from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Luke is chronicling not the life and times of Paul (or any other early Christian leader), which would have a definite conclusion, but rather a phenomenon and movement that was enduring, alive and well in his own day. For Luke, Paul's story is really about the unstoppable word of God, which no obstacle, no shipwreck, no persecution, and no Roman authorities could hinder from reaching the heart of the empire and the hearts of people who lived there.

Christ is alive and continuing His own life through His body, that is, His church.





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