

The Message of Acts

LESSON 1



Topic

Overview of Acts

Theme

God's program of redemption will always move forward.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will consider whether he is allowing God's Word to spread through his life.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 2

Scripture Focus

Various passages in Acts

Summary

Lesson 1 provides an introduction to and an overview of this study. It presents the writer, literary features, purpose, and chronology of the book of Acts. It also gives special attention to the key emphases in Acts.

Outline

I. Luke, the Writer

II. Overview of Acts

- A. Date
- B. Literary nature
- C. Purpose
- D. Basic outline
- E. Chronology
- F. Key emphases
 1. Jesus is alive
 2. Jesus is one with His church
 3. Jesus' gospel is powerful

Memory Verse

"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

GETTING STARTED

Vibrant or Dead?

Every spring the ivy reemerges along the outfield wall of the Cub's Wrigley Field. In 1937, then Cubs General Manager Bill Veeck planted the ivy to beautify the stadium. Over the decades, groundskeepers have faithfully cared for the ivy, cutting back any ends that stop growing and die off. Their job is to make sure the ivy spreads to fill the entire outfield wall. Bare spots are unsightly and unacceptable!

The cover of this course shows vibrantly growing ivy as a symbol of the spread of God's Word. The spreading started with the early church as recorded in the book of Acts. And God is still orchestrating the growth of His Word today.

ASK: God wants to spread His Word through you. Is your section of His "wall" bare? Why, or why not? (Q1)

ASK: Do you view the spread of God's Word as an important role in your life? Explain. (Q2)

Spreading Like a Virus

The world is constantly facing the threat of being overrun by harmful viruses. And the continuous mobilization of people between countries and continents means the entire world is at risk with every new viral outbreak.

Arboviruses are particularly threatening. They are spread by blood-sucking insects. Such viruses transform mosquitos from irritating pests into agents of death. Once those viruses start spreading, their power over life becomes readily apparent. For third world countries, arboviruses can be devastating.

The book of Acts is a record of a different kind of outbreak—an outbreak of life rather than death. The gospel spread from person to person during the early days of the church. It gave eternal life to all those *infected* by it. The gospel is still spreading today. The Holy Spirit is ready to use every believer to share the good news of salvation through Christ.

ASK: When was the last time you took part in the spread of the gospel?

ASK: Are you a *threat to infect* others with new life in Christ? Why, or why not?

This study of Acts will challenge you to be a part of the ongoing spread of the gospel around the world.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. Luke, the Writer

Luke's name appears in only three places in the Bible (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). But that doesn't mean he was not an important New Testament figure. Luke wrote 27 percent of the New Testament (Luke and Acts). That's more than Paul

(23 percent) and John (20 percent) wrote. Luke referred to himself throughout the book of Acts, though not by name. He used first-person pronouns to indicate he was an eyewitness to many of the events in the book (e.g., Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18).

Luke was a physician (Col. 4:14) and therefore sensitive to people’s physical needs. He grew to have a heightened sensitivity to their spiritual needs too. Later in his life, he ministered to Paul in a way that Paul held dear.

READ: 2 Timothy 4:9–11. **ASK:** Compare Demas to Luke. How would you describe their responses to the opportunity to spread the gospel? (Q3) *Demas rejected the opportunity to spread the Word while Luke embraced it.*

READ: Philemon 24. **ASK:** What clue do you get from this verse about what was important to Luke? (Q4) *Spreading the gospel was important enough to Luke that he invested his life in becoming a fellow laborer in the ministry.*

Luke understood that spreading the Word is more important than anything else on earth. He made himself available to God, and God used him in tremendous ways.

II. Overview of Acts

Luke was not one of the twelve apostles, so he did not witness many events in the Gospels and some in Acts. But under the Spirit’s guidance, Luke used careful skills of observation and research to produce his writing.

READ: Acts 1:1–4 and Luke 1:1–4. **ASK:** How are these passages related? (Q5) *Acts is in essence a second volume to the Gospel of Luke.*

Luke mentioned Theophilus in the opening of both his books. Theophilus was most likely Greek. His name means *lover of God*. His mention is a clue that Luke probably had in mind Gentile Christians as his readership. Additional clues include the Greco-Roman style preface and the clear indication of salvation to those outside the Jewish commonwealth.

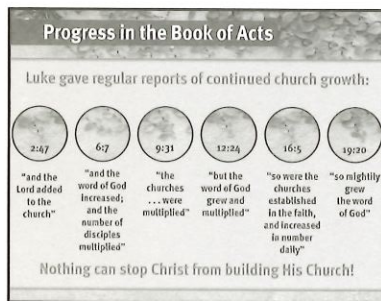
A. Date

Luke probably wrote Acts in AD 62 or 63. The omission of Jerusalem’s destruction in AD 70 strongly suggests that Luke wrote the book before that event. Also, Luke does not mention the severe persecution under the Roman emperor Nero that occurred from AD 64 to 68. And Luke did not record the outcome of Paul’s Roman imprisonment. Paul’s release happened in AD 62 or 63. It is likely that Luke wrote Acts before Paul’s release.

B. Literary nature

Acts is a narrative; it tells a true story. That means it has literary features that are typical of narratives. Literary features evident in Acts include **repetition**, **comparison**, **structure**, and **symmetry**. Identifying the literary features in Acts helps us understand the book.

Luke used **repetition** in his updates on the progress of the early church, giving a summary at six points in his book.



Also compare Peter's miracles in 5:15, 15 and 8:9–24 to Paul's miracles in 19:11, 12 and 13:6–11.

READ: Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20. **ASK:** What did Luke repeat in these verses? (Q6) *Luke repeated the spread of the Word and the subsequent growth of the church.*

Luke's updates about the growth of the church serve as the main markers in his narrative. The markers show that Acts is all about Christ's work to build His church through the power of the Spirit. Nothing could stop Christ from accomplishing His work.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2 to illustrate how repetition in Acts helps us understand the main point of the book.

Luke used **comparison** to indicate the transition from Peter's leadership to Paul's leadership. He recorded a select number of Peter's miracles throughout the first half of Acts. In the last half of the book he recorded similar miracles done by Paul. For instance, Peter healed a lame man (3:1–10) and raised a woman from the dead (9:36–41). Paul healed a crippled man (14:8–10) and raised a man from the dead (20:9–12). Luke's purposeful comparison validated Paul as a true messenger from God even though Paul was not one of the initial twelve apostles.

Luke used **structure** to record the geographical expansion of the church. The church was a new component to God's program. It was born on Pentecost in Jerusalem (1:1–6:7). As persecution increased, the church grew beyond Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria (6:8–9:31) and eventually throughout the entire Mediterranean area (9:32–28:31). This geographical movement indicates that the church erupted in Jerusalem and then grew throughout the known world.

Symmetry means balance. Two narratives are symmetrical when the main plot points in one account is reflected in the other account. Luke employed symmetry in his record of Ananias's interaction with Saul (9:1–30) and Peter's interaction with Cornelius (10:1–11:18). The Holy Spirit prepared the hearts of Ananias and Peter to receive new information about God's program for the church. God asked Ananias to visit Saul, a former enemy. He asked Ananias to visit Cornelius, a Gentile. The Holy Spirit gave direction to both Saul and Cornelius to alert them of the arrivals of Ananias and Peter. After hesitating, both Ananias and Peter agree to go against conventional wisdom and obey God. In both accounts, the new information about God's work through the church was defended before the church in Jerusalem. This symmetry communicated to the early church that Christ directed their ministry and selected their ministers. Today, Christ is still building His church in His way and by His people.

C. Purpose

There are multiple purposes for Acts. First, the book outlined the beginning and growth of the church. Luke established that the church was born on Pentecost and that nothing could impede its growth. As mentioned in the previous section, the book is dotted with statements about the onward movement of the Word and the church. The birth and growth of the church directly fulfilled Jesus' statement in Mathew 16:18, when He said, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Some people today view the church as a place for believers to retreat and form a type of defensive huddle. But Jesus' commission and the book of Acts show otherwise.

READ: Matthew 28:19, 20 and Acts 1:8. **ASK:** How would you summarize Christ's call to the church? (Q7) *Christ intends the church to be His witness in the world and to accomplish His mission of making disciples.*

Second, Acts legitimized taking the gospel to the Gentiles. The early church struggled with the idea that the gospel was for Gentiles as much as it was for Jews. Acts established that God not only intended the gospel for the Gentiles, but that God also appointed Paul to be His apostle to the Gentiles.

Third, Acts proved that the church was the new vehicle through which God would accomplish His purpose. Starting with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the early church was the new arm of God. This is an important theological distinction. The church was a new entity and should not be understood as a permanent replacement for the nation of Israel. Paul clearly argued in Romans 11:25–32 that the nation of Israel will yet inherit and fulfill the promises of the Old Testament.

Generally, Acts should not be understood as a paradigm for modern Christian missions, church growth, or normal Christian experience. Acts is a historical description of what happened, not necessarily an authoritative prescription of what should happen today. In fact, the book records many events that occurred as part of the transition from Old Testament to New Testament, including the Ascension of Jesus (1:9–11), the Holy Spirit's coming on the Day of Pentecost (2:1–4), apostolic witness and miracles (4:33), and the immediate, supernatural death of erring church members (5:1–11).

D. Basic outline

Fittingly, Luke used Jesus' parting promise to the disciples as the outline for Acts. He covered God's witness in Jerusalem (1:1–6:7), Samaria (6:8–9:31), and the rest of the Gentile world (9:32–28:31).

In Luke's account we find conversions, confrontations, confessions, conflicts—and more. In all the miracles and messages and other events, one theme remains central: Jesus Christ is building His church through the spread of the Word.

E. Chronology

An understanding of how the Epistles fit into the Acts narrative is helpful.

ACTIVITY: String a clothesline or rope across the room. With clothespins, hang sheets of construction paper with one reference per sheet: (1) Acts 1:1–6:3. (2) Acts 9. (3) Acts 13; 14. (4) Acts 15. (5) Acts 15:36–18:22. (6) Acts 18:23–21:16. (7) Acts 21:17–28:31. Hand out four sheets on which you have written the following: (1) Galatians. (2) 1 and 2 Thessalonians. (3) 1 and 2 Corinthians; Romans. (4) Ephesians; Colossians; Philippians; Philemon. Choose a volunteer to be your "timeline marker." Direct the person/marker to stand under the first reference and to move to the other references as you

The PowerPoint presentation has a timeline that you can use instead of this activity.

mention them. Direct those holding the book signs to go and stand under the correct references when you mention the book names. Fill in from the commentary below.

Acts 1:1–6:3 records the ascension of Jesus, the birth of the church, and the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem. Peter was the key personality as he preached the gospel and focused on the resurrection of Christ. As the gospel spread to Judea and Samaria, the Christian Jews faced questions regarding the use of the law and how circumcision, dietary laws, and so forth relate to the gospel. Many scholars believe that the book of James was written during this time (AD 42).

Acts 9 records Paul's conversion. Acts 13 and 14 record Paul's first missionary journey. On or shortly after his first missionary journey, Paul wrote Galatians. After his first journey, Paul met with church leaders to discuss if Gentile believers are bound to obey Jewish feasts and ceremonies. As recorded in Acts 15, the council firmly stated that Gentiles do not have to become Jewish. Thus the council endorsed Paul and his message of grace.

Acts 15:36–18:22 records Paul's second missionary journey. During this second journey, Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Luke recorded Paul's third missionary journey in 18:23–21:16, after which Paul was imprisoned for preaching the gospel.

During Paul's third missionary journey, Paul wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans. In Acts 21:17–28:31 Luke recorded Paul's defense of himself before various Roman and Jewish authorities. Paul continued to defend the grace gospel and was sent to Rome to argue his case. Paul spent two years imprisoned in Rome, during which time he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. Paul wrote the rest of his epistles after Luke concluded the Acts narrative.

ASK: Why is it important to know the historical background of the Epistles? (Q8) *Considering the historical context of a book is an important step in interpreting and applying a book correctly.*

F. Key emphases

Three key truths are emphasized in the book of Acts: Jesus is alive, Jesus is united with His church as one, and the gospel is incredibly powerful.

1. Jesus is alive

READ: Acts 1:1–5; 7:55, 56; and 9:4, 5. **ASK:** What must you conclude about Jesus from these verses? (Q9) *He is alive and active.*

Luke stressed the importance of Jesus' resurrection by mentioning it right away (1:3). He also stressed the ongoing ministries of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not abandon His church. He sent the Holy Spirit as the church's helper. Indeed, the Spirit's coming at Pentecost was a fulfillment of Jesus' words in John 7:38 and 39 and 14:15–20.

2. Jesus is one with His church

Luke emphasized that all believers have the Holy Spirit and that all believers share a oneness with Jesus. For example, when Ananias lied to Peter in Acts 5:1–11, Peter said that Ananias had lied to the Holy Spirit.

READ: Acts 9:1–5. **ASK:** How do you see the oneness and unity of Jesus and His church in this passage? (Q10) *Jesus characterized Paul's persecution of the church as persecuting Him.*

ASK: What is the benefit of unity between Jesus and the church? (Q11) *The church is a unique, loving community with the power of Christ.*

United in Christ, the disciples immediately began to meet together for worship and fellowship (2:42–47). Jesus prayed in John 17:21 that the church would be one as He and the Father are one. The early church manifested the oneness of Christ and the Father.

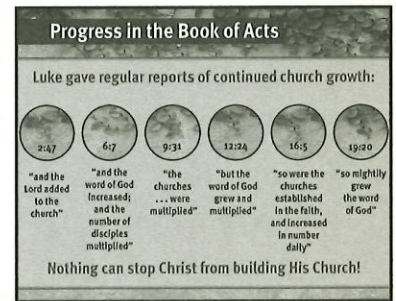
3. Jesus' gospel is powerful

Luke showed that the Spirit uses the gospel to transform lives. On the Day of Pentecost over three thousand souls were saved and transformed (2:41). Jesus' disciples had incredible boldness as they spoke forth the gospel in spite of persecution. Both Samaritans and Gentiles came to Christ (14:27). Even Saul, the most dangerous man to threaten the early church, trusted in Jesus for salvation (22:6–15). Men, women, and children of all ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds responded to the power of the gospel. Luke's narrative illustrates Paul's comments in Romans 1:16 about the gospel of Jesus Christ: "It is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

ASK: How would you respond to the notion that the power of the gospel has diminished since the time of Acts? (Q12)

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. **ASK:** How should the reality of the power of the gospel affect the church today? (Q13) *The power of the gospel has not diminished because God's power has not diminished. People could become less effective witnesses by not living by the power of the Holy Spirit, but that does not mean the gospel is less effective.*

ASK: When have you witnessed the power of the gospel? (Q14)



MAKING IT PERSONAL

Value of Acts

ASK: Why is a study of Acts useful, and even valuable, to you? (Q15)

ASK: Why is it valuable to our church? (Q16)

ASK: What are problems, issues, cares, or concerns our church might face that a study of Acts could address? (Q17)

Spring to Life!

ASK: What needs to change in your life so that you might be an active part of spreading the Word? (Q18)

ASK: To whom might you spread the Word? (Q19)

Review Resource

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Commit to spread the Word.

