

Introduction to the Book of Acts

Before delving into a study of any book of the Bible, a proper introduction is helpful. To jump into a study of the text without a little background information is like starting a conversation with a person without knowing who they are.

The Author

The writer of this book is Luke, the author of the gospel of Luke. He refers to the “former account” written to Theophilus (Acts 1:1), which was the third gospel. Early writers like Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian credit Luke with this book. There is a similarity of style, phrases and arrangement to the gospel of Luke. The writer was a close associate of Paul. He was with Paul in part of his travels (note the “we” in Acts 16:10 and 20:6). The “we” could not be Silas or Timothy (Acts 16:19; 20:4-5). There is no evidence that it was Titus. Most likely it is Luke.

What do we know about Luke? There are only three references to him: Col. 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Tim. 4:11. He was a physician (Col. 4:14). He is the only Gentile writer of the New Testament (Col. 4:11-12, 14).

Luke was an eyewitness to much of what he wrote. Notice the use of “we” from chapter 16 on. Some of his information would be received from reliable witnesses (chapters 1-15). In all his writing he was inspired (2 Tim. 3:16).

The Recipient of the Book

This book was written to Theophilus (Acts 1:1). He was the one to whom the book of Luke was addressed (Luke 1:3). He was possibly a high official in the Roman government and was called “most excellent” (Luke 1:3). Some suggest that Theophilus may not be his real name and could be a name used to protect his identity. It means “lover of God.”

When Was the Book Written?

Paul was imprisoned in Rome for the first time about 61-63. Since the book closes there, it could not have been written before then. Luke doesn’t tell us anything about what happened beyond that point.

Acts covers about 30 years (33 A.D. to 63 A.D.).

The Value of the Book of Acts

Without the book of Acts we would have no information about the early church. We would know nothing about its beginning or its growth. We would have a “blank in our knowledge which scarcely anything else could have filled up.”¹

1 Frederick Farrar as quoted by J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, Vol. 6, 22.

The book provides a bridge between the gospels and the epistles. Adolf Harnack calls it the “pivotal book” of the New Testament.² “If the book of Acts were gone, there would be nothing to replace it; and we may go further, that the Christian Scriptures would then lie before us in two disjointed fragments; the complete arch would not be built.”³ It gives us a narrative background against which the writings of Paul can be better understood. It shows us the Jewish rejection and the Gentile accepting of the religion of Christ. It shows us the work of the Holy Spirit in the first century.

Acts gives us an accurate history (Luke 1:1-3). In the late 1800s Sir William Ramsay led an archaeological expedition set to disprove Luke’s accuracy. In the process he was convinced that Luke was absolutely correct and published his conclusions in *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*.⁴

Theme and Contents

The theme of the book may be found in Acts 1:8. It is about the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to all of the world in fulfillment of the great commission. William Barclay credits C. H. Turner with dividing the book into what he calls six panels, each ending with a progress report.

Panel 1	1:1 – 6:7
Panel 2	6:8 – 9:31
Panel 3	9:32 – 12:24
Panel 4	12:25 – 16:5
Panel 5	16:6 – 19:20
Panel 6	19:21 – 28:31

There are two focal points in Acts. The first, chapters 1-12, is about the gospel to the Jews. The second, chapters 13-28, is about the gospel to the Gentiles. It is a book about conversion (and some cases of non-conversion).

This book is a summary history. Dr. Hackett said it is “...a summary history of the origin, gradual increase, and extension of the Christian Church, through the instrumentality, chiefly of the Apostles Peter and Paul.”⁵

2 Quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 17.

3 Howson, quoted by J. Sidlow Baxter, *ibid.* Vol. 6, 22.

4 See Johnny Stringer, *Truth Commentaries The Book of Acts*, xiv.

5 Quoted by J. W. McGarvey, *Original Commentary on Acts*, 3.

Outline of the Book ***From Jerusalem to All the World***

I. The Gospel in Palestine (1-12)

- A. *In Jerusalem* (1-7)
 - 1. Preparing the apostles for their work (1)
 - 2. The beginning of the gospel (2)
 - 3. Opposition and persecution (3-7)
- B. *In Judea and Samaria* (8-12)
 - 1. Conversions (8-11)
 - a. Samaritans and Simon (8)
 - b. Eunuch (8)
 - c. Saul (9)
 - d. Cornelius (10-11)
 - 2. Establishment of the church at Antioch (11)
 - 3. Herod persecutes the church (12)

II. The Gospel to the Uttermost Parts of the World (13-28)

- A. *The first missionary journey* (13-14)
- B. *The Jerusalem discussion about circumcision* (15)
- C. *The second missionary journey* (16-18)
- D. *The third missionary journey* (19-20)
- E. *Paul's trials and journey to Rome* (21-28)

For Congregational Use Only

Acts 1**Lesson 1**
Preparing the Apostles for Their Work**Outline****I. The Promise of the Spirit** (vv. 1-8)

- A. *Luke connects this to his first book* (vv. 1-2)
- B. *Jesus gave instructions to the Apostles after his resurrection* (vv. 3-8)
 - 1. Was with them forty days (v. 3)
 - a. Presented himself alive by many infallible proofs
 - b. Spoke of things pertaining to kingdom of God
 - 2. Waited in Jerusalem for the promise of the Spirit (vv. 4-5)
 - 3. Shall be witnesses (vv. 6-8)
 - a. In Jerusalem
 - b. In Judea and Samaria
 - c. Uttermost parts of the earth

II. The Ascension (vv. 9-11)

- A. *Jesus taken up out of their sight* (v. 9)
- B. *The promise of his return* (vv. 10-11)

III. The Appointment of Matthias (vv. 12-26)

- A. *Prayer in the upper room in Jerusalem* (vv. 12-14)
- B. *Peter speaks concerning Judas and selecting a new apostle* (vv. 15-22)
 - 1. The fall of Judas (vv. 15-20)
 - 2. Qualifications for a new apostle (vv. 21-22)
- C. *They chose Matthias* (vv. 23-26)

Key Verse that Summarizes the Chapter**Acts 1:8**

*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the end of the earth.*

In this study, a chapter title is given to each chapter of Acts. Chapter one is "Preparing the Apostles for Their Work." In it the Lord prepares the apostles to do the work of spreading the gospel.

The chapter begins by connecting this book to Luke's previous book, the gospel of Luke (vv. 1-2). In that book he recorded what Jesus did and taught until he ascended just after the great commission (v. 2).

Jesus Gives Instructions to the Apostles after His Resurrection (vv. 3-8)

Following his resurrection, Jesus spent forty days with his apostles. During that time he presented many undeniable proofs that he was the one who was crucified and indeed raised from the dead (v. 3). Secondly, he taught about things pertaining to the kingdom of God (v. 3). Since the church (the kingdom) is God's eternal purpose (Eph. 3:10-11), then it is essential that those who preach God's eternal plan understand the nature of the kingdom of God.

These men were instructed to wait in Jerusalem (cf. Luke 24:47) for the promise that the Father had given them, the baptism of the Holy Spirit (vv. 4-5). God had promised that he would pour his Spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:28-32). When the Holy Spirit came (Acts 2), Peter said it was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:16-21). Jesus had promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would be sent from the Father to guide them into all truth (John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; Matt. 3:11).

The baptism of the Holy Spirit was a promise, not a command.¹ The promise was given to the apostles, not all believers. The "you" (v. 5) refers back to the "apostles" (v. 2). In the next chapter of Acts, it is documented by the text that it was the apostles who received it.

The apostles asked if it was time for the Lord to restore the kingdom to Israel (v. 6). Their question reflected their misconception about the nature of the kingdom, thinking it was a material kingdom. Apparently they were expecting some kind of earthly kingdom prior to his death. When he was crucified, their hope of such a kingdom was gone (cf. Luke 24:21). Now that he had been raised, they had hope that the kingdom would be restored to the glory days of David and Solomon.

Jesus did not immediately address their misunderstanding about the kingdom (v. 7). Perhaps, that was due to the fact that he had spent so much time teaching about the kingdom (v. 3). For the time being, he told them to leave the matter (of time) to God (v.7). All they needed to know was that the Holy Spirit was coming upon them (v. 8).

When the Holy Spirit would come upon the Apostles, they would be guided to be witnesses (giving eye witness testimony) of the resurrection of Christ (v. 8). Their work would begin in Jerusalem (1-7), then spread to the rest of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12) and on to the rest of the world (chapters 13-28).

The Ascension (vv. 9-11)

After Jesus had given instructions to his apostles, he ascended in a cloud up into heaven (v. 9). When he ascended into heaven he sat down on the right hand of God (Eph. 1:20) where Daniel said he would be given a kingdom (Dan. 7:13-14).

¹ Thus, it is not the same as water baptism (Acts 10:47-48).

While they stood looking into heaven, two men (angels) announced that he would return in the same manner he left (vv. 10-11). The second coming would be just as visible and real as the ascension.

These verses serve to challenge every believer, as it did the apostles, to busy themselves in the service of the Lord. Rather than stand gazing into things beyond our knowledge or control, get busy in view of his coming again.

The Appointment of Matthias (vv. 12-26)

After the ascension at the Mount called Olivet (v. 12) the apostles went to Jerusalem.² The eleven gathered in an upper room and spent time in prayer along with the women³ and Jesus' mother and brothers (v. 14).

During the time between the ascension and Pentecost, Peter addressed the disciples (about 120 who were gathered) about the need to appoint another apostle since the fall of Judas. He made two points.

1. *The fall of Judas (vv. 15-20).* Peter said the Holy Spirit spoke by David⁴ concerning Judas's betrayal of Jesus (v. 16).⁵ Judas had been an apostle of equal standing with the rest (v. 17). However, he not only betrayed the Lord, but hung himself (Matt. 27:5) and in the process fell headlong, burst his body open and out gushed his intestines (v. 18). The money he obtained in the betrayal was used to buy a field that became known as Akel Dama which is Aramaic and means "the field of blood" (v. 19).⁶

Peter quoted Psalm 69:25 which did not specifically refer to Judas, but certainly would include him as an enemy of God. God will bring judgment and desolation upon his enemies. He also quoted Psalm 109:8 which said another would take his place. From that Peter concluded it was time to select one to take Judas' place.

2. *Qualifications for a new apostle (vv. 21-22).* Peter said that a new apostle should be chosen from among those who had been with them from the baptism of John until the ascension (v. 21). To be qualified, he must be a witness of the resurrection of Christ (v. 22).

The disciples proposed two men, Joseph and Matthias (v. 23). They prayed for the Lord to choose which of the two he wanted (vv. 24-25). They cast lots⁷ and Matthias was chosen (v. 26).

2 The mount called Olivet was a Sabbath day's journey which was less than a mile.

3 "The women that had followed the Lord Jesus from Galilee, Luke 8:2-3,23,49,55; 24:10; Matt 27:55. The women particularly mentioned are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, the mother of Zebedee's children, Joanna the wife of Chuza, and Susanna. Besides these, there were others whose names are not mentioned" (Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes*, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1997 by BibleSoft).

4 An affirmation of inspiration.

5 Probably a reference to Psalm 41:9. See John 13:18.

6 See Matthew 27:5-8.

7 Different methods were used. "But which of the several ways in which the lot was taken was adopted on the present occasion, is hardly worth inquiring" (*Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1997 by BibleSoft). However, the choice was made by God..

With the instructions the Lord had given and now with twelve apostles, they were ready to do the work that begins in the next chapter.

Questions

1. What was done to prepare the apostles for their work? _____

2. What kind of proofs could Jesus have given of his resurrection (v. 3)? _____

3. What would "things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (v. 3) include? _____

4. What other passages (besides Acts 1) promise the Holy Spirit to come upon the apostles?

5. What concept did the apostles have about the kingdom (v. 6)? _____

6. How did Jesus respond to the apostles' question (vv. 6-7)? _____

7. How did the ascension relate to preparing the apostles for their work? _____

8. What did the apostles do in the period after Jesus ascended into heaven? _____

9. How do Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8 apply to Judas? _____

10. What qualification(s) had to be met for Matthias to be an apostle? _____

