



Introduction to the Acts of the Apostles

Introduction

The Book of Acts is found in the New Testament between the four Gospels and the Epistles. Its major importance lies in giving continuity to the New Testament. It is a sequel to the Gospels and an introduction to the Epistles, making it the “hinge” upon which the New Testament turns. The Gospels introduce us to Jesus Christ and the work He began here on earth, teaching men and women about the kingdom of God. The Epistles are letters, mostly written by Jesus’ apostles, for the purpose of encouraging and exhorting those who had responded by joyfully accepting the message Jesus had taught and then joined together in local fellowship. Without the Book of Acts, there would be a definite void in the Scriptures. The Acts of the Apostles is the only authentic record of the first thirty years of the Christian church. Without it, we would not know about the dedicated lives and work of Jesus’ Spirit through His apostles after His resurrection. We would not know the dramatic story of the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost and the miracles of changed and committed lives as the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Samaria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. We would not know the exciting details of Paul’s conversion. We would not have the explicit example of the early church to inspire and challenge us to live worthy lives and continue the mission which was begun nearly 2000 years ago to spread the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. As you study Acts, may the Holy Spirit grip your heart and open your eyes to what the abundant life in Jesus Christ really is. May you be inspired to live in the light of the revelation of all Christ longs for you to be!

I. Author

Although the author of Acts is not named in the text of the book, it is generally agreed to be Luke, who also wrote the gospel bearing his name. In fact, the Gospel of Luke and Acts were originally circulated as a single work. Several other facts also support Luke as the author:

A. Both the Gospel of Luke and Acts are dedicated to *Theophilus* (Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1).

B. The writer of Acts refers to his *former account*, evidently the Gospel of Luke.

C. The orderly and methodical style of the two books is very similar.

D. The Greek of both books is said to be, along with Hebrews, the highest and finest of all the New

Testament writings. This would point to a very well-educated author. Luke was definitely that, having been trained as a physician.

E. The pronoun *we* is used many times from Chapter 16 on, indicating that the writer was one of Paul’s traveling companions. We know that Luke accompanied Paul on many of his travels, possibly as his personal physician. See Colossians 4:14.

F. Both books show a great compassion for people in general and for women in particular.

From Colossians 4:11-14, it can be concluded that Luke was a Gentile. He was a close friend of the apostle Paul and often traveled with him. The *we* passages (where the narrator includes himself in the story) in Acts show that Luke accompanied Paul on portions of his second and third missionary journeys and on his voyage to Rome as a prisoner (Acts 16:10-40 and Acts 20:5-28:31). Of all Paul’s associates, Luke seems to have been the most loyal. Near the end of Paul’s life when he was confined in a cold, dark dungeon in Rome anticipating his execution, he wrote these plaintive words to his friend and co-worker Timothy, *Only Luke is with me.* (2 Timothy 4:11)

Luke’s primary source of information for his writing was probably the apostle Paul, although he definitely used a number of other sources such as the apostle James (Acts 21:18-19). When Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 24), Luke was with him and would have had ample time to interview those who had been eyewitnesses to the events described in the early parts of the book.

Luke addressed his writing to a man named Theophilus, obviously a believer and probably a Greek. Many believe that Theophilus was Luke’s benefactor, supporting him financially while he wrote both the Gospel of Luke and Acts.

II. Background of the Book

A. Title

The Acts of the Apostles was originally the second volume of a two-part work which included the Gospel of Luke. It was not until the four gospels were collected and circulated together that the Book of Acts became a separate historical work. No one is sure how the book got its name. However, many scholars have suggested that a more fitting name would be The Acts of Jesus

Continued in the Apostles, since all the actions, preaching, and miracles of the apostles in Acts were done in His name and attributed to Him (see 1:24; 2:38; 3:6; 4:18-19, and so on through the book). Others believe that a better name would be The Acts of the Holy Spirit Accomplished Through the Apostles because after the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit for power and ministry. It is true that Acts is really a continuation of Jesus' ministry in His apostles through the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the truest title would be The Acts of Jesus Christ as Performed by His Apostles Through the Power of The Holy Spirit. In this study, we will refer to the book simply as "Acts."

B. Date and Place of Writing

It is generally believed that Acts was written sometime between A.D. 61 and 63.

Most likely, Luke wrote Acts during the two-year period when he was in Rome during Paul's first imprisonment there. It could not have been completed earlier because Acts ends with this account. Also, it was most likely not written later, or Luke would have included Paul's later travels and his trial before Nero. As stated previously, we know that Luke stayed with Paul to the end.

III. Content of the Book

A. Spiritual History

It has already been stated that Acts is a history of the early church. However, it differs from a secular history in that Luke picked and chose the events and the people he wrote about. His historical data was carefully selected and presented to give a clear picture of the birth and growth of the church in the time in which he lived. Furthermore, Luke went beyond the presentation of historical facts to show the power of God at work in all things, accomplishing His perfect will. Clear examples of this are seen in Acts 5:1-14 where even the sin of Ananias and Sapphira resulted in unification and growth of the church; in Acts 8:1-4 where the martyrdom of Stephen resulted in the Word being preached *everywhere*; in Acts 9 where Saul's zeal for God was redirected, away from the destruction of the church to the defense of the church and the preaching of the gospel far and wide. These are only a few of the examples of God's sovereignty as seen in Acts. Throughout the book, we see that in spite of strong opposition from many sources, the gospel spread and people responded with joy and commitment. As you study, look for God's hand behind the scenes working all things together for the good and growth of His church.

B. Biography

Acts continues the story of the lives of Jesus' apostles after His death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. It is primarily the account of the ministry of the apostles as they laid aside their own lives and set their hearts upon following Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Chapters 1-12 deal mainly with the life of Peter as he proclaimed the kingdom of God in Jerusalem and called the Jews to repentance. Chapters 13-28 chronicle the ministry of Paul as he preached the gospel to the Gentiles and called them to belief in Christ. Interspersed are short accounts of incidents involving Stephen, Philip and the church leaders in Jerusalem. The commitment and compassion of all these men will pierce your mind and stir your heart as you study Acts. Do not lose sight of the fact that these were ordinary everyday men. They were simply men who were committed to the will of God and were filled with the Holy Spirit. May their lives inspire you to lay aside your earthly passions, pleasures, and cares as they did and live for the only worthwhile and enduring purpose — the gospel of Christ and the glory of God.

C. Testimony

In a sense, Acts is also Luke's personal testimony. He was thoroughly convinced of the truth of all that he wrote. He was acquainted with the apostles and obviously had the utmost respect for Peter, James, Philip, Stephen, Barnabas, and all the rest. Luke's writing bears witness to the power and truth of the phenomenal era in which he lived.

Acts is also a testimony to the ministry of Paul. Paul had not been one of the original twelve. Acts 9 (also 22 and 26) records his miraculous conversion and the events which followed. The remainder of Acts is dedicated to the ministry of Paul. Luke's written account shows that this man was truly an apostle chosen by the Lord Jesus Christ and that his ministry was genuine. Peter, whose ministry is prominent in Chapters 1-12, was the *rock*. He had walked with, talked with, and learned from Jesus during His three-year ministry here on earth. Paul, however, was a latecomer to the group of apostles. He did not even fulfill the requirements for an apostle as stated in Acts 1:21-22, not having been a follower of Jesus during His earthly ministry. In fact, he had spent his early career persecuting believers in Christ. Even after his conversion, all the leaders of the church were still afraid of him. Luke's account of Paul, as described in Acts, is a testimony to the authenticity of the man and his ministry. The amazing parallels Luke draws between the careers of the two men must be more than coincidental. Compare the following sequence of events

in the ministries of these two men as recorded by Luke in Acts (taken from Explore The Book by J. Sidlow Baxter.)

- Peter: First sermon - Acts 2
 Lame man healed - Acts 3
 Simon, the sorcerer - Acts 8
 Laying on of hands - Acts 8
 Peter worshipped - Acts 10
 Tabitha raised - Acts 9
 Peter imprisoned - Acts 12
- Paul: First sermon - Acts 13
 Lame man healed - Acts 14
 Elymas, the sorcerer - Acts 13
 Laying on of hands - Acts 19
 Paul worshipped - Acts 14
 Eutychus raised - Acts 20
 Paul imprisoned - Acts 28

D. Purpose

Luke quotes Jesus' words to His apostles in Acts 1:8: *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.* The entire Book of Acts lays out that progression. Luke shows how, after the Day of Pentecost, the witness of the gospel spread through the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ's apostles from Jerusalem into the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria and on to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. At the same time the Holy Spirit stirred in the hearts of the hearers and many came to Christ. The church was born and began to grow in dynamic proportions. In one generation, the gospel spread outward from Jerusalem to be proclaimed throughout the civilized world.

Outline of The Acts of the Apostles

- I. The Birth of the Church in Jerusalem - Acts 1-7**
- II. The Spread of the Church to Judea and Samaria - Acts 8-12**
- III. The Expansion of the Church to the Uttermost Parts of the Earth - Acts 13-28**

IV. Invitation to Study

We have named Luke as the author of Acts, but there was a force beyond the human which inspired and enabled Luke to write. All Scripture is inspired and brought forth by the Holy Spirit in accordance with God's divine purpose. (See 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20.) The Book of Acts is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the true author of the book and the One who will work within you to apply this book to your life.

The Book of Acts was surely a comfort, a confirmation of the truth, and an inspiration to the men and women of the first century. As the Holy Spirit applied the truth of this book to their lives, they were encouraged to live for Christ and to proclaim His name to others. But Acts was not meant for those readers only. This "hinge" of the New Testament, which holds together the Gospel accounts and the Epistles, has been preserved by the sovereignty of God for the purpose of your edification and inspiration as well. Will you join us in this exciting study? We will read about a man who had habitually spoken "with his foot in his mouth" who now speaks out boldly and eloquently for Christ. We will see another man willingly and fearlessly lay down his life for the Truth. We will see people healed and raised from the dead. We will see a self-confident young Pharisee fall to his knees in the presence of Jesus Christ and change completely, forever. We will see successful business women, jailers, Jews, Gentiles, Roman centurions, eunuchs, and more joyfully respond to the gospel and become a part of the body of Christ? Will you commit to study this priceless book of the Bible? As you do, will you ask the Holy Spirit to open your mind and your heart to receive God's message for you? Are you willing to have your life changed? Are you willing to be filled with a passion for Christ and a desire and commitment to let Him live through you and spread the gospel through you, just as He did through the men and women of the early church? The study of Acts is going to be an exciting adventure. Please join in!