

# ACTS – AN INTRODUCTION

## WHO

Luke wrote this book as a companion to his Gospel. Luke-Acts is one book in two volumes. We know little about Luke apart from three references in the New Testament: Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; and 2 Timothy 4:11. Luke was a doctor, most probably a Gentile (from Antioch or possibly Philippi) and a close friend and companion of Paul. See passages in Acts where Luke uses the pronoun “we,” 16:10 – 17, 20:5 – 15, 21:1- 18, 27:1 – 28:16.

## WHERE

Acts details the spread of the Gospel according to the risen Lord’s commission to his apostles in 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem** (chapters 1 - 7), in all **Judea and Samaria** (Chapters 8 - 9), and **to the ends of the earth** (chapters 11-28).

## WHEN

Two dates often given for the writing of Acts are 63AD immediately following the events of Acts 28 or after 70AD the destruction of Jerusalem. The earlier date fits better with the abrupt ending of Acts 28 in the middle of Paul’s imprisonment.

Acts 18:12 “While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia...” provides a key lynchpin for the dating of the New Testament. Gallio was proconsul from 51 – 52; therefore the timeline for Acts is:

Resurrection and ascension of Jesus:	30AD
Stoning of Stephen and Saul’s conversion:	35
Paul’s First Missionary Journey	46 - 48
Council of Jerusalem	49
Second Missionary Journey	50 - 52
Third Missionary Journey	53 - 57
Paul’s Imprisonment in Caesarea	57 - 59
Paul’s Trial before Festus and Agrippa	59
Paul’s First Imprisonment in Rome	59 - 62
Paul’s second Imprisonment in Rome and death	67/8 (After the events in Acts)

## WHAT

**What is Scripture?** The Bible is God’s special revelation to us. It is an account of God’s divine activity and God’s divine word.

### **What is Scripture’s view of Scripture?**

“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Peter 1: 20–21)

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16 – 17).

**What is Jesus’ view of Scripture:** “The scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35) and, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17 – 18).

**The value of Scripture for us today,** “The holy scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15).

## WHY

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been **fulfilled** among us, just as they were **handed down** to us by those who from the first were **eyewitnesses** and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully **investigated** everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to **write** an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the **certainty** of the things you have been taught. “(Luke 1:1-4). This preface applies to Acts as well. Luke dealt with events that were accomplished, witness, transmitted, investigated and written down. He wanted his audience then and now to know that their faith rested on a firm foundation.

### **Luke’s purposes in writing Acts are:**

- To present a history (accurate and precise in detail) of the early church
- To give a defence of the Gospel for Jews (e.g. 4:8 – 12) and Gentiles (e.g. 25:8 – 11)
- To provide a guide for the church – relevant & timeless principles and practices
- To detail the geographic advance of Christianity in a generation after the resurrection
- To depict the triumph of Christianity in the face of persecution (Jewish, Gentile & Roman)

## HOW

Acts can be divided into two main sections: the **Acts of Peter** (chapters 1 - 12) and the **Acts of Paul** (chapters 13 - 28), each with three sub-sections ending with a summary.

### **1. The Acts of Peter (1:1-12:24)**

a. The Church at Jerusalem and the preaching of Peter (1:1-6:7)

**Summary:** “And so the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (6:7)

b. The spread of the Church through Palestine; the martyrdom of Stephen, Philip’s ministry in Samaria and the conversion of Saul (6:8-9:31)

**Summary:** “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.” (9:31)

c. The reception of Cornelius, the Gentile, into the Church by Peter, Peter’s escape from prison and the extension of the Church to Antioch, and the (9:32-12:24)

**Summary:** “But the word of God continued to increase and spread.” (12:24)

### **2. The Acts of Paul (12:25-28:31)**

a. The extension of the Church through Asia Minor; the Council of Jerusalem and the delivery of its decision by Paul and Silas to the new churches in Asia Minor (12:25-16:5)

**Summary:** “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers” (16:5)

b. The extension of the Church to Europe and the work of Paul in great Gentile cities like Corinth and Ephesus (16:6-19:20)

**Summary:** “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” (19:20)

c. Paul’s decision to visit Rome, his trip to Jerusalem and subsequent voyage to Rome (19:21-28:31).

**Summary:** “Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (28:31)

## THREE KEY POINTS

### • **Christianity is credible**

Luke demonstrates that Roman officials had been well-disposed and impartial towards Christians. Roman magistrates were consistently courteous to Paul. Sergius Paulus, governor of Cyprus, becomes a Christian (13:12). The magistrates at Philippi apologise publicly to Paul after mistreating him (16:35ff). In Corinth, Gallio acts with absolute

impartiality in the case brought against Paul (18:12). And the officials in Ephesus – who are described as Paul’s friends – expressed concern that no harm comes to Paul (19:31). Luke is also at pains to show that Christians were good citizens. The town clerk of Ephesus gives Christians a good testimonial (19:37). Claudius Lysias, commander of the Roman regiment in Jerusalem, indicates that no criminal charge had been laid against Paul (23:29). Festus, governor of Judea, declares that Paul has done nothing worthy of death (25:25), and Agrippa states that Paul could have been released had he not appealed to Caesar (26:32).

- **Christianity is global**

Luke demonstrates that Christianity is a universal faith for all peoples and nations. The Gospel crosses all ethnic and geographical barriers. Philip preaches to Samaritans and to an Ethiopian. Peter accepts Cornelius, a Roman army officer, into the Church. The Jerusalem Council accepts Gentiles on equal terms with Jews. Paul travels throughout the Roman Empire to win of all kinds of people for Christ.

- **Christianity is dynamic**

Luke shows how Christianity expanded because the Holy Spirit had come upon the Apostles and others, empowering them to fulfil Jesus’ mandate in Acts 1:8. Repeatedly he emphasises that the apostles were able to achieve what they did because they were ‘filled with the Spirit’ (2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3-5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9,52).

## SOME KEY VERSES

**God’s Sovereignty & Human Responsibility (2:23-24):** “This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”

**The Early Church (2:42):** “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

**Exclusive Claims of Jesus (4:12):** “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

**Boldness of the Apostles (4:13):** “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.”

**(4:18 – 20):** “Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

**Power of Prayer & Fellowship of Believers (4:31 – 33):** “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.”

**Stephen’s Vision of Heaven (7:55 – 56):** “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

**Universal Appeal of the Gospel (10:34 - 35):** Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

**Church at Antioch (11:25 – 26):** “Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”

**Council of Jerusalem (15:19):** “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

**The Man of Macedonia (16:9-10):** “During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

**Simple Gospel Message (16:30 – 31):** “The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

**Turmoil Caused by Disciples (17:6 - 7):** “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”

**Paul Preaching to Pagans (17:22-23):** “Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”

**The Lord’s encouragement to Paul (18:9-11):** “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.”

**Paul’s summary of his Ministry (20:24):** “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.”

**The Ministry of Elders (20:28):** “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

**Paul’s commission to evangelise the Gentiles (26:17 – 18):** “I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

**Paul & Agrippa (26:28 – 29):** “Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”