

*The Story of Acts***Introduction**

The next two lessons focus on the book of Acts, where Luke continues the Gospels' story. Luke's two books fit together seamlessly to show that Acts, like his gospel, is a record of Jesus' ministry. In fact, Luke opens Acts by referring to his gospel: "The first account I composed, Theophilus, [was] about all that Jesus began both to do and to teach" (Acts 1:1 NASB; emphasis added). And we can conclude that Acts is what Jesus is continuing to do and teach.

I. Luke's Message in Acts**Jesus Is Still Working**

Luke's message is clear. Jesus left the earth but sent His Holy Spirit to empower His followers so that could continue His work. To substantiate his claim that Jesus was still at work, Luke recorded the miracles performed by some of His followers. Since people are incapable of performing miracles, Jesus was alive and active on the earth. So Luke explained that Jesus' work continued and that explained the miracles. Another evidence of Jesus' work was that He was changing people's lives! There's no other way to understand the events recorded in the book of Acts.

B. Acts' Outline Tells the Story of Jesus at Work

Acts 1:8 outlines Acts' story. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His apostles, "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 world" (NIV). His ministry strategy had a three-part movement. First they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem. Then they would go to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.

II. Jesus' Strategy to Change the World**A. It Started in Jerusalem**

This first phase of planting the church in Jerusalem is recorded in Acts 1–7, and it covers a period of about three years. In the first six chapters, the story is primarily about the ministry of the apostles. Since Jesus left no written instructions, these apostles were the go-to leaders for everything. Then near the end of chapter 6, the church became so large the apostles could no longer manage the ministry. So they added seven other officers and divided the ministry work between the twelve apostles and the seven deacons. The gospel was spreading. People were coming into a relationship with Jesus, and lives were changing. Jesus' church was on the move.

B. The Work Expanded into Judea and Samaria

The story of the taking of the gospel into Judea and Samaria is told in Acts 8–12, and it covers a period of about twelve years. But it's more than a story of geographical growth. Luke also highlights the ministry of other men and women to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit was using people besides the apostles. The seven deacons appointed in chapter 6 had significant evangelistic ministry. And Paul's conversion story in chapter 9 astounds the reader. The message is clear. God's Holy Spirit was changing people and enlisting them in His service. The church in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria was growing; and it was strong and healthy.

C. The Work Spread into the World

The third movement is described in chapters 13–28 and covers a period of about thirteen years. Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the world." Chapters 13 through 28 tell the story of the gospel spreading around the Mediterranean world through the work of a man named Paul. Although the story of his missionary work doesn't begin until Acts 13, he is introduced in chapter 9. When we put the three movements together, there's about a twenty-eight-year timespan covered in the book of Acts. A way to remember this time period is to recall that there are also twenty-eight chapters in Acts—twenty-eight years, twenty-eight chapters.

III. Seven Key Passages

There are seven key passages in Acts that carry the story forward. They describe significant marker events in the life of the early church and help us understand its growth and health.

A. Acts 1:8

Acts' big idea—that Jesus' followers were His witnesses and were to take His message to the whole world—is recorded in this verse. And the verse also presents the book's outline. Luke used Jesus' commission as a template to introduce and organize his story.

B. Acts 2

The birth of the church is recorded in chapter 2. This chapter describes the events that occurred on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit Jesus had promised came to His apostles. The Christians in Jerusalem miraculously proclaimed the gospel in languages they had never spoken before. As part of that miraculous event, Peter proclaimed the message of salvation and three thousand people believed and began to follow Christ. We can only imagine what an enormous affirmation this was to these newly minted evangelists. They must have been convinced by the end of the day that Jesus was serious when He said, "You will receive power . . . and you will be my witnesses."

C. Acts 6–8

In these chapters, Luke introduces us to the need for expanding leadership in the church. The ministry could no longer be accomplished by the apostles. The Holy Spirit was blessing and using others to proclaim Jesus' good news. Luke included the stories of two of the seven deacons who were appointed in chapter 6. Stephen's great sermon is recorded in chapter 7, and Philip's ministry to the Samaritans and to the Ethiopian eunuch is found in chapter 8. These are two strategic events. Stephen refused to compromise Jesus' message, and Philip took the gospel outside the Jewish boundaries. And it's important to note that these men were not apostles. God's Holy Spirit was ministering through a new group of ministers as well. The work was spreading to the congregation of the believers. The workforce was expanding!

D. Acts 9

This passage records the conversion of a primary character in Acts—this man named Saul who became Paul the apostle. Saul went from being the church's greatest enemy to becoming Paul, one of its greatest champions. So read chapter 9 carefully, because it introduces us to the man who from chapters 13–28 was God's major witness to the world. We will study Paul's life more

thoroughly in the next lesson.

E. Acts 10 and 11

In these chapters, Luke introduces us to the first Gentile church. He describes this event in a way that highlights a critical point the church was facing at the time. Peter was the man God chose to plant this first Gentile church. But even Peter, who had been with Jesus when He ministered to Gentiles, could not imagine including them as Jesus' followers. They were "unclean", and the Jews despised them. In fact when Peter went to the Gentile's home, he reminded the host—a Roman centurion named Cornelius—that he was breaking Jewish law by entering his home. "Yet," Peter said, "God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean" (Acts 10:28 NASB).

What Peter stated as a simple event, "God showed me," actually required an elaborate miracle. Peter needed a miraculous message from God before he would associate with Gentiles. Even though Jesus commissioned Peter to be one of His witnesses to the ends of the earth, Peter couldn't imagine that Jesus included Gentiles. So Acts 10 and 11 describe a critical juncture in the Acts' story by showing the need to overcome deep prejudices before the gospel could go to the world.

F. Acts 15

A sixth essential passage, Acts 15, describes the Jerusalem Council. After Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, they returned to their home base in Antioch. Some Jewish Christians there were upset that they had invited Gentiles to receive salvation without keeping the Mosaic Law. It became such an issue that they met with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to resolve the issue. The council concluded that Gentiles do not have to keep the law to become Christians and affirmed the essential truth that Paul wrote to the Ephesian church: "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9 ESV). Acts 15, like Acts 10 and 11, shows us how the early church overcame cultural barriers as they took the gospel to the Gentiles.

G. Acts 13–28

These chapters record Paul's missionary trips and his imprisonment. On his missionary trips recorded in Acts 13–21,

Paul and his team planted new churches that he later wrote letters to. The epistles to the Galatians, Philippians, Thessalonians, Corinthians, and Ephesians are letters Paul wrote to instruct and encourage these churches. By integrating these epistles and their stories in Acts 13–21, we gain a clearer understanding of both Acts and the Epistles. Paul’s four years in prison are recorded in chapters 21–28. We will study these chapters in greater detail in our next lesson.

These seven key passages move us through the book of Acts and tell the amazing story of how the church functioned as Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem (1–7), Judea and Samaria (8–12), and to the ends of the earth (13–28).

IV. Two Kinds of Passages

A. Growth Passages

In the book of Acts, Luke included two specific kinds of passages: growth passages and what we could call snapshot passages. An illustration of a growth passage is Acts 2. After Peter preached his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, three thousand people came to Christ. A number of other growth passages tell us that God was adding people to the church daily, that more and more people believed, and that the number of disciples increased rapidly. So Luke keeps dropping statements into the narrative that tell us the gospel witness was effective. Every day more people were becoming members of His church. These passages are important because numbers matter to God. And they matter because each “number” represents another person who comes to Jesus and has the opportunity to live the life only He can offer.

B. Snapshot Passages

1. *The Good News Snapshots*. Large numbers are exciting, but Luke included another kind of passage we may call “snapshot” passages. They give us a brief picture of what was going on in the churches being planted. For instance, Acts 2 and 4 describe what was happening in these new churches in Jerusalem. We read that the people met together daily and that they shared meals and celebrated communion and took care of each other. When poor people came to their assembly, others who had land and goods sold them and gave the money to the people in need. The church not only grew in quantity, it also grew in quality as people

were transformed by following Jesus' teaching. These snapshots show the church as so attractive that people were drawn to it. Jesus' followers were verbal witnesses, but they were also living witnesses. The church was growing rapidly because its members were following Christ's teachings.

2. *The Hard News*. But Luke also included passages like Acts 5 and 6 that talk about problems in the church. The unbelievers didn't see only the Christians' positive qualities, they also saw that Christians aren't perfect. They were real people, and so they had problems. But Christians dealt with their problems and still loved each other. They still took care of each other. They didn't compromise what they believed, but they lived it in such a loving way their message rang true. Christianity was changing people's lives because it wasn't just a human movement. This God-man named Jesus was still alive. The resurrection really did happen. Jesus had sent His Holy Spirit to empower these people; and God was at work. That is the only plausible explanation for what His people were doing.

Conclusion

If Luke were writing about the church today, what would he write? Would it be a story of people loving and ministering to each other? Would it include people helping those in need? Would he write about churches resolving their conflicts in a spirit of love? Would unbelievers say, "You know, I want to be part of that movement"? Would his narrative read, "God is adding daily to the church those who are being saved"? These are questions it would serve us well to ask ourselves.