



Acts

ORIENTING DATA FOR ACTS

- **Content:** part 2 of Luke's account of the good news about Jesus; how by the power of the Spirit the good news spread from Jerusalem to Rome
- **Author:** see the Gospel according to Luke
- **Date:** see Luke
- **Recipients:** see Luke
- **Emphases:** the good news of God's salvation through Jesus is for Jew and Gentile alike, thus fulfilling Old Testament expectations; the Holy Spirit guides the church in spreading the good news; the church has the good sense to side with God regarding his salvation and the inclusion of the Gentiles; salvation for all is God's thing and nothing can hinder it; the good news is accepted in joy by some and rejected in anger by others

OVERVIEW OF ACTS

In writing his larger account of the good news about Jesus, Luke has shaped the two parts to correspond in some significant ways. In Acts, for example, the geography is now reversed; it starts in Jerusalem and then branches out to other parts of Judea (chs. 1–12); its large central section is another travel narrative, as Paul takes the gospel from Antioch to Europe (chs. 13–20); the final third (chs. 21–28) portrays Paul's trials before the same three tribunals as Jesus (the Jewish Sanhedrin [Luke 22:66–71/Acts 22:30–23:10]; the Roman procurator [Luke 23:1–5, 13–25/Acts 24:1–27]; and one of the Herods [Luke 23:6–12/Acts 25:23–26:32])—which in Paul's case results in his getting the gospel to the heart of the empire (Rome).

The key to your reading of Acts is to recognize the “movement” of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, narrated in six parts (panels) and sig-

naled by Luke's little summary statements in 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; and 19:20. In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction—sometimes geographically, sometimes ethnically, and sometimes both. The good news that is being spread, of course, is God's salvation (the forgiveness of sins) offered to all people (Jew and Gentile alike) through the death and resurrection of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Here at last the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2–3; see Acts 3:25), expressed repeatedly by the prophets as part of their hope for the future—that Gentiles would join Israel as the people of God (e.g., Isa 2:1–5; Mic 4:1–5; Zech 14:16–18)—had found its fulfillment.

The first panel (1:1–6:7) tells the story of the spread of the good news about Jesus in Jerusalem by the apostles. The second (6:8–9:31) marks the first geographical expansion to neighboring Judea and Samaria (see 1:8), where Stephen and the Hellenists play the major role. The third (9:32–12:24) narrates the first expansion to the Gentiles (Cornelius) and the conversion of the key figure (Paul) in what is to be its still greater expansion. With Paul now the central figure, the fourth panel (12:25–16:5) narrates the expansion to Gentiles in Asia, and how the early leaders dealt with the “problem” of Gentile inclusion “law-free.” The fifth (16:6–19:20) marks the jump of the gospel from Asia to Europe; the church is also now steadily more Gentile than Jewish. The sixth (19:21–28:31) tells how Paul (the apostle to the Gentiles) finally got to Rome (the capital of the Gentile world) with the good news—but he did so, Luke reminds us, by way of Jerusalem through a series of trials very much like those of Jesus.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING ACTS

The story in part 2 is still about Jesus, as the brief prologue (1:1–2) reminds us. The first part was about what “Jesus *began* to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven” (emphasis added). With some carefully chosen connections to part 1, Acts begins by picking up the prophecy from Luke 3:16 by John the Baptist about the coming Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). The disciples are promised the “power” of the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 24:49, “clothed with power from on high”) so as to bear witness to Jesus. Luke then narrates the ascension (cf. Luke 24:51) in the context of Jesus' promised return; the clear implication is that through the Spirit they are to carry on the story until he comes (cf. the parable in Luke 19:11–27).

THE GOSPELS AND ACTS IN THE BIBLICAL STORY

How Luke does this is the genius of Acts. First, note the large number of speeches that Luke records throughout the narrative (e.g., Peter in 2:14–39; 3:11–26; 10:27–43; Stephen in 7:1–53; Paul in 13:16–47; 17:22–31; 20:17–35). These tend to appear at key points and illustrate how the gospel is preached (or defended) in a variety of settings. In each case the speech either includes the essence of the story of Jesus or focuses on him at the end. Thus Jesus' story continues in Acts as the early believers bear witness to him.

Second, note (1) the connection between Jesus Christ and the Spirit and (2) that the Spirit is ultimately responsible for every major turning point in the narrative. How Luke connects Jesus and the Spirit is especially important. You will remember from reading Luke that the Spirit is the key to Jesus' earthly ministry (cf. Acts 10:38). Now "exalted to the right hand of God, he has *received* from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and *has poured out* what you now see and hear" (Acts 2:33, emphasis added). Christ, the great bearer of the Spirit, is also the great "baptizer" in the Spirit so that others will receive the Spirit and thus bear witness to Christ. It is therefore not surprising that at every turn, the Spirit is the driving force behind the forward movement of the gospel.

Third, because the gospel is God's thing, initiated by him and expressing his faithfulness to Israel through Christ, and carried out by the power of the Spirit, Luke also regularly reminds us that nothing can hinder it—not the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (chs. 3–5; "you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God," 5:39); not unbelieving Jews, like Saul of Tarsus, bent on destruction (8:1–3); not the church in Jerusalem (11:1–18; "who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" Peter asks, v. 17); not secular leaders, like Herod (12:1–24, "Herod . . . was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread" [!], vv. 23–24); not Judaizers within the church (15:1–35; "why do you try to test God?" v. 10); not religious or secular opposition from Greeks (16:16–40; 19:23–41); not shipwrecks or snakes (chs. 27–28). With the coming of Jesus and the Spirit, the time of God's favor has come. The gospel is God's activity in history; salvation is for all people, Jew and Gentile alike, and nothing can hinder it. And so the book concludes with Paul preaching in Rome with all boldness and without hindrance (28:31).

You will remember about Luke's Gospel that the universal nature of salvation was expressed in a *vertical* way to include the poor of every

imaginable kind. In Acts Luke has concentrated *horizontally* on the Gentile mission—those ultimately marginalized by Israel. But throughout the narrative the restoration of Israel (Acts 1:6) is also always kept in view. The gospel begins as good news to Israel, “heirs of the prophets and of the covenant” (3:25), so that thousands turn to Christ from the start. As it moves outward, carried by Hellenistic Jews, it embraces fallen Jews (the Samaritans, 8:4–25) and a Jewish proselyte (8:26–40). The first Gentile convert is a “God-fearer” (10:2), and wherever Paul goes, he always begins in the synagogue, where some believe. And at the end, in Rome, he still pleads with Israel to believe in Jesus (28:17–28), but they refuse, so “God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (v. 28).

That leads us to remind you of the other side of Simeon’s prophecy (Luke 2:34–35)—that Jesus will be a “sign that will be spoken against.” You will want to note as the narrative progresses that the church becomes more and more composed of Gentiles, while Diaspora Jews and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem lead the opposition. This obviously saddens Luke, but it also is part of the reminder to his implied (Gentile) readers that they belong to the Israel that God is reconstituting through Christ and the Spirit.

Finally, you will want to watch for the sudden insertion of “we” in the narrative at 16:10 (in Troas), which goes on until verse 17 (in Philippi), is picked up again at 20:5 (again in Troas), and continues through 21:19 (in Jerusalem) and again at 27:1 through 28:16 (from Caesarea to Rome). Two things are noteworthy about this phenomenon: (1) The author presents himself without fanfare as a sometime traveling companion of Paul, and (2) in these passages the details are far more abundant and vivid, suggesting that he may be using something like a diary.

A word about its placement in the canon. Luke understands his Gospel and Acts to be two parts of one story. It ended up in two books of about equal length (rather than one long book) because each would fit on one papyrus scroll. But in putting together the New Testament canon, the early church separated Luke from Acts (since both would have existed on separate scrolls, even when copied) through inspired insight. In the canon Luke now belongs to the fourfold Gospel, while Acts serves as a bridge between the Gospels and Paul. But in reading Acts, you need always to remember how it fits into Luke’s inspired plan.

A WALK THROUGH ACTS**□ 1:1–6:7 *The Good News Begins in Jerusalem***

After the prologue that picks up where the Gospel left off (1:1–11), Luke first narrates the *filling up* of the Twelve (1:12–26), since they serve as the representatives of/to Israel. The coming of the Spirit then marks a new beginning (2:1–13; the Gentile world is already present in microcosm), followed by Peter's explanation of the phenomenon of tongues and the results (2:14–41). This is followed by a series of sketches that illustrate the early life of the church in Jerusalem—its common life (2:42–47; 4:32–37); its preaching and healing ministry (3:1–26; 5:12–16); the opposition (4:1–22; 5:17–42); and judgment within the community for “testing the Spirit” (5:1–11). What you will discover as you read is a new community that believes in Jesus but continues to live within Judaism.

Be looking also for two things that carry over from the last chapter of Luke's Gospel: (1) The disciples' ministry is primarily in the temple courts—the same temple courts cleansed by Jesus and made the arena of his final days of teaching (see Luke 19:45–21:38)—and (2) everything in this section is seen as fulfillment of very cardinal moments from the Old Testament story: the end-time gift of the Spirit promised by Joel (Acts 2:16–21); the resurrection of Jesus, as David's true heir (2:24–32); the present exaltation of Jesus as the exalted Lord of Psalm 110:1 (2:33–35); that the Messiah would suffer (3:17–23); that the promise to Abraham that he would bless the nations is about to be fulfilled (3:25); that the rejected Jesus is the rejected cornerstone of Psalm 118:22 (4:11) and the Messiah against whom the nations rage (4:25–26). Be on the watch for this motif as you continue through the rest of Acts.

The section ends (6:1–7) by noting that two groups have emerged within the community: Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) Jewish Christians and Aramaic-speaking (Jerusalem-based) Jewish Christians. The former of these, who belong to the Hellenistic synagogue in Jerusalem, become the key to the next expansion. Note how verse 7 brings this panel to a conclusion.

□ 6:8–9:31 *The Good News Spreads to Judea and Samaria*

Note that this section picks up where the last one left off. You will see that the gospel has made significant inroads into the Greek-speaking

synagogue (6:8–15). The first two of the leaders mentioned in 6:5 (Stephen and Philip) are responsible for the next phase of the story. Stephen's speech (ch. 7), patterned after such passages as Nehemiah 9:6–37 and Psalms 105 and 106, takes up the two crucial issues—from their accusation (Acts 6:13)—where the new wine cannot be contained in the old wineskins (Luke 5:36–39): (1) the temple (God does not dwell in buildings made by hands, in fulfillment of Isa 66:1–2) and (2) the law (the true lawbreakers are those who crucified Jesus, not the believers). Especially watch for the role of Moses in this speech—that he who was “rejected” by Israel (Acts 7:23–29, 35, 39) also foretold that God would send them “a prophet like me from your own people” (v. 37), who was also rejected (vv. 51–52).

Next comes the expansion to Samaria and to a Gentile proselyte through Philip's ministry (ch. 8); note here that Jesus is understood to be Isaiah's suffering servant (vv. 32–35). The panel then concludes with the conversion of one of the chief leaders of the opposition in the Hellenistic synagogue—Saul of Tarsus, who will be responsible (for the most part) for the next two phases of the expansion (Asia, Europe). Note how Saul is first introduced (8:1, 3); you might also want to look ahead to the two instances where Paul himself repeats this story (22:1–21; 26:2–23), in both cases emphasizing his role in the Gentile mission. Again, watch how 9:31 sums up and thus concludes this section.

□ **9:32–12:24** *The Good News Spreads to the Gentiles*

Note how Luke begins and ends this panel with Peter stories (9:32–43; 12:1–19). The first one is intended to set the stage for the Cornelius story and to remind you that the apostles continue to do mighty works. The conversion of Cornelius is so important that Luke narrates it twice (10:1–48; 11:1–18). The significance is that the first Gentile was brought to faith, not through the Hellenists (who might be suspect in Jerusalem), but through Peter, resistant though he is. The whole is orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. When criticized in Jerusalem, Peter tells the story all over again. Because of the work of the Spirit, Peter could not hinder God (11:17). Jerusalem is amazed: “even the Gentiles” (v. 18) get in on the good news. Also crucial to this panel is the founding of the church in Antioch by the Hellenists (vv. 19–30), since it will be the sending church for the mission to Asia and Europe. The Peter story with which the section ends (12:1–19) not only illustrates the “nothing can

hinder it” motif but also sets the stage for the death of the opposition in this case (12:19–23). Note especially how the summary sentence of 12:24 sits in direct contrast to verse 23.

□ **12:25–16:5** *The Good News Spreads to Asia*

Look for several pivotal matters as you read this phase of the story: (1) The church in Antioch is the new center (12:25–13:3; 14:26–28); (2) Paul becomes the predominant figure (13:4–12); (3) the sermon in Pisidian Antioch (13:16–41) illustrates preaching in the Diaspora synagogues; and (4) the spread of the gospel also leads to the first open breach with Judaism, specifically over the Gentile mission, supported by Isaiah 49:6 (Acts 13:47).

Note how the three accounts in Acts 14 reinforce these themes, especially the power of God that accounts for the inclusion of many Gentiles and the widening breach between Diaspora Jews and the early believers in Christ. The Jerusalem council (15:1–35), with the chief roles being played by Peter and James, affirms a “law-free” gospel to the Gentiles. Note how brief the summarizing sentence is in this instance (16:5).

□ **16:6–19:20** *The Good News Spreads to Europe*

Here Luke records Paul’s second and third missionary trips (16:6–18:22; 18:23–19:20); note how Paul always goes out from and returns to Antioch. The mission to Europe is especially orchestrated by the Spirit (16:6–10)—and here the author joins the story. In this panel Luke also records instances of conflict with pagan authorities (16:16–40; 17:5–9; 18:12–17), which tend to be instigated by Diaspora Jews (17:5, 13; 18:12). In each case the state either will not intervene or apologizes. Luke also includes here an example of preaching in a totally pagan environment (17:16–34). Again note how 19:20 functions to conclude the section.

□ **19:21–28:30** *The Good News (and Paul) Reaches Rome*

You should find this final section an absorbing narrative. As you read, don’t miss that most of it deals with how Paul gets to Rome—through a series of trials similar to those of Jesus. Again be watching for the entrance and exit of the author. At the beginning and at the end, Paul is still reaching out to his fellow Jews (21:17–26; 28:17–28). But they resolutely reject Christ, so the final word is one of judgment in the words

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of Isaiah 6:9–10 (cf. Luke 8:10) and acceptance by the Gentiles (Acts 28:26–28). Note especially that in Paul’s two “defenses” (22:1–21; 26:2–23), he tells his story so as to highlight his role in the Gentile mission. Also crucial to the story is the constant reminder that just as with Jesus (who, even though he died as a state criminal, had three times been pronounced “not guilty”), so with Paul: He and the church are found “not guilty” of wrongdoing against Rome (22:29; 23:26–30; 26:32).

In his vivid narrative of shipwreck in 27:1–28:16, Luke also makes it clear to us that Paul’s getting to Rome was ultimately God’s doing. So when the apostle to the Gentiles arrives in the Gentile capital, still reaching out to the Jews but affirming the Gentiles, Luke’s grand story comes to an end.

It is hard to imagine how impoverished the biblical story would be without part 2 of Luke-Acts. Here we not only have a lot of the gaps filled in, but we are constantly reminded that the gospel is *God’s thing* in the world—salvation for all through Jesus Christ and the Spirit.