

Introduction to Acts

When we open the New Testament, we find five historical narrative books—just as the Old Testament opens with five books of Moses. In that sense, Acts functions as the second volume of Luke’s work, almost like a “fifth Gospel.” That is how we will approach it.

Each Gospel presents Jesus from a distinct angle. Matthew focuses on what Jesus said. Mark emphasizes what He did. John reveals who He truly is—the eternal Son of God. Luke, being a physician, pays close attention to Jesus’ humanity. He shows us how Jesus felt and how He related to people.

Both Luke and John also prepare us for their sequels. Luke ends his Gospel with the promise of the Holy Spirit, which Acts will unfold. John ends his Gospel with the promise of Christ’s return, which the Book of Revelation completes.

As we read Acts, we must remember that we are reading Luke’s continuation. Many people have suggested that Acts is better described not as “The Acts of the Apostles,” but as “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” And certainly, the Spirit is active on every page. Jesus promised this in the Upper Room. In John 14 He said:

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.”

In John 16 He added:

“When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth... and He will tell you things to come.”

One remarkable truth about the Spirit is that He does not speak about Himself. He always points to Jesus. Even in Old Testament typology, the Spirit is often pictured as the unnamed servant. For example, in Genesis 24, Abraham’s servant is a type of the Holy Spirit—sent to find a bride for the Son—yet the text never mentions his name. We learn elsewhere that his name is Eleazar, which means “God is my help,” a fitting picture. But Scripture leaves him unnamed, emphasizing the Spirit’s quiet, servant-hearted role.

Because the Spirit does not magnify Himself, neither should we. His role is to exalt Jesus Christ. Yet Acts shows us how central the Spirit’s work is in the birth and mission of the Church.

Jesus said in John 16:7:

“It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you.”

For the Spirit to indwell the Church and empower Christ’s witnesses worldwide, Jesus first had to ascend.

Many Bibles title this book *The Acts of the Apostles*, but that title is imprecise. Only two apostles dominate the narrative—Peter and Paul—and one deacon, Philip, plays a major role. Chapters 1–12 focus mainly on Peter and Philip. Chapters 13–28 follow Paul’s ministry until his arrival in Rome.

Acts may feel incomplete, and in a sense it is. It gives us the first forty years of the Church's story. Revelation continues the narrative and spans the entire Church Age symbolically through the seven letters in chapters two and three.

A brief outline of the opening chapters helps us get oriented.

Chapter 1 describes the Ascension and the apostles' commission.

Chapter 2 records Pentecost, the giving of the Spirit, and Peter's first sermon.

Chapter 3 shows the healing of the lame man, leading to Peter's second sermon.

Chapters 4–6 describe persecution, the appointment of the first deacons, and the ministry of Stephen.

Chapter 7 preserves Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin—one of the most remarkable summaries of Old Testament history in Scripture.

Chapter 8 shows intensified persecution and introduces Saul, who will soon become Paul. We also meet the Ethiopian official in a remarkable episode with Philip.

The second major unit of the book focuses on Paul's conversion, his missionary journeys, the Jerusalem Council, and finally his appeal to Rome.