

# How to Understand and Apply the Bible

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## Interpreting Acts

Acts as a genre: *Travel biography*.

1. When possible, read Acts through in one sitting. Breaking a travel narrative into parts might cause you to miss the big picture!
2. Acts covers, in steps, the “outline” that Jesus gives his followers before his ascent.

Key verse:

“But 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 earth.” (Acts 1:8)

### **Phase 1: The witness in Jerusalem (1:1-6:7)**

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. (Acts 6:7)

### **Phase 2: The witness to Hellenistic Jews and then throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 6:8-9:31)**

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. (Acts 9:31)

### **Phase 3: The witness to God-fearing Gentiles and growth of the church in Syrian Antioch (9:32-12:24)**

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44-46)

As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers. (Acts 16:4-5)

### Phase 3 continued: The expanding witness across the Gentile world to Rome itself (12:25-28:30)

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.” (Acts 23:11)

3. Read Acts devotionally, keeping in mind what this document would mean to people like Luke—Gentiles who experienced salvation by God’s power. In understanding God’s purposes through inspiring his servant Luke, we will understand his continuing purposes as the kingdom continues to expand.

## Themes of Acts

1. Christianity spread due to the power of the Holy Spirit; it was not a man-made phenomenon.

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the **Holy Spirit** and began to speak in other tongues as the **Spirit** enabled them. (Acts 2:2-4)

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. (Acts 4:31)

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the **Holy Spirit**.” (Acts 9:17)

While Peter was still speaking these words, the **Holy Spirit** came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the **Holy Spirit** had been poured out even on Gentiles. (Acts 10:44-45)

When Paul placed his hands on them, the **Holy Spirit** came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. (Acts 19:6)

2. God’s plan of salvation started with the Jews but then spread to the Gentiles in fulfillment of God’s prophetic intention.

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the **Gentiles** and their kings and to the people of Israel.” (Acts 9:15)

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on **Gentiles**. (Acts 10:45)

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to **Gentiles** God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:18)

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the **Gentiles**. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “‘I have made you a light for the **Gentiles**, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” When the **Gentiles** heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. (Acts 13:46-48)

The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the **Gentiles** had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. (Acts 15:3)

“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the **Gentiles**, and they will listen!” (Acts 28:28)

3. Christianity is focused on the coming kingdom and is not a direct threat to Rome, nor did it oppose Rome in any way.

After they left the room, they began saying to one another, “This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.” Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” (Acts 26:31-32)

4. Christianity is not a new religion; it is an extension of Judaism. The central proclamation is that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, the Son of God.

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” (Acts 2:36)

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. (Acts 17:2-4)

“However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the

Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.” (Acts 24:14-15)

“But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” (Acts 26:22-23)

## How to read Acts: Map in hand, history in mind!

<https://viz.bible/journeys/>

### Sample Passage – Acts 20:1-24

When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. <sup>2</sup> He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, <sup>3</sup> where he stayed three months. Because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. <sup>4</sup> He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. <sup>5</sup> These men went on ahead and waited for **us** at Troas. <sup>6</sup> But **we** sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

<sup>7</sup> On the first day of the week **we** came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. <sup>8</sup> There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. <sup>9</sup> Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story **and was picked up dead.** <sup>10</sup> Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “He’s alive!” <sup>11</sup> Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. <sup>12</sup> **The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.**

<sup>13</sup> **We** went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where **we** were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. <sup>14</sup> When he met **us** at Assos, **we** took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. <sup>15</sup> The next day **we** set sail from there and arrived off Chios. The day after that **we** crossed over to Samos, and on the following day arrived at Miletus. <sup>16</sup> Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.

<sup>17</sup> From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. <sup>18</sup> When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. <sup>19</sup> I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. <sup>20</sup> You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. <sup>21</sup> I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

<sup>22</sup> “And now, **compelled by the Spirit**, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. <sup>23</sup> I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. <sup>24</sup> However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is **to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.**”