

THE BOOK OF ACTS: PT 1

CLAYTON CHURCH OF CHRIST

LIFE GROUP GUIDE



BUT YOU WILL
RECEIVE POWER
WHEN THE HOLY
SPIRIT HAS COME
UPON YOU, AND
YOU WILL BE MY
WITNESSES IN
JERUSALEM AND IN
ALL JUDEA AND
SAMARIA, AND TO
THE END OF THE
EARTH.

ACTS 1:8

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AN INTRO TO ACTS



Acts is the story of God's grace flooding out to the world. Nothing is more prominent in Acts than the spread of the gospel. Jesus promises a geographic expansion at the outset, and Acts follows the news of his death and resurrection as it spreads from a small group of disciples in Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the faraway capital of Rome.

Through the repeated preaching of the gospel to different people groups, the gospel of grace draws them in, constitutes them as the church centered on the grace of Jesus, and then sends them out in mission to the world. Acts is a historical account of how the resurrection of Jesus changes everything through the birth of the early church.

God is clearly central to the gospel's expansion. He is at the heart of the gospel message and, through the Holy Spirit, he is responsible for its remarkable growth.

The gospel expands not through human strength but through the power of God over significant barriers of geography, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, wealth, persecutions, weaknesses, suffering, sickness, and imprisonments. Many of these barriers appear so inviolable that, when the gospel is preached to a new segment of society, riots ensue. But Acts makes clear that no one is beyond the scope of God's saving power, nor is anyone exempt from the need for God's redeeming grace.



A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF ACTS

Acts shows that the new Christian movement is not a fringe sect, but the culmination of God's plan of redemption. What was seen only as shadows in the Old Testament, God reveals finally and fully through Jesus Christ. The book of Acts does not primarily provide human patterns to emulate or avoid. Instead, it repeatedly calls us to reflect upon the work of God, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, establishing the church by the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel's expansion is the culmination of what God has been doing since the beginning. Acts consistently grounds salvation in the ancient purpose of God, which comes to fruition at God's own initiative. This reveals God to be the great benefactor who pours out blessings on all people. Even the opportunity to repent is God's gift.

Watch this two part video from **The Bible Project** on Acts:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGbNw855ksw> ("Overview Acts 1-12" on YouTube)

&

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-17KxpjL0Q> ("Overview Acts 13-28" on YouTube)

Acts is significant for chronicling the spread of the gospel, not only geographically but also culturally. It records the transition from taking the gospel to an exclusively Jewish audience—with Peter preaching to a small group in the Upper Room—to the gospel going out among the Gentiles, primarily under the ministry of the apostle Paul. The transition is best illustrated by Peter's vision in which he heard a voice telling him, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (10:15). This led Peter to then share the gospel with many Gentiles. The lesson? God wants His message of hope and salvation to extend to all people—"in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (1:8).

- **Ps Chuck Swindoll**

DATES & HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Acts is the second part of a two-volume work, with the Gospel of Luke being the first volume. Neither book names its author, but the Lukan authorship of Luke–Acts is affirmed by both external evidence (church tradition) and internal evidence. Church tradition supporting Luke as the author is both early (from the mid-second century AD) and for more than a century and a half unanimous (it was never doubted until the 19th century). The “we” sections of this book (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16) reveal that the author was a companion of Paul’s and participated in the events described in those sections. So the author of Acts was one of Paul’s companions listed in his letters written during those periods (Luke is listed in Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24) and not one of the men referred to in the third person in the “we” sections (see Acts 20:4–5). It seems clear that the author was from the second generation of the early church, since he was not an “eyewitness” of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 1:2), and was a Gentile (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.4.6, says Luke was “by race an Antiochian and a physician by profession;” see Col. 4:14).

A number of scholars date Acts as early as AD 62, a guess based primarily on the abrupt conclusion of the book. Since Acts ends with Paul in Rome under house arrest, awaiting his trial before Caesar (Acts 28:30–31), it would seem strange if Luke knew about Paul’s release (a proof of his innocence), about his defense before Caesar (fulfilling Acts 27:24), and about his preaching the gospel as far as Spain (see note on Acts 28:30–31), but then did not mention these events at the end of Acts. It seems most likely, then, that the abrupt ending is an indication that Luke completed Acts c. AD 62, before these later events occurred.

Acts is the only biblical book that chronicles the history of the church immediately after Jesus’s ascension. As such, it provides us with a valuable account of how the church was able to grow and spread out from Jerusalem into the rest of the Roman Empire. In only three decades, a small group of frightened believers in Jerusalem transformed into an empire-wide movement of people who had committed their lives to Jesus Christ, ending on a high note with Paul on the verge of taking the gospel to the highest government official in the land—the Emperor of Rome. - **Ps Chuck Swindoll**

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

In short, Acts is about what Jesus continued to do after his ascension. It records the expansion of the early church from Jerusalem, to Samaria and right into the heart of Rome. While there are probably many reasons Luke wrote Acts, from the material he included it seems clear that Luke was keen for everyone to know that this Jewish Messiah is not just for Israel, but is the Saviour of the whole world. It's a book about the first witnesses to the resurrected Saviour and how through God's Spirit those witnesses took the Gospel right into the heart of the most powerful empire the world had known. The world was being reshaped around Jesus.

-from Village Church Brisbane



1:1 - 6:7

THE GOSPEL STARTS IN JERUSALEM

- 1:1-26** The risen Lord Jesus promises his gathered disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them and they will be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8).
- 2:1-47** Many Jewish people, gathered from "every nation under heaven" to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem, hear the word of God about Jesus. More than 3000 people receive the good news and are baptised as believers (2:41, 47).
- 3:1 - 4:31** Many of the Jews who heard Peter and John preach the message about Jesus boldly in the temple believe, in total about 5000 men (4:4).
- 4:32 - 6:7** Despite much persecution, the word of the Lord continues to spread, with multitudes of both men and women in Jerusalem being added to the Lord, including a great number of the priests (5:14; 6:7).



6:8 - 9:31

THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO JUDEA & SAMARIA

- 6:8 - 7:60** The word continues to be powerfully preached by Stephen, until he is executed by the Jewish leaders.
- 8:1-40** In God's sovereignty, the persecution of the church leads to the spread of the gospel throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1), fulfilling the first stage of Jesus' mission (1:8). Philip preaches in Samaria, with many locals joyfully embracing the word of the Lord, including Simon the Magician (8:6, 12-13, 25). Lastly, Philip sees an Ethiopian eunuch come to faith in Jesus (8:35-38).
- 9:1-31** Saul, the great persecutor of the Christian church, comes to faith after being confronted by the risen Lord Jesus (9:17-22) and is commissioned to evangelise "the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (9:15). To the shock of the Jews, Saul (now Paul) immediately proclaims Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus (9:20) and the church multiplies, with newfound peace throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria (9:31).



9:32 - 12:24 THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO THE GENTILES

9:32 - 11:18

After Aeneas is healed, residents of Lydda and Sharon turn to the Lord (9:35). Likewise, after Tabitha is raised, many in Joppa trust in Jesus (9:42). Finally, to the shock of the Jewish believers, the Holy Spirit converts the Gentile Cornelius and all his household to the message of Jesus (10:44). The doors are now open for the Gentile mission to begin!

11:19 - 12:24

On account of the persecution, the gospel spreads to the Jews as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Uniquely, the gospel is preached to the Gentiles as well in Antioch, with many coming to faith in Jesus (11:21-24). The church is fully established through the preaching ministry of Barnabas and Saul (11:26), and Antioch becomes the new base for Paul's three missionary journeys into Asia-minor, Macedonia and Greece. Back in Jerusalem, the word of God continues to spread and flourish, despite the imprisonment of Peter and execution of James (12:24).



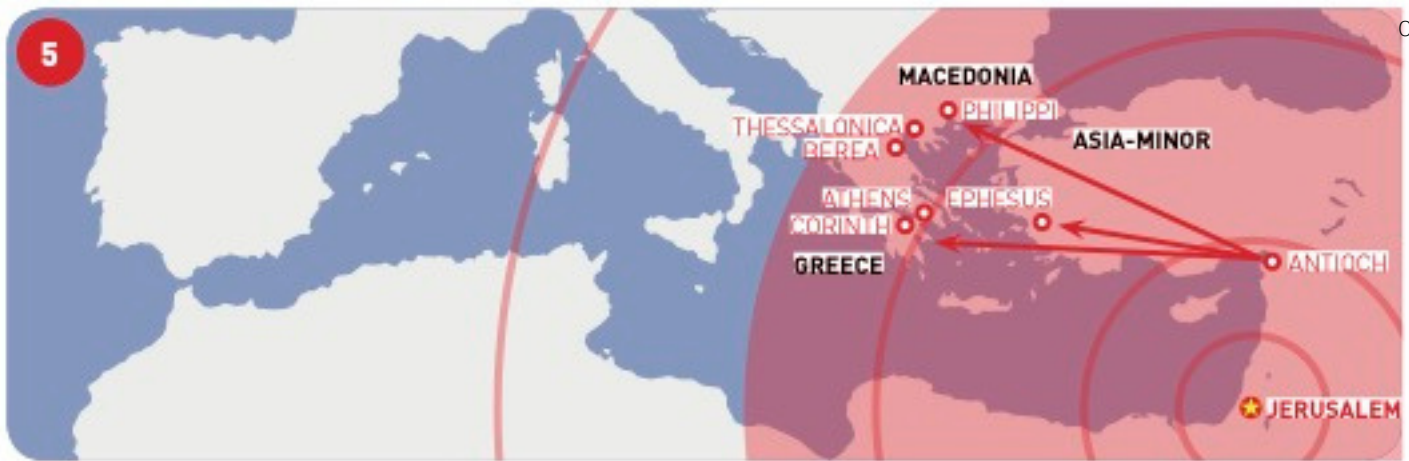
12:25 - 16:5 THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO ASIA-MINOR

12:25 - 14:28

After being commissioned (13:2-3), Paul and Barnabas sail from Antioch (in Syria) to Cyprus and then onto Pisidia and Galatia, visiting the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Along the way they face much opposition to their preaching from both Jews and Gentiles, culminating in Paul almost being stoned to death (14:19). Nevertheless, by God's grace, a Roman leader (13:9), and many Gentiles believe and the word of the Lord spreads through the whole region (13:48-49; 14:1, 21, 27).

15:1 - 16:5

Despite the call for Gentile believers to be circumcised, the Jerusalem Council sends delegates to the largely Gentile church in Antioch to encourage them in their faith, though urging them to not be a stumbling block to the Jewish believers. Furthermore, though Paul and Barnabas part company, the apostles revisit and strengthen the churches planted on their previous mission together (15:39-40; 16:1), and the number of believers continue to grow (16:5).



16:6 - 21:16 THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO EUROPE

- 16:6 - 17:15** Guided and empowered by the Spirit, Paul and Silas bring the preach the word in Macedonia, namely in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Despite them being imprisoned, beaten and lynched, many come to faith in Jesus: Lydia and her household [16:14-15], the Philippian jailer and his family [16:30-34], a few Jews, many devout Greeks and several leading women [17:4-5, 12].
- 17:16 - 18:22** Despite Paul being mocked for his belief in the resurrection in Athens, some men and women join him and trust in Jesus [17:34]. Likewise in Corinth, despite strong opposition from the Jews, Crispus the ruler of the Synagogue, his whole household and many Corinthians believe the gospel of God and are baptised [18:8].
- 18:23 - 19:41** Paul teaches for two years in Ephesus "so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" [19:10]. After Paul performs extraordinary healings and exorcisms in the name of Jesus, fear falls on the residents, who praise the name of Jesus and many repent of their evil practices. "In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power." [19:20]
- 20:1 - 21:16** Paul travels throughout Macedonia and Greece, encouraging, instructing and farewelling the churches of these regions, as well as the Ephesian elders, on his way to Jerusalem.



21:17 - 28:31 THE GOSPEL ON THE WAY TO ROME

- 21:17 - 23:35** In the face of hostility, arrest, imprisonment and an assassination plot, Paul still manages to preach to all the gathered Jews in Jerusalem, to the Jewish council and to his Roman captors.
- 24:1 - 26:32** Again during his self-defence, Paul explains the message of Jesus to the Roman Governors, Felix and Festus, and Agrippa, King of Judea in fulfilment of Jesus' promise to him [Acts 9:15-16].
- 27:1 - 28:31** Despite being bound on a ship, shipwrecked on Malta and imprisoned in Rome, Paul witnesses to the sailors and soldiers, the Maltese people, and the Jews and Gentiles in Rome. The book of Acts concludes with Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ "boldly and without hindrance" [28:31]. From Rome, over many centuries, the word of God continues to spread to 'the ends of the earth'.

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESS

Read Acts 1:1-26

In this opening chapter of Acts, Luke introduces several important gospel perspectives that recur throughout the rest of the book. Chief among them is that the book of Acts is first and foremost a book about Jesus. He is the primary character of the book and the focus of all its events. Acts depicts the continuing actions and teachings of Jesus, following his ascension, in a way that no other book of the Bible does.

Acts demonstrates that as the budding Christian movement spreads, Jesus himself is at work. The church is Jesus' vehicle to continue his work in the world. In the opening chapter, Jesus promises his disciples the Holy Spirit in power (Acts 1:5), commissions them to take the gospel to the "end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), ascends into heaven (Acts 1:9), and is promised to return again (Acts 1:11).

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESS

Read Acts 1:1-26

A Little Bit More

Jesus spends 40 days from his resurrection until his ascension and during this time he was sighted by crowds of people and performed many miracles.

Billy Graham writes, "One reason Jesus stayed on earth for 40 days...was to demonstrate to His followers that He was truly alive.

After all, they knew the Roman authorities had put Jesus to death...[and] they had forgotten His promise that He would return from the grave, and they felt they had no future.

But when Jesus appeared among them after the resurrection, their lives were changed. The greatest miracle in all of history had just taken place: Jesus Christ was alive!"

Author Luke puts his retelling of the 'Great Commission' right before the ascension, and although it is brief, it is a perfect distillation of our directive while we are here on earth. We are to be witnesses, starting where we are and moving out into the ends of the earth. We will receive the power of the Holy Spirit to do God's will.

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESS

The Big Picture

Acts 1 shows us that the ministry of Jesus did not stop with the Gospels; it is an ongoing work, initiated by Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, and thereafter mediated by the Holy Spirit.

Read / Reflect / Discuss

- Read Acts 1:1-26
- v6-8 talk of the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples. What do you think it means to receive the Holy Spirit?
- What part does the Holy Spirit play in enabling followers of Jesus to be "witnesses"?
- Read v13-14 and expand on what your take away is based on who is present in the room?
- If you were to "tell people about Jesus everywhere", what would that look like?
- Do you consider yourself, and your life, a witness to the life of Jesus? Why/why not?
- How do you think your prayer life should reflect this push to be a witness, be empowered by the Holy Spirit, and to share Jesus to the world?

PENTECOST

Read Acts 2:1-47

In Acts 2, Jesus' promise of the Spirit becomes a reality as the Spirit descends on the disciples at Pentecost. The disciples "began to speak in other tongues" (Acts 2:4), and devout Jews from many nations were amazed, "because each one was hearing them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:6). God shows that the Holy Spirit is empowering people to be witnesses and the Gospel is breaking through linguistic barriers and going to all nations, and then Peter stands up and, in the first recorded sermon in Acts, explains how Pentecost is the glorious and long-anticipated fulfilment of God's plan of redemption that has been in place since the beginning.

Through Peter's sermon, we see the most prominent theme of Acts: The gospel of Jesus will go out to the nations through the witness of his disciples and the enabling of the Holy Spirit.

You can watch a wonderful sermon from Louie Giglio about Acts 2.

(Strike the Match - RightNow Media)

<https://app.rightnowmedia.org/en/player/video/499781?session=499784>

PENTECOST

Read Acts 2:1-47

A Little Bit More

We get the birth story of the church in this chapter, and it begins with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit on the believers present. An indwelling that is given from God, not earned by the people. The presence of the Holy Spirit also enabled the disciples to step into abilities that they were unable to produce on their own and to see fruits from those abilities that they could not procure on their own.

Verses 4-41 share the story of supernatural activity resulting in miraculous responses from the listeners.

Peter draws the crowd's attention to the meaning of Pentecost by reminding them of the prophecy from Joel 2:28-32. In the book of Joel the 'outpouring of the Spirit' was preceding the "day of the Lord" when God would establish his kingdom and blessing would be poured out on his people, while judgment was poured out on those rejecting God.

PENTECOST

Read Acts 2:1-47

A Little Bit More

It can be believed that Peter was suggesting a similar experience for the current listeners and those reading Acts today. That God will pour out his blessing, his presence, his Spirit on those who call on God.

Verses 38 & 39 gives a promise of hope, that for all who repent and baptised, that God will pour his Spirit into them.

Following this, Luke paints a beautiful picture in verses 42-47 of believers being united in vision, generosity, and desire to see the will of God fulfilled in their community. May it be so with us.

PENTECOST

The Big Picture

In Acts 2:1–47, Jesus' disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit so that they are enabled to be Jesus' witnesses to the world.

Read / Reflect / Discuss

- Read Acts 2:1-47
- Compare the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) to Acts 2:1-13. What does this teach us about God's desire and design for us?
- V1-13 shows God's power making people more capable than they ordinarily are to live out His will. Share a time of God sustaining and empowering you to do His will.
- Read out loud v25-28. Do you know this to not just be poetic imagery, but a true understanding of God's character?
- If you were to "tell people about Jesus everywhere", what would that look like?
- Read v42-47 and dream of what this could look like for our context and our culture. What steps do we need to take?

GROWING WITNESS & OPPOSITION

Read Acts 3:1 - 5:42

The first three chapters of Acts form a triad focused on the Spirit and the empowerment for witnessing to the name of Jesus that the Spirit will bring. Acts 1 was waiting for the Spirit, Acts 2 marked the coming of the Spirit, and now Acts 3 shows the apostles' being empowered by the Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost begins to ripple throughout Jerusalem and the new church, inspiring miraculous healings and bold preaching of the gospel. The church continues to grow and experience tremendous blessing, but a new theme is introduced: **significant opposition**.

Acts 4 marks the first persecution, a topic that will continue through to and reach its culmination in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7). From Acts 4 on, this book will illustrate the diametrically opposed systems of the "world" and the lordship of Jesus Christ. The apostles are threatened, jailed, and beaten, and conflict even arises from within. Despite the rising opposition, the message of Acts 3-5 is clear: The gospel will advance because God is at work.

GROWING WITNESS & OPPOSITION

Read Acts 3:1 - 5:42

A Little Bit More

Chapter 3 sets the tone of what the disciples are trying to achieve. They are showing that with the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, plus the coming of the Holy Spirit, things are now different. Peter and John heal a man near the temple but are quick to share that this healing only comes through Jesus Christ.

Peter goes on to make sure that all the listeners are aware that they too can participate in the life changing Good News of Jesus.

John the Baptist told the same message, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4), and with repentance comes restoration. Peter and John do not deviate from this message.

Karl Barth said, "What we think about God will determine what we think about everything." It would seem that the author Luke is determined to make sure that we are all on the same page about the reality of a risen Saviour, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the will of God for us to make disciples.

GROWING WITNESS & OPPOSITION

Read Acts 3:1 - 5:42

A Little Bit More

The very next chapter, chapter 4, introduces the idea that the message of Jesus is not going to be accepted by everyone and that it will even prove to be offensive to some people. In this chapter we see the very first case of persecution against the newly formed NT Church.

John Piper speaks about this chapter and says, "Peter draws out the implication of this universal Lordship of Jesus in verse 12: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Since God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead and since God has made him head over all his house—over all the kingdom and all the redeemed—therefore Jesus is now the only way to heaven, and the confession of his name is the only hope of salvation from sin and judgment."

GROWING WITNESS & OPPOSITION

Read Acts 3:1 - 5:42

A Little Bit More

The disciples are arrested and told not to continue telling people about Jesus, but upon the disciples return from arrest they immediately share their story and begin prayer for boldness to continue preaching.

Bibleref.com writes this, "But when Peter and John return to the other Jesus-followers, they don't pray for protection—they pray for courage. They quote David who said the nations and leaders will rise against God's followers, but their efforts will be in vain. That doesn't mean God will always protect the church from harm (Acts 12:1–2). But, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they choose to face that danger with boldness in order to continue their mission of bearing witness to Jesus (Acts 4:23–31)."

GROWING WITNESS & OPPOSITION

Read Acts 3:1 - 5:42

A Little Bit More

Then chapter 5 begins and we see some examples of extreme consequences. Firstly, is the consequence of lying, not just to the apostles, but to God. Ananias and Sapphira who are part of the early church movement and connected to the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit are struck dead upon lying. It is not known exactly why this severe punishment was given, but some commentaries suggest it could have been to preserve the integrity of the early church which has only just formed, to set a high standard of how believers would conduct themselves before God, or to build a deep sense of trust that when followers of Jesus spoke you could be sure they spoke truthfully.

In verse 33 we find the next example of extreme consequences when the Sanhedrin seek to kill the apostles for their teaching of Jesus, and although the disciples are released without being executed they are still beaten before being released. One commentary shares, "The apostles considered submission to God the right thing to do even if the Holy Spirit leads them to do or experience hard things."

GROWING WITNESS & OPPOSITION

The Big Picture

Immediately following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Acts 3:1–5:42 records the growing church's experience as Jesus' witnesses: Spirit-empowered ministry, and opposition to that ministry.

Read / Reflect / Discuss

- Read Acts 3:1 - 5:42
- How do we manage the tension of a church being persecuted while also experiencing revival and growth?
- Read 4:13-22. Is it possible for you to represent Christ so well that even if the gospel may offend, your life and the Holy Spirit's power still win people to Christ?
- 4:23-31 shows believers praying for courage and boldness. Where do you need courage and boldness in your life? Pray as a group!
- Why do you think Ananias & Sapphira were dealt with so harshly? Do some googling!
- Read 5:41-42. What is your response to hardship, trials, and opposition? How would you like to respond in the future?
- Do you take comfort that you are part of a movement that will never die?

STEPHEN

Read Acts 6:1-7:60

The young church begins to experience intensified opposition, and one of its new leaders, Stephen, is executed by the religious authorities for charges of blasphemy. This event marks the beginning of serious persecution. Yet even amid the rising opposition, God's power can be seen at work preparing for the gospel to scatter from Jerusalem out to the nations.

Beginning with Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-7), the Christian gospel is proclaimed to an ever-widening circle—to Samaria (Acts 8:4-25), to an Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40), to a Gentile God-fearer (Acts 10:1-48), and to the Gentiles of Antioch (Acts 11:19-30). Key figures in the outreach are the Hellenists Stephen and Philip, the apostle Peter, and eventually Paul and Barnabas. The stage is then set for Paul's ministry, which will go to the "end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Check out this great article for further reading:
(*'The Story of Stephen'* on [medium.com](https://medium.com/acts-study-guide/the-story-of-stephen-59c87dd58ab1))
<https://medium.com/acts-study-guide/the-story-of-stephen-59c87dd58ab1>

STEPHEN

Read Acts 6:1-7:60

A Little Bit More

On the ['himpublications.com'](http://himpublications.com) blog site Chad Harrington writes a piece regarding the "5 Hard Lessons in Evangelism" we learn from Stephen. They are summarised as:

Sometimes we need to share the whole story

Stephen offers a great example of sharing the story of Jesus in the context of the larger story of Scripture.

Sometimes our words will fall on deaf ears

God used the same situation to harden the hearts of some listeners while also spreading the Gospel further.

Sometimes God chooses to take harsh action

God is full of grace and truth, and there is still place in God's heart for him to take harsh action. We need to trust that God knows best.

Sometimes people don't respond well

Sharing our faith doesn't always end in conversion and sometimes rejection happens after our proclamation.

Sometimes evangelism leads to death

We often ask, "How could the God that allows persecution be the God of goodness?", but we must know that death is not the worst thing that can happen to someone while on earth. A life absent of the touch of God is a far worse fate.

STEPHEN

The Big Picture

Before his death, Stephen eloquently tells the story of Israel to show how Jesus is the culmination of God's redemptive plan and how, even through rejection and persecution, the power of God is advancing.

Read / Reflect / Discuss

- Read Acts 6:1-7:60
- V6:1-4 show a high value placed on "social justice" issues. What part should the church be playing in community well-being?
- V6:8 onwards show the trial of Stephen. What does this show in regards to trusting in God, and how would you respond to this?
- Being full the Spirit and wisdom are mentioned multiple times, how do you take active steps to be full of both? What does it look like?
- Can you accept that how you respond to hardship in your life can be a catalyst for spiritual growth in other people?
- What godly character does Stephen have that you want to develop?

SAUL

Read Acts 8:1-9:31

Stephen's murder kicks off a time of serious persecution led by Saul, and the young Christian community is scattered away from Jerusalem throughout the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria. In the next four chapters (Acts 8-11), Acts moves from persecution to the gospel spreading across borders and boundaries: first to the Samaritans, then to the Gentiles. God's purposes continue to work through and overcome every obstacle, as what is intended to crush the movement becomes fuel for the gospel's advance.

Here is some additional reading from bible.org about the 'Unlikely Conversion' of Saul. It is a great read and well worth your time.

<https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-22-unlikely-conversion-acts-91-19>

SAUL

Read Acts 8:1-9:31

A Little Bit More

Saul is obviously known better by the name of Paul, by which he is first referred to in Acts 13:9. It's a common misunderstanding that God changed his name, similar to Jesus renaming Simon to Peter. In reality it is almost certain that Saul/Paul were the dual names he always had, but one was connected to the Hebrew heritage (Phil. 3:5) and the other connected to his Roman heritage (Acts 16:37).

Saul's conversion is one of the most incredible feats when we consider his power and influence prior to conversion, and then his impact and dedication to the Gospel after his conversion. Timothy Keller writes, "Paul's conversion is a great reminder that no one is beyond the reach of Jesus."

Dr. Josh Moody, senior pastor of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, and founder and president of God Centered Life ministries, shares some lessons that we can take from this conversion story in Acts:

SAUL

Read Acts 8:1-9:31

A Little Bit More

1 - Paul himself tells us what we are meant to learn from his conversion. In 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul says: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

In other words, his own conversion stands as a model to teach us that anyone can come to Christ. That there is no sin too bad, no evil too wicked, that can prevent us from receiving the grace of Christ.

2 - We learn that...it is possible to reject Jesus. Many people do. But in principle, no one is beyond saving. This should encourage us when we think of family members or friends who do not yet know Jesus. This also motivates us to continue to pray for them and witness to them.

3 - What would have happened if Ananias had not been obedient to his task? God would have found someone else no doubt. And yet Ananias' obedience matters...

SAUL

Read Acts 8:1-9:31

A Little Bit More

3 [continued]...Would we obey God to serve someone converted from a background like Paul's? Sometimes God asks us to do things that are difficult, hard, even risky. Would we obey?

4 - We learn how much Jesus loves the church, for it is his own body. Right at the heart of Paul's theology is a theology of the church. And much of this is surely derived from this conversion experience—often a man's or woman's theology is built upon the way that they first encountered Christ. Here he meets Christ who tells him not, "why do you persecute my people," but instead "why do you persecute me?" The church is Christ's body.

This story shows the power of God in changing hearts and lives. That power is still alive and working today. As followers of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we get to partner in this transforming work.

SAUL

The Big Picture

In Acts 8:1–9:31, the church faces its fiercest opposition yet in the persecution led by Saul, but this violence actually serves to advance God's work and spread the gospel out from Jerusalem.

Read / Reflect / Discuss

- Read Acts 8:1–9:31
- What does the conversion of Saul teach us about God's grace & redeeming power?
- Is any person beyond the saving grace of God? Do we have people we have "given up" on?
- What does repentance mean? How would you describe repentance based on the Saul to Paul story?
- Read 1 Timothy 1:16 and share what God is demonstrating through your life.

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

Read Acts 9:32-12:25

The previous section of Acts recorded the conversion of the gospel's fiercest opponent, Saul, into its greatest missionary. Now the significant barrier between Jews and Gentiles is overcome as God leads Peter to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, and the Jewish Christians begin to realise that God is offering salvation to all people through the work of Jesus.

God can make all things clean and from here on in Acts we begin to see that the gospel overcomes all obstacles, whether ethnic, cultural, religious, or political.

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

Read Acts 9:32-12:25

A Little Bit More

An article by Jane Williams, printed in The Guardian titled 'Acts of Apostles, part 6: The gentile mission' shares this information:

"...Luke, on the other hand, is writing with the benefit of hindsight, reporting on a period that is now past, but living at a time when the divisions over the issue are largely just a memory. Luke tends to see the spread of the gospel all over the world and through all cultures as inevitable. He sees the seeds of the gentile mission right back in Jesus' own life and work...Luke is perfectly clear that the decision to include gentiles in the new Christian community is one forced on the church by the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10, he describes a dream that Peter is reported to have had, in which he is explicitly told that he must eat things that were forbidden by Jewish law.

So as far as Acts is concerned, the spread of the gospel to gentiles is something that happens in an orderly, spirit-filled manner and with the imprimatur of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, as soon as they hear Peter's experience.

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

Read Acts 9:32-12:25

A Little Bit More

Paul, on the other hand, suggests that the situation was rather messier and more prolonged than that. In his letter to the Galatian Christians, he describes a public confrontation between himself and Peter in Antioch, where he accused Peter of hypocrisy. Peter had apparently been happy to waive the Jewish food laws and eat with gentile Christians until a party of Jewish Christians arrived. Paul seems to suggest that there were groups of Jewish Christians who travelled round, trying to enforce circumcision and observance of the law on new converts, and that they were causing considerable division and unrest in the churches.

But perhaps one or two things emerge clearly. One is the interesting...assumption that Christians should agree on boundaries. It would surely have made as much sense for gentile Christian churches to go one way and Jewish Christians to go another? But no, Paul and Luke agree that this was a matter for consultation.

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

Read Acts 9:32-12:25

A Little Bit More

The second is that both parties in the argument were forced to be slightly counter-cultural in their handling of the issue. Their common faith made both Jewish and gentile Christians stand out from their own communities because of a loyalty to something bigger." [end of article reference]

Dr. Josh Moody writes, "God "accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right." Oh how revolutionary it would be if we could truly grasp the power of this truth! How devastating has the breaking of this rule been to the church and to nations down through history. How silly, pathetic, and demonic, is our erecting of human barriers and distinctions along race lines! What pain and unnecessary suffering has been done because we did not listen to what Peter said here, what he realized! God "accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right." With power Peter then preached the gospel to these Gentiles, and as he preached the Holy Spirit fell upon them. Of course! Pentecost has arrived for these now that the gospel is preached to them too and a new wave of God's Spirit begins to these people groups. How merciful is God, and how great and good he is!

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

The Big Picture

In Acts 9:32–12:25, we see the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, dramatically demonstrating that the barrier between Jews and Gentiles is being demolished and salvation is now streaming out to all nations.

Read / Reflect / Discuss

- Read Acts 9:32–12:25
- The early church displays the gospel breaking ground in hearts that are far from God. What is your role in the gospel reaching new hearts?
- Acts 10:34–43 show Peter giving his understanding of the gospel message. How would you share the gospel in a short form?
- Acts 10 shares the wrestle between tradition and relationship. What are the modern day traditions that we hold onto?
- Acts 11:1–30 is a picture of a godly church under pressure. How do we respond? How would our church respond?
- Read Acts 12, and tell me what type of person you think Peter is. How do you think he would be acting if he lived your life? How would he be different?

PAUL & BARNABAS ARE SENT

Read Acts 13:1-14:28

Through Peter's vision and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius's family in the previous section of Acts, God powerfully demonstrated that the gospel is going to the Gentiles. Now, Paul and Barnabas are sent out to preach and we see the beginnings of the missionary movement that will take the gospel out from the Jewish homeland and into Asia Minor. Acts 13-14 records Paul's "first missionary journey." A new recurring theme is introduced here as we repeatedly see the Jews rejecting the gospel while the Gentiles embrace it.

Here is a insightful short video talking about Paul's missionary journeys: (Paul's Missionary Journeys, The Bible Project - YouTube)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fglsbcGSr3A>

PAUL & BARNABAS ARE SENT

Read Acts 13:1-14:28

A Little Bit More

An interesting thing to note at the start of this, 13:1-3, is that the believers were united in worship and fasting when the Holy Spirit lead Saul/Paul and Barnabas to be sent off for missionary work. This speaks to the importance and power of God's people joining together in worship, not for the sake of singing songs, but understanding that in worship we are opening ourselves up to be ministered to by God.

We see Paul preaching the Good News with boldness and clarity, and starting in the synagogues. This could be taken as a sign that Paul & Barnabas had hoped that the Jewish nation would receive the message of Jesus and be a leading light to the Gentiles.

Although there is opposition (14:2, 14:5, 14:19) there is still a large number of new believers won (14:21). In the midst of all the trials, there is an undeniable joy in the work of following God's calling and seeing the lost be found.

PAUL & BARNABAS ARE SENT

The Big Picture

Commissioned by the Antioch church, Paul and Barnabas set off on their first missionary journey to bring the gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 13–14.

Read / Reflect / Discuss

- Read Acts 13:1–14:28
- V13:16–25 tell the story of a God who remains true and never fails a promise. What promises from God are you holding on to?
- Read 13:42–52 and share why you think some people reject the gospel?
- What does repentance mean? How would you describe repentance based on the Saul to Paul story?
- Read 1 Timothy 1:16 and share what God is demonstrating through your life.

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Read Acts 15:1-35

After Paul and Barnabas complete their first missionary journey, the gospel has begun to take greater root among the Gentiles, but a religious faction arises to teach that Gentile Christians must be circumcised and must follow the law of Moses to be saved. In Acts 15, the church convenes a major assembly, known as the "Jerusalem Council," to discuss conditions for Gentile membership in the church and what is necessary for salvation.

A short enjoyable video to watch is "Acts 15 / The Jerusalem Council / Bible Study" by Spoken Word on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXUSFoV9Ttk>

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Read Acts 15:1-35

A Little Bit More

The Jerusalem council brings to light something that we don't always put at the forefront of our minds when we consider our faith; doctrine matters. What we believe to be true will affect what we do, so what we believe to be true should be true. The standards that we believe we are being held to, we will hold others to, even if they do not share those standards.

Something startling to note is that some scholars have placed this council occurring twenty years **AFTER** Jesus' ascension back to Heaven. This is startling because even after **TWO DECADES** some church leaders and believers were still under the belief that the Good News was still predominantly for Jewish people. The arguments that are raised are primarily around making sure that new converts are still fitting in with the Old Testament laws and Jewish customs. People have not understood.

Peter stands in front of the council, and in the most simple ways, explains the basis for salvation: (15:11) "We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Read Acts 15:1-35

A Little Bit More

It is recorded that this message was met with interested silence as Paul and Barnabas told all the wonderful things that God is doing among the Gentiles.

Then James stands and quotes a passage from Amos 9:11-12, and in doing so educates the listeners that the Good News going out to the Gentiles is not contrary to God's eternal plan, but in fact it is a fulfilment.

It may have taken twenty years, but Peter and the apostles have finally figured out that the Good News is not just a message of salvation to a select few, but open to any and all that trust and believe in the work of Jesus.

'For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.'

Ephesians 2:8-9

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

The Big Picture

In Acts 15:1–35, the Jerusalem Council is convened to decide whether non-Jewish believers must submit to all the requirements of the law of Moses, and especially circumcision, in order to be accepted as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Read / Reflect / Discuss

- Read Acts 15:1-35
- There is a council that is deciding what beliefs & doctrines the early church needs to agree on. Together, write a list of some beliefs that you think are *necessary* for Christians.
- If someone asked you right now, "What must I do to be saved?", what would you tell them?
- Read Romans 3:23-24. What does this say to a person struggling with "feeling worthy"?
- V15-35 show a picture of church leaders wrestling with "what is necessary" vs "how do we preserve unity". How important is the unity of believers to your church? How can you tell?
- Read Acts 15:11. Pray and praise God for the complexity and simplicity of His saving truths.

**Thank
you for
helping
us make
disciples.**

