

A SERIES IN ACTS 1-12

To the ends of the earth



GROWTH GROUP BOOKLET
PARTICIPANT VERSION

Introduction

To the ends of the earth...

That's the boundless extent to which God's grace must flow through the church.

The book of Acts, Luke's sequel to his Gospel, calls us to participate in this global witness of the gospel. As the early church grappled with varying degrees of persecution and challenges, Luke's literary masterpiece on God's redemptive actions would have provided invaluable guidance. It reminded the church of its history--how they came into existence through the message of the gospel. It reminded the church of its identity, its mission, and its trajectory during turbulent times. It showed the church and the world that its gospel wasn't a threat to the empire, or something to be legislated. It reminded the church of its glorious God who saves people through the message of the gospel. Acts would have been a huge comfort and challenge to the early church.

Remarkably, even in the 21st Century, Acts remains profoundly relevant. Its timeless message resonates with us as we endeavour to share the gospel with our community and beyond. Amidst our own opposition and adversity, Acts imparts the truth that our triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—is still actively at work within His church today. It also imparts a sense of clarity regarding our identity, purpose, and direction as a church—enabling us to comprehend our role as God's people in a hostile world. Furthermore, Acts calls us to a sacrificial nature befitting the church in a world seeking self-fulfilment. Acts has so much to say to us!

As we embark on a journey through Acts 1-12 this term, expect God to ignite and equip us as a contemporary church. It's crucial to recognize that Acts is not a mere historical chronicle. It transcends mere documentation of events from the early church era. Rather, Luke meticulously selects and presents a historical narrative that underscores the initial strides towards the universal spread of the gospel, inspiring us to continue this divine mission to the ends of the earth. We pray that this is a fruitful term of studying God's word and doing life together.

In Christ,
MPC Staff

Background of Acts

Who wrote Acts?

Based on evidence both inside and outside of the Bible, the book of Acts is attributed to Luke. Based off his literary style and form, Luke was believed to be a well educated Gentile who knew the Old Testament well. Whilst Luke was not an Apostle, Luke most likely journeyed with the Apostle Paul throughout his church planting expeditions (indicated by the “we sections” across Acts 16-27). Beyond this internal evidence, church tradition and history ascribes the Gospel of Luke and Acts to the person of Luke from as early as the second century.

When was Acts written?

It is believed that Acts was written during 70-80 AD. This period followed the execution of the Apostle Paul (64 AD) and coincided with the reign of the Flavian dynasty of Emperors. This was most likely a time of uncertainty for the ever-growing Christian community. Enduring sporadic and localised persecution, the early church found itself devoid of protection from the empire and needing of encouragement to press on in the faith.

Who was Acts written for?

- **Theophilus**

As for its intended audience, the book of Acts speaks to both a specific and a universal audience. It is widely accepted that Acts was addressed to a figure named Theophilus. In the opening verses (Acts 1:1-2), Luke refers to his previous work, the Gospel of Luke, also directed towards Theophilus. Although not explicitly stated within the text, Theophilus is commonly interpreted as a patron or a high-ranking official, likely holding a leadership position within the early church, though his precise identity remains elusive.

- **Paul’s Churches**

The dedication to Theophilus, coupled with the prevalent theme of gospel-driven suffering in Acts, suggests that the recipients may have also been communities led by influential Greco-Roman citizens. These communities, likely established by the now-deceased Apostle Paul, found themselves enduring persecution without significant support. Beyond this specific audience, Acts also carries a message for the universal church. It speaks to believers across time and place, offering insights and guidance relevant to all ages of Christian history. Acts continues to resonate with our contemporary church, offering timeless wisdom and encouragement, pointing us to our God’s plan to save.

Background of Acts (Cont.)

What is the purpose of Acts?

Acts is a work of literary art with historical, theological, pastoral, evangelistic, and apologetics aims. In short, Acts doesn't just tell us to do evangelism, it does this and much more!

- **Historical Purpose:** A primary aim of Acts is historical accuracy, intending to document events precisely. Penned by one of Paul's companions, Luke's account serves to furnish the Pauline churches with their historical foundation. It helps them answer the question: where have we come from?
- **Theological Purpose:** Acts also seeks to demonstrate the divine workings behind the construction of the church. Acts emphasis how these are the acts of the Lord Jesus through his new people, the church. It also shows us how the church community (both Jew and non-Jew) is an integral part of God's plan in the gospel.
- **Evangelistic Purpose:** Acts also seeks to evangelise those who read it. Through the narratives of Peter, Stephen, and Paul (along with the accompanying signs and wonders) it aims to present the essence of their preaching—the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ who saves humanity.
- **Apologetic Purpose (1):** Acts endeavours to reassure the Pauline churches that opposition to their faith in Jesus Christ does not undermine the credibility of the gospel. This opposition is portrayed as part of a historical pattern of rejection, echoing Israel's rejection of the Prophets and also of the Lord Jesus at his death.
- **Apologetic Purpose (2):** Acts also endeavours to show Romans that Christianity poses no threat to the empire and is not illegal. The narrative underscores that one can be both a Christian and a good Roman. The threat to Rome is not this new church community, rather Christians will seek to live peaceful and godly lives in the present age.
- **Pastoral Purpose:** Acts also aims to provide comfort and assurance to the Gentile church, elucidating their place within God's people and thereby imparting a sense of identity and belonging. Acts helps these people (along with Jewish believers) to understand that the church is for both Jew and Gentile. Helping them understand who they are, their purpose, and their future as the people of God together.

For further reading

The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus by Alan J. Thompson

The Acts of the Apostles by David G. Peterson

Week 1

Acts 1:1-11

Pray

Read: Acts 1:1-11 & Luke 1:1-4

1. In verse 1, we read that the book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Luke describes his first work as “all that Jesus began to do and to teach”. What might this imply about the purpose/focus of Luke’s second work (Acts)?

>> Application & Reflection: In this scene, Luke hints at the purpose of Acts. Acts exists to show us what the risen Christ is continuing to do through his church. How might this purpose/vision speak into our view of church and God?

2. In verses 4-8, while eating with his disciples, Jesus speaks about the mission that the disciples are to embark on. What do you learn about the nature of this mission?

>> Application & Reflection: In this scene, Luke shows us the breadth of God’s mission: to reach the ends of the Earth with the gospel. What might it look like for you to engage in this mission? Where have you been doing it already? Where can you do it more?

3. In verse 10-11, divine messengers appear after Jesus ascends into heaven. As the disciples look into the sky, the messengers gently rebuke them. What might we learn from this rebuke?

Read: Acts 1:12-26 & Psalm 69:25; 109:8

4. After Jesus' ascends, the apostles return to Jerusalem and replace Judas. In verses 15-26, Peter speaks of how the Judas' controversy and replacement was the fulfilment of Psalm 69:25 & Psalm 109:8. What might this moment teach us?

>> Application & Reflection: In this scene, Luke shows us the first challenge that the church faces. When the church is faced with controversy/challenge, what's your response (to God or to others)? How might this scene encourage us/help us?

Pray