RECAPTURE THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT OF CHRISTIANITY!

The book of Acts is part two of the compelling story of Jesus and reveals how the church was established in spite of extreme opposition. In *Understanding the Bible: The Book of Acts*, you’ll discover how the Old and New Testaments together present Christianity as a continuation of God’s plan for salvation. Explore the struggles of the apostles and see the Holy Spirit intervene in miraculous ways to keep them moving forward. Discover how the Christian revolution—that all began with Jesus—changed, and continues to change, the world and the course of history forever.

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At the time of Jesus’s crucifixion, his disciples were in fear for their lives. Weeks later, they were completely transformed as they boldly began the movement we know as Christianity. Luke recounts that story in his two-volume history of Luke and Acts.

In his Gospel, Luke traces the life of Jesus the Messiah from his birth to his three-year ministry

Mark Strauss’s concise description of Luke’s historical record shows us how Christianity was not a new religion in the first century, but rather a continuation of God’s plan of salvation from the very beginning.

Our Daily Bread Ministries
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The word revolution can refer to a radical change in the way people think, act, and view the world. Consider the Copernican Revolution, when Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) showed that the earth was not the center of the universe but actually circled the sun. This heliocentric (sun-centered) model radically transformed the way people thought about the cosmos. Then there was the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, when an essentially animal-powered society was transformed into a machine-powered one. To see its effect, try to count the number of machines and electrical devices you use every day. In the latter part of the twentieth century, we experienced the Computer Revolution. Practically everything we own now—from our phones to our
cars to our coffeemakers—is controlled by tiny silicon chips, which perform tasks a million times faster than we could ever do before.

Most recently is the Internet Revolution, where we have instant access to almost any information on Earth. I can Google (which is now a verb) the name of any historical figure and get an instant biography on Wikipedia. I can Skype or FaceTime my friend in the Middle East and talk to him face-to-face for an hour. I can share a paper I’ve written with a colleague online in South Africa and invite her to give me feedback. I can set up a virtual video classroom with a group of students scattered throughout the world, hosting a lively discussion while lecturing through a PowerPoint slideshow. This is all possible because of the World Wide Web, millions of computers around the world linked together and sharing information. This reality would have seemed like science fiction a few decades ago. This is truly a revolution!

While all these revolutions are remarkable and life-changing, the New Testament book of Acts describes the greatest revolution of all time. This revolution began with a single man in the tiny backwater province of Judea in the Roman Empire. When Jesus of Nazareth left this earth, he had little more than a hundred followers. Yet the revolution he launched ended up transforming the world and changing forever the course of human history. The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts tell the story of this revolution.

**The Acts of Jesus, Part Two**

The book doesn’t tell us much about the actions of Jesus’s twelve apostles. Though they appear in the early chapters of Acts, the twelve soon fade out of the story. A better title might be “The Acts of Jesus Part 2,” since the author introduces his book by referring to his previous volume as Part 1 of the Jesus story:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (Acts 1:1–2, emphasis added)

Only Luke among the four gospel authors wrote a sequel. Keep in mind, however, that Luke and Acts are not just two volumes by the same author. It isn’t that Luke had a bestseller with his first volume and decided to write a sequel to earn more royalties. Rather, the two books together form a single two-volume work. While the Gospel of Luke tells the story of the salvation achieved through Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, Acts describes how, after Jesus’s ascension, the church spread the good news of salvation from its Jewish roots in Jerusalem outward to the Gentile world. The story that starts in Jerusalem at the beginning of Luke’s gospel does not reach its narrative conclusion until the end of Acts, when the gospel comes to Rome (Acts 28). Scholars refer to this two-volume work as “Luke-Acts.”

As you read Acts keep this unity in mind. How have events in the Gospel of Luke prepared for those in Acts? What parallels do you see between the actions of Jesus in the Gospel and the apostles in Acts?
The Acts of the Holy Spirit

While “The Acts of Jesus, Part 2” is a good title for this book, another one might be “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” since God’s Spirit is the driving force behind the mission of the church. The theme verse of Acts is often identified as Acts 1:8, which says that after his resurrection and before ascending to heaven, Jesus told his disciples:

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)

Jesus says the Holy Spirit will be his presence—empowering, guiding, and directing his disciples as they take this message of salvation across the globe. How could a lowly band of Galilean fishermen and common peasants turn the whole world upside down? (Acts 17:6). How could so few accomplish so much—without phones or satellite TV or cars or planes? The answer Acts gives us is that this revolution was not accomplished by any human power. The church of Jesus Christ would thrive because it is the work of God. The church has something far more revolutionary than the World Wide Web. We have the guiding and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who links all believers together, making them a powerful force for God.

The Plan of Acts

This theme verse (Acts 1:8) also gives us the structure and plan of Acts. Jesus tells his disciples that they
will be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” A simple geographical outline of the book is:

1. The Gospel to Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)
2. The Gospel to Judea and Samaria (8–12)
3. The Gospel to the Ends of the Earth (13–28)

Two great movements must be kept in view. The first is a geographical movement, as the good news moves from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The second is an ethnic, or people movement, as the message moves from Jews to Gentiles. The two movements are closely linked:

(1) Jerusalem represents Judaism and God’s Old Testament promises to bring salvation to the world through the Jewish nation. This promise goes back to God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). God promised Abraham that he would create a great nation (Israel) through him and through that nation bless all the people of the world. This promise was fulfilled through the salvation accomplished by Jesus the Messiah (Luke 1:55, 73; 3:34; 19:9; Acts 3:25; 7:17).

(2) The book of Acts culminates in Rome, the capital of the vast Roman Empire. Rome represents the world of lost people Jesus came to save. The good news that began in Judaism was all along meant to fulfill God’s promise of salvation for the whole world. While the Gospel of Luke recounts salvation accomplished through Jesus the Messiah, the book of Acts describes salvation announced to the ends of the earth.
Who Was Luke and Why Did He Write?

Early church tradition tells us that the author of this two-volume work was Luke, a physician by occupation (Colossians 4:14) and one of the apostle Paul’s missionary companions (Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). Colossians 4:10–15 implies he was a Gentile (a non-Jew), since he is not listed among Paul’s Jewish associates (Colossians 4:11). Luke was also a devoted and meticulous historian. In the prologue to his gospel, he identifies his overall purpose when he says he is writing “an orderly account … so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke points out how he has interviewed eyewitnesses and carefully investigated everything (Luke 1:3–4).

As a historian, Luke seeks to accurately record the facts about Jesus and the growth of the church. As a Gentile, he is intensely interested in how a message that had such deep roots in Judaism was good news for the whole world. These credentials prepared him well for writing this history of the early church.

So why did Luke write? He likely had a variety of purposes: (1) to preserve the stories of Jesus and the growth of the church for future generations; (2) to defend the Christian faith against its Jewish and Gentile opponents; (3) to train up new believers in the foundations of their faith; and (4) to call unbelievers to faith in Jesus.

Ultimately, Luke’s purpose is the confirmation of the gospel: He writes to confirm that God’s great plan of salvation, predicted in the Old Testament, has now come to fulfillment in Jesus’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension and continues to unfold.
in the growth and expansion of the early church. In the gospel of Luke, this purpose is achieved by demonstrating that Jesus is the mighty Messiah and Son of God who has fulfilled the promises made to Israel. In the book of Acts, it is achieved by showing that the growth and expansion of the church—and particularly the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God—is the work of God and the fulfillment of prophecy. Since this movement is directed and empowered by the Spirit of God, it is unstoppable. Let’s take a closer look at how it played out in Luke’s historical account.

**Luke’s Audience**

To whom was Luke-Acts written? Both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are addressed to a man named Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Luke refers to him as “most excellent” Theophilus, which indicates a high social status. We don’t know for sure who Theophilus was, but he was likely the patron who sponsored Luke’s writing (a very expensive endeavor). Perhaps he was also a new believer, since Luke says he is writing so that Theophilus can know the certainty of “the things he has been taught” (Luke 1:3). This may mean he has been taught the basics, but needs more training. In any case, these volumes are clearly addressed not just to Theophilus but to a larger audience. This audience was likely Christian communities facing challenges and opposition from their Jewish and Gentile neighbors. In the face of growing opposition, Luke writes to provide encouragement, confidence and a firm foundation for their Christian faith.
two

Key Themes of Acts

If you’ve ever watched a real courtroom trial or are a fan of courtroom dramas, you know that the best lawyers build their case by accumulating evidence. Connecting one fact with another, they build an airtight case for their side. Luke may be a doctor, but he writes like a lawyer, building a case for the truth of the gospel through the story he tells. If the overall purpose in Luke-Acts is the confirmation of the gospel, the sub-themes in Acts serve as evidence confirming that message. As you read Acts, keep your eyes open for the following themes.

The Purpose of God and the Fulfillment of Scripture

Luke seeks to show that Christianity (called “the Way”) is not a new religion. It is “Judaism-fulfilled”—the
fulfillment of promises made to Israel and the climax of God’s plan of salvation. Luke stresses the continuity between the old and the new in God’s plan of salvation.

The themes of promise and fulfillment permeate the narrative of Luke-Acts. From the start, Luke emphasizes that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes. As prophesied, he is a descendant of King David born in Bethlehem, who will reign forever on David’s throne (Luke 1:32–35, 69–70; 2:1–20; Acts 2:30; 13:23). Prophecy is fulfilled not only in Jesus’s birth but in a multitude of ways:

- In the ministry of John the Baptist (Luke 3:4–6), Jesus’s preaching and healing ministry (Luke 4:18–21)
- His resurrection (Acts 2:25–28)
- His ascension to God’s right hand (2:34–35)
- The pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (2:16–21)
- The persecution of the church (4:25–26)
- The rejection by many in Israel (28:26–27)
- And the mission to the Gentiles (13:47)

Jesus’s rejection and death might seem like a tragedy, but all along it was God’s purpose and plan to bring salvation to the world. In his speech on the day of Pentecost, Peter tells his fellow Jews in Jerusalem, “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23, emphasis added). Similarly, in Acts 4:27–28 we learn of the conspiracy to kill Jesus that, “They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” The seemingly tragic events of
Jesus’s arrest, trial, and crucifixion were in fact all according to God’s plan.

**The day of Pentecost** was the Old Testament festival known as the Feast of Weeks, signaling the end of the grain harvest. It was held fifty days after Passover, hence the name Pentecost, the Greek word for “fiftieth.” Christians now observe Pentecost as the birth of the church as described in Acts 2.

Further evidence of this theme is Luke’s fondness for the Greek verb *dei* (“it is necessary”) to describe God’s sovereign purpose. The suffering of the Messiah was no tragedy; it was God’s plan and a divine necessity (*dei*) to accomplish salvation for the world (see Luke 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7; 24:44; Acts 1:16; 17:3).

**The Unstoppable Progress of the Gospel**

The remarkable success in the spread of the gospel provides overwhelming evidence that this movement is the work of God—that church of God, by the Holy Spirit, will be *unstoppable*. Whenever the followers of Jesus face opposition, a supernatural breakthrough occurs. In the early chapters of Acts, the apostles are repeatedly arrested, jailed, and beaten, yet the church continues to grow. Stephen is martyred for his witness and the church is scattered; but wherever they go they proclaim the gospel. The apostle James is executed by Herod Agrippa and Peter is put in prison awaiting execution. But Peter is released by an angel and Herod dies a gruesome death as judgment from God. The same theme appears throughout Paul’s ministry. He is repeatedly beaten and imprisoned. He
suffers stoning, shipwreck, and even snakebite! Yet the gospel advances. The simple message: the gospel is unstoppable because it is the work of God.

**The Holy Spirit**

The agent behind the unstoppable gospel is the Holy Spirit, who, as noted earlier, plays a leading role in Acts. Like the conductor of a symphony, the Spirit directs the gospel as it moves forward.

1. Jesus pours out the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, confirming that he has been vindicated as Messiah and Lord at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33), fulfilling Scripture (Acts 2:16–21; Joel 2:28–32) and heralding the arrival of God’s end-time salvation. In Joel 2:28–32 and elsewhere in the prophets, the pouring out of the Spirit confirms the dawning of the new age of salvation (Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:27; 37:14; 39:29). Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 highlights this fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

2. As the sign of salvation, reception of the Spirit by individuals and groups marks entrance into the new covenant people of God (Acts 2:38; 8:15–17; 19:1–7). Though Jewish believers are shocked when the Spirit is poured out even on uncircumcised Gentiles, they cannot deny that this is the work of God (10:44–48; 11:15–17; 15:8).

3. The Spirit fills and empowers believers to speak boldly and to perform miracles (Acts 1:8; 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24, 28, etc.).

Finally, the Spirit guides and directs the progress of the gospel. We see this carried out as:

- The Spirit instructs Philip to approach the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29) and whisks him away afterwards (8:39).
- The Spirit tells Peter that Cornelius’s men are looking for him (10:19; 11:12).
- The Spirit warns of famine through the prophet Agabus (11:28) and directs the church in Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (13:2).
- Particularly significant is Acts 16:6–7, where Luke notes that Paul was “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (emphasis added).
- Just after this, the missionary group tries to enter Bithynia, “but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (emphasis added). Remarkably, the “Holy Spirit” and the “Spirit of Jesus” are equated, an implicit affirmation of Christ’s divine nature.

Miracles, Signs, and Wonders

Another important theme in Acts is the recurrence of miracles that validate the church’s message (Acts 2:43; 3:1–10; 4:16, 22, 30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:13; 9:40; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11; 20:9–10). Jesus is identified by Peter as “a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him” (2:22; cf. 10:38), and the apostles replicate these signs: healing the sick (5:15–16; 9:34; 19:12; 28:8) and the lame (3:1–10; 8:7; 14:9), casting out demons (5:16; 8:7; 19:12), and raising the dead (9:40;
Spiritual counterfeits like the sons of Sceva fail when they try to reproduce these miracles (19:13–16).

**The Good News of the Suffering Messiah**

One question raised against Christianity by its opponents was, “How can Jesus be the Messiah if he was crucified?” The Messiah was meant to be a conquering king, not an executed criminal. In response Luke repeatedly shows that Jesus’s suffering and death did not negate his claim to be Messiah. All along it was prophesied that the Messiah must suffer and die (Luke 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 4:25–26; 8:32–35; 17:3; 26:23). Nor did Jesus die as a criminal. He was the innocent and righteous Servant of the Lord (Acts 3:14–15; Isaiah 53:11). During his trial and crucifixion, Jesus is repeatedly declared “innocent” (or “righteous”): three times by Pilate (Luke 23:4, 14–15, 22), by Herod (23:15), by the criminal on the cross (23:41), and by the centurion overseeing the crucifixion (23:47).

**The Rejection of the Gospel by Many in Israel**

Another challenge Luke’s readers faced is how God’s promises can be fulfilled if so many in Israel have rejected the message. Luke responds by showing that the Jewish rejection of the gospel is not surprising, since throughout history Israel has been a stubborn and resistant people. This theme is perhaps best captured in the response to Stephen’s speech to the religious leaders:

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not
persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him.” (Acts 7:51–52)

Yet not all Israel rejects the message. Indeed, many Jews respond positively, especially in the early chapters of Acts (2:41; 4:4; 6:7; and also 21:20). These are the righteous remnant of Israel, who are faithful to God’s promises and welcome the arrival of God’s salvation. Throughout Israel’s history, there has always been a righteous remnant and an unfaithful majority.

**Salvation for All People**

Another theme to look for while reading Acts is that salvation is for *all people*. The flip side of Israel’s rejection is the influx of Gentiles into the church. Many Jews reject the message while many Gentiles are receiving it. The challenge from opponents in this case is: “How can Christianity be the fulfillment of Israel’s promises if the church is made up mostly of Gentiles?” Luke’s narrative response is that the salvation of the Gentiles is not an anomaly, since it was prophesied beforehand in Scripture (Luke 2:32; 3:6; Acts 10:34–35; 13:46–47; 15:16–18). Furthermore, God himself initiated the Gentile mission (Acts 10:15, 34–35, 45–47; 11:12, 15–17; 15:7–11). For this reason Gentiles should be accepted into the people of God by faith alone, without being required to adopt Jewish practices (15:11–19). Luke also spends much of his narrative defending the apostle Paul, the “apostle to the Gentiles.” Paul is not a renegade Jew, as some have claimed, seeking to undermine the traditions of Judaism. Rather, he is faithful to the traditions of his ancestors (13:32–33; 22:3, 14; 24:14; 26:6; 28:17), fulfilling God’s call to Israel to be a light for the Gentiles (13:47).
love maps. I always have. I have a poor sense of direction and so early on I learned to read maps well. And now that most of us have GPSs on our phones or in our cars, I have to say I really miss maps. A GPS tells you when and where to turn, but a map shows you the big picture. You can see where you are and where you need to go. It provides perspective and orientation in a disorienting world.

The book of Acts functions like a roadmap for the progress of the gospel. The spread of the good news begins in Jerusalem as the resurrected Jesus ascends to heaven and then pours out the Holy
Spirit to guide and empower his followers. Though the disciples face persecution and stiff opposition in Jerusalem, thousands of Jews believe the message and respond. When persecution results in the scattering of the believers, they take the message wherever they go, first to Judea and Samaria, and then beyond to the Gentile world—the ends of the earth. Below we will summarize each stage in this great movement.

**GEOGRAPHICAL MOVEMENT 1**

**The Gospel to Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)**

In chapter one of this booklet we learned that Acts contains two distinct movements: a geographical movement and an ethnic (people) movement. Here we see how the geographical movement occurring in Acts 1–7 reinforces a few of the themes we just read about in chapter two. The growth and expansion of the church is unstoppable. It will be the work of the Holy Spirit, not any human power or plan.

Acts begins with an account of Jesus’s ascension (Acts 1:1–11), already briefly described at the end of Luke’s gospel (Luke 24:50–53). Here we learn that Jesus remained with the disciples for forty days before ascending to heaven, teaching them about the kingdom of God. He also instructed them to remain in Jerusalem until they were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

After the ascension, the apostles choose a replacement for Judas (1:12–26). The purpose here seems to be to restore the number of apostles to twelve, representing the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Luke 22:29–30). Their role as the restored people
of Israel is to be a light of revelation to the Gentiles (see Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47).

The events on the day of Pentecost support Luke’s theological purposes in various ways: (1) As the fulfillment of Scripture (Joel 2:28–30), the pouring out of the Spirit means that God’s final (eschatological) salvation has arrived and Jesus’s followers are its recipients. (2) That Jesus pours out the Spirit confirms that he has been vindicated at his resurrection and ascension and is now enthroned as Lord and Messiah at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:29–36). (3) Jesus’s resurrection also demonstrates God’s sovereignty over human history. Though wicked people put Jesus to death, this was all part of God’s plan to provide salvation for the world (2:23–24).

\[ \text{Eschatology is the study of the end of things—the culmination of God’s plan in history.} \]

The episodes that follow Pentecost reveal four key characteristics of the Jerusalem church: **Remarkable Growth.** Three thousand people respond to Peter’s preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:47). This explosive growth continues in the episodes that follow. By Acts 4:4, there are more than five thousand believers! Several statements of numerical growth follow (5:14; 6:1, 7; 9:31). This extraordinary success in Jerusalem is part of Luke’s confirmation of the presence and power of God behind this movement. It also confirms that Luke does not view the mission to the Jews as a failure. A remnant of Israel is being saved even if the majority rejects the message.
By itself, rapid growth is not a sign of success or of the movement’s genuineness. But the timing of this explosive growth was specifically matched by the Holy Spirit to reach people from all over the Roman empire who were in Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost.

Unity in Community. In several summaries, Luke points to the unity and generosity of Jerusalem church (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37). The community represents a new spiritual family, which cares deeply for its own. This is seen in the sharing of possessions (2:44; 4:32), the meeting of needs (2:45; 4:34–37), the generosity of Barnabas (4:36–37), and the selection of a committee of seven to meet the needs of the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jewish believers (6:1–7). This kind of unity is shockingly countercultural to the Greco-Roman world, where ethnic and socioeconomic differences are extreme. It is clear that the Holy Spirit is at work creating unity and fellowship.

Power and Authority. A third characteristic of the Jerusalem church is the supernatural authority demonstrated by the apostles in preaching and in miracles (Acts 2:33; 2:43; 3:1–10; 4:16, 22, 30; 5:12, 15–16; 6:8). This authority recalls Jesus’s ministry (Luke 4:32, 36) and reminds the reader that the apostles are Christ’s representatives, continuing what “Jesus began to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1). The authority of the apostles provokes awe among the Jerusalem populace (2:43) and astonishment from the religious leaders (4:13). Similar fear and awe are seen in the account of Ananias and Sapphira, who are judged
by God for lying to the Holy Spirit (5:11–16). God radically judges sin to maintain purity in his church.

**Boldness amid Persecution.** A fourth characteristic of the Jerusalem church is its joy and boldness despite increasing persecution. After healing a lame man, Peter and John are arrested and warned to stop preaching about Jesus (Acts 3:1–4:22). Later, all twelve apostles are arrested, delivered from jail by an angel, rearrested, beaten, and released (5:17–42). Despite these trials, the apostles boldly challenge the religious leaders for rejecting their own Messiah (4:10; 5:30; cf. 2:23; 3:13–19) and assert, “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (5:29; cf. 4:20). After being flogged, the apostles leave “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (5:41). The church grows stronger through suffering, confirming that God is empowering this movement.

Persecution intensifies until it results in the execution of Stephen (Acts 6:8–8:1). Stephen, one of the committee of seven (6:1–7), begins preaching and performing miracles among the Hellenistic-Jewish synagogues in Jerusalem. He is seized and charged with blasphemy, accused of speaking against the temple and the Law of Moses (6:8–15). In making his defense, Stephen gives the longest speech in Acts, a summary of the history of Israel that demonstrates how the nation has continually rejected God’s messengers (7:1–53). In the climax of the speech, Stephen points out that Israel has always persecuted the prophets, even killing those who predicted the coming of “the Righteous One,” the Messiah. And “now you have betrayed and murdered him” (7:52).
Furious at this accusation, the crowd drags Stephen out of the city and stones him to death (7:54–60).

**GEOGRAPHICAL MOVEMENT 2**

**The Gospel to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12)**

After the stoning of Stephen, “a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). This dispersion marks the beginning of the second major geographical division of the book: the gospel to Judea and Samaria (and Syria). Though a tragic injustice, the stoning of Stephen and the scattering of the believers has a positive result, forcing the gospel out of its Jerusalem enclave.

**Philip’s ministry to Samaria and to an Ethiopian** (Acts 8). One of those forced to flee Jerusalem is Philip, who heads north and preaches the gospel with great success in Samaria. The evangelism of the Samaritans can be viewed as a transitional step for the gospel’s advance from Jews to Gentiles. The Jews viewed Samaritans as half-breeds, descendants of Israelis who had intermarried with Gentiles and were now practicing a corrupt version of Judaism (2 Kings 17:24–41; Ezra 4; Nehemiah 6; John 4:9). Animosity and violence characterize the history between these two related people groups. This may explain the surprising fact that the Holy Spirit does not immediately come upon the Samaritans when they believe, delaying until Peter and John arrive from Jerusalem. The likely reason for this delay is to emphatically connect the Samaritan believers to the Jerusalem church. In light of the bad blood between Jews and Samaritans, the
Holy Spirit makes it clear to both the Samaritans and the Jerusalem believers that there is to be only one church—the unified body of Christ.

**Ezra and Nehemiah** record the history of the exiles from Judah who returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon. The Assyrians who captured the northern kingdom of Israel had populated the region surrounding Judah with Gentiles who intermarried with Israelites. The northern kingdom’s capital was Samaria, hence, they became known as Samaritans. Many of the local residents harassing the returning exiles were Samaritans.

The conversion of an Ethiopian court official (Acts 8:26–40) can also be seen as an intermediate step between Jews and Gentiles. He is evidently a “God-fearer,” a Gentile who believes in the one true God of Israel. Philip meets him in the desert as he is returning from a visit to Jerusalem and leads him to Christ by explaining the meaning of the text he is reading—Isaiah 53:7–8. This passage, which depicts the Messiah as the suffering servant, reinforces two of the themes we looked at in chapter two: that the Messiah’s suffering was good news, and that it was the purpose of God and the fulfillment of Scripture.

**The Conversion of Saul/Paul** (Acts 9:1–31). Another key transition to the Gentile mission is the dramatic conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Saul is first mentioned at the stoning of Stephen as one who supported the execution (7:58; 8:1). Saul subsequently launches his own crusade against the Christians, eventually heading to Damascus in Syria to arrest and imprison Christians there. On the way, however, he has a dramatic
encounter with the risen Jesus, who calls him into his service. Saul’s life is turned upside down as the great persecutor of the church becomes its greatest advocate. Luke repeats the account three times in Acts—first the episode itself (9:1–19) and then twice as retold by Paul (22:1–21; 26:1–29). His intentional repetition is a strong indicator of the story’s importance.

Throughout the rest of Acts, Luke focuses on Paul and his missionary journeys (chs. 13–28). By using his story to defend the gospel’s expansion to the Gentiles he demonstrates that this apostle to the Gentiles is not a renegade Jew. God himself called and appointed him.

**The Conversion of Cornelius** (Acts 10:1–11:18). The conversion of the God-fearing Roman centurion Cornelius is another key transition in Acts, as the Holy Spirit confirms that Gentiles and Jews alike are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. The emphasis throughout the story is that the mission to the Gentiles was initiated by God himself, not by any human initiative (Acts 10:28, 44–47; 11:15–17; cf. 15:7–11). Again, repetition demonstrates this theme’s importance, as the event is narrated in detail (10:1–48) and then summarized in Peter’s report to the Jerusalem church (11:4–17).

**The Church in Antioch** (Acts 11:19–30). Luke here describes the founding of the church in Antioch, a church that will become the launching point for Paul’s outreach to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1–4; 15:40; 18:23). Much of this episode is a flashback, picking up from the dispersion of believers in 8:1 (11:19). We now learn that the first Gentile conversions occurred in Antioch, long before Peter’s visit to Cornelius, and that Barnabas and Saul played a key role in launching this church.
Luke probably reversed the order chronologically to highlight Peter’s critical role in the mission to the Gentiles. As the spokesperson and leader among the twelve apostles, Peter’s testimony carried great weight, especially among conservative Jewish Christians.

**GEOGRAPHICAL MOVEMENT 3**

**The Gospel to the Ends of the Earth (Acts 13–28): The Journeys of Paul**

The third major geographical section of Acts—and by far the longest—concerns the three missionary journeys of Paul and his arrest and journey to Rome. Luke’s primary purposes in spending so much time on Paul are to show that: (1) Paul is not a traitor to his Jewish religion, but is faithful to his Jewish heritage through his allegiance to Jesus, the Jewish Messiah; (2) the Gentile mission was all along part of God’s plan for Israel and was initiated by God himself, not by any human being; and (3) Christians are good citizens and are no threat to Roman authority.

**First Journey: The Gospel to Cyprus and Galatia** *(Acts 13:1–14:20)*. It is the Holy Spirit who calls for the first missionary journey *(Acts 13:2)*. This is God’s plan, not Paul’s! The missionaries—Paul and Barnabas (and their assistant John Mark, who shortly returns to Jerusalem)—first travel to the island of Cyprus, Barnabas’s home island *(4:36)*, and then north into Galatia, where they establish churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe *(13:4–14:20)*. Paul’s message in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch *(13:13–52)* is particularly important, illustrating the kind of message Paul brought to Jews and God-fearing
Gentiles in the synagogue. He traces God’s covenants with Israel from the patriarchs to the coming of the Messiah. The passage also establishes a pattern of response by Jews and Gentiles. After an initial positive response, most of the Jews reject the message (13:44–45) and Paul turns to the Gentiles (13:46–48). This pattern will be repeated throughout Acts. While a remnant of Jews respond favorably, the majority reject the gospel, and many Gentiles accept it.

After returning to appoint elders in the churches they have established, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch, reporting success: God has “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27).

The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–35). After their return, a crisis occurs in the church at Antioch. Some Jewish Christians come from Jerusalem claiming, “Unless you are circumcised, according to custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). This question of whether Gentiles need to become Jews in order to be saved was one of the most challenging issues facing the early church. In what has been called the “Council of Jerusalem,” the leaders conclude that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised or keep Israel’s ritual laws to be saved, since both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith alone. At the same time, they encourage Gentile Christians to abstain from certain practices highly offensive to Jews (15:19–21, 28–29).

Second Journey: The Gospel to Macedonia and Achaia (Acts 15:36–18:22). The second missionary journey begins when Paul suggests that he and Barnabas return and encourage the churches started in Galatia. Yet a conflict arises over whether or not to take John Mark, who had deserted them on the
first journey (Acts 13:13). When they cannot resolve the issue, Barnabas and John Mark sail for Cyprus and Paul chooses a new partner, Silas, and heads back to Galatia.

While encouraging the churches in Galatia, Paul and Silas pick up a promising new disciple named Timothy in Lystra. Timothy will become one of Paul’s most faithful and trustworthy associates (see Philippians 2:19–22). Paul’s plan is to head west into the Roman province of Asia, but through a vision God redirects them to cross the Aegean Sea into Macedonia (northern Greece). There they establish churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. From Macedonia, Paul heads south into Achaia (southern Greece). In Athens he delivers his famous Mars Hill address before the Greek philosophers of the Areopagus. While Paul’s sermon in Antioch Pisidia (Acts 13:13–41) was a good example of his preaching to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, his address on Mars Hill illustrates how he shared the gospel in language the pagan Gentiles easily understood. Paul then moves on to Corinth, where he spends eighteen months establishing the church. Finally, he returns to Jerusalem and Antioch (18:22).

Third Journey: The Gospel to Asia Minor (Acts 18:23–21:16). Paul had stopped briefly in Ephesus in Asia Minor while returning from his second journey, leaving his associates Priscilla and Aquila there to start the church (Acts 18:18–21). Now he returns to Ephesus and ministers there for about three years, strategically using the city as a base of operations to evangelize the rest of Asia Minor (19:10). The seven churches of Revelation (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea) and the churches at
Hierapolis and Colossae (started by Epaphras, one of Paul’s disciples; Colossians 1:7) were likely established during this period. Luke’s account of Paul’s time in Ephesus focuses especially on the theme of spiritual warfare and the gospel’s triumph over popular magic (see Acts 19:11–20; cf. Ephesians 6:12).

**Fourth Journey: The Gospel to Rome** (Acts 21:17–28:31). After three years in Ephesus Paul returns to Jerusalem, despite various prophecies about the dangers that await him there (Acts 20:23; 21:10–11). From his letters written about this time, we know Paul was also carrying a collection of money from his Gentile churches for the poor and persecuted Jerusalem Christians (Romans 15:25–31; 1 Corinthians 16:1–3; 2 Corinthians 8–9; cf. Acts 24:17). Seeking to mend fences with some Jewish Christians who are skeptical of his Gentile ministry, Paul follows James’s counsel and financially supports several men fulfilling a Jewish vow. Yet while Paul is in the temple finishing this task, some of his Jewish opponents from Ephesus recognize him and falsely accuse him of bringing Gentiles into the inner temple courts, a violation punishable by death. A riot ensues and Roman troops move in, seizing Paul and putting him under protective custody (Acts 21:17–22:29).

After appearing before the Jewish Sanhedrin, Paul is transferred by the Romans to Caesarea Maritima, the Roman headquarters on the Mediterranean coast (Acts 22:30–23:35). He remains in custody there for two years, appearing before two Roman governors, Felix and Festus, and before the Jewish king Agrippa I (24:1–26:32). In all three cases, Paul’s defense becomes an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus (cf. 9:15). Finally,
hoping to please the Jewish leaders, Festus decides to send Paul back to Jerusalem for trial. Knowing that he would likely be executed there, Paul appeals to Caesar in Rome, the right of every Roman citizen (25:10–11). Paul had hoped to go to Rome years earlier to preach the gospel (Romans 1:10–13; 15:23–24). Now he will get his chance.

Luke’s dramatic description of Paul’s sea voyage to Rome is a remarkably detailed nautical account, including a harrowing storm, shipwreck, and even snakebite (Acts 27:1–28:16). Luke clearly loved the drama of sea travel. The main theological theme of the account is God’s providence. Despite fierce opposition and danger, God is in charge and the gospel moves relentlessly toward its goal of reaching the ends of the earth.

Acts concludes with a description of Paul’s arrival in Rome and his two-year house arrest there (Acts 28:11–31). As the capital of the Roman empire, Rome is a key symbolic goal for the church’s mission to reach the “ends of the earth” (1:8). Luke ends with three of his central themes: (1) Israel is divided. When Paul meets with the Jews in Rome, some accept the gospel but the majority reject it (28:17–27). (2) The Gentiles accept the message. In response, Paul says, “Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (28:28). (3) The gospel relentlessly advances. Luke concludes that Paul, under house arrest, “proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” (28:30–31). The gospel messenger may be in chains, but the gospel message is not. God’s work rolls forward.
Conclusion: The Revolution Continues

We have pointed out that if the Gospel of Luke is “The Story of Jesus, Part One,” then Acts is “The Story of Jesus, Part Two.” While the Gospel tells how Jesus accomplished our salvation through his life, death, resurrection and ascension, the book of Acts tells what Jesus continued to do through his church. Jesus’s followers (his “witnesses”)—filled, empowered, and guided by the Holy Spirit—took the message of salvation from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and all the way to Rome. The theme of Acts is the unstoppable progress of the gospel. The gospel is unstoppable because it is the
work of God—the fulfillment of his promises to bring salvation to all people everywhere. The gospel that began in Judaism was the fulfillment of the covenant God made with Abraham to bless all nations through his descendants (Genesis 12:1–3). The church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, is now the instrument of these blessings.

The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, boldly and fearlessly continuing to preach the gospel. Yet this is by no means the end of the Story. While relentlessly moving forward, the gospel has not yet reached “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Although Part One and Part Two of the story of Jesus have been written, Part Three is being written today. You and I, and all those who confess Jesus as Lord, are commissioned to finish the task. Like our spiritual ancestors before us, we are Jesus’s witnesses—filled, empowered, and guided by the Spirit of God. Our task is to carry forward the Revolution, to take the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth. Let’s write the rest of the Story! 🎈
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