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Lesson 1

Background of Acts

Before analyzing the text of any book of the Bible, it is well to learn the historical background. Also, it is best to take a “skyscraper” view of its general contents. Accordingly, this first lesson is divided into two parts: background and survey.

I. BACKGROUND

At the very outset of our study these are some of the questions that come to mind: Who wrote the book? When did he write it? What was his main object? What is the historical setting? How does the book serve a particular function in the entire Bible? The answers to these and other questions are given briefly below.

A. Name

The short name usually assigned the book is “Acts.” The full name “Acts of the Apostles” is traceable back to the second century. When the book was originally written, its author, Luke, probably combined it with his earlier writing, the gospel of Luke. Then when his gospel was joined to the other three gospels, Acts stood alone. Here are some observations.

1. The key word in the longer title is *Acts*. These are not the dreams, theories, or speculations of the apostles, but their acts, their deeds, things they actually accomplished. Anyone who denies the divine power manifested in the early church must deny the factuality of the acts of this book.

2. The phrase “of the apostles” probably refers to the main apostles of the years of the book’s record. Of these apostles, Peter and Paul were the key leaders.

3. It is recognized that the book records the acts of the Holy Spirit as He worked through the apostles. In that sense the book

could be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's name appears about seventy times in the book.

B. Author

Luke is the author (cf. Acts 1:1 with Luke 1:1-4). He was a Gentile about the same age as Paul and was his constant companion for about the last twenty years of Paul's life. Paul probably led Luke to the Lord. Luke was a gifted scholar and physician, and from his Christian life shined forth such admirable traits as kindness, loyalty, faith, and exuberance. New Testament references to him (outside of Acts) are Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11. Read these.

C. Date Written

Luke apparently finished writing Acts around A.D. 61 while Paul was still imprisoned in Rome (Acts 28). The Holy Spirit's design was not to include any more of Paul's life or of the church's experience in this book, so He inspired Luke to write at this time.

D. Period Covered

The time span of Acts is about thirty-one years. The narrative begins with Jesus' ascension (A.D. 30) and closes with Paul in prison (A.D. 61). It would be interesting to compare the church's succeeding generations with the one of Acts, as to the advance made in the propagation of the gospel. Some of the later epistles and Revelation 2-3 furnish descriptions for such a comparison.

E. Geographical Centers

The mission assigned to the early church, spelled out in Acts 1:8, was universal. The performance of that mission in the years of Acts retained the universal quality, for the home base of the missionaries kept moving. The advance was generally from east to west: Jerusalem to Antioch (Syria) to Ephesus to Rome. Of the four cities, Acts records the most details in connection with Jerusalem and Antioch.

II. SURVEY

"Image the whole, then execute the parts." This is the correct order in Bible study. We should first get an overview of the book

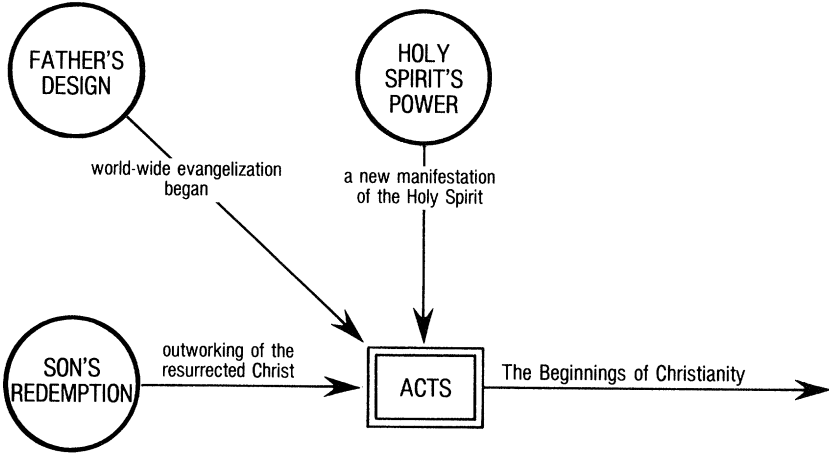
in its large scope, and then study the smaller parts in detail. For the purposes of this short study guide, the following descriptions bring out the highlights of a survey of Acts.

A. The Principal Subject of Acts

Acts is basically a history of the beginnings of Christianity. How significant were those beginnings! The active role of the three Persons of the Godhead¹ at this great period of world history, is indicated in Chart B.

THE ROLE OF THE THREE PERSONS OF THE GODHEAD

Chart B



The principal subject of Acts may be identified in other ways. Some of the various titles that could be assigned the book are:

- The witness of the gospel
- The living Lord in action (In Acts Christ *continues* to do what He *began* to do in the gospels. Cf. Acts 1:1)
- The advent and activity of the Holy Spirit
- The early church in action

Keep the above mentioned principal subjects in mind as you proceed from chapter to chapter in Acts.

1. When a generalization is made concerning the prominent functions of the three Persons of the Godhead during the years of Bible history, it may be said that the Father is most prominent in the Old Testament, the Son in the gospels, and the Holy Spirit in Acts.

B. Place in the Bible

Acts is the sequel to the gospels that precede it and the background to the epistles that follow it. It is the historical record that attests the success of Jesus' earthly ministry by showing how the risen Lord works in the present age in the hearts of men. The explanations and interpretations of the tremendous events of Acts are given in the epistles. Thus it is obvious how important a place Acts fills in the New Testament.

C. A Key Verse

The verse most frequently recognized as the key verse of Acts is 1:8: "But you shall be filled with power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (*Good News for Modern Man*).

The words in the middle of this verse "You will be witnesses for me" are both a command and a prophecy. It will be seen in connection with survey Chart C how the church extended its witness in the geographical directions of 1:8.

D. A Key Word

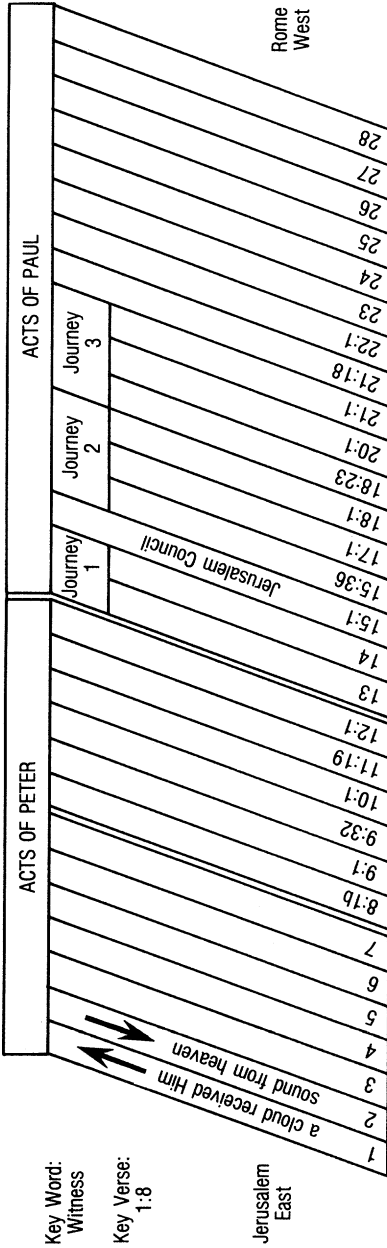
A key word of Acts is "witness," appearing in its various forms about twenty times.

E. Structure

Survey readings of Acts reveal, among other things, the large movements of the book and the major emphases. When all this data is in and worked over, the structure of the book begins to take shape. One way to show this organization is by means of a survey chart. Before you study survey Chart C you should make at least one cursory reading of Acts, observing the highlights and recording a chapter title for each segment shown. Try to choose your chapter titles from the text itself (see examples for chaps. 1 and 2). This will help you develop an awareness of key words and phrases, which are vital tools in Bible study. (Note: Although most of the chapters of Acts are study units beginning with the first verse of those chapters, some segments begin at verses other than the first verse, depending on the narrative. Follow the divisions shown on Chart C). You may choose to make your own survey chart before referring to Chart C.

Chart C

ACTS THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY



Key Word: Witness

Key Verse: 1:8

Jerusalem East

Rome West

1.	Jerusalem	Judea and Samaria	Uttermost Parts
2.	Church Established	Church Scattered	Church Extended
3.	Jewish Period	Transition	Gentile Period
	Church Is Born	Church Is Scattered	Church Extends Overseas
	Church Grows Through Testing	Church Embraces Gentiles	Church's Leader on Trial
	Paul in Acts ↑	Saved	Missionary at Liberty
	Persecutor	Instructed	Missionary in Bonds

• **Observations on Chart C**

1. The twenty-eight chapters of Acts fall into three main divisions, with dividing points at 8:1*b* and 13:1. Note the three outlines (1, 2, and 3 on the left side of the chart), which demonstrate this threefold organization. The geographical outline is a natural unfolding of 1:8. The outline on the church shows a progression of the church in the Acts narrative. Read 8:1*b* and 13:1-4 to see how the new divisions begin at those points.

2. Acts can also be divided into two main parts from the standpoint of main characters (see top of Chart C). In chapters 1-12, Peter plays the leading role, whereas in chapters 13-28 everything centers on Paul's activities.

3. Note the divisions related to Jew and Gentile. In the early chapters of Acts, the Jews compose most of the audience of the gospel. In chapters 10-12 the church sees its responsibility to extend the invitation of the gospel to Gentiles as well. From chapter 13 on, the field is the world. The prominent note of Peter's message, delivered to Jews, was "repent" (see 2:36-38). Paul, whose ministry enlarged to include Gentiles (cf. 18:6), emphasized more the positive aspect of conversion, "believe" (see 16:30-31).

4. Paul as a missionary served well when at liberty (13:1-21:17) and remained loyal when in bonds (21:18-28:31). In both situations God's word multiplied, and souls were saved.

As you conclude your study of this first lesson, ponder over the key verse 1:8: "You will be witnesses for me." In that one word "witness" is condensed the whole wisdom of God as to the worldwide work that He would have His people accomplish in this age. We are to be witnesses unto Him; we are to bring the gospel ("glad tidings") to every creature.

Think of the need for witnessing. Someone has said, "Christ alone can save the world, but Christ cannot save the world alone." That is, Christ cannot do this unless He abandons His plan, for His plan is that every believer should be a witness.

Ask yourself the following questions: Is my life a witness for Christ? If not, why not? If I have no witness for Christ, what am I witnessing to? "Of the abundance of the heart... [the] mouth speaketh" (Luke 6:45). "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38). If I have no witness, have I any experience? If there be no stream, is there any spring? If no ray, is there any light?

These are serious and searching questions, which every believer should ponder. "He who has no passion to convert, needs conversion." "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10, *Good News for Modern Man*).

Lesson 2

Acts 1:1-26

Witnesses for Jesus

The setting of Acts chapter 1 is vividly set forth in the book's opening paragraph of verses 1-5. Jesus had accomplished many things in His earthly ministry, which included His atoning death and postresurrection appearances. Now, at the end of forty days of such appearances, He stood before His closest disciples and gave them His parting orders. This was the hour for Him to return bodily to heaven while the disciples were to prepare to move out to the far corners of the earth with the message of the risen Lord.

● **Paragraph Divisions** Read the chapter paragraph by paragraph. New paragraphs begin at verses 1, 6, 12, 15, 23. If this segment is analyzed in two units, those units would be verses 1-14 and 15-26.

● **Observations and Questions**

1. Who are the speakers in the second paragraph (vv. 6-11)?

2. Compare the question about the kingdom (v. 6) with the reference of 3b.

3. Make a study of promise (v. 4), power (v. 8) and prayer (v. 14).

4. How does the phrase “witness with us” (v. 22) relate the narrative of 1:15-26 to the previous paragraphs?

5. Who are the principal persons of verses 1-14?

Of verses 15-26?

6. What is the main point of chapter 1?

7. What is taught about Christ in this chapter?

About the Holy Spirit?

Is there any reference to the Father?

• **Applications**

1. List an example to follow:

2. Sin to avoid:

3. Command to obey:

4. Promise to claim:

5. Prayer to echo:

• **A Topical Study:** THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST.¹

This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner (1:1).

The second coming of Christ is said to be mentioned 318 times in the 260 chapters of the New Testament, or once for every 25 verses. Paul preached much about Christ's return and frequently mentioned the subject in his epistles (e.g., 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:16-17; 5:1-4, 23). God bids us comfort one another with the reminder of the second coming of Christ (1 Thess. 4:18 context). This doctrine is not given the prominence in the church today that it received from Christ and the apostles. Paul emphasized three great truths concerning Christ:

(1) His death, (2) His resurrection, and (3) His coming again. These are His past, His present, and His future work for man. As Christians we need to look up for His return, and we also need to proclaim this promised event.

I. THE FACT OF CHRIST'S COMING

Why does a Christian believe that Christ is literally coming again? Because:

1. Jesus Himself said He would return (John 14:3).
2. The angels said He would (Acts 1:11), and they were not mistaken when they announced His first coming (Luke 1:30-33; Matt. 1:20-22).
3. The Holy Spirit, by the mouth of the apostles, repeatedly said He would (1 Thess. 4:16; Heb. 9:28; 10:37).
4. God, through the mouth of the prophets in the Old Testament said He would (Zech. 14:1, 3-4; Mal. 4:1-2).

II. THE MANNER OF CHRIST'S COMING

Christ's coming will be

1. personal, "the Lord himself" (1 Thess. 4:16).
2. bodily, "this same Jesus . . . in like manner" (Acts 1:11). Jesus went away with a real body, flesh and bones. He now sits at the right hand of God, ministering as our High Priest until the day when He will return for the church.
3. visibly, "every eye shall see him" (Rev. 1:7; cf. 1 John 3:2).

1. Recommended reading on this subject: René Pache, *The Return of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1955) and William K. Harrison, *Hope Triumphant* (Chicago: Moody, 1966).

4. suddenly, “as . . . lightning” (Matt. 24:27).
5. unexpectedly (Matt. 24:44, 37-39; Mark 13:35-36).
6. triumphantly (2 Thess. 1:7-10; Rev. 19:11-16).

III. THE OBJECT OF CHRIST’S COMING

Christ will come in order

1. to receive His own unto Himself—a phase of His coming called the rapture (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-53).
2. to reward His servants (Matt. 16:27; Luke 19:11-27; 1 Cor. 9:25; 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Peter 5:4; Rev. 3:21).
3. to judge and reign—a phase of Christ’s second coming subsequent to the rapture (Rom. 14:12; 1 Cor. 3:13-15; 15:24-26; Matt. 25:32, 46; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; Jude 14-15; Zech. 14).

IV. THE TIME OF CHRIST’S COMING

The exact time of Christ’s coming is not revealed (Matt. 24:36, 42; Mark 13:32; 1 Thess. 5:1-2). It has been hidden from us, with divine purpose. This makes the command of daily faithfulness a real test.

V. THE APPEAL TO CHRISTIANS IN VIEW OF CHRIST’S COMING

Make your own outline on the basis of these verses:

1. 1 Thessalonians 4:14

2. Matthew 6:10; Revelation 22:20

3. 2 Timothy 4:8

4. 2 Timothy 4:1-2; Matthew 25:14-30; 28:18-20

5. Mark 13:35; Romans 8:19, 23; 1 Thessalonians 5:6; Titus 2:13

6. 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 3:5

7. 2 Peter 3:3-4

8. Philippians 3:20; 1 John 3:1-3

9. 1 John 2:28

• ***A Final Thought***

As you conclude this lesson, bring together these two statements in your thinking and ponder their urgency:

This Jesus . . . will come back.
You will be witnesses for me.²

2. Acts 1:11 and 1:8 (*Good News for Modern Man*).