

The Book of Acts

Lesson 2

Structure and Content

Lesson Guide



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or manuscript versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Preparation

- Read the book of Acts

Notes

I. Introduction (0:18)

II. Rhetorical Strategy (1:21)

A. Stated Purpose (2:22)

1. Historical Account (3:18)

Luke had a concern with writing a true historical account (Luke 1:1-3):

- referred to things that have been fulfilled among us
- consulted eyewitnesses
- carefully investigated details
- wrote an orderly account

Luke intended his two-volume work to provide a true historical record, beginning with the life of Jesus and continuing with the first-century church.

He understood that God reveals himself in real history, in space and time, and he works through history to bring about his salvation and judgment.

Critical theologians often read about supernatural acts of God in Scripture as expressions of nonfactual religious sentiments.

Luke wrote in a way that made it easy to verify or disprove his claims and located his accounts within well-known historical contexts:

- 5:34 – Gamaliel
- 18:12 – Gallio
- 23:26 – Felix
- 24:27 – Festus

Mentioning historical figures by name made it possible for his readers to examine his research independently.

Scholars have proven Luke to be a reliable historian:

- Acts 27:21-26 – Luke described Paul’s actions onboard a ship in ways that have been confirmed by historical research.

- Acts 28:7 – Luke reflected knowledge of historical terminology.

God's eternal truth is not detached from the realities of life — salvation comes in and through real history.

2. **Gospel Message (10:31)**

Luke wanted his readers to adopt certain perspectives on the theological significance of historical events he reported in the book of Acts.

He wrote to assure Theophilus that the true church includes both Jews and Gentiles and that Jesus is the true, risen Savior of them all.

Luke viewed the world and all of history through the lens of Christ's lordship and kingdom.

B. Reliance on Authority (13:58)

Luke asserted historical and theological truths based on the authority of Christ and his apostles.

1. Words (15:51)

Luke recorded the testimony of the Lord's chosen eyewitnesses.

The most prominent way Luke presented authoritative words was by recording speeches.

Luke relied on speeches as an appeal to the authority of the apostles.

The speeches in Acts:

- Tell us who the early church leaders were and what they thought.
- Show us why the disciples were willing to suffer for the sake of Christ.
- Bear witness to the apostles' service to Christ.
- Record the apostles' instructions for building his kingdom.
- Authorize Luke's perspectives on the history of the early church.

We have confidence in the veracity of the speeches in Acts because the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write an infallible and authoritative history.

The speeches are accurate representations of real speeches because they have:

- distinctive styles – Luke was more concerned with writing what the speakers actually said than he was with modifying their speeches.
- independent contexts – The speeches in Acts address the people and situations that Luke described (Acts 4, 13, 17).
- speakers' individuality – Each speaker displays individual characteristics (Acts 20).

2. Deeds (24:38)

The Holy Spirit empowered the apostles in miraculous ways that validated their gospel message (13:7-12).

Luke recorded authoritative words and deeds to persuade his readers of the truth of his accounts.

C. Structural Patterns (26:48)

1. Summary Statements (27:04)

Luke made many authorial comments (explicit comments by an author on what takes place in their accounts) throughout Acts.

Luke commented on the gospel's progression in six summary statements:

- Jerusalem
- Judea and Samaria
- Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch
- Cyprus, Pamphylia and Galatia
- Asia, Macedonia and Achaia
- Jerusalem to Rome

Luke provided summary statements to highlight the stages of the success of the gospel and the growth of the church (Acts 5:42; 28:30-31).

2. Church Growth (31:48)

Luke regularly mentioned two pairs of dynamic forces.

Within the church:

- internal growth – the positive effects of the gospel within the Christian community
- tension – problems, questions, controversies and struggles that occurred within the church

Internal growth led to tension, and tension led to internal growth.

Outside the church:

- external growth – numerical growth of the church by adding new members
- opposition – conflict between the church and the unbelieving world

External growth led to opposition, and opposition led to external growth.

Luke demonstrated the reciprocal relationship between these forces:

- internal growth and tension yield external growth and opposition
- external growth and opposition cause internal growth and tension

Every major section of the book of Acts depicts the growth of the gospel as it spread through the witness of the early church.

III. Content (35:16)

Luke's two-volume work explains how Jesus brought and began to build God's earthly kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel.

In Acts, Luke described how Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit to empower the apostles and the church to continue his kingdom-building work.

Jesus instructed the apostles to proclaim the gospel first in Jerusalem and then to the rest of the world (Acts 1:8).

A. Jerusalem, Acts 1:1–8:4 (38:08)

Jerusalem was the capital city of ancient Israel, God's special nation in the Old Testament, and was central in Jesus' ministry.

Luke reported the growth of the kingdom through the gospel in Jerusalem in four narratives:

- outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 1, 2)
- Peter's temple sermon (Acts 3, 4)
- Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5)
- selection of deacons (Acts 6:1–8:4)

Internal growth:

- apostles' commission (Acts 1)
- outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2)
- miracles in Jerusalem (Acts 3–5)

Tension:

- twelfth apostle (Acts 1)
- Ananias and Sapphira's lie (Acts 5)
- discrimination against Hellenistic widows (Acts 6)

External growth:

- 3,000 people added on Pentecost (Acts 2)
- grew to 5,000 when John and Peter jailed (Acts 4)
- many Jewish priests added (Acts 6)

Opposition:

- arrest and beating of Peter and John (Acts 5)
- martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7)
- scattering by persecution (Acts 8)

B. Judea and Samaria, Acts 8:5–11:18 (42:56)

Luke's focus on the general area of Judea and Samaria can be divided into four main stories:

- ministry of Philip (8:5-40)
- conversion of Paul (9:1-31)
- Peter's ministry in Lydda and Joppa (9:32-43)
- Peter's ministry in Caesarea (10:1–11:18)

Internal growth:

- new believers filled with the Holy Spirit (8)
- Saul made an apostle (9)
- Gentile believers received the Holy Spirit (10)

Tension:

- Questions about the Holy Spirit (Acts 8)
- Simon the magician (Acts 8)
- Jews hesitated to receive Gentiles (11)

External growth:

- Phillip's evangelistic ministry (8)
- conversion of Saul (9)
- conversion of Cornelius (10)

Opposition

- persecuted believers (9)
- attempt to assassinate Saul (9)

C. Ends of Earth, 11:19–28:31 (45:45)

1. Phoenicia, Cyprus, Syrian Antioch, 11:19–12:25 (45:56)

First significant spread of the gospel beyond Judea and Samaria.

- expansion of the gospel to Syrian Antioch (11:19-30)
- Peter's deliverance from prison (12:1-25)

Internal growth:

- Barnabas and Saul taught new believers (11)
- Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison (12)

Tension:

- spread the word only among Jews (11)
- believers doubted Peter's release (12)

External growth:

- ministry of Barnabas (11)

Opposition:

- death of James (12)
- imprisonment of Peter (12)

2. **Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Galatia, 13:1–15:35 (49:26)**

The gospel stretched into eastern portions of Asia Minor.

- Paul's first missionary journey (13:1–14:28)
- council in Jerusalem (15:1-35)

Internal growth:

- strengthening of the churches (14)
- Jerusalem council (15)

Tension:

- circumcision and diet (15)

External growth:

- first missionary journey (14)

Opposition:

- rejected by unbelievers (14)

3. **Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia, 15:36–21:16 (51:34)**

Paul traveled through eastern Asia Minor, to the province of Asia in western Asia Minor, then across the Aegean Sea.

- Paul's second missionary journey (15:36–18:22)
- Paul's third missionary journey (18:23–21:16)

Internal growth:

- instruction of Apollos (18)
- Paul's teaching (19)

Tension:

- Paul and Barnabas argued (15)
- Paul warned the church (20)

External growth:

- many converts and churches planted (15–21)

Opposition:

- angry mobs and Zealots pursued Paul (Acts 17, 20)

4. **Jerusalem to Rome, 21:17–28:31 (53:55)**

Paul's journey from Jerusalem to Rome roughly divides into four sections:

- Paul's witness in Jerusalem (21:17–23:11)
- Paul's imprisonment (23:12–26:32)
- journey to Rome (27:1–28:14)
- witness in Rome (28:15-31)

Internal growth:

- Jewish believers' joy (21)
- willingness to suffer (21, 22)

Tension:

- rumor (21)
- tension in the church (21)

External growth:

- gospel to high-ranking officials (23–26, 28)
- preached without hindrance (28)

Opposition:

- Paul's arrest and imprisonment (24)
- imprisonment in Rome (28)

Paul's experiences in Rome highlighted the internal tensions and opposition facing the early church, as well as the impossibility of stopping the gospel.

IV. Modern Application (58:50)

A. Literary Character (59:02)

If we hope to understand Acts, we must take into account the kind of literature it is and the ways this kind of literature communicates its ideas.

1. Selective (1:00:58)

The events in Acts span the years from the ascension of Jesus to the imprisonment of Paul in Rome — a period of three or four decades.

Luke's twofold stated purpose: to write a reliable history of the church, and to convey and confirm the truth of the gospel.

Luke did not record everything about this period of church history.

Each account in Acts is there to help Luke accomplish his two-fold purpose.

2. **Episodic (1:03:28)**

Each individual narrative in Acts is part of Luke's overall strategy and message.

Each episode is also distinct and has its own smaller points and details to teach about how the church is to continue building God's kingdom.

3. **Implicit (1:04:47)**

Two main types of literature in the New Testament:

- argumentative discourse (e.g., New Testament epistles)
 - represents a conversation
 - teaches directly and explicitly

- narrative discourse (e.g., Gospels and Acts)
 - tells a story
 - teaches implicitly

Luke's narratives were not written simply to report events but to instruct and assure Theophilus and the church — these purposes are implicit in every narrative.

As we engage with the book of Acts, it's crucial for us to uncover these implicit teachings as well.

One way to evaluate and apply biblical narrative is to note what God approves and blesses or disapproves and curses:

- emulate the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that are pleasing to God
- avoid those that oppose him

We can see Luke's implicit teaching by observing the examples he provided for us.

B. Discontinuities (1:13:41)

Although the Bible was written for us, it is not written directly to us.

1. Different Time (1:14:43)

Acts focuses on the original apostles, the authoritative witnesses of Christ in the first century.

Luke insisted that the original apostles were unique:

- had to have seen the resurrected Lord
- be appointed to the office directly by God himself
- had special authority and power

Unfortunately, many Christian groups have looked to Acts as a model of Christian living that should be precisely followed in every age.

When well-meaning Christians fail to account for the discontinuities between the first century and our day, they often try to apply the teachings of Acts in inappropriate ways.

2. **Different Circumstances (1:19:32)**

The events in Acts took place in the historical circumstances of the first century and much of Luke's accounts depend on these circumstances.

Some Christian groups have tried to return to the cultural practices of the first-century church.

We often find different applications of the same principle even in the book of Acts itself (Acts 2:44, 45).

The church has always recognized that the same biblical principle must be applied in ways that are appropriate to the current circumstances.

C. **Continuities (1:21:58)**

1. **Same God (1:22:15)**

Luke's record of salvation history reminds us:

- we serve and testify to the same Lord Jesus Christ that the apostles and early church served.
- we are empowered by the same Holy Spirit who was present in the first century.

- we do all for the glory and honor of the same Father.

God worked through the gospel in the first century and he continues to do so today.

2. **Same Goal (1:23:47)**

In Acts, God's purpose was to build his kingdom in Christ through the apostles and then through the church.

The goal of the modern church is to conform to God's mission of building his kingdom in Christ.

If we are to honor and obey Christ, the church must submit to the authoritative witness of the apostles.

3. **Same Gospel (1:26:20)**

We all need the same salvation which is available in Christ as he forgives our sin and brings us into his kingdom (Acts 16:31).

This gospel remains the same for all people in all places and all times.

Acts teaches us that no tension, no opposition is sufficiently powerful to oppose the growth and spread of redemption.

V. Conclusion (1:28:53)

3. What structural elements reveal the structural pattern of the book of Acts? How does this pattern help us understand the message of the book?

4. Discuss and give examples of internal growth and tension, and external growth and opposition that took place in Jerusalem.

5. Discuss and give examples of internal growth and tension, and external growth and opposition that took place in Judea and Samaria.

6. Discuss and give examples of internal growth and tension, and external growth and opposition that took place at the “ends of the earth,” as it was known in that day.

7. When we make modern application of Luke's message in Acts, why should we take into account the kind of literature Acts is?
8. What discontinuities exist between Luke's original audience and us? How do these affect the way we apply Acts in the modern world?

9. What continuities exist between Luke's original audience and us? How do these affect the way we apply Acts in the modern world?

Application Questions

1. Why is it important to interpret Acts correctly?
2. What relevance is there in believing that Acts records real history?
3. What is the relationship between the church and God's kingdom on earth?
4. What kinds of growth should we expect from our own congregation? How can we achieve these kinds of growth?
5. What encouragement can be found in conflict?
6. What does God approve of and bless, and what does God disapprove of or curse? Why should we pay attention to these things?
7. How do our circumstances resemble the circumstances of Acts? How are they different? Why should the modern church consider these similarities and differences when applying Acts to our modern lives?
8. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?

Glossary

Ananias & Sapphira – Married couple in the early church who lied about the amount of money they received from the sale of their property and were struck dead by God as punishment (Acts 5)

Apollos – Eloquent Jewish speaker and teacher who worked with the apostle Paul to grow the early church, especially in Ephesus and Corinth

Aquila – Jewish tentmaker and Christian convert who had come to Corinth with his wife Priscilla after Emperor Claudius commanded all Jews to leave Rome; friend and coworker of the apostle Paul; instructed Apollos regarding the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection

argumentative discourse – Literature that represents a conversation, such as when a writer speaks directly to his audience; literary device used to communicate ideas directly and explicitly

Cornelius – Captain of the Roman army from Caesarea who was converted to Christianity through Peter's ministry (Acts 10–11)

Elymas – Magician from Cyprus who miraculously was made blind, convincing the proconsul of Paphos to believe the gospel (Acts 13)

episodic – Consisting of a successive selection of smaller accounts

Felix, Marcus Antonius – Governor of the Roman province of Judea who tried Paul in Caesarea and kept him in prison for two years, expecting a bribe for Paul's freedom

Festus, Porcius – Governor who succeeded Antonius Felix in the Roman Province of Judea; sent Paul to Rome to stand trial after Paul appealed to Caesar

Gallio – Proconsul of Achaia around A.D. 51; refused to prosecute Paul because he considered the Jews' complaint against Paul to be a matter of Jewish law

Gamaliel – Respected rabbi, Pharisee, and member of the Sanhedrin who defended the apostles before the Jewish council; the apostle Paul's teacher before Paul's conversion

Jerusalem – City where David established his throne and Solomon built the temple during the united monarchy; capital of the southern kingdom of Judah that was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and later destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70; city where the early church began

Jerusalem Council – Meeting in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 where the apostles and church leaders addressed concerns in the early church; in particular, whether or not Gentiles were required to follow the Mosaic law to be saved

Judea – Name used for Jerusalem and the surrounding areas after the Babylonian exile; southernmost of the three traditional divisions in ancient Palestine with Samaria in the center and Galilee to the north

narrative discourse – Literature that tells a story; literary device used to communicate ideas and lessons indirectly

Philip the evangelist – Name of a deacon from the church in Jerusalem who preached the gospel in Samaria and made many converts, including the Ethiopian eunuch; not Philip the apostle

Priscilla – Jewish woman and Christian convert in the early church who, along with her husband Aquila, worked and traveled with Paul and later gave instruction to Apollos in Ephesus regarding the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection; also called Prisca

Samaria – Capital city of the ten northern tribes of Israel that fell to Assyria in 722 B.C.; also, central region of ancient Palestine located between Judea and Galilee

Simon the magician – Magician from Samaria who tried to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit

Theophilus – Person to whom Luke addressed both his gospel and the book of Acts