

**SHAPEDBYSCRIPTURE**

And You Will Be  
My Witnesses

ACTS

**DAN BOONE**

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## Introduction

# THE *SHAPED BY* *SCRIPTURE* SERIES

The first step of an organized study of the Bible is the selection of a biblical book, which is not always an easy task. Often people pick a book they are already familiar with, books they think will be easy to understand, or books that, according to popular opinion, seem to have more relevance to Christians today than other books of the Bible. However, it is important to recognize the truth that God's Word is not limited to just a few books. All the biblical books, both individually and collectively, communicate God's Word to us. As Paul affirms in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." We interpret the term "God-breathed" to mean inspired by God. If Christians are going to take 2 Timothy 3:16 seriously, then we should all set the goal of encountering God's Word as communicated through all sixty-six books of the Bible. New Christians or those with little to no prior knowledge of the Bible might find it best to start with a New Testament book like 1 John, James, or the Gospel of John.

By purchasing this volume, you have chosen to study the book of Acts, which contains several exciting stories about the fledgling Christian church engaging the mission of God after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The goal of this series is to illustrate an appropriate method of studying the Bible. Since Acts is a larger book, we will not study every single chapter in detail. Instead, we'll choose a few stories for deeper examination, with the hope that the method modeled and practiced here will give you a useful way for engaging further study.

## How This Study Works

This Bible study is intended for a period of seven weeks. We have chosen a specific passage for each week's study. This study can be done individually or with a small group.

For individual study, we recommend a five-day study each week, following the guidelines given below:

1	On the first day of the study, read the relevant passage several times until you become fully familiar with the verses, words, and phrases.
2	On the second day, we will review the setting and organization of the passage.
3	On the third day, we will observe some of the realities portrayed in the passage.
4	On the fourth day, we will investigate the relationship of the individual passage to the larger story of God in the Bible.
5	On the fifth day, we will reflect on the function of the story as we hear it today, the invitation it extends to us, and our response to God, who speaks through God's Word.

If this Bible study is done as a group activity, we recommend that members of the group meet together on the sixth day to share and discuss what they have learned from God's Word and how it has transformed their lives.

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You may want to have a study Bible to give you additional insights as we work through the book of Acts. Other helpful resources are *Discovering the New Testament* and *Acts: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, available from The Foundry Publishing.

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## Literary Forms in the Bible

There are several literary forms represented throughout the Bible. The divinely inspired writers used various techniques to communicate God's Word to their ancient audiences. The major literary forms (also known as genres) of the Bible are:

- narratives
- laws
- history
- Wisdom literature (in the form of dialogues and proverbial statements)
- poetry (consisting of poems of praise, lament, trust in God, and more)
- prophecy
- discourses
- parables
- miracle stories
- letters (also known as epistles)
- exhortations
- apocalyptic writings

Within each of these forms, one may find subgenres. Each volume in the *Shaped by Scripture* series will briefly overview the genres found in the book of the Bible that is the subject of that study.

When biblical writers utilized a particular literary form, they intended for it to have a specific effect on their audience. This concept can be understood by examining genres that are familiar to us in our contemporary setting. For example, novels that are comedies inspire good and happy feelings in their readers; tragedies, on the other hand, are meant to induce sorrow. What is true of the intended effect of literary forms in contemporary literature is also true of literary forms found in the Bible.

## Introduction



# THE BOOK OF ACTS

If you are looking for great story-telling, dramatic adventure, and spellbinding plot, you've come to the right book. Acts does not disappoint. In twenty-eight chapters, we find ourselves in the middle of trials, riots, protests, persecutions, jail-breaks, martyrdom, shipwrecks, and skin-of-the-teeth rescues. We visit the great cities of the ancient world, including Jerusalem, Rome, Corinth, and Antioch. We meet the divine and the demonized, the wealthy and the poor, the accused and the emperor. The fast-paced action occasionally slows for long speeches that tell us what is going on behind the scenes.

In a book called Acts, we expect action—and we get it. However, the full title tells us that we are reading the Acts of the Apostles. If we hear “apostles” and think we’ll hear the stories of the twelve disciples Jesus selected in Luke’s Gospel, we will be disappointed—few of them get much press, except for Simon Peter, who is the star of the first half of Acts. After that, a former persecutor of the apostles is converted to Christianity and becomes a key player in the movement. We meet Saul of Tarsus, who becomes Paul the apostle to the gentiles. While the word “acts” refers to the things people say and do, “Acts of the Apostles” is about the things the Holy Spirit does through the church. The action hinges more on the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus than on the initiative of Jesus’s followers. The energy in the book is always from God, through the Spirit, in Jesus’s name.

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## Who Wrote Acts?

Having heard the first version of the story, we are primed for the sequel. Luke’s Gospel precedes Luke’s Acts. Luke is most likely an educated, well-traveled Greek who is thought to have converted to Judaism and learned the Old Testament story before converting to Christianity. He is credited with writing the third Gospel and the book of Acts, both of which are addressed to Theophilus (see Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1). Theophilus is thought to have been a wealthy patron who supported Luke’s writing. It is likely he was an affluent Greek who feared God before converting to Christianity.

## Literary Form

Acts stands alone in the New Testament. Like the four Gospels, it contains stories of healings, demonic confrontations, opposition from enemies, imprisonments, and death. It is also like the epistles in recounting visits to different cities, each with their own leaders, local cultures, and theological problems. Yet Acts is neither gospel nor epistle — instead, it is a theological narrative.

By “narrative,” of course, we mean that Acts is a story. Stories cohere around characters who have experiences. Stories require a scaffolding of meaning. In other words, stories need a setting with culture, language, and history. The more we understand this scaffolding, the more we understand the story. We become insiders who have something in common with the characters in the story.

The Gospel of Luke begins like this: “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:1–4, NRSV).

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The writing of stories becomes history when someone sets out to write “an orderly account of the events.” Many view the book of Acts as early church history, and it is . . . and it isn’t. The pure historian seeks to write so that people can know what happened at a specific time and place. Their objectivity is important — they seek to write without prejudice or opinion. They interview eyewitnesses, search documents, and look for evidence that fills in chronological blanks. Luke, however, is doing something different — he begins with the end in mind. He intends to influence his readers. In a sense, his work is more akin to a historical novel — a story that uses the historical setting and facts but reorganizes them to tell a story. He selects and arranges the events, then tells them from his perspective. At times, he even writes himself into the action. Luke becomes the omniscient narrator who relates the characters’ thoughts, conveys their dialogue, and fills in their personalities. Even more importantly, Luke embraces a certain theology, and he wants to persuade us to believe what he believes. This is why we call his story a theological narrative.

A good storyteller uses several devices, one of which is repetition. There are connections between the stories of Luke and the stories of Acts. What we have already seen Jesus do in Luke, we see the disciples repeat in Acts — from healings, to casting out demons, to confronting authorities, to dying. Additionally, in Acts, Luke repeats key words and phrases from his Gospel, including “boldness,” “signs and wonders,” “ends of the earth,” and “kingdom of God.”



Another rhetorical device is speeches by the key characters—almost one-third of Acts is comprised of speeches. These include Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, Stephen’s martyrdom speech, and Paul’s speeches to the Roman rulers and to the leaders of the church at Ephesus. Because of the logistics involved in using papyrus, ink, and a quill, we assume that no one was taking notes when these key speeches were made. Rather, in the same oral tradition that accurately preserved the Old Testament, the early church recalled the sermons and addresses of their leaders until there was widespread consensus on what had been said. Luke has a keen interest in connecting these speeches with God’s historic activity in the Old Testament. This is why Acts is filled with references to ancient texts—Luke wants to ground the early church in Israel’s election as the people of God.

## Entering the Story

Another interesting feature of the Acts of the Apostles is its placement in the canon of Scripture. It is located between the four Gospels and the epistles to the churches. The content of Acts is similar to the stories in the Gospels, but it works in the context of the gospel’s spread to gentile cities. Acts serves as a bridge between Jesus’s ministry near Jerusalem and the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Acts also serves as a bridge between Peter and James’s leadership in Jerusalem to Paul’s leadership as the apostle to the gentiles. Imagine going straight from the Gospels, which never mention Paul, to the Roman and Corinthian epistles—we would wonder who this Paul is. He seems to take the reins from Peter about halfway through the book of Acts. The center of gravity shifts from Jerusalem to Antioch, and we sense that it will continue moving toward Rome.

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## Historical Context

Many people have grown weary of the changing world we live in and have sought to get back to the church’s ancient roots. They believe that Acts describes “pure Christianity”—the good old days when the Spirit was on the move and signs and wonders were performed. There is certainly a compelling nostalgia to the idea of returning to our roots and experiencing the miracles of first-century Christianity. If Luke’s intent was to provide a template for the church today, then we should try to replicate what we see in Acts. However, if Luke has a different intent, we need to ask different questions.

If we read the book of Acts as a categorical decree of how leaders are to be selected, how the church is to be organized, how baptism is to be practiced, or how speaking in unlearned languages should be understood, we have a problem—while these things are part of the story, Luke never intended to write a manual. Instead, Acts shows

flexibility in baptism, in titles for church leaders, in conversion experiences, and so much more. Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, a narrative like Luke's should not be read as an authoritative prescription. For example, in Acts, we have a filling with the Spirit that includes the gift of speaking and understanding unlearned languages, and other fillings with no mention of this gift. We have baptisms in ponds, and desert baptisms where there may have been no bodies of water available. We have adult baptisms and baptisms of entire families, likely including infants and unconverted slaves. To demand that every person's experience with the Spirit or every baptism follow the pattern of Acts is to turn the book into an operating manual rather than an account of God's movement in the world. Acts does not give us a prescriptive pattern for the operation of the church. It does, however, show us something to emulate: the joyful, intentional, Spirit-enabled expansion of the good news to the ends of the earth, and thereby, the establishment of the church of Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles is an open-ended story that is still being lived out by Jesus's followers. In one congregation I pastored, we named our weekly newsletter "Acts 29." Though the book of Acts ends with chapter 28, we believed we were writing the continuing story of the gospel. As you study the selected texts from Acts, my prayer is that you will find yourself "on mission."

## Structure and Organization

Commentaries suggest several different outlines for Acts. Some divide the story into the leadership of Peter and Paul. Others take the geographical mandate of 1:8 and follow the movement from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth (Rome). Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart suggest a six-part outline that reflects the movement of the mission:

- 1:1–6:7 The church in Jerusalem grows even in the face of opposition.
- 6:8–9:31 The church experiences its first geographical expansion to nearby Greek-speaking Jews.
- 9:32–12:24 The first expansion to the gentiles is introduced by the story of Cornelius's conversion, which is told twice.
- 12:25–16:5 Paul takes the lead and moves into gentile territory. Questions of divisions between Jews and gentiles begin to arise.
- 16:6–19:20 The gospel invades Europe. While Jews resist this movement, gentiles are more and more receptive.

- 19:21–28:30 The gospel moves to Rome. Paul is tried three times and found innocent each time. He tells the story of Jesus to rulers along the path to Rome.

Ultimately, it probably doesn't matter how we outline Acts. If this were a rhetorical argument like Romans or 1 Peter, an outline would be immensely helpful in understanding the point being made. But this is a story; a narrated theology; an account of people's actions. In this way, it is more like a novel than a legal brief. We rarely outline novels—usually, we start a new chapter when the action shifts. This is what happens in Acts.

## Major Theological Themes

Acts is as much about theology as it is about narrative—there is more going on here than storytelling. We see several theological emphases in the book:



**God is active in history.** The story of redemption does not begin with Jesus's resurrection—it begins with creation and the call of Abraham. The promises God made to Israel are fulfilled in the acts of Jesus and the early church.



**Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.** His life, death, and resurrection are prophesied, and his is the name by which all people can be saved.



**Repentance is the only appropriate response to the gospel of Jesus.** Repentance was first made available to the Jews, and is now available to the gentiles too.



**God is more than an ancient being who set the universe in motion.** We understand God's nature and intent through the work of the Holy Spirit. This same Spirit energized Jesus in the Gospel of Luke; now we see that divine power and presence unleashed through God's people.



**Those who repent and believe in Jesus are gathered into a community called the church.** These people are from differing and diverse backgrounds but find unity in the mission and message of Jesus. They share their wealth with each other until there are no needy among them.



**This community longs for the return of Jesus, the new heaven and earth, and the restoration of all things.** They believe they are living in the last days and that Jesus's return is imminent. Sharing the gospel is urgent business.



**Luke sees a geographical strategy for the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth (1:8).** It should be noted that there were other movements of the gospel during this time, specifically to Egypt and Mesopotamia.



**There are theological tensions about the practices of Judaism versus the practices of the gentile converts.** Must gentile converts be circumcised? Must they go through Jewish rituals of purification and baptism? Several stories in Acts deal with these colliding issues.



## Week One: Setting the Stage

# ACTS 1:1–14

Luke's opening verses connect volume one with volume two—we see the handoff of the mission of God as accomplished by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (volume one) to the apostles and leaders of the church in the Acts of the Apostles (volume two). The same Holy Spirit who energized the ministry and mission of Jesus in the Gospel will empower the church in Acts. Knowing the plot line of Luke is essential to following the plot line of Acts—so in today's opening reading, we will go back into the closing verses of Luke and read our way into Acts. Moreover, Jesus's ministry and message underpin everything the apostles do in Acts. To fully grasp this, one should read the entire Gospel and then, without stopping, read Acts.

While this week's text is not long, it is rich and deep in themes that are key in Acts. We will study the kingdom of God as the primary metaphor of Jesus's ministry and the heart of the disciples' message. We will hear the Father's promise—the baptism of the Holy Spirit—which becomes the enabling power for the church. We will see Jesus's ascension to the right hand of the Father and hear the promise of his return. We will also see the mission of the church unfold with the proclamation of the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

## WEEK 1, DAY 1

Read Luke 1:1–4 and 24:13–53. Then listen to the story in Acts 1:1–14 by reading it aloud several times until you become familiar with its verses, words, and phrases. Enjoy the experience of imagining the story in your mind, picturing each event as it unfolds.

# WEEK 1, DAY 2

## ACTS 1:1-14

### The Setting

In some ways, it would be better if the Acts of the Apostles immediately followed the Gospel of Luke—it would be easy to transition from the story of Jesus to the story of Jesus’s followers. But we have John in the middle. It would be interesting to see a re-play of the conversation in the early church as they determined the order of the books of the New Testament. My guess is that they were trying to figure out what to do with the odd Gospel of John—this Gospel was probably placed last because it is unlike the other three. Whatever the case, John definitely disrupts the transition from Luke to Acts.

Luke’s Gospel told of “the beginning” of all that Jesus did and taught leading up to his resurrection and ascension; Acts is another beginning. As Luke’s Gospel began with the Messiah’s birth, Acts begins with the birth of a messianic people, the church. As the Holy Spirit was the enabling agent in Mary’s pregnancy, the Holy Spirit is the empowering agent in the church. As Jesus went into the world around him proclaiming the kingdom of God, the disciples go to the ends of the earth proclaiming it. What Jesus did in Luke’s Gospel, the disciples do in Luke’s Acts.

### The Plot

**To discover the transition from Luke’s Gospel to Acts, summarize or paraphrase the general message or theme of each group of verses (following the pattern provided for Luke 24:36–42, 44–49).**

#### 1. Luke 24:36–42

After two of his followers describe their encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, the resurrected Christ appears to the rest of the frightened disciples. He offers his wounded body as evidence of his resurrection. As he eats with them, they stand in disbelief. It is a scene of utter shock and surprise.



## 2. Luke 24:44-49

Jesus gives the disciples the ability to understand the Old Testament scriptures.

While most readers focus on the gift of the Holy Spirit in this passage, the gift of understanding the scriptures is crucial for understanding the sermons and speeches in Acts.

The apostles constantly reference the Old Testament as they declare that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. This gift clothes them with God-given power.

## 3. Luke 24:50-53

## 4. Acts 1:1-3

## 5. Acts 1:4-5

**6. Acts 1:6-8**

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**7. Acts 1:9-11**

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**8. Acts 1:12-14**

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## WEEK 1, DAY 3

### What's Happening in the Story?

As we notice certain circumstances in the story, we will begin to see how they are similar to or different from the realities of our world. The story will become the lens through which we see the world in which we live today. In our study today, you may encounter words and/or phrases that are unfamiliar to you. Some of the particular words and translation choices for them have been explained in more detail in the **Word Study Notes**. If you are interested in even more help or detail, you can supplement this study with a Bible dictionary or other Bible study resource.

#### 1. Acts 1:1–3

Jesus appeared to the apostles, providing convincing proof of his resurrection. Then, for forty days, he taught them about the kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup> Luke grounds the reality of the resurrection in the eyewitness testimonies of people known to the community. It is interesting that, while the Gospel collapses the time between the resurrection and the ascension to a few brief days, Acts tells us that forty days elapsed between these two events. The particular timespan reminds us of the forty days God spent with Moses on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 24:12–18), and the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. The apparent contradiction in these accounts of the ascension indicates the role this event plays in each book. In Luke, the ascension is a conclusion, a dramatic finish to Jesus's earthly ministry. In Acts, the ascension is the beginning of the church.

#### 2. Acts 1:4–5

Jesus reminds his disciples not to leave Jerusalem. We imagine them raring to go. But something critical has yet to happen—the baptism of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> In Luke 3:21–22, the Spirit descends on Jesus in bodily form like a dove and a voice from heaven confirms the Son. John the Baptist has already declared in Luke 3:16 (NRSV), “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong

#### WORD STUDY NOTES #1

<sup>1</sup>“The kingdom of God” is a phrase used in Luke and Acts to refer to God's reign. It is better understood as a “realm of presence” than a place.

#### WORD STUDY NOTES #2

<sup>1</sup>Some people prefer the wording of baptism “with” the Holy Spirit, or “into” the Holy Spirit. However we phrase it, the Father is the baptizer, and the Holy Spirit is the metaphorical water that believers are immersed in. The result is that baptized believers are clothed with power.

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As Jesus teaches, the disciples ask him an important question: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (NRSV). Israel’s destiny was a hot topic during Jesus’s public ministry. Many have speculated that in asking this question, the apostles are assuming the same thing the crowd on Palm Sunday did – that the Messiah came as a political ruler to overthrow the Romans. Jesus does not rebuke the disciples for asking the question – they are simply connecting current events with God’s historic promises to Israel. He does, however, redirect their question about *when* the kingdom will come into an explanation of *how* it will come. God’s promises to Israel are rooted in his promises to Abraham. The mission to the ends of the earth is an extension and fulfillment of God’s promise to bless all tribes and languages and peoples through Israel. The family of God is about to branch out in geography and bloodline as gentiles take center stage in God’s mission.

#### 4. Acts 1:8

[illegible]

5. Acts 1:9-11

After telling the disciples that the fulfillment of God’s promises to all people will be their mission, Jesus ascends. As the disciples watch with their question about the restoration of the kingdom still hanging in the air, they see Jesus lifted into a cloud.<sup>1</sup> They stand in stunned silence. One of them may well have broken the hush with the words, “Did he say ‘to the ends of the earth’?” As they watch, two men in white robes interrupt them with a question: “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (v. 11, NRSV). Who are these two men? Some have speculated that they are the two angels of Luke 24:4 who stood in dazzling clothes before the empty tomb and told the women, “He is not here, but has risen” (24:5, NRSV). Others suggest that the two men are Moses and Elijah, who appeared on the mountain of transfiguration when Jesus’s clothes became “dazzling white” (Luke 9:28-36, NRSV). Either way, these men give the disciples a gentle prod to stop sky-gazing and get on with the mission.

**Create your own brief description of the world and reality portrayed in verses 12-14.**

6. Acts 1:12-14

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**WORD STUDY NOTES #5**

<sup>1</sup>Luke carefully chooses his words when he writes that Jesus was “lifted up.” This is the same phrase used to describe Jesus’s death on the cross. In this passage, it describes his royal ascension to the throne of God as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The ascension is the coronation of the King who sits at the right hand of God.

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## Discoveries

Let's summarize our discoveries from Acts 1:1–14.

1. The opening chapter of Acts suggests that God's mission has expanded from Israel to the ends of the earth. God has always been intent on saving the whole world, but here, God's people are empowered for the mission.
2. While the church may be anxious about the *when* of the kingdom, Jesus focuses on the *how* of the kingdom. It is better to spend time seeking the fullness of the Holy Spirit than the date of Jesus's return.
3. Jesus's ascension is more about reigning than leaving; it is the completion of his earthly mission.
4. Witnessing to the ends of the earth requires the empowerment of the fullness of the Holy Spirit.
5. Disciples who wish to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit must assume a posture of prayer.