

\*New Beacon Bible Commentary

A rolled-up newspaper is positioned diagonally across the center of the cover. The word "ACTS" is printed in large, bold, red capital letters, centered over the newspaper. The newspaper itself is a light gray color with some text and a small logo visible on its surface.

# ACTS

A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

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# CONTENTS

<i>General Editors' Preface</i>	11
<i>Author's Preface</i>	13
<i>Abbreviations</i>	15
<i>Bibliography</i>	23
<i>Table of Sidebars</i>	39
INTRODUCTION	41
A. Authorship	42
B. Addressee or Audience	44
C. Date of Composition	44
D. Genre of Acts	46
E. Sources and Intertextuality	48
F. Textual-Critical Issues	48
G. Literary Features	49
H. Theology and Acts	51
I. Engaging Acts in a New Day	53
COMMENTARY	57
I. Preface: Continuity, Commission, and Promise (Acts 1:1-11)	57
II. God and the People of God: Restoration and Division in Jerusalem (Acts 1:12—8:3)	65
A. Gathering and Preparations (1:12-26)	65
B. Pentecost and the Fulfillment of God's Promises to Israel (2:1-47)	71
1. The Coming of the Holy Spirit (2:1-13)	71
2. Peter Speaks to the Gathered Crowd (2:14-41)	78
3. The Spirit-Created Community of Believers (2:42-47)	93
C. A Healing that Leads to Opposition (3:1—4:31)	99
1. The Healing of a Crippled Man at the Temple (3:1-26)	99
a. The Account of the Healing (3:1-10)	101
b. Peter Explains What Happened (3:11-26)	104
2. Religious Leaders Oppose Peter and John (4:1-22)	111
3. The Believers' Response to Opposition (4:23-31)	122
D. Additional Images of the Community of Believers (4:32—5:11)	127
1. Unity and Sharing among the Believers (4:32-37)	127
2. The Violation of Unity and Sharing—Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)	131

E. Intensified Opposition from Religious Leaders (5:12-42)	136
1. The Church's Mission Continues in Jerusalem (5:12-16)	136
2. Hostile Reaction by Jewish Leaders (5:17-42)	138
F. Internal Struggles and Caring for Widows (6:1-7)	147
G. The Persecution of Believers in Jerusalem (6:8—8:3)	153
1. Stephen's Arrest and Murder (6:8—7:60)	154
a. Stephen's Arrest (6:8-15)	154
b. Stephen's Speech before the Jewish Council (7:1-53)	156
c. Stephen's Murder by the Jewish Council (7:54-60)	166
2. Persecution Extends to All Believers (8:1-3)	168
<i>Excursus: God and the People of God (Acts 1:12—8:3)—</i>	
<i>The Narrative Portrait of the Church in Jerusalem</i>	171
III. God and the Spreading Gospel: The People of God and Other "Peoples" (Acts 8:4—14:28)	173
A. The Ministry of Philip (8:4-40)	174
1. Philip and the Samaritans (8:4-25)	174
2. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40)	180
B. The Transformation of Saul—from Persecutor to Persecuted Preacher (9:1-31)	186
1. The Healing and Call of Saul (9:1-19a)	186
2. The Initial Ministry of Saul in Damascus (9:19b-25)	191
3. The Introduction of the Transformed Saul in Jerusalem (9:26-31)	193
C. The Extension of Peter's Ministry outside Jerusalem (9:32—11:18)	197
1. Peter's Miracles among Some Believers (9:32-43)	198
a. Peter's Healing of Aeneas (9:32-35)	198
b. Peter's Raising of Tabitha (9:36-43)	199
2. Peter, Cornelius, and the Salvation of Gentiles (10:1-48)	202
a. An Angel Appears to Cornelius (10:1-8)	202
b. Peter's Heavenly Vision (10:9-16)	205
c. Cornelius' Representatives Meet Peter (10:17-23a)	206
d. Peter at Cornelius' House (10:23b-48)	208
3. Peter's Response to Questions from Jerusalem Believers (11:1-18)	214
D. The Beginnings of a New Church in Antioch (11:19-30)	220
E. Politics and Persecution of the Church (12:1-25)	224
F. The Ministry Journey of Barnabas and Saul/Paul (13:1—14:28)	233
1. Call, Commission, and Contention (13:1-12)	233
2. Proclamation in Antioch of Pisidia (13:13-52)	238
3. Continuation and Confirmation of Ministry (14:1-28)	248
<i>Excursus: God, the People of God, and Other "Peoples" (Acts 8:4—</i>	
<i>14:28)—The Developing Narrative Portrait of the Church</i>	255

IV. God and the Expanding Mission: Tension and Reconstitution of the People of God (Acts 15:1—19:41)	257
A. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)	257
1. The Problem (15:1-5)	259
2. The Debate and Evidence (15:6-12)	261
3. The Assessment by James (15:13-21)	264
4. The Letter to Gentile Believers (15:22-29)	268
5. The Delivery and Reception of the Letter (15:30-35)	269
B. Changes to Paul's Ministry after the Jerusalem Council (15:36—16:10)	272
1. A Serious Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (15:36-41)	272
2. An Addition to Paul's Ministry Team (16:1-5)	273
3. The Vision of the Macedonian Man (16:6-10)	274
C. The Ministry of Paul in Philippi (16:11-40)	277
1. The Conversion of Lydia (16:11-15)	277
2. The Conversion of the Philippian Jailer (16:16-40)	280
a. The Conflict and Arrest over a Slave Girl (16:16-24)	280
b. The Earthquake and the Conversion of the Jailer (16:25-34)	282
c. The Release and Departure of Paul and Silas (16:35-40)	283
D. The Ministry of Paul in Macedonia and Greece (17:1-34)	285
1. Paul and Silas in Thessalonica (17:1-9)	286
2. Paul and Silas in Berea (17:10-15)	287
3. Paul in Athens (17:16-34)	288
E. The Ministry of Paul in Corinth (18:1-17)	300
F. The Ministry of Paul in Ephesus (18:18—19:41)	309
1. Paul's Travels, with a Stop in Ephesus (18:18-23)	310
2. Apollos in Ephesus (18:24-28)	311
3. Summary of Paul's Ministry in Ephesus (19:1-10)	313
4. Effects of Paul's Ministry in Ephesus (19:11-22)	316
5. Controversy: Ephesian Defenders of Artemis (19:23-41)	321
<i>Excursus: God, the People of God, and the Expanding Mission (Acts 15:1—19:41)—The Portrait of the Church within the Roman Empire</i>	329
V. God and the Purposes of God: Scrutiny and Validation of the Reconstituted People of God (Acts 20:1—28:31)	331
A. Paul's Journey to Jerusalem: Revisiting the Churches (20:1—21:17)	332
1. Travels from Ephesus to Macedonia, Greece, and Troas (20:1-6)	333
2. Believers in Troas (20:7-12)	335
3. Travels from Troas to Miletus (20:13-16)	336
4. Paul's Speech to the Ephesian Elders (20:17-38)	337
5. Travels from Miletus to Caesarea (21:1-8a)	347
6. Believers in Caesarea (21:8b-14)	349
7. Travels from Caesarea to Jerusalem (21:15-17)	350

B. Paul's Defense of His Ministry in Jerusalem (21:18—23:35)	352
1. The Meeting with the Jerusalem Church Leaders (21:18-26)	352
2. Troubles at the Temple (21:27-36)	355
3. Paul's Speech before the Jewish Crowd (21:37—22:29)	358
4. Paul's Hearing before the Jewish Council (22:30—23:11)	363
5. Jewish Plots and a Change of Venue (23:12-35)	368
C. Paul's Defense of His Ministry in Caesarea (24:1—26:32)	373
1. Paul's Trial before Felix (24:1-27)	374
a. The Charges against Paul (24:1-9)	374
b. The Defense by Paul (24:10-21)	378
c. The Response from Felix (24:22-27)	381
2. Paul's Hearing before Festus (25:1-22)	384
a. Festus in Jerusalem with Jewish Leaders (25:1-5)	384
b. Paul's Appeal to the Emperor (25:6-12)	385
c. Festus' Recounting of Paul's Case (25:13-22)	388
3. Paul's Hearing before King Agrippa (25:23—26:32)	392
a. Paul's Case Reintroduced (25:23-27)	392
b. Paul's Defense (26:1-23)	393
c. Paul's Exchange with Festus and Agrippa (26:24-29)	400
d. Paul's Case Reviewed (26:30-32)	402
D. Paul's Journey to Rome: Shipwreck and Salvation (27:1—28:16)	403
1. Beginning the Journey (27:1-12)	404
2. Storms and Shipwreck (27:13-44)	407
a. Storm and Despair (27:13-20)	407
b. Paul's Attempt to Encourage (27:21-26)	408
c. Drifting at Sea (27:27-32)	410
d. Paul's Successful Attempt to Encourage (27:33-38)	411
e. Shipwreck and Safety on Land (27:39-44)	412
3. Stay in Malta (28:1-10)	413
a. Paul and the Snake (28:1-6)	413
b. Paul's Ministry among the Maltese (28:7-10)	415
4. Final Leg over Land to Rome (28:11-16)	416
E. Paul in Rome (28:17-31)	419
1. Paul's Initial Meeting with Local Jewish Leaders (28:17-22)	419
2. Paul's Second Meeting with Jewish Leaders (28:23-28[29])	422
3. Paul's Ministry Continues (28:30-31)	425

# COMMENTARY

## I. PREFACE: CONTINUITY, COMMISSION, AND PROMISE: ACTS 1:1-11

ACTS

1:1-11

### BEHIND THE TEXT

Like the Gospel of Luke, the book of Acts begins with a preface that follows the advice and practice among historians of that day. Both the mention of the “former book” and the overlap in content from the end of that gospel (esp. Luke 24:36-53) subtly induce the recipient to read the ensuing narrative in light of the Lukan narrative about Jesus (→ also Introduction). Such expectations for the reader are not surprising, since Theophilus is the addressee for both works (→ “Addressee or Audience” in Introduction). The preface to Acts, however, lacks the distinct transition to the first narrative materials that accompanies the preface to Luke’s Gospel. Thus, scholars disagree over where the preface ends and where the story of Acts begins. The general structure, literary connections, and shared content suggest that these first eleven verses form a literary unit that offers both a retrospective glance to the ending of the Lukan Gospel and a prospective glimpse of what will unfold in the narrative of Acts.

The narrator does not explicitly identify the exact location for what these verses mention. However, inferences here as well as information from Luke 24 suggest that Jesus and his apostles were in Jerusalem and in neighboring areas. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus appeared to the gathered followers in Jerusalem (24:33-49) and then ascended to heaven from Bethany (24:49-51), a village probably located about two miles east of Jerusalem. However, later in Acts 1:12, the stated location is the Mount of Olives, an area known for its abundance of olive trees between Jerusalem and Bethany. This location was known as a hideout for underground, Jewish revolutionary groups that opposed the religious establishment and the Roman occupation of Israel.

## IN THE TEXT

■ **1-5** The narrator's first statement connects Acts with the Third Gospel, described as his **former book** (lit., *first word*). Here **Theophilus** is also addressed but, as in that gospel, no other information reveals his identity. Luke reminds him about that prior narrative of Jesus. The verb **began** (*ērxato*) in Luke 3:23 similarly indicates the inception of Jesus' ministry, which will then continue in Acts through the apostles and others.

The narrator or a character in the Third Gospel often describes Jesus as teaching (see Luke 4:15, 31; 5:3, 17; 6:6; 11:1; 13:10, 22; 19:47; 20:1; 21:37; 23:5). He frequently associates the believers as doing the same thing after the ascension (see Acts 2:42; 4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 28, 42; 11:26; 13:12; 15:35; 17:19; 18:11, 25; 20:20; 28:31). Here Jesus is teaching the apostles. The phrase **through the Holy Spirit** appears ambiguously in Greek, between the mention of Jesus' instruction and his selection of apostles. Thus, it is unclear to which the phrase applies. The ambiguity suggests that the phrase describes *both* aspects regarding the apostles as dependent on the Spirit's activity.

Such matters continue until Jesus ascends to heaven, which only the Lukan corpus describes. The same verb, *analambanō*, describes Elijah being taken up to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11 LXX). This suggests that the author links these two incidents. He offers no other details here, content to summarize matters the Third Gospel developed more fully.

The remainder of that first statement (Acts 1:3-5) retains the reader's attention on Jesus and his apostles. The Lukan Gospel account seems to limit Jesus' appearances to one day (see Luke 24). Here, however, the author states that these extended over a period of **forty days**. The significance of this longer period may be found on at least two levels.

First, the extended time provides sufficient evidence for Jesus' resurrection. The noun translated **convincing proofs** (*tekμήrios*) appears only here in the NT. In Greek rhetoric, it describes compelling evidence that results in defensible or irrefutable conclusions.

Second, the number **forty** probably links the beginning of Acts with OT stories of preparation and God's dealings with the people of Israel (see Exod 24:12-18; 34:28; Deut 8:2; 1 Kgs 19:8). Luke 4:1-13 describes Jesus' temptation as over forty days. Thus, as Moses prepared to receive God's commandments for the people, Jesus prepares his apostles and gives them his commandments (Spencer 2004a, 34-35).

This narrative includes little of Jesus' teaching. What little Acts mentions appears elsewhere. Several aspects of the teaching here are noteworthy.

First, the teaching is about **the kingdom of God**, a common but undefined expression for Jesus' message in Luke's Gospel (e.g., 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 9:2; 10:9; 17:20-21; 18:16-17; 22:16, 18). This same expression also describes the message of the Christian preaching in Acts (e.g., 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31). In Jesus' day, people hoped for the kingdom of God in the distant future. However, in both the Third Gospel and Acts (as in other NT texts), it expresses how God had *presently* entered into human experience through Jesus. The mention of this both here at the beginning of Acts and then later at its end (28:31) brackets the entire work with this theme as a literary *inclusio*. It lets the reader know without question "that the triumph of God's reign is the subtext of the narrative sandwiched between" (Wall 2002, 41). The term as used in both the Third Gospel and Acts also contrasts against its common reference to the Romans and the empire's imperial power.

Second, Jesus instructs the apostles to **not leave Jerusalem**, which reiterates the Gospel account (Luke 24:49). Luke offers no reason for these instructions. But he later describes the Pentecost scene in Jerusalem as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Thus, at this stage Jerusalem is the geographical and theological center of the Acts narrative.

Importantly, the author places this instruction in the context of a meal, a common feature of the Third Gospel (see Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10; 22:7-38; 24:13-35). The participle *synalizomenos*, translated **while he was eating**, literally connotes the sharing of salt among persons. The social implications of shared meals point to what Jesus and the apostles hold in common. Their shared beliefs, values, practices, and traditions define the boundaries and rules that govern their meal and solidify their places within that group (see Thompson 2007, 77-78).

Third, Jesus tells his apostles to **wait for** or **expect**, as the verb *perimenō* often connotes, **the promise of the Father** (see Luke 24:49). He subsequently clarified this as being **baptized with the Holy Spirit**. There is no mention of Jesus saying anything resembling this in the Gospel of Luke. But the saying may reiterate the unfulfilled prophecy of John the Baptist (Luke 3:16). The Spirit is important here, because the promised Spirit baptism would establish



continuity between Jesus and these apostles as well as enable them to serve as prophetic witnesses, as readers will soon see.

■ **6-7** Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God probably precipitates the question about the restoration of **the kingdom to Israel** here. The dual conjunctions *men oun* typically link two events, with the latter event being dependent upon the first (Levinsohn 1987, 141). Thus, the participle *hoi synelthontes*—translated **those who came together**—probably refers to the eleven apostles, although a larger group of followers is not out of the question (Johnson 1992, 26). The imperfect tense of *ērōtōn* suggests that their questioning persists. That tense was typical in questions, since any inquiry was incomplete until it was answered (Barrett 1994, 75).

Jesus' reference to the Holy Spirit probably stimulates their questions, since Jewish tradition associated the Spirit's coming with the last days (see 2:17) and Israel's restoration (see Isa 32:14-30). No doubt, the apostles are speaking about the fulfillment of the messianic mission. They expect this would include both the reestablishment of a politically independent Israel apart from Roman rule and an accompanying conversion of Gentile nations to Israel's God (e.g., Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-8). The indicative **restore** (*apokathistaneis*) in their question has a similar meaning in the LXX (Mal 4:6; Sir 48:10). There, it referred to Elijah and the restoration of all things associated with his return (Johnson 1992, 26).

Jesus' response in v 7 contrasts the *apostles'* misunderstanding with the *divine* understanding. This redirects the apostles' attention from *when* things would happen to *who* controls them. The apostles ask Jesus about the consummation of the kingdom with regard to **time** (*chronō*) in terms of chronology or dates on a calendar. Jesus' negative response refers both to such **times** (*chronous*) as well as to **seasons** (*kairous*) or specific times when God would act as falling under the **authority that uniquely belongs to the Father** alone.

■ **8** The conjunction **but** (*alla*) contrasts Jesus' refusal to grant the apostles' request with this ensuing promise. Jesus' followers did not receive the knowledge they sought. But he offers them other details. His promise of their reception of **power** (see Luke 24:49) correlates both with the Spirit's future coming and with their impending mission to be Jesus' **witnesses**. It is *not* concerned with matters of personal benefit or help.

To serve as Jesus' witnesses meant that the apostles would speak about Jesus from personal experience and conviction. That would be possible only as the promised Spirit enabled them. This power refers to a divine gift essential for them to be effective witnesses to these gospel events. It is not to make them and future believers "strong" in the faith.

This statement about their mission functions loosely as an outline of the Acts narrative. It would begin in Jerusalem (through 8:3), continue to the

regions of Judea and Samaria (8:4-40 and perhaps ch 9), and then move on to other parts of the Mediterranean world.

One should not miss the radical overtones of this brief list. It includes places and persons most Jews considered outside the bounds of God's saving work. The phrase *heōs eschatou tēs gēs*, **to the end of the earth**, occurs four times in the LXX (Isa 8:9; 48:20; 49:6; 62:11; see *Pss. Sol.* 1:4). In Isa 49:6 (quoted in Acts 13:47), the phrase describes Israel's call to be "a light to the Gentiles," so they may share in God's salvation.

The singular *eschatou*, **end** (ends in most translations), may not refer to perceived geographical boundaries of the planet or the known world of that era. Commentators often conclude that the phrase refers to Rome. This corresponds with its role as the westernmost locale in Acts' list of locations from where Jewish pilgrims had come to Jerusalem (2:9-11). But Rome was typically regarded as the *center* of the world, not its *end*. Here, the phrase may not have a *geographical* reference as much as a *theological* one. God's purposes seek to bring salvation to *all* (Luke 1:46-55; 2:28-32), as represented by the capital of the Roman Empire.

■ **9-11** The ascension of Jesus is not a separate scene but immediately follows his commissioning of the apostles. Jesus' departure to heaven is reminiscent of the departure of significant prophetic figures in Jewish tradition, including Enoch and Elijah (see 2 Kgs 2:1-12; Philo, QG 1.86) as well as Moses (see Philo, *Moses* 2.291; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.326).

In the OT, a **cloud** typically symbolized God's activity and presence (see Exod 16:10; 19:9; 24:15-18; 40:34; 1 Kgs 8:10-11). The imagery may also remind the reader of the cloud that blanketed the transfiguration scene (see Luke 9:28-36). Thus, some argue that the **two men** who appeared with the apostles after Jesus' ascension were Moses and Elijah (Johnson 1992, 27; Wall 2002, 43-44). However, most scholars point to the similarities between these two men and the angelic messengers at the empty tomb (Luke 24:4, 23). What may be more significant than the identity of the messengers is their message. It helps the apostles grasp what takes place and how that relates to their commissioned role as witnesses.

Explanation of the significance of Jesus' ascension is left for later (→ 2:32-36). For now, the narrator highlights three matters.

First, Jesus is taken **into heaven**. The phrase appears four times in Acts 1:10-11. This redundancy probably explains why some MSS omit one of those phrases. However, the repeated mention of **heaven** clarifies the inferences of the cloud imagery. This and the passive voice of the two verbs translated **taken up** (vv 9, 11) indicate that God's presence captures Jesus and carries him heavenward.

Second, the five references to what the apostles *themselves* saw emphasize their commissioned role as witnesses. The first two references (v 9) reaf-

firm that the apostles could vouch for Jesus' departure because they were eyewitnesses.

The verb *atenizō*, translated **looking intently**, is a common Lukan term (see Luke 4:20; 22:56; Acts 3:4, 12; 6:15; 7:55; 10:4; 11:6; 13:9; 14:9; 23:1). It underscores that the apostles saw *everything* as Jesus departed. The two textual variants of the verb **looking** (*blepontes* or *emblepontes*) both fit the context. The first variant repeats the participle in Acts 1:9 and correlates with the verb **you have seen** later in v 11: the apostles saw Jesus' ascension as first-person witnesses, which was not the case with the resurrection. The second variant intensifies the verbal root, so that it conveys a gaze of intense consideration (BDAG 2000, 321-22).

Third, the messengers redirect the apostles' attention from Jesus' departure to his return. The expression **will come back in the same way** probably employs the imagery of Dan 7:13. It describes "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven." The question and assurance given to the apostles provoke them to embrace their mission as witnesses. Not only would they be Jesus' representatives, but their proclamation about him would declare God's primary role in the story of Jesus. This is the point of the statement "you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Thus, the message serves as a call to action for the apostles prior to Jesus' second return (Tannehill 1990, 18-19).

## FROM THE TEXT

Like most texts, the opening of Acts offers an agenda for the rest of the narrative. It includes hints regarding what readers should bring to the table and expect as they engage this story. The author does not state such matters directly. But the literary imagery and connections in this introduction coax readers into making appropriate judgments about what this story is about and what (or who) is the driving force behind it.

This prefatory passage affirms that the unfolding story of Acts is a story of continuity on two interrelated levels.

*First*, the story of Jesus in both the Third Gospel and Acts is a continuation of the OT story of God. Both the OT literary allusions and the ascension scene in Acts point to God's presence and activity. Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God and his twice-repeated promise of the Holy Spirit indicate that what happened in the forty days was consistent with what the Lukan Gospel presents: God was at work to fulfill God's promises to Israel. Readers must keep this important message and emphasis in mind as the narrative moves toward the Pentecost events of ch 2. There Peter's explanation will unpack these themes more fully (2:14-36). Ultimately, the ascension is about God's presence and fulfillment of divine promises.

*Second*, the story of Acts continues the story of Jesus as presented in the Third Gospel. There is an inherent theological and christological emphasis in Acts. The activities of the apostles and other believers are linked to the purposes and activities of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah (Christ), as presented in the Gospel of Luke. All else that happens in Acts begins with God's purposes as seen in Jesus as depicted in the Lukan Gospel.

Thus, when Jesus commissions his apostles to witness "to the ends of the earth" (1:8), no hint appears about the replacement of Israel as God's people with the church or about the creation of the church as a spiritual Israel. Rather, the cues about taking the gospel message about Jesus to the Gentiles come from the OT understanding of Israel as God's people. The story of Acts is a continuation of the story of God and the people of God. It is ultimately a part of God's plan of salvation from the beginning. The story begins with God and points back to God.

The continuity of these related stories emphasizes the apostles' role as witness *and* the Spirit's role as the power for witness. On the one hand, the apostles not only were called to be witnesses but also were prepared for their task. The extended time of preparation indicates that the experience of the extraordinary or divine occurrences was not sufficient. These verses imply the exercise of theological reflection: Jesus and the Eleven wrestled together with the implications of all Jesus embodied *as* the gospel. This reflection provided the context for them to discover the connections between their experience and God's purposes. At the beginning of Acts, Luke nudges us to be reflective in our reading and in our testimony regarding God's grace on our lives.

On the other hand, the words of Jesus in Acts 1 define the role of the Spirit in terms of witness rather than in terms of believers and their lives in obedience to God. Unlike Paul in Rom 8, Luke offers *nothing* here about the role of the Spirit in salvation, one's personal life, strength for living faithfully, or one's relationship with God. Rather, Acts describes the role of the Spirit in terms of empowerment for ministry as witnesses. The promise of the Spirit is to enable the church to fulfill God's purposes for God's people. It is not for the fulfillment of personal goals or aspirations for the Christian life. Luke redirects our attention again and again to God *alone*, rather than to what God can do for us.