

March 7, 2021 by Steve Brandon



# Progress in the Early Church

## Acts

1. When Jesus left the earth, he continued to add to his church (Acts 2:47).
2. When suffering great opposition, the church multiplied greatly (Acts 6:7).
3. When facing violent attacks, the church experienced peace and comfort (Acts 9:31).
4. When branching out into new cultures, the church increased and multiplied (Acts 12:24).
5. When facing schisms and splits, the church was strengthened in the faith (Acts 16:5).
6. When expanding across the world, the church prevailed mightily (Acts 19:20).
7. When Paul was restricted, the church carried on without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31).

Since the fall, we have been working our way through the book of Acts. We have taken up Acts, chapter 1 and verse 8 as the theme verse of the book. These were the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples before he ascended into heaven:

### Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

In this verse, we have noted the key phrase, "You will be my witnesses." Indeed, this is what we have seen and will continue to see throughout the book of Acts. We see the apostles bearing witness to Jesus. We have turned this into the great application of the book: "Be my witnesses." We, too, are called to share of our experiences in our walk with Christ with those around us, at work, at home, in our neighborhoods, or wherever the Lord leads us.

This verse also tells us the power we must rely upon the by his witnesses. We must rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit. He guides us and empowers us to speak boldly in the name of Jesus.

Regarding the entire book, Acts 1:8 also gives a great geographic outline of the book. Jesus first mentions, "Jerusalem." Then, he mentions "Judea and Samaria." Then, he mentions "to the end of the earth." Jerusalem was (and is) the center of the religious world. It was in the day of Jesus. It is in our day as well. Judea and Samaria were bordering regions around Jerusalem. Judea was in south. Samaria was in the north. "The end of the earth," of course, is just that, a reference to all around the globe.

You can easily think of these locations as concentric circles, that emanate out from Jerusalem, until they reach the entire world. This is exactly what we see in the book of Acts. Chapters 1-7 all take place in the city of Jerusalem. Chapters 8-12 take place in Judea and Samaria. Chapters 13-28 tells the story of the beginning of the world-wide spread of Christianity. Acts 1:8 is a legitimate way to understand the book of Acts.

But there are other ways that you can look at the book. It's a bit like slicing up pizza. This past Thursday, we had some pizza for lunch. We cut one of the pizzas in squares. We cut the other pizza in wedges. Both ways work. Both ways divide the pizza into appropriate size pieces to eat. They look different. When you cut the pizza into wedges, all pieces are alike. You get the same proportion of pizza and crust. But when you cut the pizza into squares, the pieces are all different. Some pieces are squares with no crust. Some pieces are squares with a rounded crust side. Some of the pieces are tiny wedges with lots of crust. But either way you slice it, they still make up a pizza.

So, likewise with the book of Acts. You can slice up the book using Acts 1:8 and the geographic references throughout the book. Or you can slice it up using the various progress reports that are placed throughout the book as markers of the progress of the growth of the church. These verses are found in Acts. You still have the book of Acts.

I believe that both ways are legitimate ways of understanding the book of Acts. They may look a little different. They may have a little bit of a different emphasis. One emphasizes geographical growth. The other emphasizes spiritual and numerical growth. But they both work. Some have argued, however, that the progress reports are **the** given literary markers of the book of Acts, and, are thereby the better way to organize Acts. As Peter Krol says, ...

"This geographical breakdown [of using Acts 1:8 to outline Acts] make a lot of sense, and can certainly be helpful for visualizing the narrative. My chief concern with it is that it doesn't follow closely on the literary markers, ... [which] are the narrative statements summarizing the Christian movement's growth. There are seven such statements scattered through the book (Acts 2:47, 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, 28:30-31), and every one is accompanied by a tangible sense of narrative resolution, giving us good reason to see them as marking Luke's main units of thought."<sup>[1]</sup>

While I think Krol's arguments are a little like insisting upon cutting pizza in wedges and not squares, it still is helpful for us to know and understand Acts from the vantage point of the progress report. And this week, as we have arrived at one of the progress reports (Acts 6:7) in our exposition of the book, it would be helpful to work through these progress reports. Thinking about them will only help us to understand the book of Acts by looking at the way that the Lord worked to continually bless it in great ways. Hopefully, they will encourage us to see the

church as triumphant, that we might trust the Lord to do the same among us.

So, this morning, I want to spend the entire time looking at the various progress reports that are interspersed throughout the book of Acts. Appropriately, the title of my message this morning: "The Progress of the Early Church." We find seven progress reports in the book of Acts. (Though the exact number is somewhat disputed.) Each of these reports fill us in on how the church is expanding and growing.

Each of these progress reports are a bit like the sort of mid-term report card that a teacher might send home with students to give to their parents, to update them on their academic progress. Only, in the book of Acts, we are dealing with a straight-A student, who always receives stellar mid-term grades, filled with A's and A+'s. All of the progress reports in Acts have words like "numbers increasing" (Acts 2:47; 6:7; 12:24; 16:5) and "disciples multiplying" (Acts 6:7; 9:31). We hear of how the church is being "built up" and "prevailing" (Acts 9:31; 19:20), and how the kingdom of God being "unhindered" (Acts 28:30-31). These reports are like those sent to parents that sound like this:

The student shows enthusiasm for classroom activities.  
The student sets an example of excellence in behavior and cooperation.  
The student is very hardworking and always completes all of his/her work.  
The student takes an active role in discussions.

These are all very positive remarks!

If these progress reports teach us anything, they teach us that God's church will prevail! May this be encouraging to us all, to know that our prayer will be answered, "Thy kingdom come!" Jesus will build his church. God can grow our church.

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So, let's begin with the first progress report. It comes in the very last verse of chapter 2. Acts 2:47. This verse completes the narrative that began on the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people were saved from their sins. We read, ...

Acts 2:47

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

If we learn anything from this, we learn that ...

## **1. When Jesus left the earth, he continued to add to his church (Acts 2:47).**

If you remember, this is the context of the first two chapters: Jesus had left the earth and his disciples! In chapter 1, Jesus ascended into heaven. The man that they were following for three years, their leader, was gone! In his absence, the first thing the disciples did was pray. "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Perhaps their prayers were more fervent than ever because Jesus wasn't there in the flesh to direct them in the way that they should go. Surely, they felt led to help bolster their leadership at the end of chapter 1, when they decided to replace Judas to bring a full 12 disciples into the leadership team.

Beyond that, I'm sure that they felt alone, perhaps fearful of the future. But then the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost. He came with power, just as Jesus had told them would happen (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit filled all of the disciples "to speak in other languages" (Acts 2:4) that they had never known before! The multitude heard them speak in their own tribal languages! They were all amazed!

And so, Peter spoke, telling the people that the coming of the Spirit was in fulfillment of the prophecy found in Joel, chapter 2. Then, he preached the gospel to them, "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know-this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it" (Acts 2:22-24). Peter then finished with famous words. "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36).

At this word, the people were cut to the heart, convicted of their sin. They repented and believed in Peter's word! Three thousand people were added that day to the church! Mind you, this all happened **after** Jesus left the earth. After his death, his followers were few, perhaps even as low 120 disciples were continuing to follow Jesus. But now, there were 3,000! While Jesus was absent, he continued to keep his promise to build his church (Matthew 16:18). You might even argue that Jesus has been more effective building from heaven than from earth! It's like the days of COVID-19! Many office workers are finding that they are being more productive from home than they ever were from the office!

And it didn't stop there. It's not like the church was stagnate at 3,000 people. It continued to grow. Every day it grew. This is what the first progress report says, "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). When Jesus left the earth, he continued to add to his church. Jesus didn't need to be physically present to build his church. He does an even better job when he is gone.

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Let's reflect upon the second progress report. It comes in Acts 6:7.

Acts 6:7

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Here's my point:

## **2. When suffering great opposition, the church multiplied greatly (Acts 6:7).**

If you remember the context of chapters 3-6 (because we have been preaching through it), we have seen the church experiencing great opposition. First of all (in chapter 4), the apostles were arrested for preaching the gospel, because the Sadducees couldn't handle the apostles preaching in Jesus the resurrection from the dead (Acts 4:2). Because they were arrested late in the evening, they spent a night in prison! When they appeared before the council the following morning, they boldly proclaimed the gospel! "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11-12). The religious council didn't know how to handle these uneducated men (Acts 4:13). Finally, they gave them a verbal warning, not to preach any more in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18). Compared with what comes later in the book of Acts, this isn't even a slap on the wrist! Yet, it was the first demonstration of opposition to the gospel.

The second form of opposition came by way of Satanic enticement. This came with Ananias and Sapphira lied to the leaders of the church about the offering that they presented! They sold a piece of property and pretended to bring it all to the church to help out the poor. This was blatant hypocrisy in the church! But Peter saw right through it. He said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?" (Acts 5:3). This was Satan, opposing the church by trying to destroy the church from within.

But that wasn't all of the opposition. In chapter 5, it also came from the religious authorities again. They were arrested again for preaching the gospel. Before being released, they were beaten (Acts 5:40). A further threat comes in chapter 6, when the apostles were tempted with distraction administrative matters (i.e. serving tables), rather than focusing their attention prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4).

None of these things stopped the church. Instead, it marched forward! "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). Or as I have said it, when suffering great opposition, the church multiplied greatly (Acts 6:7).

Salvation even extended to the Jewish priests, who would have to give up everything to follow Jesus! They would lose their reputation. They would lose their place in the synagogue. Certainly, there would be an economic impact upon their lives as well, as they would lose their job! Their job was to offer up sacrifices for the people of Israel! But in believing in the sacrifice of Jesus, they would no longer be willing to offer up such abominations to the Lord. But "a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

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Let's transition to the third progress report. It comes in chapter 9 and verse 31. It reads like this:

### Acts 9:31

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

From this verse, we learn, ...

## **3. When facing violent attacks, the church experienced peace and comfort (Acts 9:31).**

Chapters 7 and 9 are some of the most violent chapters in the entire book of Acts. At the end of chapter 7, we read of the death of Stephen. He was stoned to death! This was certainly, one of the worst ways to die! Picture it with me. You were often rushed off by a mob of people, who would throw you down from a cliff's edge. The hope is that you would break a leg, so you couldn't run. Then, you were pelted with rocks from above. These rocks would vary in size from a baseball to a bowling ball. They would rain down upon you. One might hit your knee, causing you to bend over to care to your wound. Next, another rock cracks upon your back and head. Soon, you are unable to stand.

This is the progression of the persecution in chapters 4 and 5. From verbal warning (Acts 4) to physical beating (Acts 5) to execution (Acts 7). We read about the death of Stephen at the end of chapter 7. After Stephen confronted his hearers, ...

### Acts 7:57-60

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

And so, Stephen became the first martyr of the Christian Church.

In chapter 9, we see Saul, the zealous Pharisee, heading off to persecute Christians. He received letters from the high priest to bring anyone following Jesus, men or women, bound to Jerusalem that they might experience persecution in the city. Now in Acts, we don't see him actually binding Christians and dragging them off to Jerusalem, as he is converted there on the road to Damascus to become a follower of Jesus. We know that he did at some point from chapter 7, when he witnessed the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58) and chapter 9 when he came to Christ. Listen to how he described himself in 1 Timothy 1:13, "I was a blasphemer, and a persecutor and a violent aggressor" (NASB). And in Philippians 3:6, he describes himself as "a persecutor of the church."

Yet, facing such violent persecution, we see "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied" (Acts 9:31). Or, as I have said, "When facing violent attacks, the church experienced peace and comfort (Acts 9:31)." The contrast here couldn't be more stark. On the one hand, the church was experiencing the most danger from persecution in the entire book. But on the other hand, the Holy Spirit was present, giving comfort to the afflicted.

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Let's move on to the fourth progress report. It's found in chapter 12 and verse 24. This is the shortest of the progress reports. It simply says this, ...

Acts 12:24

But the word of God increased and multiplied.

We learn this ...

#### **4. When branching out into new cultures, the church increased and multiplied (Acts 12:24).**

In chapters 10, 11, and 12, the church was growing not so much in geography as much as it was growing in ethnic diversity.

In Acts, chapter 10, Peter will take the gospel to the Gentiles, not because it was his idea, particularly, but because it was the Lord's idea. Perhaps you remember the story. Peter is on the rooftop praying, when he fell into a trance. He saw this dream with a sheet, descending upon the earth. On the sheet, there were "all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds" (Acts 10:12). And Peter was told to kill and eat them. But he objected, because, according to the law, these animals were unclean. Peter, being a devout Jewish man, he had never eaten anything unclean before. Well, the vision repeated a few times. Then came a voice from heaven, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15).

At these words, Peter was confused. But at that moment, there was a knock on the door, from some soldiers, sent from the home of Cornelius, a Gentile centurion. They came because he had a vision to send to Joppa a few days earlier for a certain man named Peter, who would bring them a message. Seeing this as more than a coincidence, Peter and a few of his friends went with these Gentiles.

Then, it all came together in Caesarea, as he was in the home of Cornelius. Peter said, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). And then, he proceeded to preach the gospel, "To [Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43). At this moment, "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word" (Acts 10:44). These Gentiles spoke in tongues and were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:46-48). It was an amazing event in history, when the apostles came to clearly understand that Gentiles are fellow heirs of the gospel by faith in Jesus Christ!

With his news, the gospel began to spread among the Gentiles (Acts 11:20). Now, this didn't stop the persecution. In fact, Herod the king ordered James to be killed with the sword. But, as Acts 12:24 says, "the word of God increased and multiplied." This comes in the context of the gospel extending, not only in geography, but to new cultures as well. As I have said, "When branching out into new cultures, the church increased and multiplied (Acts 12:24)."

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Let's move on to the fifth progress report. We see this in Acts 16:5.

Acts 16:5

So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

This verse comes in the backdrop of some great days and then, some difficult days for the church. The great days in the church was the sending out of Barnabas and Saul! They brought the gospel to the Gentiles with some intentionality. We read about that in chapters 13 and 14, some wonderful chapters! But then, the difficulty comes. The difficulty wasn't so much in persecution, but in division within the church. There were doctrinal disputes. There were differences of opinion. Yet, the church prevailed. We learn this, ...

#### **5. When facing schisms and splits, the church was strengthened in the faith (Acts 16:5).**

In chapter 15 of Acts, we have one of the most consequential chapters in the entire book. Because, there was a debate about the gospel. Some were saying, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). But Paul and Barnabas and Peter and James and the rest of the apostles gathered in Jerusalem to oppose this thought. This was the first time in the church that a major doctrinal issue arose. It threatened to divide the church in two: (1) those who believe that circumcision is necessary for salvation; and (2) those who believe in the full grace of God in salvation, that you are saved by faith alone.

You could have easily had the church split in two. This is what we call a "schism," a formal breach of union due to differing beliefs. This would have been catastrophic for the early church to have had such major differences of belief. Now, praise the Lord, this didn't happen. They found unity!

At this great assembly in Jerusalem, you had debate back and forth (Acts 15:7). Then Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:7-11).

Then Paul and Barnabas told of their journeys. They "related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12). They told of how they experienced many of the Gentiles converted through faith in Jesus. Then James stood up and added his confirmation to these words. As a result, the apostles won the day. The schism was averted. The church didn't split in two.

So, they wrote up a document, describing their decisions with the aim that this document would be distributed among all of the new churches. Paul and Barnabas were all set to deliver the message to the churches. However, they had a disagreement among themselves. Barnabas wanted to bring Mark along on their journey (Acts 15:37). But Paul “though best not to take with them [Mark] who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia” (Acts 15:38). And the difference of opinion between these two men was great enough, that there was a rift between them. So, they went their separate ways. Barnabas took Mark and sailed away (Acts 15:39). But Paul took Silas to visit the churches they had planted (Acts 15:40).

Despite the differences, the decision of the elders and apostles in Jerusalem were delivered to the churches. These churches “were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (Acts 16:5). Or, as I have sought to summarize, “When facing schisms and splits, the church was strengthened in the faith (Acts 16:5).”

I’m so encouraged by this particular summary statement, because in these days of COVID-19, we have experienced some difficulties in the church. Our unity has been threatened. But God’s work to build his church is way bigger than COVID! I have no fear of the future of the church of Jesus Christ. We will prevail.

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The next report comes in chapter 19 and verse 20. We read, ...

Acts 19:20

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

Again, this sounds much like all of the other progress reports. Things were going well. There was increase in the church. It was prevailing mightily. This comes after Paul and Timothy and Titus had brought the gospel to Philippi (Acts 16), Thessalonica, Berea, Athens (Acts 17), Corinth (Acts 18), and Ephesus (Acts 19). The gospel was being received by many. I believe that this verse teaches us that ...

## **6. When expanding across the world, the church prevailed mightily (Acts 19:20).**

During these days, the church wasn’t merely limping by, barely making budget, existing as the same-old, same-old, and stagnate in numbers. No, it was growing and expanding and increasing and prevailing all over the world! In the places where Paul was visiting, we were seeing churches crop up, in Philippi and Thessalonica and Corinth and Ephesus. And I would imagine that churches began in other cities as well, even where we don’t have record. Such was the character of the early church.

Now, it is interesting here in Acts 19, where exactly this progress report is situated. It’s right in the middle of the narrative of Paul’s time in Ephesus. This was his second visit to Ephesus. The first visit came in Acts 18:19-20, when Paul was in the synagogue reasoning with the Jews about Jesus. Those in Ephesus asked him to stay for a longer time, but Paul left them saying, “I will return to you if God wills” (Acts 18:21).

Well, God did will, and Paul came back to Ephesus. While there, he began a little congregation, beginning with 12 men, who were only baptized into the name of John the Baptist, having never heard of Jesus. But of hearing of Jesus, they were baptized in the name of Jesus. Thus began the church in Ephesus. Paul stayed for several years in Ephesus, teaching in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). Things were going very well in this idolatrous city. “the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled [and] many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their [idolatrous] practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver” (Acts 19:17-19).

Then comes our progress report: “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (Acts 19:20). Or, as I have said, “When expanding across the world, the church prevailed mightily (Acts 19:20).”

Soon after this, there was a riot in Ephesus, which pushed Paul to leave town. He resolved to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome. “Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, ‘after I have been there, I must also see Rome’” (Acts 19:21). And it is there, where Paul was in Rome that we find our last progress report. It comes in the last two verses of the entire book of Acts, when Paul is in Rome.

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Now, Paul’s journey to Rome was not a smooth one. When visiting Jerusalem, he was arrested in the temple and spent a night in jail. There was a plan to kill him, so he was brought in a clandestine mission to bring him safely to Caesarea, where he remained in jail for several years as the authorities tried to figure out what to do with him. Finally, he was brought to Rome as a prisoner. And the book of Acts closes with him in house arrest.

Acts 28:30-31

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

From this we learn that ...

## **7. When Paul was restricted, the church carried on without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31).**

That’s the emphasis of Luke as he wrote these words. Yes, Paul was forced to remain in his home. Yes, Paul was a prisoner of the state. But people came to him. He was free to preach the gospel with boldness. As a result, the kingdom of God continued on “without hindrance.”

That’s where the book of Acts ends. It ends on this note of the gospel going forth unhindered! Though Paul was bound, the gospel was not bound. It during these days when Paul wrote 2 Timothy, his final letter. He wrote it to encourage his son in the faith (2 Timothy 2:1). He

writes, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" (2 Timothy 2:8-9). That's what Luke wants to leave us with: the word of God is not bound!

Though Paul was bound at home, he was "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:30-31).

It is interesting to note that Luke doesn't end the book of Acts on a sour note. He doesn't end by telling the story of Paul's beheading. Rather, he ends it by telling us that the gospel was going forward "without hindrance." Such is the flavor of the book of Acts. It's a book of triumph. It's a book of success. It's a book of progress. Nothing stopped the church.

My only prayer is that we, as a church might know something about the progress of the gospel here at Rock Valley Bible Church!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 7, 2021 by Steve Brandon.  
For more information see [www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org](http://www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org).

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[1] Peter Krol, "Acts: The World's Salvation Cannot be Stopped" (<https://www.knowableword.com/2021/02/26/acts-the-worlds-salvation-cannot-be-stopped/>).