



## **Introduction to Acts**

Starting a new series today called Live Sent and we're going to be studying the book of Acts. One of the longest books in the NT, 28 chapters, 1003 verses, 18,374 words. And over the next 16-17 weeks, we're going to be walking through this book that is so action packed it has the makings of a Hollywood movie. We've got jailbreaks, deception, and murder. We've got angels and demons, miracles, powerful stirring speeches, heroes and cowards, good guys that get killed, bad guys who get saved, and an infinitely good and powerful God who directs every second of it! And best of all—this is a true story! And it's unique in a variety of ways...

### **A Unique Book**

Only sequel in the New Testament and it serves as a sequel to Luke. Luke and Acts are two parts of one story. Luke ends his Gospel with the ascension of Christ and Acts begins his history right where he left off, with the ascension of Christ. So Acts really is just Luke part 2! And it's the only book that gives us a historical account of the apostles' ministry, and spends a lot of time focusing on two of them—Peter and Paul. So it's a unique book.

### **A Unique Author**

Written by a guy named Luke who was one of Paul's travel companions. Luke was a Gentile (That means he was not a Jew—he was Greek) And he is the only Gentile author of any book in the NT. Not only that, but between Luke and Acts he wrote more content than any NT author! Add to that Col 4:14 tells us that he was also a beloved physician—which I'm sure Paul appreciated when he got beat up as he often did.

So this is Luke and Dr. Luke writes Acts between AD 60 and AD 65 to a guy named Theophilus. We don't know a ton about Theophilus. In Luke he addresses him as "most excellent" Theophilus so he may be a court official or someone who financially supported Luke. We're not sure, but just like he did in Luke, he begins Acts by addressing Theophilus, "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen." (Acts 1:1-2) Which means in Acts, we're dealing with a..

### **A Unique Time Period**

It was a transitional period where the church was just being getting off the ground. In Acts we see the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant (it's ok if you don't know what those are we'll talk more about them). From a blessings reserved for one people and nation to a gospel available to all people and nations. So just a very unique time. And because it's set in a unique transitional time, the book of Acts poses...

## A Unique Interpretive Challenge

Without question, the most difficult part about studying Acts is knowing what is descriptive and what is prescriptive. Now when I say *descriptive* I'm referring to texts that are simply reporting what happened—and Paul taught in the synagogue. When I say *prescriptive*, I mean texts that are giving patterns for us to follow today... Look at 1:24ff... When it comes to discerning God's will by rolling dice is the text just reporting what they did then or giving us a pattern for what we should do now? And I can't tell you how many theological disagreements stem from this difficulty. In Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit falls on believers who then speak in tongues, does that sometime after we're saved, we should expect the Holy Spirit to fall on us and speak in tongues. Should we? Acts 15 the Apostles send a letter to the Gentiles telling them to abstain from meat with blood in it. Should we? In Acts 16, Paul exorcises a demon—is this a formula for us? In Acts 19, Paul lays his hands on some believers and they received the Spirit—should I? Are there still apostles today? Isn't this fun? So there are certainly challenges when it comes to studying Acts but I can assure you there is great reward.

We lived in a church-owned office-turned living space for which we were *very* grateful, but it never really felt like ours bc...it wasn't. And we took care of the house, but there were these plants outside up against the house that were just growing out of control and we didn't care. Had a mailbox that would fall over if you pushed it a little. Didn't care. And when we moved here and finally got our own house something changed. I cared about how the yard looked and whether the mailbox was sturdy. Like I couldn't believe how much more I cared about something that was mine; something that I felt a sense of ownership towards.

And when it comes to the book of Acts we need to keep in mind that this is not someone else's story. We're not just reading about some people, in a place, back then. You'll never own that. Make no mistake about it, if you are a believer in this room, what we're about to study is *our* story. There is a sense in which our church is 23 years old but there's sense in which our church is 2000 years old. And it started right here in Acts and what we're living out now is not a different story but the same story, chapter 2019, same power, same mission, same God. "We must not study the Bible as people scrutinizing a book for insights into the distant past. Rather we should approach it as people who are desperate to see the God about whom we read move mightily in the present." (Merida, *Exalting Christ In Acts*) **Pray.**

Let's pick it up in vs. 6, "So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority." So the disciples here are thinking through a nationalistic lens. They want to know if Jesus is going to restore ethnic Israel to its former glory as a world super power like they were when King David was on the throne. And Jesus says that's none of your business. It's not for you to know. And instead of focusing on your nation I want you to focus on taking the Gospel to all nations leading to verse 8 which is the theme verse of Acts. If there was a summary verse for the book of Acts this is it. "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." Everything that happens for the remainder of this book is the outplaying of this statement! Notice this is not a request Jesus is making. It is a prophecy. He is foretelling how things are going to play out for them and in many ways how it's continuing to play out for us. So we're going to spend most of our time on this verse that really sets the stage for the rest of the book and I want us to see three things. The Goal of our mission. The Power for our Mission. And the Scope of our mission.

## The Goal of Our Mission

The goal of our mission is, in one word, witness. You will be my witnesses—a witness in this context is someone who accurately portrays what they see and hear. In the parallel account of this conversation at the end of Luke, he tells us exactly what it is they're witnessing to. Jesus says, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things." (Lk. 24:46-48). The gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins. That's what you're going to live and for most of you lose, your lives for. This word witnesses is μάρτυρες (martyres) in the Greek and it's where we get our word "martyr" from.

And so right before Jesus ascends to heaven, he shatters the American dream. Like, don't try to live so that people remember your name and greatness. Live so that long after your gone people still remember mine. And this is so countercultural. In a culture that says advance yourself, and promote yourself the Bible says crucify yourself and spend your life commending the works of Another. That is a life that counts! That is an unwasted life. So we're called to witness. Now how are supposed to do that? In a phrase—words and deeds.

Look at vs 1 with me, "In the first book O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up..." So we want to witness to the gospel by faithfully representing Christ's works and words. And as you read Acts, you learn very quickly that when it comes to faithfully witnessing to Christ works and words are inseparable. Both necessary. Both compelling.

For example, the way they early church loved and cared for one another was utterly unique. Think about it, here was a community who embraced you regardless of your past, race, social class, sex, and education level. It was very attractive. Not least to women. In a society that sexualized and downgraded women, the Christians believed women and men were equal, said that if you wanted to have sex with a women you had to marry here and commit yourself to her for life, and in the meantime if it came to it, the man was called to sacrifice his life for the woman. It shouldn't surprise us that a large portion of the early church was female. It was attractive to the poor because they saw how everyone shared their possessions and how their love for Christ and one another was more important than their money and their stuff.

In 360AD Emperor Julian—who was a pagan emperor—wrote a letter complaining about how Christianity is putting pagan religions to shame, "Why then do we...not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause...it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious [Christians] support our poor in addition to their own." Don't miss this our homes, our dinner tables, our finances, are not for comfort, but for witness. They are to be used in a way that displays a kind of selfless love and beauty that is so foreign to the world that it puzzles people. It causes them to think we may have something that they don't. And when we love like this, we provide a witness to the gospel with our works.

But that's not all. Works in themselves are not sufficient to witness to the Gospel we have to have use our words. Just as often as you see people caring for one another, you see the Gospel being proclaimed. And this is everyone's responsibility.

Michael Green in his book *Evangelism in the Early Church* says it this way:

“There was no distinction in the early church between full time ministers and laymen in this responsibility to spread the gospel by every means possible, there was equally no distinction between the sexes in the matter. It was axiomatic that every Christian was called to be a witness to Christ, not only by life but lip.”

(Green, *Evangelism In The Early Church*) So our works adorn the Gospel but our words announce the Gospel. This is what fundamentally sets us apart. Other religions have Gods. Holy Books. Holy Days. Nice good people. But only we have the Gospel. And as important as good deeds are, the unbelievers in our neighborhood and in Bangladesh are not fundamentally desperate for our money or encouragement or even our sympathy. They are fundamentally desperate for the Gospel. And the only way to share the Gospel is with language. And some of us may be terrified at the thought of sharing the Gospel and if that’s you I understand, want to encourage you that while #1 while the goal our of mission it witness, #2 the power for our mission is not in our own gifts and abilities but in the the Holy Spirit.

### **The Power for Our Mission**

Jesus makes it very clear in Mt. 28 that he will be with his disciples as they make disciples. And he’s with them through the Holy Spirit. In fact, Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ. So Jesus doesn’t just peace out. In a real way the book of Luke records the acts of Jesus on earth and Acts records the acts of Jesus from heaven through the Spirit. And because of that it’s not surprising that book of Acts mentions the Spirit far more than any other book in the NT! And it is the Holy Spirit that is going to emboldened and empower Christ’s people and cause the church to expand. He’s the key. And without him, trying to witness is pointless. Look at vs. 4 “And while saying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father”, which verse 5 says is the Holy Spirit.” (Illustration?)

Jesus is saying, like stay where you are; don’t even try to go out and witness this until you receive the Spirit because there’s no way you can do this on your own. Without the Spirit nothing happens. We are completely dependent on the Spirit to make our witness effective. This is great news! It means that when it comes to witnessing, God is not looking for your talent, but your willingness. Your willingness to open your mouth and allow the Spirit to work. The story of the early church is not a story about how the Gospel advances on the backs of a talented few. It’s the story of how the Holy Spirit used profoundly ordinary Christians to achieve extraordinary multiplication.

The explosive growth of the church has puzzled historians for years. According to Robert Wilken former history professor at UVA, by the year 200 there were a little over 200k Christians, by 250 over a million, by 300 over 6 million. One History Yale professor said we couldn’t really know. It was the Holy Spirit working through people who were desperate for and dependent on him Holy Spirit at every level and opened their mouths to witness. And if I’m just being honest, this kind of desperation for the Spirit seems to be lacking in our churches today. We’re skeptical of the Holy Spirit—we believe in Him but don’t really have a category for how he fits into our daily life. We wouldn’t say this, even feel like as long as we have Jesus we don’t really need the Spirit. And because of that many of us—myself included—often live with very little felt dependence on the Holy Spirit.

“If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.” (Tozer)

If the Holy Spirit disappeared from your life, would anything really change? Again Tozer, “The Spirit-filled life is not a special, deluxe edition of Christianity. It is part and parcel of the total plan of God for His

people.” And not only would we be arrogant to think that we don’t need the Spirit we would be fools to think we could accomplish anything for the sake of Christ without Him.

### The Scope of Our Mission

So the goal of our mission is witness. The power for our mission is the Holy Spirit and the last part of vs. 8 gives us the scope of our mission, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” And this three-fold progression really serves as the literary structure for the book of Acts. Chapters 1-7 the Gospel in Jerusalem. 8-11 Gospel in Judea and Samaria and 11-28 gospel to Europe and Rome.

Notice also that this progression starts locally and expands globally. And this is instructive for us as we witness. Jesus spent most of his time ministering in the greater Jerusalem area and he tells his disciples to start their witness where he has already witnessed with preaching and miracles for 3 years. I’ve seen local disciple-making ignored by people who say things like no one deserves to hear the Gospel twice when there are people who haven’t heard the Gospel once. And while Iraq doesn’t have a Gospel witness like Roanoke, the reality is that you are a Christian that God has placed in Roanoke. People ask how important is making disciples in Roanoke, and I say important enough that he brought you here. And if you live 99% of your life in Roanoke, it’s not ok to punt on making disciples here because you’re praying for India. Hudson Taylor said the light that shines the farthest shines the brightest at home.” This is why we did a series on network-evangelism so that we can witness to our Jerusalem. Small group question! Disciple-making starts at home, but in the end it can’t stay at home. It has to go to the ends of the earth.

At this moment, 7,102 people groups, 3.19 billion people 41.6% of the world has never heard the name of Jesus. Paul asks in rom. 10 How are they to hear without someone preaching and how are they to preach unless they are sent? His answer: they won’t. From it’s conception our church has had a heart for the nations. Look at the wall (flags outside). And I am extremely excited about the international missions work that God is preparing us for. We’re working on missions international trips in South America with the IMB and on the other side of the world with two of our IMB missionaries. We’ve just made a strategic hire. Josh Sizemore, both he and his wife former full-time IMB missionaries to Turkey both with M.Divs. in International Church Planting. Like when it comes to global disciple-making our foot is on the gas. We said that 2019 is the year of disciple-making. And whether it’s local or global I want us to live Sent. I want us to have a church culture where it’s uncomfortable to sit back and watch other people do ministry. Until Jesus returns, we have work to do... Vs. 9ff. Always rubbed me the wrong way. Why are we looking? Because someone just ascended into heaven that’s why!

“His departure means that they now have work to do. Jesus’s command means that they are not to gaze into the heavens idly, awaiting his return, but engage in the task Jesus has given them to do in the meantime.” (Bock, *Acts*)

To witness to the forgiveness of sins...