

## Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 65: The Acts of the Apostles, Part I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### *Introduction:*

The Book of Acts is the powerful and engaging account of the birth and growth of the Christian Church. The church would grow quickly from 120 committed disciples in Jerusalem to several hundred thousand throughout the Roman Empire, reaching the known world for Jesus.

The Greek word translated "acts" was generally used to describe the deeds of great and famous men. Since the book describes the works of a number of prominent men from the early church including the actions of Stephen, James, Barnabas, Peter and Paul, it appears to be an apt choice.

Of course, virtually every commentator points out, it is in fact, The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles since He is mentioned over seventy times and His work is described in each and every chapter.

Luke, in his Gospel, presented "*all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day He was taken, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.*" (vv. 1 and 2) In Acts he explains what Jesus continued to do through the Holy Spirit, keeping His promise in verse 8.

The ascension of Jesus, the closing episode in Luke, is also the climax of the opening events in Acts (v 11), showing that Luke's writing was continuous and supporting the possibility they may have been written at the same time.

Did Jesus do a good job of training and preparing His apostles for the work He intended for them to do as recorded in Luke? **The answer lies in the Acts!**

#### *Author:*

The person traditionally and almost universally accepted, as the writer of Acts is the same Dr. Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke. (For more personal information refer to the introduction of the Gospel of Luke.)

Luke was a close acquaintance of Peter and so had ready access to eyewitness and written accounts of the church's birth, dispersion and growth.

He later traveled with Paul as his companion, fellow worker, and personal physician (Col. 4:14), and thus had first hand knowledge of the church's missionary expansion.

Many commentators date The Book of Acts in Luke's later years approximately AD. 80 to 85. However, I must agree with those who date it AD. 60-61, around the same time he wrote his Gospel. There are two main reasons for this:

1. The form of the book leads us to believe he wrote the accounts to Theophilus in two successive documents, both historic and accurately documented so that Theophilus "*might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.*" (Luke 1:4) It makes sense that these would be written as quickly as possible to correct any error in stories being circulated about Jesus and the Church.

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2. Luke was a careful and accurate historian, "*Having investigated everything carefully . . . to write it . . . in consecutive order, . . .*" (Luke 1:3)

It was not his style to omit any important information about things that had already occurred, and yet, he did not record:

- 1) The martyrdom of James the brother of Jesus who was also the pastor of the church at Jerusalem in AD. 62.
- 2) The persecution of the church at Jerusalem under Nero in AD. 64
- 3) The final trial and death of Paul, Luke's friend and co-worker in 65-67
- 4) The fall of Jerusalem in AD. 70.

Since none of these are included, it is proper to conclude that Luke wrote the book before they happened, meaning between AD. 60-61.

Bible Survey Lesson 66: The Acts of the Apostles, Part II

### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### *Introduction:*

The entire Book of Acts is outlined for us in one verse. The complete history of the early church, its birth and its growth, is summarized in one verse. And God's plan for his church is also contained in that same verse.

#### **READ ACTS 1:8--NASB**

Jesus commissioned, even commanded, His followers:

*"you shall receive POWER . . ."*

The Greek work translated "power" is, as most of you know, the word *dynamos*, the root work for our word dynamite. There is no doubt that word speaks to us of great explosive power. It is only lacking in its duration of effectiveness.

I prefer another English derivation of *dynamos*, the work dynamo. A dynamo is that big machine in a hydra-electric dam that puts out a continuous flow of great power that, rather than exploding--causing an effect and disappearing, is an ongoing source of unlimited power.

The followers of Christ will receive ongoing, unlimited, supernatural power from the Holy Spirit to do God's job. ***What job?***

*"you shall be My WITNESSES . . ."*

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What is a witness? Simply, one who tells what they have seen, heard and experienced. So, the followers will receive supernatural power for the purpose of accounting to others what they have know. *Where?*

*"in JERUSALEM, . . ."*

The followers of Christ are responsible to share what they know at home. The events of the rejection, crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah happened in Jerusalem, and that is where the eyewitnesses are. There is, therefore, no excuse for failing to spread the "Good News" throughout the sphere of influence of that city.

But the power given to them is unlimited and with great privilege comes great responsibility, so they must witness beyond Jerusalem

*"in all JUDEA and SAMARIA, . . ."*

The followers of Jesus are also responsible to witness throughout their larger sphere of influence, their county or district, and their state or province. Supernatural power makes it possible so they have no excuse.

God's plan is a grand one. His followers must stretch out beyond their wildest imaginings and reach . . .

*"even to the REMOTEST PART OF THE EARTH."*

Jesus has entrusted the salvation message, not to angels, or prophets, or kings, or nations, or educators, but to His followers.

The question answered in Acts is *"How did they do?" Let's find out!*

### **I. WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM (Chapters 1:1-8:3)**

For forty days before He ascended back into heaven, Jesus prepared the disciples for their great task, giving them the blueprint for world evangelism and promising them the power to make it happen.

*And it happened!*

#### **A. Conception of the Church (1)**

The few remaining close followers of Jesus returned to the upper room to obediently wait for God to work. We know this is what they were doing because they continued to pray together and do business. They replaced the dead traitor, Judas, with Matthias who had been with them to see and be instructed by the risen Christ.

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### **B. Birth of the Church (2)**

*"They received power"* just as Jesus had promised. It was immediate and obvious. They were speaking the *"mighty acts of God"* and people from all over the Roman Empire and in town for the Holy days understood every word they said, each in his own language.

Then Peter preached Jesus, the Messiah, alive, working miracles, *"delivered up by the predetermined plan of God, . . . nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men,"* raised up again by God, ascended and sitting at the right hand of God, offering salvation.

And, *"there were added that day about three thousand souls."* (v 41) Just read verses 42-47. They started acting like a church. They studied together, ate together, prayed together. They witnessed, ministered to the needs of the body, praised and worshipped, *"And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."* (v. 47)

### **C. Growth of the Church (3:1-8:3)**

The growth of the church had just begun and would accelerate, fueled by three things:

#### **1. Pentecost**

The power that began at Pentecost continued and *"many wonders and signs were taking place."* Peter healed an incurable cripple drawing a huge crowd.

#### **2. Preaching**

Peter again presents the Gospel message and this time five thousand believe. The church beginning with 120 is growing supernaturally fast with over 8000 in a matter of days. That is good news and bad news for the Apostles.

#### **3. Persecution**

*The religious leaders* see thousands of Jews following Jesus and imagine all their loss of power, influence, and revenue.

*The Romans* see a growing sect of fanatics now large enough to bring insurrection and rebellion to the Empire.

*The artisans and shopkeepers* see loss of revenue as the new believers stop buying trinkets, amulets, statues and souvenirs.

The persecution comes to a climax with the arrest and trial of a newly appointed deacon of the church, Stephen. He is framed by the elders and scribes and brought to the council to answer the charge of preaching destruction of the temple.

In answer to the charges he preached a glorious sermon taking the council from Abraham, through Joseph, Moses, David and Solomon, all the way up to the murder of their Messiah. *They stoned him!*

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The stoning of Stephen brought a new and violent attempt to destroy the church, led by a young Pharisee, Saul, who *"began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put into prison."* (8:3)

### **II. WITNESSES IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA (Chapters 8:4-12:25)**

Persecution drove the Christians out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria. They had little choice. They had no jobs, no families, no homes, no safety, no security, no future. It was leave or die.

But, *"those who had been scattered went about preaching the word."* (v. 4) Little did Saul know that even now, as an enemy of God, he was spreading the Gospel.

#### **A. Philip Preached (8:4-40)**

One of those who left Jerusalem was Philip, one of the seven chosen Deacons. He settled in *"the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them."* (v 5)

He was a gifted evangelist and *"multitudes"* listened to him preach. But, in the middle of this successful evangelistic crusade among the cities of Samaria, an angel told him to leave his successful meetings and go down to a desert road running south from Jerusalem to North Africa.

Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia, actually introduced the gospel to North Africa, which later became a stronghold of Christianity. This then becomes an early step toward fulfilling the last part of the commission.

#### **B. Paul Prepared (9)**

Chapter 9 is the famous account of Saul's conversion. Saul meets the Lord and the persecutor becomes the preacher. He is taken to Damascus to be discipled by Ananias.

Paul, *"immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues saying, 'He is the Son of God.'"* (v. 20) but it took Barnabus to convince the church that he was truly converted.

#### **C. Peter Prepared (10-11)**

Peter, through a vision and a message from God, learns that God intends the Gospel to go to gentiles as well as Jews. He experiences this first hand as he leads a Roman centurion, Cornelius, to faith in Jesus.

Peter became the driving force behind the church's outreach to gentiles stating, *"God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."* (11:18)

Word came to Jerusalem that there was a "Greek Church" in Antioch, so the leaders sent Barnabus to check it out. He was so impressed he went to Tarsus to find Paul to join him and went back to minister at that church.

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### **D. People Persecuted (12)**

Persecution increased as the church grew. Herod turned up the heat:

John's brother, James was run through with a sword. Peter was arrested and only a miracle saved him, but the church was on the run again. Herod's death was encouraging, but Roman and Jewish pressure remained

*"But, the Word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied."(v. 24)*

### **IV. WITNESSES TO THE REMOTEST PART OF EARTH (Chapters 13-28)**

Out of Jerusalem, a struggling Jewish congregation, and Antioch, a thriving Gentile congregation comes a missionary movement that will change the world.

#### **A. Paul, the Missionary Pioneer (13:1-21:26)**

The church at Antioch was filled with gifted men (13:1). The Holy Spirit led them to commission Barnabas and Paul for a special work that would spearhead the fulfillment of the last part of the great commission, to reach the remotest parts of the earth.

#### **1. Trip #1 (13:4-15:35) See back of your Bible for a map of Paul's journeys**

The first trip is relatively short, with Barnabas leading, Paul preaching, and John Mark along to help. They went to Cyprus (Barnabas' home), over to the Galatian mainland to Perga (where Mark split to go home), Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and as far as Derby.

The gentiles responded and the Jews *"instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas,"* (13:50) They doubled back, organizing churches, appointing elders, and training them before returning home.

A council at Jerusalem was called to debate whether a gentile had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian and that took Paul and Barnabas to that city. They took the official letter from the church back to Antioch. This explains why, on this map, their second trip is started from Jerusalem.

#### **2. Trip #2 (15:36-18:22)**

The purpose of the second trip was to *"visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of God, and see how they are."* (15:36)

Paul and Barnabas separated over the issue of taking Mark. Paul took Silas with him and headed north while Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Crete. This time Paul took an overland route and went far beyond the preview of their first trip. He revisited each of those churches, meeting Timothy in Lystra and taking him along.

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This long journey was led by the Holy Spirit and they ended up in the Macedonian city of Philippi, then on to Thessalonica, Berea and down to Athens. The entire trip was filled with thrilling episodes, but we don't have time to sightsee. It was in Athens that Paul delivered his classic sermon based on their "Unknown God."

Paul traveled on to Corinth where he met Aquila and Priscilla who traveled with him as far as Ephesus on his return trip to Caesarea and Jerusalem then home to Antioch.

### **3. Trip # 3 (18:23-21:26)**

The third trip began as the second, revisiting and strengthening the churches in Galatia and Phrygia. He visited Ephesus, spent considerable time in Greece and followed the coast on a series of ships to Patara, then back to Tyre, Caesarea, ending in Jerusalem.

### **B. Paul, the Model Prisoner (21:27-28:31)**

It was while in Jerusalem that his final troubles began. Persecution from the Jews and Romans would lead him on one last trip, to Rome, and to his death (not recorded in Acts).

#### **1. Treatment (21:27-23:35)**

The men who had been chasing Paul all through Asia Minor saw him in the Temple and started to stir up a mob against him. They grabbed him and were beating him when the commander of the Roman garrison came to his rescue.

He was chained and questioned and when found to be an educated man from Tarsus, was allowed to address the mob from the steps of the garrison going into the temple. He preached the truth, inciting a riot, and was about to be flogged by the Roman commander when he found out Paul was a Roman citizen. He kept him safe for the night but put him before the Sanhedrin the following day.

His confrontation with the religious leaders brought such a stir that the Roman soldiers came again to save him, and he finally agreed to start the Roman process of justice that would bring him to Rome.

#### **2. Triumphs (24-26)**

From here to the end of his life Paul is at his triumphant best. He gets to speak before rulers and kings, just as Jesus had promised.

He will present the gospel to Felix, governor of Judea, Festus, who replaced Felix, Agrippa, Puppet King of Judea, before he appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome.

#### **3. Travels (27-28)**

This last trip was an exciting one. He was shipwrecked, saving the lives of all hands and the soldiers sent to guard him. He was bit by a viper, allowing him to witness to the people of Malta. He finally arrived in Rome, capital of the Empire.

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**The end of his life was glorious.** He was under a very loose house arrest, able to receive many visitors and free to write many of the Epistles which we need to understand salvation by grace through faith and other key doctrines of our Lord.

### ***Lessons:***

1. Luke shows us that God has a plan, His plan includes His people, and His plan cannot be stopped.
2. The "great commission" has never been rescinded. We need to be working toward taking the Gospel to the entire world.
3. Everything the church accomplishes is done in the power of the Holy Spirit.
4. Persecution is a reaction to the effective work of the church, but, persecution causes the church to grow even faster.