

ACTS

SMALL BEGINNINGS



Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. Acts 1:1-11 — An Ascending Saviour
- III. Acts 2:1-40 — A Day Called Pentecost
- IV. Acts 3:1-10 — A Miraculous Name

Introduction

Introduction

Acts is the story of God's grace flooding out to the world. Nothing is more prominent in Acts than the spread of the gospel. Jesus promises a geographic expansion, and Acts follows the news of his death and resurrection as it spreads from a small group of disciples in Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and to the capital of Rome.

Through the repeated preaching of the gospel to different people groups, the gospel draws people in, constitutes people as the church, and then sends people out on mission to the world. *Acts is a historical account of how the resurrection of Jesus changes everything.*

God is central to the gospel's expansion. He is at the heart of the gospel message and, through the Holy Spirit, he is responsible for its growth. The gospel expands through the power of God despite significant barriers of geography, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, wealth, persecution, weakness, suffering, sickness, and imprisonment.

Many of these barriers appear so impregnable that, when the gospel is preached to a new segment of society, riots ensue. But no one is beyond God's saving power, and neither is anyone exempt from the need for redeeming grace.

Placing It in the Bigger Story

Acts shows that this new Christian movement is not a fringe sect, but the culmination of God's plan of redemption. What was seen only as shadows in the Old Testament, God now reveals more fully through Jesus Christ. The book of Acts does not primarily provide human patterns to emulate or avoid. Instead, it repeatedly calls us to reflect upon the work of God, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and how it establishes the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel's expansion is the culmination of what God has been doing through the Old Testament, and through the Gospels. Acts reveals God to be the great benefactor who pours out blessings on all people. Even the opportunity to repent is a gift from God.

AN ASCENDING SAVIOUR

Acts 1:1-11

Acts 1:1-11

An Ascending Saviour

Scripture Text

Acts 1:1-11

Big Idea

Jesus has promised to empower us with the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel to the ends of the world. Therefore, all believers can joyfully receive the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in order to live their lives proclaiming and following Jesus.

Overview

The Acts of the Apostles is the second volume authored by Luke, the Greek physician who was Paul's companion during his mission to proclaim the gospel. Similarly, the second volume is also addressed to Theophilus (Acts 1:1).

Acts follows the story of Jesus presented in Luke's Gospel, with the disciples of Jesus bringing the gospel to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8). Luke's gospel begins with reference to the Gentile world and culminates in Jerusalem. Acts begins from Jerusalem, with the gospel going forth to the ends of the earth. At the heart of the Gospel of Luke is the resurrection of Jesus. At the heart of the book of Acts is the ascension of Jesus, whose mediatory work at the right hand of the Father sends the Spirit to empower his church for the mission of the gospel.

Observation and Meaning

The English word 'ascend' has two main meanings. The first meaning is 'to go up'. The second meaning is 'to ascend to a throne' (to become king). In Japanese, there is another word apart from 'shouten'. The word 'soku' means 'to rise up the steps and get to the throne'. Everything Jesus began to do on earth as a man, he continues to do from heaven as the King of kings.

1. What do we learn about the role of a prophet from the phrase '*speaking about the kingdom of God*' in Acts 1:3 (see also Luke 24:13-35 and Acts 8:26-40)?
2. In Acts 1:5, what does Jesus mean when he says to the disciples "*John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit*" (see Acts 1:8, Luke 24:48, Isaiah 32:15 and Ezekiel 11:18-20)?
3. Why did the disciples have to receive the Holy Spirit? What is the purpose of it for the kingdom of God (Acts 1:8)?
4. Notice what the two men in white robes said to the disciples (Acts 1:11). What prompted them to say this? What might the disciples have felt or what might they have been thinking?

Application

- Having ascended, Jesus is no longer constrained by time and space. He affects the whole earth. What are the implications of this for you (see Matthew 28:20)?
- How might you, in view of Jesus' charge to be his witness, be simply standing and looking into heaven? In other words, how might you have dismissed Jesus' charge to be a witness and in so doing have overlooked the role of the Holy Spirit in your life?
- In what way do you lack a sense of urgency when it comes to speaking about and living out the gospel? In what ways do the cross and the Holy Spirit empower you to be a witness for Jesus' kingdom (consider the roles of prophet, priest and king)?

**Jesus Christ became your representative before God,
long before he ever called you to be his representative to the nations.**

A DAY CALLED PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-40

Acts 2:1-40

A Day Called Pentecost

Scripture Text

Acts 2:1-40

Big Idea

The Holy Spirit is given to the church to empower all tribes and tongues to be unified and to preach the good news to all nations. Therefore, we need to be personally and regularly filled by the Holy Spirit. We do this not for selfish gain, but in order that our lives might faithfully display and proclaim the gospel to all nations. The promise of salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to all, and the right response is to repent and turn to Jesus by faith.

Overview

If the events in this passage really happened, why don't they happen every time we gather as a church? We know these are not random events and that there is a deeper reason why things happened the way they did. The Greek word '*Pentecost*' means '*fiftieth*', and those present on the Day of Pentecost would have been aware of another '*fiftieth*' event.

The events described in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit appeared and rested as tongues of fire on individual believers, occurred on the '*Feast of Shavuot*' (the Day of Pentecost). This was the same day the Jews were celebrating God's giving of the ten commandments (the Torah) on tablets of stone. This was the day God chose to send the Holy Spirit to write His commandments on the hearts of His people. It confirmed God's promise in Jeremiah 31:31-34, and it confirmed the promise Jesus had told His disciples (Acts 1:4).

There are deliberate comparisons between the Day of Pentecost and the day Moses came down Mount Sinai:

- Both events took place at the same time on the same month, and happened to a newly redeemed people. The Exodus marked the birth of the Israelite nation while Pentecost marks the birth of Christianity.
- Both events involved God's people receiving a gift. The Israelites received the law (the Torah) and the disciples received the Holy Spirit.
- The Israelites left Egypt on Passover and 40 days later arrived at Sinai. Then Moses went up on a mountain to see God (Mount Sinai). Ten days later Moses came down with the ten commandments (the Torah) and the Israelites broke the covenant. 3000 people died as a result (Exodus 32:28). Jesus died on Passover and 40 days later went up on a mountain to see God (Mount of Olives). Ten days after Jesus ascended, the Holy Spirit came down and 3000 people were saved (Acts 2:41).
- Both events had similar sounds and symbols: wind, fire, smoke, and voices. The Hebrew word for 'thunder' in Exodus is 'kolot', which means 'voices' or 'languages'.

- The fire at Sinai was one fire visible by all. The fire at Pentecost was individual fires on every person. At Sinai the people were kept away from the fire, but at Pentecost the fire came to the people.
- In both events God gave His commandments (the Torah) to His people and in both cases He sealed the covenant He had made with them. At Sinai He gave the Law written by His finger on tablets of stone. At Pentecost, He gave the Law written on people's hearts.
- In both events a mixed multitude of people were represented (Exodus 12:38 and Acts 2:5).
- The law (the Torah) attempted to change people from the *outside*. The Holy Spirit attempts to change people from the *inside*. The word 'Torah' means 'teaching,' and the Holy Spirit is called 'the teacher' (John 14:26).

In Acts, chapter two, God shows up again in the same way He came before. The disciples see fire and smoke. They hear voices and the place shakes violently. *God is moving, but what is He wanting to communicate?*

Observation and Meaning

1. How does the scene of Pentecost draw reference from the following Old Testament imagery, and what might it represent in Acts, chapter two?
 - **Tongues of fire** (Exodus 3, 13:21-22)
 - **Rushing wind** (Genesis 1:2, Ezekiel 37:7-10, John 3:5-8))
 - **Tongues of the nation** (Psalm 22:27, 66:4, 72:11, 86:9, Genesis 11:1-9)
 - **Outpouring of God's Spirit** (Numbers: 11:16-30, Joel 2:28)
2. Why were the people '*cut to the heart*' (Acts 2:37)? What did Peter urge them to do in response to being '*cut to the heart*' (Acts 2:38)?
3. Peter urges the crowd to "*repent and be baptised*" (Acts 2:37). As believers, what significance does water baptism have for our lives?
4. What is the promise (see Acts 2:39)? What is its purpose and to who does it apply?

Application

- What hinders you from confessing your sins to God? What prevents you from being '*cut to the heart*' and turning from your sins?
- When you gain a *fresh awareness of God's holiness* and a *fresh awareness of your own sinfulness* (both of which are a gift of the Holy Spirit), how do you try to fill the gap? In other words, what kind of self-effort do you resort to in order not to be exposed for who you really are (such as disconnecting, comparing, critiquing, boasting, defending, pretending or strategising)?
- Martin Luther famously said '*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*' How are you using repentance as a gift from God in your daily life? How does the promise of the Holy Spirit encourage and enable you to lead a life of repentance?

A MIRACULOUS NAME

Acts 3:1-10

Acts 3:1-10

A Miraculous Name

Scripture Text

Acts 3:1-10

Big Idea

Jesus has inaugurated the kingdom of God, and it is our duty to continue to extend it through faith in Jesus' name.

Overview

The first three chapters of the book of Acts form a triad. They focus on the Holy Spirit and his empowerment for witnessing to the name of Jesus:

1. the apostles **wait** for the Spirit.
2. the apostles **witness** the coming of the Spirit
3. the apostles are **empowered** with the Spirit

Some people have been in churches which focus all their attention on the miraculous. Some people have heard about miraculous events which have been proven to be false. Others watch televangelists who use the miraculous to promote themselves and increase their wealth. We must safe guard our hearts from either becoming cynical, or from seeking external signs and wonders at the expense of God's inner workings in our lives. This is why we need a biblically informed understanding of the miraculous. John explains that '*Jesus did many other signs... But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*' (John 20:30-31).

Miracles point upwards to Jesus.

Miracles point forwards to the

future. Miracles point inwards to

our real need. Miracles point

backwards to the cross.

Observation and Meaning

1. Compare the healing of the lame man (Acts 3:1-20) with Jesus' healing of the paralysed man (Luke 5:17-26). What similarities and differences are there between these two accounts?
2. Peter and John ask the lame man to "*Look at us*" (Acts 3:4), before asking the people "*why do you stare at us?*" (Acts 3:12). How might we explain this apparent contradiction?
3. What was the lame man expecting from Peter and John? How is what Peter offered better than what the lame man was hoping for (Acts 3:6)?
4. When Luke records the lame man '*leaping and praising God*' (Acts 3:8), he sees this as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 35:6). When Peter refers to the '*Righteous One*' (Acts 3:14), he is also referencing to Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 53:11). In what way have we, as believers, been miraculously healed through the anguish and sufferings of Jesus (Isaiah 53:4-5)?

Application

- What is your attitude towards the miraculous? Why do you think this way?
- The power of God's salvation not only produces generosity, it also produces concern for the weak. This is what we see in Peter and John's interaction with the beggar. No wealth was required in order for Peter and John to be a channel for God's grace to transform this man's body and heart. Peter and John had no money, and neither did the beggar. Therefore, the lame beggar had nothing to offer in exchange for healing. Jesus extends his power to those who have no right to claim it. How might you extend God's grace in the coming days to those who have nothing to offer in exchange?
- What are some specific '*miraculous works*' you have experienced (this could be a story about sanctification or about a miraculous event)?

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