

OPENING LECTURE
OVERVIEW OF ACTS
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It was back in the fall of 2013 that we last studied the Book of Acts. The world has changed a lot in the first quarter of the 21st century – we’ve had seven presidential elections, suffered a horrendous act of terrorism on American soil, and seen the morals of the country become even more liberal. We can be thankful that we live in a nation where elections are free and we can have a voice in our government; where we can take satisfaction that the terrorist was found and executed; and, now how we should be concerned for our future and the future of our children as society is rapidly changing and embracing new so-called “freedoms.”

Television has become more adamant in showing open homosexual lifestyles portrayed as being “normal.” Trying to find any movie to watch without graphic violence or offensive language is a real challenge. Changing times are not new. “The younger generation no longer respects its elders. Students tyrannize teachers. Children fail to rise when elders enter a room and have atrocious manners.” So said Socrates. It’s still a world in a state of flux.

And the church has undergone change too. It’s no longer the “little brown church in the vale.” Styles of worship, music and its presentation, outreach programs, multiple services in many places – it’s ever evolving. People of the Word itself has had to cope with change: new property to accommodate our Bible study, the expansion of Zoom groups, and the need to incorporate so monies donated can be tax right offs to offset lack of church support.

The Book of Acts is about the church . . . not a building, but a bride. A people called out of the world and pledged in fidelity and loyalty to the Bridegroom – the risen Lord Jesus Christ. We need the Book of Acts to form a bridge for the transition from the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and triumphant resurrection to His ascension and promised return, the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost, and the spread of the gospel message to the world outside Jerusalem.

Acts is a book about decades of transition. So, we must be careful about getting **all** of our doctrinal foundation from just this book of the Bible, because we may be trying to set in cement something that God hadn’t fully formed yet. As we study the rest of the New Testament writings of Paul, Peter, James, John and the writer to the Hebrews, we will see the basic tenets of faith become fully solidified as the Holy Spirit was moving and growing these new Christians. But Acts is the foundation.

I have a dozen commentaries on my shelf and they have names like *The Birth of the Body*, *The Growth of the Body*, *The Spreading Flame*, *Wind and Fire*, *Drumbeat of Love*, *The Acts of God*, “*The Spirit, the Church and the World*,” *Be Dynamic*, *Be Daring* –

just to name a few. All of those titles punctuate the exciting emphasis that Bible scholar and translator J. B. Phillips gives us in his commentary on Acts. He writes:

"One cannot spend several months of study in this book without being profoundly stirred and, to be honest, disturbed. The reader is stirred because he is seeing Christianity, the real thing, in action for the first time in human history. Here we are seeing the church in its first youth, vibrant and unspoiled . . . a body of ordinary men and women joined in an unconquerable fellowship never before seen on this earth.

"But the reader is also disturbed for surely this is the church as it was meant to be. It is vigorous and flexible, for these are days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle-bound by over-organization. These men did not make "acts of faith," they believed; they did not "say their prayers," they really prayed. They did not hold conferences on psychosomatic medicine; they simply healed the sick.

"Because of their willingness to believe, to obey, to give, to suffer, and, if necessary to die, the Holy Spirit worked through them to revolutionize the western world for the cause of Jesus Christ."

I picked out another title from the third stanza of an old, familiar gospel song to name the book of Acts, "Like a might army / Moves the Church of God; / Brothers, we are treading / Where the saints have trod." That hymn is "Onward Christian Soldiers." If you ever feel like you're alone in this pursuit toward heaven, come back to the book of Acts and you'll see that you are interwoven and interrelated with some of the greatest men and women who ever lived. Their stories are found in this book.

That's what we're going to be studying – the birth of the church, its infancy, its persecution, its expansion, its vision, its impact. These 28 chapters written by Dr. Luke (the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke), are crammed with accounts of healing, martyrdom, imprisonment, conversions, dangers, shipwrecks, rescues and riots. There are almost 100 personal names mentioned, and Luke discovered that the thrilling truths about Jesus' followers – their acts of benevolence, acts of courage, acts of worship, acts of sharing faith – were too good not to be recorded for posterity.

Perhaps some of you can remember the 1984 Olympics held here in Los Angeles – A single runner winds his way toward a packed stadium. His is the last leg of a relay that has taken other runners across open farmland, along vast oceans, and through busy city streets. This was an inspiring journey, one that fulfills an ancient tradition – to carry the Olympic flame.

Then, as this final torchbearer entered a dark passageway and then emerges into the brilliant arena, the crowd erupted in thunderous applause. Holding the flame high, the runner ascended a towering flight of stairs at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. As

he reached the top, he turned and grandly lit a gigantic torch – the symbol of the Olympic spirit.

The Bible traces a similar relay, only with a different flame – the flame of Christ. The Old Testament patriarchs and prophets carried it bravely, passing it on through each generation until Christ Himself stepped into the world, but it exploded in its ultimate glory and power when Jesus conquered death and rose from the grave.

At that time, new torchbearers took Christ's fire into their hearts and began spreading His flame. The book of Acts is their story.

Acts is usually considered one of five historical books in the New Testament. The first four are the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books are all accounts of the life of Christ and, more accurately, biographic viewpoints. But Acts is a true history book, putting shoe leather on the gospels so that we can see how the early Christians lived out the teachings of Christ.

Broadly speaking, we can say that Acts is a sequel to all the gospels. Notice how each gospel ends:

Matthew: with Christ's resurrection (28:1-10)

Mark: with Christ's ascension (16:19)

Luke: with Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit (24:49)

John: with Christ's second coming (21:22)

In the first eleven verses of Acts, the author presents all four of these key themes and shows how they relate to the church. In this way, Acts becomes that bridge, taking us from the life of Christ in the Gospels to the practical theology of the Epistles.

There are several ways the Book of Acts could be outlined and made clear:

First there is the geographical outline given by the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:8 – you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem (Acts chapters 1-7), and in all Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12), and to the ends of the earth (Acts 13-28).

Second could be a chronological outline –

Ascension to Pentecost – Acts 1

Pentecost to the death of Stephen – Acts 2-7

Stephen's death to Saul's conversion – Acts 8-9

Saul's conversion to his missionary journeys – Acts 10-12

Paul's missionary journeys to his arrival in Rome – Acts 13-28

Third is a biographical outline that shows us the two dominant personalities of the book: Peter – Acts 1-12, Paul – Acts 13-28

With a team of excellent lecturers this year, there is no “one” particular outline that we’ll follow. In the gospels we find Jesus Christ offering His life, but in the book of Acts we find Jesus offering His power. More often than not we’re going to be emphasizing that amazing gift.

Several years ago, the *Discipleship Journal* had some good ads that were really applicable to our study. One showed a plug coming out of a Bible. Another ad showed a set of battery jumper cables commonly used to jump-start a stalled car.

In the case of the plug coming from the Bible . . . it needs a source of power to plug into. That’s you – the Christian – full of Holy Spirit power! We know that God’s power of the gospel message is given through the medium of preaching. God uses us to energize His Word in hearts and minds of the non-believer as we faithfully proclaim it to the world.

But I like the idea of the jumper cables because they show that power is available in both sources . . . both God’s Word and the believer. Sometimes we need a “jump start” from God’s Word to motivate us, renew us and prod us, if you will, to continue to be faithful to the Great Commission.

Other times we can use Scripture to “jump start” a conversation that leads to our witness . . . much as Philip did with the Ethiopian eunuch.

The very word “power” usually leads us to think of noise, movement, pulsating, throbbing or exploding or any of those descriptions we associate with power. But Holy Spirit power is like the traffic officer who holds up his white gloves of authority to the oncoming car. The glove does not stop the car, but the power or authority it represents can. It’s silent power. That’s why sometimes we don’t recognize we have it.

You know where His silent power works best? In funeral homes where people are coping with the ultimate factors of this life . . . death. It’s at work in the hospital room where the news is not good. The power goes to work.

Some of you here now have been through some low tides in your life this last year. You’re probably thinking, “I can’t believe where I’ve been. I would never have believed it if someone would have told me ahead of time this is what I’d be coping with today.” But you’re here. You don’t look any different on the outside, but inside you know it’s only by God’s grace and power at work in you that you’re still looking forward and not dwelling on the past.

There was persecution in the early church. Saul (later to be called Paul) was one of the zealous leaders. But when the new converts were out preaching and witnessing and stirring up the persecution, they weren’t talking about the church. They witnessed about Jesus! What He could do. How He could work. What a fantastic person He is. Is

that your witness? We don't need people out talking about the church . . . we need people talking about Christ. And the only way we have the confidence to do that is with the authority of Scripture to back it up, but first we need to know those Scriptures. That's why we're into another year of in-depth Bible study.

The purpose of this study in the book of Acts is to make living the Christian life so comfortable, so natural, so much a part of you that, not only will your very lifestyle be a witness for Christ, but you will know with confidence that you have the power of the Holy Spirit to minister to others because Christ has ministered to you. You can share your testimony because of the change He has made in your life; and you have the God given power to lead someone else away from Hell and into Christ through the power of God's Word. This is the exciting and powerful goal of this Bible study!

As with any new infant, the "first" time he crawls or walks or talks is exciting. The infant church in the book of Acts has some firsts too:

- Peter's first sermon
- the first opposition
- the first discipline
- the first persecution
- the first organization
- the first martyrdom
- the first missionary thrust to the Gentiles
- the first occurrence of being called "Christians"
- the first organized approach to world evangelism

When I first started to study the Bible, for some reason I had a hard time grasping that Peter and Paul were aging through the book of Acts. This book covers about a 33-34-year period. Paul is no spring chicken as he travels, and evangelizes and eventually winds up in Rome. As he traveled, he wrote First and Second Thessalonians from Corinth on his second missionary journey. On his third journey, he wrote:

- First Corinthians from Ephesus
- Second Corinthians from Macedonia
- Galatians from Macedonia or Greece
- Romans from Corinth

In Rome under house-arrest for two years, he wrote four more of his letters, commonly called the "prison epistles." They are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. And shortly before his death, he wrote First and Second Timothy and Titus.

Our God likes things done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40) and He is not a God of confusion. And the very last thing we can do is put God in a box. There are times when He may work exactly as He did in the book of Acts, and there are times when He may not. Most of us didn't have a conversion experience like Paul's. Most of us have not stood up to speak of Christ and have 3,000 souls converted in a day. Some of us may

have had honest disagreements with other Christians that have broken relationships like Paul and Barnabas experienced. We may have had to say farewell to dear Christian brothers and sisters as God led us or them to another place.

In fact, we can see a great comparison between Luke's story of the church and our own Christian development. We, too, go through stages of establishing, scattering and extending.

As new Christians, we enter a period of putting down roots; becoming established. It's a nurturing time when Christ holds us close to Himself, often protecting us from many of life's pains and giving us a sturdy foundation. Then, according to His timetable, the next phase begins.

Persecution and pain, discomfort and disappointment are the watermarks of this stage. This time may bring a literal scattering – moving away from family or friends as a result of layoffs at work or changes in careers. Or it may mean an emotional scattering that comes from broken relationships or topsy-turvy circumstances. Through such times, the Lord strengthens us so that eventually, we enter another phase of life.

Having profited from life's lessons, we become seasoned, mature servants of Christ – cracks and all. We're extensions that reach out to comfort and encourage the young in faith. He uses us as vessels that overflow with the message of Christ's power and faithfulness to His committed followers. We're meant to continue to carry the torch. But you can't light another's candle of hope if your own torch of faith isn't burning.

There is much to learn from our study of the Book of Acts. We will do our best as we study together to bring application and insight to the lessons you work as home. Let's not be afraid of change . . . as they say, "change is the only thing constant." Let the Holy Spirit begin to change you through the power of God's Word and through the friendships you'll make in your small groups. My prayer for each and every one of you is that your thirst for the Word of God will grow and this will be an enriching study for all of us.

To accompany our study of Acts, we're going to delve into some church history. It's usually studied in a classroom setting and not from the pulpit. It is important, however, that we gain knowledge of those who have gone before us and inspire us with their lives of faith. Each lesson will have short biographies of two lives and we're going to ask you to read them on a volunteer basis. There is nothing for you to prepare. You'll be given the printed version a week before it's your turn to share and you simply read it. These biographies are also on our People of the Word website. I want to thank Beverly Ashworth for typing these biographies.

We also have two special lectures that will cover the First Thousand Years of Christianity, and the Second Thousand Years of Christianity. Those two weeks you will

not have a lesson to prepare or small group time, but an extended lecture time that will give you a meaningful overview of how Christianity came to be where we are today. We have Laurel Porro, a gifted teacher and former member of People of the Word, to thank for these essays first given in 2013.

My personal prayer for each of you is that this will be a year of spiritual growth, a new appreciation for those who have gone before us, and a deepening of relationships within your small groups.