

Usually when I preach, I like to work my way through whole books of the Bible, and my preference has always been, to teach from the letters – the epistles... And it'd be very tempting for me to just stay in the letters, because I find them easy to preach from, but we need to have a **balanced** diet of God's word, and so sometimes we work our way through the Gospels; sometimes we delve into themes within the Old Testament...

But I've actually very rarely preached from the book of Acts, and I've certainly never taken a congregation right through it... And the book of Acts, is a genre (a type of literature) all of its own. Some people, when they read the book of Acts, think they're just reading history, and it is history, but it's much **more** than that – it's packed full of theology – it's packed full of what we can learn about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.... And in the Bible, the book of Acts, is the only transition that we have, between the gospels and the letters.

The gospels record of what Jesus said and did, right up until Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and that's where they stop. And then the letters are written to established churches... And there's a big gap there – What happened, between these times??? What happened, that this small group of disciples (about 120 in all) – a group who's leader had left them and gone up into heaven... What happened, that from these few, reluctant; cowering; uncertain; confused, individuals, ,,,, churches had sprung up and grown, all over the known world????

How did it come to this???? What did God do??? How did the disciples achieve it??? What did the early church look like??? How did they function???

And the answers to all of these questions, we find, right here in the book of Acts. And as we study this book, my prayer, is that God would show us, how we could have a similar effect on the world around us, as what those disciples had, on the world around them.

So, let's begin. Acts 1:1...

The book of acts, is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of a 2 volume work. It was written by Dr Luke, who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. Luke was a gentile medical doctor (and in fact, I understand that Luke is the **only non-Jewish** writer of any of the Bible), and so that makes it unique for a start. And in both the Gospel of Luke, and the book of Acts, we can begin to appreciate the analysis of Luke's scientific brain and the detail that he records of the events.

And both the Gospel of Luke and the book that we know as "The Acts of the Apostles", were written for the benefit a bloke by the name of "Theophilus". The name "Theophilus", can mean either "God lover", or "Loved by God", and we don't know who this bloke is. There is speculation that both Luke and Acts were written to be used in Paul's defence, when he was on trial in Rome, and there's some **very good** evidence for that, but we don't know, so that only remains an interesting speculation.

The Gospel of **Luke** begins: **Luke 1** Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as

those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

And then the gospel of Luke unfolds. And now, the second volume – the book of Acts begins: Acts 1:1 **1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,**

And then comes the book of Acts, and it's **very** obvious that Jesus' activity in the world, has **not** come to an end, with His departure. These are the things that Jesus **began** to do and teach, and now he continues it, through His apostles....

Now, Luke doesn't give his book a title. The church has come to know it as "The acts of the Apostles", or just simply "Acts". Really, I reckon a better name, would be "The acts of the Holy Spirit", or "The acts of God", or "The acts of Jesus Christ, through His Holy Spirit"... Because this is what Jesus is **continuing** to do in the world....

OK... Today's reading (Acts 1) introduces a fair bit of the content that we're going to encounter over the next few months, and I'm going to highlight these with headings:

1. The first heading is: Jesus Lives

The Book of Acts picks up the story **after** the resurrection. After Jesus has been raised from the dead, He appeared to His disciples for a period of 40 days, and during that time, He gave them commandments, and He taught them about the Kingdom of God. And we're going to find, that unsurprisingly, the resurrection is a critical element to the message that the disciples will share.

2. The second heading I've given is: Holy Spirit

The highlight of the book of Acts, comes in Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost. And that is the chapter of Acts that **most** of us will be most familiar with, as we celebrate Pentecost – Whitsunday – the day when the Holy Spirit came upon the Early church.

And right from the beginning of chapter 1, it's looking forward **to** this highlight. Jesus **tells** His disciples – (no, **more** than that) – He **commands** them – He **orders** them, “**Do not leave Jerusalem, until you are “baptised” with the Holy Spirit!!...**” And I'd love to jump straight into chapter 2 now – it's so exciting – but we're just going to have to wait until next week... The disciples were told to wait, and we're going to have to wait until next week too.

John baptised you with water. I'm going to baptise you with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now....

3. My third heading, is: Religious Persecution

Even with Jesus dangling this tantalising promise of the Holy Spirit, in front of them, even though He has been teaching them about the Kingdom of God, the disciples are still fixated, on the Kingdom of Israel. And when He tells them about the Holy Spirit, the first thing they think of, is "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

So, He's still trying to get them to concentrate on the Kingdom of God, and they're still concentrating on the Kingdom of Israel...

And the Disciples have a lot to learn. They went first and foremost, to the Jews... But they are met with a wholesale rejection by the Jewish religious establishment. And the Jewish religious leaders will continue to pursue the Christians, and persecute them, and beat them and kill them.... And, the disciples continued to preach the Good News to the Jews, right up until the very last chapter of Acts, where it records:

Acts 28:25-28

<sup>25</sup> ..... "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:

<sup>26</sup> " 'Go to this people, and say,

"You will indeed hear but **never** understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive."

<sup>27</sup> For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed;

lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart

and turn, and I would heal them.'

<sup>28</sup> Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."

4. The fourth heading, is "The Great Compulsion"

You've probably heard of "The Great Commission": Matthew 28:19–20 <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

We preachers - we pull that one out a lot – we love it... One of the most difficult tasks, for a preacher to do, is to get the flock active and involved in ministry... And at the end of Matthew, there's a commandment – it's an imperative – you must be doing it – Go. Make disciples. Do stuff... Quick. Everybody look busy – Jesus is coming...

And I've been in a lot of churches, over a lot of years of my life, and I've heard a lot of great stirring sermons, given on the great commission – the preacher's nailed it – and the congregation walk out the door – very passionate sermon, Pastor – and they go home, completely the same – and they come back to church next week, exactly the same as they came the week before....

The great commission, we turn into the great omission, until it becomes for us, the great compulsion. Here in Acts, it's not given as a commandment – it's written as a statement of fact:

**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."**

There's no commandment there – it's a statement of fact.

When the Holy Spirit, comes upon God's people in power, **with** the Spirit, comes a great compulsion – a compulsion to be His witnesses. Sometimes people will say, "Oh the Spirit was really moving in Church today"... and they'll usually be describing a particularly wonderful feeling that was felt as the music played and they felt themselves, to be in a wonderful place with God.... "The Spirit was moving.", they say...

Well, let me tell you something, "When the Spirit of God moves – when the Holy Spirit comes upon a church in Power – the people of that church are compelled, to be witnesses for Him – not just in the church, but out in the world."

A sure sign that the Holy Spirit is moving in a church, is when those disciples of Christ, are compelled, to share the good news out in the world. When you can't just bottle it up inside – it's just got to come out...

And I pray that the Holy Spirit will come upon this little church in power – I pray that The Lord would compel us – that we would be so filled with His Holy Spirit that we just cannot keep it inside – we just have to be witnesses for Him.

We will find that when the Holy Spirit is given, witness is increased – the word of God is increased. We will find, that when the Word grew, the Church grew. When the Word grew, the Church grew. When the Word grew, the Church grew...

So the disciples would be **witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth**

That means they were going to begin witnessing, right where they were. They would then radiate out into Judea – the country areas. They would then find themselves preaching to neighbouring regions – people that they didn't even like – the Samaritans – a mixed race who had, years ago, given themselves over to idolatry... And then finally, they would take the gospel to the end of the earth.

And that's the pattern that unfolds in the book of Acts....

I **believe** this is a challenge to us today. Mission begins in our own back yard, and it extends into the surrounding districts. That's the whole premise upon which Bush Disciples began...

As a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, your mission does **not** begin overseas – it may **continue** overseas – but it does not **begin** in a foreign land. Your mission – the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ – begins right in your own home town. And I know there's a bunch of you ready to quote to me “a prophet is never welcome in their home town”, because Jesus said that when Nazareth rejected Him<sup>1</sup>... But the fact that Nazareth was His home town, didn't stop Him – He still preached, and

He still healed – He just wasn't accepted as well as in other places, because they took offence at Him.

Today there is a modern phenomenon (and I hope you don't take offence at this), but I call it "Mission Tourism". Where we get it into our heads, "I need to do a mission trip overseas, and that will be fulfilling the great commission..." And we head off for one or two weeks, we get involved in ministry while we're away, and then we come home again... - our mission's been done for the year...

When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we are compelled, to be His witnesses, here, there, and everywhere...

5. Which brings me to the 5<sup>th</sup> heading – I've been using the word "Witness" a lot, and that's our next heading.

The word "Witness", in the Greek, is actually the word **μαρτυρία**, from which we get our word "martyr". And right throughout the book of Acts, we will find these disciples of Christ witnessing – telling people about Jesus, wherever they went. Witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ, even under the threat of death. And, many of them **are** killed. But the great compulsion that they have inside of them – the Holy Spirit – **drives** them to continue to be witnesses, even when they **are** persecuted.

Why were they so keen to be witnesses? Well, they were compelled by the Holy Spirit. But also, their expectation of the imminent return of Jesus, sets the tone for their ministry.

After Jesus ascends into heaven, a couple of angels appear to the disciples, and they say something like "What are you

doing, standing around, looking up there? Jesus is coming back, and He'll come back the same way He went.”

And the compulsion that **we** have to share **our** faith, is made all that much stronger, when **we** believe, and **expect**, the return of Jesus. It could be soon – we don't know when... So stop standing around, and get on with witnessing.

6. The 6<sup>th</sup> word I have, is “Prayer”

Before the Holy Spirit came upon them, these early Christians devoted themselves (in one accord), to prayer. And if **we** desire to be a community, who will experience the power of the Holy Spirit, then **we also**, should follow their example, and be of one accord, in prayer.

7. The final heading I have for today, is “Church”

Judas had to be replaced. The Scriptures said that he would be replaced, and so they did replace him. And to be effective, they had to select someone who had been there, through the whole ministry of Jesus, and they had to be someone who had actually witnessed the risen Christ.

And this is our first recorded church meeting. They prayed about it. And they brought it to the church. There was about 120 believers, and the church narrowed it down to 2 suitable candidates. And the next part – you might be surprised how they selected them. They cast lots. They put forward 2 names – Justus<sup>ii</sup> and Matthias, and then they cast lots....

What an interesting way to discern the will of God. Does that mean when we want to make a decision here, we just flip a coin, or cast the dice????

Why did they cast lots? Well, the reason they cast lots, was to take the decision out of **man's** hands, and put it into **God's** hands. Casting lots is something that the High Priest used to do. He had 2 stones (a black one and a white one), called the Ummin and the Thummin. And they'd put them into a bag, and pray for God to reveal His will, and they'd draw out one stone, and that would stand as the decision of God.

Now, why don't we still do that today? Why don't we cast lots to determine the will of God? I'll tell you why. Because this is chapter 1, and next week is chapter 2. This week, they have not been filled with the Holy Spirit. Next week, they will be filled with the Holy Spirit. And this is the very last time, that the Bible records the casting of lots, as a method to determine the will of God.

Holy Spirit living inside of us, reveals to us, the will of God. And so we **don't** roll the dice or flip a coin to know what God wants – we don't **need** to. Our intimate relationship with Holy Spirit, reveals His will to us.

And right throughout Acts, we'll see **that** happening – God speaking to His disciples, through the Holy Spirit.

And we'll also see the place of the church in that. A lot of people today, see the church as a bad thing – maybe it's got something to do with our individualistic view of Christianity. But in Acts, we will see the necessity of Christians meeting together, to worship and pray, and to be taught.

Anyway, I reckon we've gone plenty far enough. It's gone quite long, because we've had an introduction to Acts, and we've discussed chapter 1. Remember the highlight is next week, when the Holy Spirit comes upon the church.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 13:53-58

<sup>ii</sup> Joseph called Barsabbas and also called Justus