ACTS

EMPOWERED FOR MISSION

5 STUDIES | ACTS 5 – 8

MINCHINBURY
ANGLICAN CHURCH

These studies are adapted from the studies *Mission Unstoppable* by Bryson Smith (Matthias Media, 2012) and *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work* by John Stott (Inter–Varsity Press, 1998). Several helpful insights are also owed to *The Book of Acts* by I. Howard Marshall (Inter–Varsity Press, 2006).

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SERIES OVERVIEW

In the book of Acts we get a glimpse of what a healthy church looks like. Not a perfect church, but a healthy one. The early church was full of imperfect people (Acts 5:1–11) and used imperfect systems (6:1–7). We nevertheless see a church that is devoted to the things that really matter (2:41–47), that is finding renewal (3:12–26) and that is stepping out boldly to tell the world about Jesus (4:13–31). The result is two-fold.

On the one hand the church experienced growing opposition and persecution, reaching a low point with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7). But on the other hand, this persecution allowed the church to expand its influence beyond Jerusalem (Acts 8), and it continued to grow in both numbers and maturity – and to an eventual majority of non-Jewish believers (Acts 10-17). The apostle Paul and his team were significant in a mission across Asia and Europe (Acts 13-24) and his example of faithfulness and perseverance are an inspiration for us to continue the mission Jesus to all nations in our day.

DATE & AUTHORSHIP

Acts was written by Luke, who was trained as both a doctor and an historian. Acts is the sequel to the book which bears Luke's name. Acts was written to continue recording for the future all that Jesus began to do and teach (Acts 1:1). In other words, Acts assumes that the risen Lord Jesus is continuing to work in the world through his Word and through the Holy Spirit, even after his resurrection and ascension into heaven. We see both the Word and the Holy Spirit establishing a church, which is both the platform for, and the result of, mission to the ends of the earth.

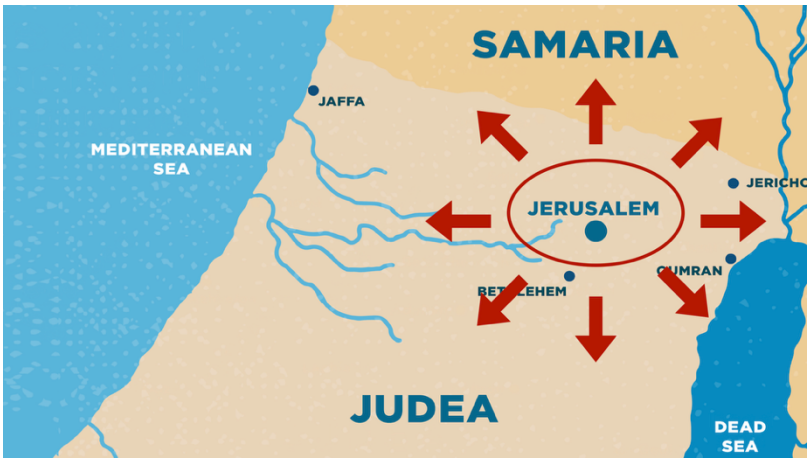
FLOW OF ACTS

The book of Acts has the following structure:

1:1 – 6:7	The Word and Spirit establish the church in **Jerusalem**
6:8 – 12:24	The gospel goes to **Judea**, **Samaria** & the **Gentiles**
12:25 – 19:20	The gospel goes to **Asia Minor** & **Europe** under Paul
19:21 – 28:31	The **gospel continues to spread** despite persecution

This bible study series concerns events after Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit with power, and after the first signs of opposition to the gospel and those who proclaim it. The action starts in Jerusalem, but by chapters 7 and 8 we see the gospel start to go out beyond Judea to Samaria.

Our hope, as you listen to these sermons and work through these studies, is that you will be recharged in your walk with Jesus and step out into the world in boldness to proclaim the good news of the forgiveness and sins and the gift of eternal life in his name.



"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:8

1 ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA
Acts 5:1–11

What sort of 'fruit' to you expect to see from a genuine Christian community?

The narrative picks up after the events of chapter 4. What Luke recounts reveals a fledgling church growing in all sorts of ways – some joyous, some not.

READ Acts 4:32–37

1. In 4:31 we see that the believers' prayer was answered and they were freshly filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. Consider Luke's summary that follows: What evidence do you see of this filling of the Holy Spirt among the believers (vv.32–37)?

- Can you think of times/ways you've seen the Holy Spirit at work among believers today?

READ Acts 5:1–11

2. In v.1 what are we told Ananias (and Sapphira) did? Why do you think they did this?

3. In v.2 what are we told Ananias (and Sapphira) did?

- What do you think of this? Were they within their rights? Why/why not?

4. Why do you think they pretended to give the whole amount?

5. According to Peter, what sin had Ananias committed? What do you think this means?

6. Do you think Peter expected Ananias and Sapphira to hand over the full amount? Why/why not? And if not, what's the issue?

7. What happens to each as a result? What is the effect of this?

- How do you feel about this shocking result?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

8. The radical generosity of the early church is striking. What are some ways we could live that out in our church?

9. The Ananias and Sapphira incident is confronting, especially the suddenness and severity of the judgement. What might this show us:

- About us?

- About God?

10. It can be easy to distance ourselves from Ananias and Sapphira's actions, but it's worth considering: what might be equivalents for us today?

2 APOSTLES BEHAVING BRAVELY
Acts 5:12–42

In your experience/understanding, what are some of the reasons Christianity is actively opposed, especially by authorities of various kinds?

Like the period described at the end of chapter 2, there are positive signs for the early church at the start of chapter 5 – more and more people believe in Jesus and the church grows. However, the opposition that first reared its head in chapter 4 hasn't gone away and it resurfaces here.

READ Acts 5:12–18

1. Yet another summary from Luke. What were the apostles doing? And what are the various responses to them and the believers?

2. Why do you think the religious authorities respond as they do (vv.17-18)?

READ Acts 5:19–42

3. What happens to the jailed apostles, and why?

4. How do the religious authorities respond to this 'jailbreak'?

5. Compare this arrest incident with Peter and John's previous arrest (4:1–22). What's similar about it and what's different? What do the differences indicate?

6. What is the apostles' response to the Sanhedrin (vv.29–32)? What strikes you about it?

7. The Sanhedrin are furious and want the apostles executed. One of them, however, does not. What is Gamaliel's argument (vv.33–39)? What do you think of it?

8. Describe the effort of persecution on the apostles (vv.41–42). Is it successful? How do you feel about their response?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. Opposition to the gospel and the persecution it might bring has looked different throughout time and throughout the world.

- Where in the world today does persecution continue to look like this?

- Where doesn't it look like this (and what does it look like)?

10. "I'm not brave like Peter and John". What do you think of a comment like that?

11. "We must obey God rather than men."

- When does this apply? When doesn't it?

- When do you find this especially hard to do?

3 GROWING PAINS
Acts 6:1–15

How do you tend prioritise things in general? What set of criteria do you use? What about when it comes to spiritual/ministry things?

The growth of the church has meant the inevitable complexities and pains that accompany any growing community – not least of all a multicultural community in first century Judea. The 'growing pains' are also felt as the church continues boldly to proclaim the risen Jesus.

READ Acts 6:1–7

1. What is the source of tension amongst the believers?

2. What solution is reached? Who is involved?

3. Who isn't involved, and why?

- Do you think this is a good solution? Why/why not?

4. Consider Jesus' 'mission plan' (1:8). How might this have shaped the church's dealing with this problem?

- Though things look quite a bit different from the early church, we still have to wrestle with strategic ministry decisions. What are some examples you can think of in our church/the church today?

READ Acts 6:8–15

5. What are we told about Stephen?

6. Who are the people opposing Stephen?

7. What specific charges are made against Stephen, and why do you think these charges are so serious?

8. Compare this opposition to the opposition Peter and John faced in chapters 3, 4 and 5. What's similar? What's different?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. In 6:1–2 the apostles ran the risk of being diverted from the task to which God had called them.

In what ways are we susceptible to the same 'danger'? Can you think of 'good things' which can divert us from 'best things' in following the risen Christ?

10. Consider the circumstances of Stephen's arrest and how his trial proceeds.

- What about it do you find discouraging? What do you find encouraging?

- To what extent (and where) is this the experience of Christians today?

4 THE VOICE OF THE MARTYR
Acts 7:1–8:3

Discuss some ways in which the ongoing work of the risen Lord Jesus has been opposed in Acts so far.

Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin in response to the charges against him is the longest recorded speech in Acts. Luke clearly thought it significant and wanted his readers to know what Stephen said.

READ Acts 7:1–53

1. In response to the accusations against him, Stephen spends most of his time recounting Israel's history from the Old Testament.

(i) What 'main events' does he include?

(ii) Why do you think Stephen does this (retell Israel's history)?

2. Stephen has been accused of being against Moses. What does he say about Moses in vv.35–39? In what ways is this a defence against the accusations?

3. Stephen has also been accused of being against the temple. What does he say about the temple in vv.44–50? In what ways is this a defence against the accusations?

- Can you think of a time when you have felt 'unfairly accused' as a Christian? If you're comfortable sharing: what was that over? How did you deal with it?

READ Acts 7:54–8:3

4. What is it in Stephen's speech that most angers the Sanhedrin?

5. What do you think Stephen means in v.56?

6. Consider the climax of all this (vv.57–60).

(i) What finally happens to Stephen? How do you feel about that?

(ii) What do we discover about Stephen's character here?

7. A young man named Saul is mentioned in passing here (7:58 and 8:3). What impressions do you get of him?

The escalating hostility that we have noted in Acts has finally exploded. Luke records that 'on that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem', breaking it up and scattering believers beyond Jerusalem and Judea.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

8. In what way is Stephen a good model for us to follow?

9. While not as severe, what are some ways we might face accusations and have to give answers like Stephen?

10. What do you know about the persecuted church today? What are some ways we with our great freedom can support sisters and brothers facing persecution elsewhere?

5 THE GOSPEL GOES OUT
Acts 8:4–40

Do you see yourself as an *evangelist*? Why/why not?

The blood of the church's first martyr now runs in the streets of Jerusalem. It is a tragic and brutal moment in the history of the early church. Yet even through this tragedy we discover important things about the ongoing work of the risen Christ.

READ Acts 8:1–8

1. What were the negative results of Stephen's death? What positive thing actually resulted from it (cf. 1:8)?

2. Why do you think the apostles stayed in Jerusalem?

READ Acts 8:9–17

3. What does Luke tell us about Simon of Samaria?

Philip's preaching of the gospel (accompanied by miraculous signs) causes many in Samaria to believe and be baptised – including Simon himself. Peter and John are sent to check this evangelistic movement out. They discover that 'the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them'. Hard to know why post-Pentecost. The most likely explanation is that God withheld the giving of the Spirit until the apostles came so that the Samarian believers could be seen as fully incorporated into the community of faith (a bit Cornelius the Roman's conversion in chapter 10 with Peter present).

READ Acts 8:18–25

4. What does Simon get so wrong (cf. his similarity to Ananias and Sapphira)? What does he get right?

- In what ways can people today (us, even) make Simon's mistake?

- If we do, what encouragement do you take from this incident?

As Luke's account continues, we see the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit, directing evangelism and effecting responses of faith.

READ Acts 8:26–40

5. Philip is directed by an angel to the Gaza road where, prompted by the Spirit, he encounters an Ethiopian official returning from temple worship in Jerusalem and reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah.

What does Philip do? What is the Ethiopian official's response?

6. Philip goes on to share the good news about Jesus. What is the Ethiopian's response to the gospel?

7. What role does scripture play in the man's conversion?

8. If Philip's ministry in Samaria was the beginning of witness outside of Judea (Samaria), what was Philip's ministry to the Ethiopian the beginning of?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. In want ways do we see the sovereignty of God operating in Acts 8? How is this an encouragement to us?

10. While there are elements unique to the events of the early church, what have you learned from this passage that might help you become a more effective evangelistic witness:

- In *where you might see* evangelistic opportunities?

- In *how you might take* evangelistic opportunities (what you might say)?

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