

ACTS

EMPOWERED FOR MISSION



5 STUDIES | ACTS 1–4

This study owes several helpful insights to the studies *Mission Unstoppable* by Bryson Smith (Matthias Media, 2012) and *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work* by John Stott (Inter–Varsity Press, 1998), as well as *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.

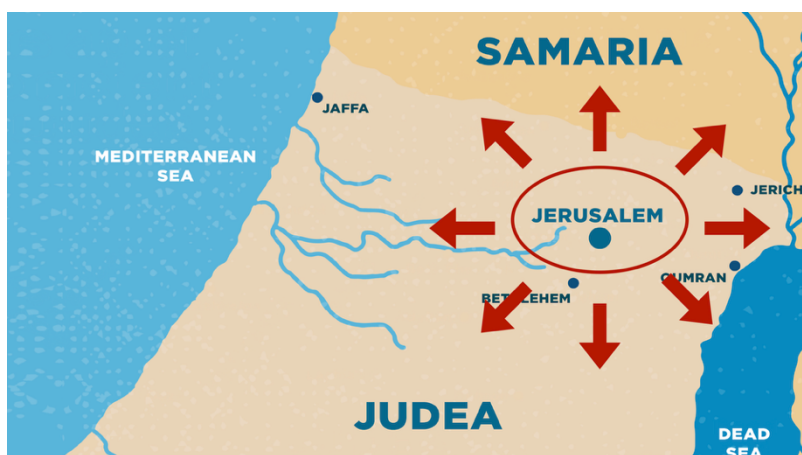
FLOW OF ACTS

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 the events at the very beginning of the church, and all the action takes place in or just outside Jerusalem – from the moment of Jesus’ ascension, to the coming of the Holy Spirit with power, to the first signs of opposition to the gospel and those who proclaim it.

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 of 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

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES: PART 1

Acts 1:1–11

Imagine a task you have to do (at work; in life generally). What are the sorts of things that might help you feel equipped to carry out that task?

- Consider the 'task' of fulfilling Jesus' ministry here on earth. What helps you feel equipped for this task?

The book of Acts opens where Luke's Gospel concluded. The events described in the first eleven verses of chapter 1 overlap with and unpack the events related in the last half of Luke 24.

READ Luke 1:1–4 and Acts 1:1–5

1. In what ways are the books of Luke and Acts similar? In what ways are they different?
2. What is the significance of the word 'began' in Acts 1:1?
3. Why is it important that Jesus showed himself to the apostles, gave 'many convincing proofs' that he was alive, and spoke about the Kingdom of God?

4. What does Jesus want the apostles to do? What does he want them to 'wait for'?
 5. Why do you think Jesus instructed the apostles to wait (a) in Jerusalem, and (b) to be 'baptised with the Holy Spirit'?
- In what way do these instructions and promises apply to us as followers of Jesus today? In what way might they *not* apply?

READ Acts 1: 6–11

6. Consider the apostles' question to Jesus in v.6, and Jesus' reply (vv.7–8?) What does this tell us about the apostles' expectations, and how do they differ from Jesus' plans?
 7. Consider v.8 more closely. How do you understand its significance (a) to the apostles in this moment, and (b) to the unfolding book of Acts?
- Where do we fit into Jesus' mission plan of 1:8? What difference should this mission plan make to us – as individual believers and as a church?

8. The apostles were people like Peter, James, John, etc. What do you know of their track record with Jesus up to then? How surprising, then, is their involvement in this mission?

- In what way does this encourage you in your ongoing discipleship of Jesus?

This opening passage concludes with Jesus being 'taken up while they were watching' (v.10). So spectacular is this sight that the apostles have to be stirred from their bewilderment and awe by two heavenly messengers, who remind them that Jesus will one day return 'in the same way' – that is, Jesus' ascension is an assurance of his Messianic rule (*a la* Daniel 7:13), and that, connected with Jesus' commission in vv.7–8, the gospel must be preached to all nations before the end can come (cf. Mark 13:10).

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. Remember the apostles' question in v.6. Though we may not be first century Jewish people, what are some ways we as Jesus' followers today can fall into the same mistake?

10. How have you seen the equipping power of the Holy Spirit:

- in the ministry of others?
- In your own life?

2 YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES: PART 2

Acts 1:12–26

Give some examples of jobs/roles that require specific qualifications. Why do those qualifications matter?

In the second half of chapter 1 we see a glimpse of leadership within the nascent Jesus movement. In vv.13–14 the key figures are named: the eleven remaining disciples, as well as ‘the women’ (most likely women such as Mary, Martha and Mary Magdalene), as well as ‘Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers’ (e.g. James, who would go on to be important in the early church and write the book of James). And in vv.23 and 26: Joseph (called Barsabbas) and Matthias, the one who ends up replacing Judas.

READ Acts 1:12–14

1. What do we learn about the ascension and the apostles from v.12? What is the significance of this?
2. Prayer seems to be the major activity the apostles and other disciples engage in when they return (v.14). How does Luke describe these prayers?

3. Given the promises Jesus has made (1:4–5, 7–8; also Matthew 28:19–20), what does this show us about the nature and place of prayer in the lives of Jesus' followers?

- In what ways do you find this description of persistent, united prayer encouraging to your own prayer life/our church's prayer life? In what ways do you find it challenging?

READ Acts 1:15–26

4. What other (super) early church details do we get from v.15 (i.e. speaker and number)?

5. Peter makes a case for needing to replace Judas. Why, according to him, does this need to happen (vv.15–20)?

6. What are the qualifications for the person who would replace Jesus (vv.21–26)? Why are they important?

7. How is the replacement chosen? What do you make of this as a method?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

8. While the focus here is leadership in the church, what would you say 'qualifies' believers to serve Jesus in general?

9. While the unique time of apostolic leadership has passed, the church still needs leaders. What are some principles we should bear in mind as we seek to appoint people to positions of ministry leadership?

3 A PENTECOST MIRACLE

Acts 2:1–47

What difference do you think it would make if the Holy Spirit were withdrawn from your life and your Christian community?

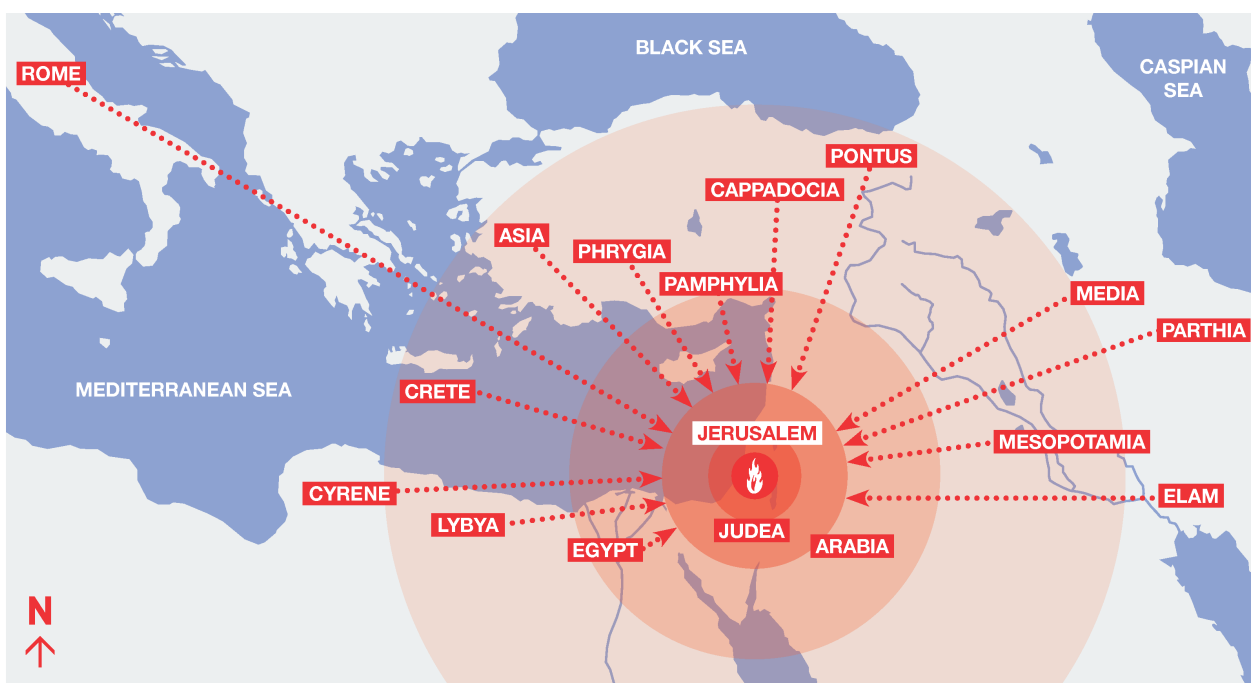
The events recounted in Acts chapter 2 are among the most significant in all Scripture. The coming of the Holy Spirit to every believer marks a watershed moment in salvation history; not only can God's people have God 'in them' in a new and profound way, it's from this point that the rapid growth of the early church and its eventual geographical and cultural expansion begins (as outlined in Acts 1:8).

The event has become known as 'Pentecost', which is the New Testament name of the Jewish Feast of Weeks that was being observed at the time. Held on the 50th day after the Sabbath of Passover week, it celebrated the wheat harvest with a one-day festival during which special sacrifices were offered. Just as other festivals were associated with special moments in Israel's history, Pentecost was associated with the renewal of the covenant made with Noah and then with Moses.

READ Acts 2:1–13

1. What physical descriptions does Luke give of the coming of the Holy Spirit? What do you make of them?

2. A crowd is drawn by hearing this Spirit-enabled tongue speaking. What are their different reactions to this event?
3. Luke emphasises the multi-ethnic makeup of the crowd (v.5, 9–11), presumably gathered in the temple precinct for the festival. What significance is there in this? Why do you think this multi-lingual proclamation event the first work of the indwelling Holy Spirit?
- The phenomenon of speaking in other unlearned languages was obviously unique to this moment of the Spirit's coming. At the same time, what are some ways the church today can continue in the 'spirit' (no pun intended) of this event?



Nations of People Mentioned at Pentecost

- 4.** What do you observe as Peter addresses the crowd (vv.14–15)?
- 5.** How does Peter explain the amazing events that have taken place?
- 6.** According to v.17, the filling of the apostles with the Holy Spirit reflects that the 'last days' have now commenced. What do these last days precede (cf. v.20), and what is it necessary to do during these last days (cf. v.21)?
- Consider the designation 'the last days'. What does that evoke for you? What difference does the knowledge that we're in the last days before God's final judgement have on you?
- 7.** Peter connects all this to Jesus – he makes clear that Jesus is the Lord in whose name salvation is now found. But it's worth looking more closely at the rest of his speech and some of the specific things he says about Jesus. In particular:
- i. According to vv.22–24, what did God do for Jesus vs what men did? What does this show?
 - ii. According to v.27, what did the Old Testament predict about God's coming King?
 - iii. On what basis does Peter make the declaration, 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah' (vv.29–36)?

- 8.** In response to Peter's clear proclamation of the truth about Jesus (and the truth about the people), what is the crowd's reaction. What does Peter tell them to do, and why?

The end of this chapter shows the spiritual and practical results of the outpouring of the Spirit. About 3000 people respond with repentance and are baptised (growing the fledgling church twentyfold!). And in vv.42–47 we get a glimpse of a community transformed by the Spirit: devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, worship and prayer; sharing possessions for the common good; praising God (and, presumably, proclaiming Jesus therein), and experiencing daily conversions.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

- 9.** How do you respond to the work of the Holy Spirit as you see it in Acts 2?
- 10.** Consider those involved in the events of this chapter:
- How are we different from the apostles? In what ways are we similar?
 - How are we different from the crowd? In what ways are we similar?
- 11.** When and in what ways have you seen and experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in your life and Christian community – either here at Minchinbury or elsewhere?

4 PETER AND JOHN WENT TO PRAY

Acts 3:1–26

What examples can you think of people being helped 'in Jesus name' (from the world today or from history)?

Chapter 3 picks up an unspecified amount of time after the events of Pentecost. The event it recounts is the first of note after the miracle of 3000 converts in one day, and it takes place during the period described at the end of chapter 2, with the church growing daily and 'having favour with all the people'. But some things are about to change...

READ Acts 3:1–10

1. Consider what we're told in v.1. Who's mentioned? Where were they going? What does this tell us?
2. What are we told about the crippled man?
3. When the crippled man sees Peter and John, he naturally asks them for money. What does Peter do?

4. What does the man do after being healed? Note especially where he goes.
5. How do the people respond to this miracle?
 - What things from this miracle do you think apply to us today? What things might not apply to us?

In Acts 1:1 Luke said that his 'first narrative' recorded all that Jesus *began* to do and teach – i.e. this second volume would record what Jesus *continued* 'to do and teach' through the apostles (1:2). Luke also told us in 2:43 that 'many signs and wonders were being performed by the apostles'. This miracle is a particular and dramatic example of both those things.

READ Acts 3:11–26

6. When Peter sees a crowd gathering on account of the healing, what does he do? Note his opening words (vv.12–16).
7. There are a few differences between Peter's speech here and his one in Acts 2 (e.g. focus on Jesus' power to heal; the OT scriptures quoted). What are the similarities?

- 8.** Look at each of the titles Peter gives to Jesus. How do each of these speak to the uniqueness of Jesus?

A consistent message is starting to emerge from the apostles about Jesus: he is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and Jewish hope, and it's now through faith in Jesus and his death and resurrection that forgiveness of sins and restored relationship with God is possible.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

- 9.** What principles of witnessing to Jesus can we draw from this passage?
- 10.** Peter challenged his hearers with the necessity of repentance and faith.
- What happens when we downplay the necessity of repentance and faith?
 - Who in your life needs to hear and respond to this call?

5 IN THE NAME OF JESUS

Acts 4:1–37

In your experience, what are some of the reasons Christianity is criticised and opposed?

The events of chapter 4 follow directly on from those of chapter 3. In the wake of this miraculous healing, together with Peter's sermon which followed it, the Jewish authorities confront Peter and John.

READ Acts 4:1–4

1. Who arrests Peter and John, and why? Is this the only result of the miracle?

READ Acts 4:5–22

2. What do you note about the authorities' initial questioning (v.7)? What is it reminiscent of?

3. How do Peter and John react to their arrest and interrogation?

- What about Peter and John's reaction here do you find encouraging? Is there anything about it that you find challenging?

4. How do the authorities react to Peter and John's words?
5. What do Peter and John say in answer to the authorities (vv.19–20)? What point are they doubling down on?
6. What is striking about their courage? What does it show?

READ Acts 4:23–31

7. Describe/summarise the prayer in these verses. How is it different than you might expect after all that Peter and John had been through?

Luke concludes this dramatic episode with a summary description of the Spirit-transformed Christian community at the time. Like his similar description in chapter 2, the community is characterised by unity, other person centredness, powerful apostolic teaching, and radical generosity.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

- 8.** When have you seen resistance, subtle or overt, to the gospel? What truth from this passage equips you to face and respond well to this resistance?
- 9.** 'Peter and John are superheroes of the faith. It's easy for them to be so brave. I'm just a normal person. I can't be expected to be as bold as them'. What do you think about a comment like that?
- 10.** Who is suffering persecution for the gospel that you could be praying for? How could you learn more about persecuted believers around the world?

