

ABIDE: A BIBLE READING CHALLENGE

JOURNEY THROUGH THE NEW TESTAMENT

GOD IS ON THE MOVE

ACTS

The book of Acts is absolutely vital to our sound understanding of the whole of the New Testament. It sits as an axis point that turns our attention to the events that occurred directly after Jesus ascended into heaven. This book is the fifth and final historical book of the New Testament and is how we get from Christ's earthly ministry, to the spread of His church which continues on to this day.

It is in this very book where we learn about the vital features of church life. It is also in this book where we learn, and observe, and pattern ourselves in such a way that honors Christ in performing Biblical Missions work, starting new churches, handling problems within the church, how to evangelize, the importance of prayer in the church, and how to withstand persecution as we continue to lovingly proclaim the Gospel.

Additionally, the Book of Acts serves as a bridge that helps us cross that barrier that had once existed between the Jewish nation and the rest of the Gentile world. We can also see that Acts serves as a bridge between the Gospels, and the letters to the New Testament.

Can you imagine the wealth of information we would have never known existed if we simply had to read the Gospel of John, and then, once you were done with John, you were confronted with the book of Galatians? Who's Paul? Why did these kinds of problems exist in that Church? When did Paul go see them? How did Paul's missionary assignment take shape in order for him to minister to these people in the first place?

On and on that would go. There would be so much information missing that there would be no telling what church might look like today. The ramifications would be incalculable.

Furthermore, when you're reading the book of Acts, what you are observing is a time of transition. The transition taking place is one that moves us from God's Nation that was to live and serve Him under the law, and God's Children as we live and serve Him under grace. We take this for granted now, but while it was happening, it was a hard pill for people to swallow. Peter struggled, Jewish converts struggled, Paul struggled, the people group called the Judaizers struggled; struggle is nearly on every page in the Book of Acts as this painful time of transition was happening for some of God's people, and especially for God's enemies.

From the time the Church was empowered by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost to the time when the Gospel, through the church, spread to Rome, the Book of Acts is the book where we see God on the move, and the actions of those churches

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that were founded since then, can still be seen and felt all the way to our day. In fact, the call of the Gospel demands that God's churches continue, and allow God to move through us, and through successive generations, until Jesus returns.

How to Think About Acts

Once again, just like in Luke's Gospel, we see the name Theophilus, and we also see the purpose and timeframe for this writing. Luke tells,

“The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: To whom also he showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God: And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me.”

Luke wanted to write about those events that happened directly after Jesus ascended into heaven, and what we learn ultimately is a heavy emphasis given to the importance of witnessing in the life of the believer, and the life of the church body as a whole.

This is exactly why we hear so much preaching about witnessing in church (or at least you should), and in teaching settings. It is because that is the defining theme in the Book of Acts. This book speaks to us and says, “Go tell people about Jesus.”

Furthermore, as you listen to this encouraging message to evangelize, a fun way to think about this little history book is to take a look at Acts 1:8 *“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”*

The book of Acts actually follows this pattern geographically as Luke tracks the progress of the Gospel message among God's people. Take a look at this outline:

Jerusalem (Acts 1-7)— Luke begins to explain the foundational progress made in those first few months of God empowering the church by His Holy Spirit.

The Preparation of the Church (Acts 1): The apostles decide to replace Judas' position, and as a result, Matthias is selected to fill this role by casting lots. We also find Jesus' church waiting in Jerusalem just as Jesus had instructed.

The Power of the Church (Acts 2): The time of preparation is over and here is where we read of that great day of Pentecost when God gave His church power to do His will. Peter also delivers a powerful sermon and gives the greatest invitation of all time.

The Preaching of the Church (Acts 3): Peter heals a man outside of the gate 'Beautiful' and he is immediately confronted by the religious leaders.

The Problems of the church (Acts 4-7): In this section you see problems that come by way of persecution, problems that come by way of deception, and problems that come because of neglect.

Judaea and Samaria (Acts 8-12)— Luke begins to introduce us to a few new individuals and a few new adventures and hardships.

Meeting With Philip (Acts 8): The first time we meet Philip it is when he was called of God to go and preach the Gospel in Samaria. Then, we find Philip going back to Jerusalem and witnessing all over the place there. After that, God calls Philip to leave Jerusalem and witness to a man traveling in the desert.

Seeing New Victories (Acts 9-11): This is when we really start to learn about Paul. We see Paul really was the definition of a religious terrorist before Christ confronted, and saved him. Then Luke leads us on to a situation between Cornelius and Peter. This is an extremely exciting story as God breaks through Peter's life and began tearing down the Jew and Gentile wall that had previously existed. This testimony of Peter's was then made known to other believers which led to more preaching and more witnessing, and chapter 11 ends with Paul and Barnabas being sent out to help some believers back in Judaea.

Facing Greater Violence (Acts 12): The ruler Herod makes an appearance in this chapter, and Luke tells us that his express purpose was to take out key leaders of the church at Jerusalem. He had already captured and killed James (John's brother), and once he had noticed that this gave him some positive publicity, he captured Peter and intended to kill him also. Peter ended up making a miraculous escape, but what we're reading is a very real, very dangerous hostility toward the message of Christ and those that carried it.

Uttermost Parts of the World (Acts 13-27)— These chapters largely focus on the journeys and experiences of Paul and can be divided into two main sections.

Paul the Pioneer (Acts 13-21): Reading this section will detail the three missionary journeys of Paul. They are also the beginning of the "we" sections of the book of Acts. In other words, Luke shifts from telling the events that he was told of, and begins explaining what he, himself, experienced with Paul.

Paul the Prisoner (Acts 22-27): Paul is taken into custody and begins sharing the Gospel to every guard, governor, and dignitary he meets all the way to Rome.

What to Look for in Acts

Acts is full of excitement! There is adventure, traveling, narrow escapes, miraculous escapes, hardships, friendships, mistakes, and glorious successes filling every page you read. This is where you find God's Spirit falling down and empowering Jesus' church and teaching us the importance of fellowship, corporate prayer, preaching, and most importantly, how we exist for the sole purpose of bringing glory to Christ and bringing lost sinners to a saving knowledge of Him!

Important Transitions— This is where many people get into trouble when they're studying the book of Acts. They love the stuff at the beginning about healing, speaking in tongues, raising the dead, but they don't notice the transition taking place as the book progresses.

Casting Lots: At the very beginning, there was an old system that was used in order to select Matthias as Judas' replacement as an apostle, and it was a lot-casting system. This was a valid Old Testament method for determining God's will. But as you read the book of Acts, you never see this again.

Angels: Near the beginning of Acts, there is a prominent role given to angels in order to help, guide, and direct God's people on different occasions, but as the book moves on, you read of this less and less and eventually, not at all.

Signs and Wonders: Another evidence of this are the signs and wonders that were used in order to confirm God's Word. But the more the letters were written and circulated among God's churches, and the more the Christian message grew, the fewer miraculous events took place.

Visions: Visions were another prominent feature near the beginning and toward the middle of the book in order for God's men to determine His will, but eventually, you see the focus shift solely on prayer for means of direction.

The Empowerment of the Church— You'll notice that this has been mentioned many times, but you would do yourself a disservice if you read the book of Acts without seeing God's great power given to His churches. When Jesus left on His final journey to heaven to leave His church to continue on the work He had given, there were 120 people who made up that group. Then, when the church was empowered, that number jumped to a few thousand, then more, then more! From this time, rulers tried to stop the church, but God's church carries on. From this time, governments attempted to outlaw the church, but the church still carries on. From this time, false teachings came to destroy the church, but the church still carries on. From this time, God the Holy Spirit has empowered the church that Jesus started in such a way that there is no opposition too great, and no culture so vile that it can withstand the greatness of God's wonderful Gospel.

Jesus promised that the gates of hell would never prevail against His church, and with the Holy Spirit empowering the church, every age has had a faithful, and will continue to have a faithful witness until Jesus returns for His people. We can't lose!

The Holy Spirit— Just like the empowerment of the church, there is a reason the Holy Spirit rises up in the explanation in several instances in this chapter, and that is because this member of the Godhead takes the lead role in the life of God's people once Christ ascends into heaven. In the Old Testament, the prominent member of the Godhead was God the Father. Once we get to the Gospels, the prominent member of the Godhead working among mankind was God the Son. Now, the prominent member of the Holy Trinity working for the good of His people is the Holy Spirit. This is why the Spirit is mentioned many, many times throughout our reading of the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit was active among God's people then, and the Holy Spirit is active among God's people now.

What to Gain from Acts

The Fulfilling of God's Promise— The Book of Acts is the fulfillment of God's promise to receive power to do God's Work here on earth. Jesus told His first church that they would soon be empowered, and then, they would be witness to the uttermost parts of the world, and that is exactly what happened.

The Continuation of God's Plan— In the book of Acts we can hear the soft and strong whisper of Christ's Words to that first church 2,000 years ago, "... and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

We come to Him bruised, and Jesus says, "I am with you always..." We come to Him abandoned by people that were once with us, and Jesus says, "I am with you always..." We come to Him confused at what direction to take, and Jesus says, "I am with you always..." We come to Him hurting, discouraged, happy and glad, and His promise is forever the same to those who make up His churches, "I am with you always..."

He's here with us today, empowering us to carry out those same orders and aren't you so glad to be a part of it?



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