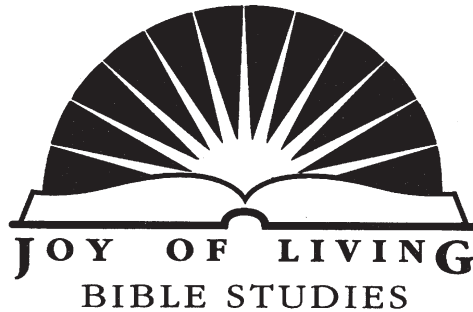


Acts

Lesson 1



Out of the Shadows

From Tarzan to Indiana Jones, from Buck Rogers to Luke Skywalker, action thrillers have entertained generations of readers and moviegoers. For me, the book of Acts is the action thriller of the New Testament. The very name, *Acts*, suggests action. Here we find a tale set in the exotic culture of the first-century Roman world. The story is rich in plot twists, peril, narrow escapes, conflict, and intrigue, all set against the backdrop of fast-changing world events.

The book of Acts is truly one of the most exciting books of the Bible. Its full name is “The Acts of the Apostles,” yet the only apostles prominently featured are James, John, Peter, and Paul. The book should probably be called “The Acts of God,” for it reveals how God acts through Christians. We see the healing life of Jesus Christ poured out upon a corrupt and dying society through ordinary people like you and me.

We could never understand the New Testament without the book of Acts, for it fills the gap between the four Gospels and Paul’s letter to the Romans. At the end of the Gospels, we find a handful of Jews gathered in Jerusalem talking about a coming kingdom. In Romans, we find a letter from an apostle who is not even mentioned in the Gospels and who was not one of the Twelve. The book of Acts tells us how this small band of Jews in Jerusalem became a multi-ethnic force for global transformation.

The Lord’s Strategy in the Book of Acts

The first verses of Acts give us the key to the book. They reveal the strategy by which Jesus Christ proposes to change the world. It is His strategy by which His church is to operate. The church ceases to become effective in the world when it departs from this strategy.

I believe most Christians suffer from an inferiority complex when we confront the world around us. Many of us have accepted the notion that the church is irrelevant in the world. Don’t be fooled! The church is the most important body in the world today—more important than the United Nations, NATO, and all the governments of the world combined. Whatever happens in the world today is a result of what the church is doing—or failing to do. We shall see this clearly in the book of Acts.

The strategy of the Lord Jesus is given to us: “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until

the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen” (Acts 1:1-2).

The author of Acts is Luke, the beloved physician (see Colossians 4:14), who accompanied Paul on some of his journeys (much of this book is an eyewitness account). When Luke speaks of “my former book” (Acts 1:1), he refers to the Gospel of Luke (Acts could be called “The Gospel of Luke: The Sequel”). We do not know how Luke became a Christian, though he may have been converted by Paul. There was a close friendship between Paul and Luke, because Luke remained at Paul’s side through times of danger, hardship, and trial.

Luke addressed both of his books to a man named Theophilus (see Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1). This name means “friend of God.” There is no person named Theophilus mentioned anywhere else in Scripture, so Theophilus may have been the name of a young Greek convert to Christianity, or it may be that Luke addressed his two books to any reader who is a friend of God, much as I might open a general letter to the members of my church by writing, “Dear Friend in Christ.”

What is the Lord’s great strategy for achieving His work in human history? Luke writes, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach.” Luke says that his previous book, the Gospel of Luke, was a record of what Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, “began to do and to teach.” This implies that the second book, the book of Acts, is the continuation of what Jesus began to do and teach.

In a real sense, the book of Acts does not recount the acts of the apostles or the acts of the church but the continuing acts of Jesus. In the Gospels, Jesus did His work through His physical body of human flesh. In the book of Acts, He does His work through the bodies of men and women who are indwelt by His life. Thus, whether in the Gospels or in Acts, *incarnation*—the Son of God taking on human flesh—is the secret strategy by which God changes the world.

Whenever God sends a message to the human race, He clothes His message in flesh and blood. He manifests His own life through the life of a human being, making clear what He has to say. That is the strategy of the book of Acts: Men and women, possessed by Jesus Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, manifest the life and power of God the Father. That’s the secret of authentic Christianity. Any so-called Christianity that does not operate by this strategy is false Christianity. Many individuals and institutions have adopted the guise of Christianity but are not indwelt by the life of Jesus Christ—and they do not represent authentic Christianity.

The indwelling power of the Holy Spirit could only be glimpsed through shadows and symbols in the Old Testament. Now it is about to burst forth upon the scene. God's plan for you and me has come out of the shadows and into reality. The indwelling Spirit empowers us to af-

fect our world. That's the secret of authentic Christianity. That's God's strategy for our lives: Possessed by Jesus Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we go forth to manifest the life and power of God the Father. The action thriller of the New Testament has begun!

Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the "Challenge" questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the "Personal" questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Introduction to Acts.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the Introduction to Acts or from your teacher's lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, tack it to your bulletin board, on the dashboard of your car, etc. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its "address" (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read Acts 1:1—2:4, concentrating on 1:1-8.

1. a. In Acts 1:1, how does Luke summarize what he wrote about in his former book, the Gospel of Luke?

 b. With what event does Acts 1:2 say the Gospel of Luke account ended? Compare this with Luke 24:49-51.

2. a. How does Acts 1:3 summarize the period between Jesus' resurrection from the grave and His ascension into heaven?

 b. In Acts 1:4, Luke repeats the information he gave in Luke 24:49. How does Acts 1:5 define the gift the disciples were to wait for?

3. What question did Jesus' words arouse in the disciples? (Acts 1:6)

4. a. The disciples, like many Jews in their day, hoped that God would revive the political nation of Israel. How did Jesus redirect their focus in Acts 1:7-8?

- b. Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 is a commission to all Christians throughout the ages. How is each believer enabled to fulfill this commission? (Acts 1:8a)
5. Challenge: Jesus spoke of this power earlier in His ministry. What did He tell His disciples in the following verses?
 Luke 12:11-12
- Luke 21:12-15
6. Personal: If you are a Christian, have you realized that Jesus wants you to be His witness, and that He has provided everything you need to do it? Whom is He calling you to speak to? Write out briefly what you might say.

Third Day: Review Acts 1:1—2:4, concentrating on 1:9-11.

1. What happened after Jesus gave the commission to His disciples? (Acts 1:9)
2. Challenge: The “cloud” that hid Jesus from the disciples' sight may have been the visible manifestation of the divine presence and glory.¹ How did God reveal His glory in this way to Moses and the people of Israel?
 Exodus 19:9
- Exodus 34:4-5
- Exodus 40:34
3. Read Mark 9:2-7. When had some of the disciples previously seen a similar manifestation of divine glory?
4. What happened shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven? (Acts 1:10)
5. a. What did these two “men,” who were actually angels,² tell the disciples? (Acts 1:11)
- b. Challenge: How did Jesus' own words confirm this, according to the following verses?
 Matthew 24:30

1. Frank E. Gaebelin, editor. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990)

2. Ibid.

Matthew 26:64

6. Personal: Jesus tells us very plainly that He will return and how He will return. What are some of the false ideas people may have about Christ's return? How do you feel about the return of the Lord Jesus?

Fourth Day: Review Acts 1:1—2:4, concentrating on 1:12-14.

1. After Jesus' ascension into heaven, where did those who witnessed it go? (Acts 1:12-13a)
2. Who was present at this time? (Acts 1:13b)
3.
 - a. Read Luke 6:12-16. Who chose these men? What did He call them, and what larger group were they selected from?
 - b. Who is in the Luke list but not in the Acts list? (Luke 6:16b)
4.
 - a. Who else joined the eleven apostles in the upstairs room? (Acts 1:14b)
 - b. Challenge: Read Luke 8:1-3; 23:49; and 23:55—24:10. What do you learn about "the women" Luke mentions in Acts 1:14?
 - c. Challenge: How did Jesus' brothers respond to His earlier ministry in Mark 3:20-21 and John 7:2-5? How does Acts 1:14 show their attitudes and beliefs had changed?
5. What did all these people do, as they waited in Jerusalem for the fulfillment of Jesus' promise? (Acts 1:14a)

6. Personal: Do you gather with other believers to spend time in prayer? How do you think this helps you fulfill Jesus' commission to witness for Him? If you do not spend time praying with other believers, would you like to start doing it now? How will you do this?

Fifth Day: Review Acts 1:1—2:4, concentrating on 1:15-26.

1. Read Luke 24:51-53. Where does verse 53 say the apostles spent most of their time while they waited in Jerusalem for the fulfillment of Jesus' promise?
2. Acts 1:13a tells us that when the apostles arrived in Jerusalem "they went upstairs to the room where they were staying." However, in light of Luke 24:53, where is it likely that the events that began in Acts 1:15 took place, considering how many people were present?
3. a. What did Peter say the Scriptures foretold about Judas, the apostle who had betrayed Jesus? (Acts 1:16-17,20; the quotations are from Psalms 69:25 and 109:8)
 - b. In Acts 1:18-19, what did Luke explain had been the tragic end of Judas? (In the lesson 2 commentary Ray Stedman will address the comparison of this passage with other information about Judas' death in Matthew 27:3-5.)
4. a. What did Peter say it was now necessary to do? (Acts 1:21a,22b)
 - b. What qualification did they believe was necessary for the person that they would choose? (Acts 1:21b-22a)
5. a. How did they choose between the two men that met the qualification? (Acts 1:23-26)
 - b. Challenge: The decision was made in the Old Testament way. The casting of lots is a dignified ritual that recognizes that God is present in even the smallest details. What do you learn about this in Proverbs 16:33?
6. Personal: Peter, though a fisherman by trade, knew the Old Testament Scriptures well enough to quote from it and to be led by its words. Jesus must have spent much time teaching the apostles from the Scriptures, and the believers must have continued to seriously study the Scriptures after His ascension (see Acts 6:4). By studying this course, you are also preparing yourself to make decisions based upon God's Word. Are you memorizing verses each week, so that you can call them to mind and quote them when appropriate?

Sixth Day: Review Acts 1:1—2:4, concentrating on 2:1-4.

1. In Acts chapter 2, we witness the birth of the church (i.e. the body of Jesus Christ). Where does Acts 2:1 say the believers were on the day of Pentecost?

2. a. The day of Pentecost occurred fifty days after the Passover feast. It was a Jewish feast day called the Feast of Weeks (see Exodus 34:22). It was also called the Feast of the Wave Loaves (see Leviticus 23:15-17). Pentecost came at the end of the wheat harvest in Israel, and the Jews were to take this new, freshly harvested wheat and bake two loaves. These loaves symbolized the two bodies from which the church would be formed: the Jews and the Gentiles.¹ Read Matthew 15:22-28. To whom did Jesus say He was first sent in verse 24?
 - b. Read John 10:14-16. How does Jesus show that His church will also include the Gentiles?

3. Challenge: The two loaves of the Feast of Weeks were to be baked with yeast. Yeast is a symbol of sin. The wave loaves were the only sacrifice in all the Old Testament that ever included yeast. Why? Through the symbol of those leavened loaves (made with yeast), God was telling us that the church is not made out of perfect people. It is made up of imperfect people—saints who still battle the old sin nature.² What do you learn about this in Galatians 5:13,16-17?

4. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on 120 people who were gathered in one place, and the Spirit made them one. What signs accompanied the Spirit's coming? (Acts 2:2-4)

5. Challenge: The baptism of the Holy Spirit is not necessarily associated with tongues, or fire, or wind.³ (We will learn more about these signs in future lessons.) The essence of the baptism of the Spirit is that the many become one. How does Paul explain this in the following passages?

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

Ephesians 2:11-18

6. Personal: Have you realized that as a Christian you are "one", or united, with every other believer, no matter how different they are from you? Neither race, nor language, nor culture, nor age, nor social status, nor any other fact about Christians can divide us into separate groups in God's view. How does this help you to think about believers from other church traditions that may hold some beliefs that are different from yours, but who still trust in the blood of Jesus Christ for their salvation?

1. Ray Stedman, see lesson 2 commentary.

2. Ibid.

3. This is based on Pastor Stedman's understanding of what the Bible has to say on this matter; your denomination may believe differently. You may wish to consult your pastor for additional information.