

THE NEVER ENDING STORY

We've overslept! — An Introduction to the Book of the Apostles

Over the next four weeks, we invite you to step into the Book of Acts as we invite the Holy Spirit to do nothing short of waking us up from a long sleep. The following study guide is intended to promote discussion among our study groups and will be updated from week to week as we progress through this wake up call.

The Acts of the Apostles

The Book of Acts, sometimes called the fifth Gospel, is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Dr. Luke is the writer, as he states in his introduction (v. 1).

The Book of Acts is a remarkable story in many ways. It is a bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles. The New Testament without the Book of Acts leaves a great yawning gap between Luke and Romans. As Ray Stedman says,

“We could never understand the New Testament if we did not have the book of Acts, for it fills the gap that would exist between the Gospels and the book of Romans, which follows. At the end of the Gospels we find a handful of Jews gathered in Jerusalem talking about a kingdom to come to Israel. In the book of Romans we find an apostle who is not even mentioned in the Gospels, and who was not one of the twelve, writing to a band of Christians in the capital city of Rome, talking about going to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts tells us how this happened, and why this change occurred.”

Special features of the Book of Acts

1. The power of Lord Jesus Christ

The Lord Jesus has left His disciples now. He is gone. He has ascended in the first chapter of the book. But He is still at work! He has just moved His position, His

location. He has moved His headquarters from Capernaum to the right hand of the Father. The Lord Jesus Christ is prominent. He is at work from the vantage place of heaven itself.

2. The power of the Holy Spirit

Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit. This promise is mentioned in the Gospel of John four times (John 1:33; 7:37–39; 14:16–17; 20:22). The same promise is given in the Book of Acts (Acts 1:8). You and I are living in the age of the Holy Spirit. The great fact of this age is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers

3. The power of the Church

There is a power in the Church, and, of course, this is the working of the Spirit of God.

The Key¹ Verse — Book of Acts: Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

- The last recorded fact about Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is the Resurrection, which is recorded in Acts 1.
- In the Gospel of Mark, the last recorded act of Jesus is the Ascension, which is also recorded in Acts 1.
- In the Gospel of Luke, the last recorded fact is the promise of the Holy Spirit. That is also in Acts 1, and
- In the Gospel of John the last recorded fact is the second coming of Christ. You guessed it—that is also in Acts 1.

¹ Other words to describe the adjective “key” is crucial, central, essential, indispensable, pivotal, critical, dominant, vital, principal, prime, primary, chief, major, leading, main, important, significant. Antonyms: peripheral

According to the key verse, the book divides in 3 parts

1. The Lord Jesus Christ at work by the Holy Spirit through the apostles in Jerusalem. (Acts 1:1 through 6:7)
2. The Lord Jesus Christ at work by the Holy Spirit through the apostles in Judea and Samaria. (6:8 to 9:31)
3. The remainder of the book is devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ at work by the Holy Spirit through the apostles unto the uttermost part of the earth. (9:32 through 28:31)

The Book of Action — The Never Ending Story!

The book of Acts is the action book of the New Testament, and it constitutes therefore one of the most exciting books of the Bible. The full name of it is, "The Acts Of The Apostles," but there are not many apostles mentioned in it. James, John, Peter, and Paul are the only ones who appear in any prominence. Through the centuries Christians have shortened this title and called it simply, "The Acts." We like that better for this is the book of action, revealing how God is at work through Christians in the early Church — and, yes, in the Body of Christ today.

There is intense conflict throughout the book, but a conflict met by a ringing confidence.

- It is a record of power exercised in the midst of persecution;
- An account of life and health pouring from a living Christ into a sick society through the channel of obscure men and women, very much like you and me.

The Book of Acts is a never-ending story of action that we are called to today as was the early Church.

WEEK ONE

Acts 1:1-14

Read Acts 1:1-14 below and follow our study guide from one week to the next in this series that is intended to wake us up from a sound sleep.

¹In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ²until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (New International Version)

Questions for Your Consideration

The beloved physician Luke followed up his Gospel with an account of the exciting history of the early New Testament Church. The book of Acts demonstrates Jesus Christ's promise and His commission to the Church being fulfilled. What can we learn and apply from the book of Acts today?

Is the power of the early church manifested in our churches today?

1. Define 'the church.'
2. Did the early church operate on a higher spiritual level?
3. Is it possible the Holy Spirit is withholding his power today from the Church or is it possible today's churches are not taking advantage of what has been freely given?

In the early church, the resurrection of Jesus Christ was the very center and heart of the message, and no sermon was preached without it. The theme of Peter on the Day of Pentecost was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "He is risen!" was proclaimed. Paul's center and heart was proclaimed everywhere, everyday.

As was the Apostles and disciples.

64 So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." (Matthew 27: 64)

1. What is the center and heart of the Church today? Why?
2. What is the center and heart of your message today? Why?

Luke continues his accurate and exciting history, begun in the Gospel of Luke, with this book about the first 30 years or so of the New Testament Church. We can learn much from the zeal, mission and examples of the first Christians, fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

3. How did Jesus Christ begin to fulfill His promises through the Church?

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18)

Luke 24:46-49

Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high." (Luke 24:46-49)

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

4. Did the disciples have absolute proof of the resurrection?

Acts 1:3

...to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. Act 1:3

The four Gospels, Acts and passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 give details of the infallible proofs of Jesus' resurrection. The zeal and fearlessness of the formerly fearful disciples also testify to their conviction that Jesus Christ was killed but was raised from the dead and was now backing up their efforts with power.

5. What message did two angels give the disciples when Christ was taken up to heaven?

And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:10-11)

This hope of Jesus Christ's return was a key element of the gospel—the good news—the early New Testament Church taught.

6. Is the “good news,” this hope of Jesus Christ's return the key element in your life? If not why? If so, how is it manifested through your life? How might we encourage each other

The first fourteen verses of chapter one constitute an introduction to the book of Acts, giving us the key to the book. Here we have revealed the essential strategy by which Jesus Christ proposes to change the world, a strategy which is the secret of the revolutionary character of the church when it is operating as it was intended to operate.

As Ray Stedman wrote,

“I strongly suspect that most Christians suffer from a terrible inferiority complex when we confront the world around us. We have bought the idea of many around that the church is quite irrelevant, a not at all important segment of society. That view is absolutely false. The church is the most important body in the world today -- far and away beyond every other body -- because whatever happens in the world happens as a result of something that is, or is not, happening in the church.”

We shall see this clearly in this book of Acts.

WEEK TWO

“He Ate With Us.” (continuing in Acts 1: 1-14)

Key Point: Jesus’ essential strategy

1. We manifest His life (incarnation), He spoke to us, (“the promise of the Father,”) and "He ate with us.”

2. Shadows of this these truths found through the Old Testament vs the reality of the risen lord.

3. Witnessing over propaganda

The mark of the false church is that it loves to talk about itself. We witness to what we have seen and experienced.

Background and review

We could never understand the New Testament if we did not have the book of Acts, for it fills the gap that would exist between the Gospels and the book of Romans, which follows. At the end of the Gospels we find a handful of Jews gathered in Jerusalem talking about a kingdom to come to Israel. In the book of Romans we find an apostle who is not even mentioned in the Gospels, and who was not one of the twelve, writing to a band of Christians in the capital city of Rome, talking about going to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts tells us how this happened, and why this change occurred and why it is a never ending story that has us as its current chapter.

7. Who is the author of the Gospel of Luke?

8. Who is the author of the Book of Acts?

It has been said that the Gospels were accounts of beginnings. Jesus, the man, came to begin something, "to do and to teach" and that the Book of Acts is the continuing account of Jesus. Acts is not the acts of Christians, but the continuing acts of Jesus. In the book of Acts he is doing it through the bodies of men and women who are permanently present because of His life in them. Thus, whether in the Gospels or in Acts, **embodiment** is the secret strategy by which God changes the world.

Introduction — The essential Strategy

Acts 1:1-14 Revised Standard Version (RSV)

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

1 *In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. 4 And while staying[a] with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me, 5 for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

The Ascension of Jesus

6 *So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” 9 And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”*

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

12 *Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away; 13 and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and*

Matthaeu, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. 14 All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

It has been said the first fourteen verses of Acts 1 gives us the key to the book.

3. **Read the first 2 verses again².** How does Jesus Christ propose to change the world?

“Whenever God wants to get a message across to us He does not simply send someone. He drives his point in flesh and blood — His flesh and blood. He becoming the Son of Man and manifesting His own life through the blood and flesh of us human beings who have given our lives over to Him. It is as simple as that. The Lord takes control of and is present in us. We, thus, manifest His life.”(Ray Stedman)

4. **Would you call it revolutionary?** And if so, define revolution in the context of this first chapter.

5. **Having defined revolutionary,** what are its characteristics as noted in chapter one?

This would imply very strongly that the church is very relevant to the world. In fact, whatever happens in the world, happens because something is or is not happening in the church. This would imply that the church is not a segment of the

² Luke wrote his account of Acts to “Theophilus, “ which means "loved of God,” an otherwise unknown person within the Bible. Yet, had Theophilus had not shared Luke’s letter there would not have the Gospel of Luke or the book of Acts.

world, but the most important body of culture. [Note: When we say “church,” we do not mean the building on the corner or the legal, institutional, denominational church, we mean the sum total of all believers all over the world who make up the Body of Christ.]

6. **Take some time to consider** if we are revolutionary as a church today.

Think about what the church is doing or not doing today that would or would not support “whatever happens in the world, happens because something is or is not happening in the church.” Please do not glance over this consideration. The people within the Catch Ministry as a body have the power to be strongly powerful in the world. As a member of this community, you have a very big role to play in the world.

7. Whether you see yourself a part of the Catch Ministry or of another body, do you have any **sense of getting a wake-up call?**

The first chapter tells us Jesus lives. Jesus is risen from the dead. Jesus is alive! And Luke offers in his letter three categories of proof that Jesus was risen:

- He appeared numerous times to them during forty days. This was not a figure of someone’s imagination.
- He spoke to them about the kingdom of God.
- He ate³ with them.

³ The word, "staying" has a marginal reference which gives eating as the actual Greek word used.

Jesus says to the eleven disciples, "Stick around in Jerusalem." Don't go outside the city until the promise of the Father has come upon you." Why? Because you'll make a mess of it if you try witnessing without this.

8. **When have you stepped out from the Holy Spirit** and operated on your own power and not the power of God?

So like the disciples, the Lord also says to us, don't try to do anything on your own. In fact, it is absolutely essential not to try to do anything without the power of the Holy Spirit. Don't try anything without receiving "the promise of the Father" — the real thing — the actual Holy Spirit Himself.

Shadows of this these truths found through the Old Testament vs the reality of the risen Lord.

Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and many of the kings of Judah and certainly all of the prophets up to John the Baptist experienced the filling of the Spirit, but experienced it in shadows. They taught that there was coming One who would immediately place believers into the body of Christ, making them part of His life.

Thus our Lord stresses the reality of the Holy Spirit given now, immediately, when anyone believes in Jesus. It is the means by which the risen life of Jesus becomes available to us, continuously and constantly. All that He is, made available through all who believe in Him, is the means by which Jesus' life is still impacting the world.

9. Our good friend and mentor Ray Stedman said, **“Your task is to be the manifestation of power, not the exercise of a program.”** **What does this mean to you?**

10. What kind of power?

11. **What does it mean when Jesus says,** “Be my witnesses.” When we chat about our wonderfulness in relationship to the Lord, or act as though we are trying to sign up soldiers for the Army — “Christ needs you!” — we are not serving as witnesses. We are serving as witnesses when our eyes are focused on Him as we present ourselves as visible evidence, only speaking to what the Lord has done and what we have experienced.

Throughout the book of Acts, and through the life of the church, the emphasis has always been on the fact that the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit, is for everyone.

Another thread that runs throughout the book of Acts is the hope of Christ's return.

“And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:9-11 RSV)

He just disappears.

12. **So, where did He go?** Up to heaven? Another planet? Or maybe just in a different dimension of existence. What do you think?

The point, of course, is because he left, we can have all of Him.

Though he was to go away, his return is certain. "This same Jesus," they say, "will come back again." When he comes he will come in exactly the same way as they saw him go. It is part and parcel of the mystery of incarnation, the grand strategy that God employs.

Look at Verses 12-14:

***12** Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away; **13** and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. **14** All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

13. **What did they do while they were waiting?** Why, the only thing left to them -- they prayed. Isn't prayer the final rest for you? When you have sought after your own resources, developed wonderful programs, talked about how great church attendance and the marvelous things you have done for God, you are left in the in-between times. You are not cut off by God. You are linked to Him through prayer. And I am and so is everyone who believes in the risen Lord and has received the promise of the Father. It is how the Lord touches and changes the world.

If you have put it to the side, rediscover the power... the promise of the Father. We encourage you to embrace these truths as your own ... because they are!