

THE ACTS OF JESUS

STUDY GUIDE

Acts 1-7



250 East 61st Street New York, NY 10065
TrinityNY.org

Overview

Luke wrote this book as a “Part 2” companion to his Gospel of Luke. From the start he explains that:

“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,”

Acts 1:1

If Luke’s first book was about what Jesus began to do, then his Part 2 (the book of Acts) is about how the work of Jesus continued throughout the early days of the Church and how it continues even to this day. While we see many notable figures throughout the book (Peter, Stephen, Paul, Timothy, etc.), this isn’t a story about people; it is a story about what Jesus is doing through them.

One key idea that threads throughout the entire 28 chapters of this amazing book is that the work of Jesus continues through people who are led by the Spirit. It was not blind luck or human effort that transformed a small and beleaguered group of disciples into a global community of faith. It was the work of Jesus. What He came to do, He continues to do even today.

One of the key verses for the entire book also provides a basic outline for how the story unfolds:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Acts 1:8

The story that Luke tells begins with the early believers witnessing in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), then in the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12), and finally unto the ends of the earth (Acts 13-28).

How to use this guide

This guide is meant to help you understand and respond to God’s Word. Each chapter will give a basic overview, some key questions to ask, and prompts for how to apply it to your life. When you come to read God’s Word, whether you are in a small group or on your own, take time to come before God in worship. Ask Him to lead and guide your time. Ask for grace to read, listen, and respond as He leads.

Acts 1: Jerusalem

Overview

Luke gives the premise for writing his book. This is the story of how the work of Jesus continued after his ascension into heaven. The disciples are given a mission but told to wait until the power of the Holy Spirit is upon them. While they wait and prepare for that moment, the disciples choose a replacement for Judas.

~Read Acts 1~

Key Questions

Luke begins by describing the time between Jesus' resurrection and His coming ascension. He taught the early disciples for 40 days about the coming of God's kingdom. What do you think they discussed and how did it impact the disciples? (Hint! Look at how Luke describes the disciples in the last few chapters of Luke and then in the first few chapters of Acts.)

What does this imply about the need and the result of you spending time with Jesus and His Word?

The disciples are told to wait for a power which was promised by God, told to them through Jesus, and made available to them by the Holy Spirit. Why do they need to wait?

Jesus tells them that when they receive the power of the Spirit, they *will* be witnesses. People who are operating in the power of the Holy Spirit witness about Jesus. What do you think witnessing means and how are you living that out?

Why do you think the disciples felt the need to replace Judas' position as the 12th disciple? Think back to their last 40 days of discussion.

Applying Truth

God's work requires God's power. You cannot live the life that He has called you to in your own strength and effort. Acts is a story of the continuing work of Jesus through people who were led by the Holy Spirit. Even as the disciples waited for that first gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, so we who have the Spirit within us must also wait for His leading in our lives.

What areas of your life are you living in your own strength and what has that cost you?

Where are you outpacing God's leading?

Pray

God grant me the grace this week to move in the power at the timing of Your Holy Spirit.

Acts 2: Jerusalem

Overview

Acts 2 tells the story of how the Holy Spirit came upon the early believers on the day of Pentecost. God's prophecy came true and the early church began to miraculously speak the story of Jesus in such a way that each person understood it in their own language. Peter preaches the message of Jesus as the rejected Messiah Who is now calling Israel to Himself, and many respond to the Gospel. In response to God's Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, a new faith community is gathered.

~Read Acts 2~

Key Questions

Pentecost was a celebration of the first harvest of wheat when many Jewish pilgrims came from all over the empire to Jerusalem to celebrate and make offerings to God. Why is this setting significant for the coming of the Holy Spirit?

While they were waiting, there was a rushing wind and what seemed like tongues of fire came upon the believers. Read 2 Chronicles 7:1-4 and Exodus 40:34-38. What is significant about this imagery and what does it imply?

When they spoke the words of Jesus, they miraculously spoke in languages they didn't previously know. The pilgrims who had traveled from all over the world to be there suddenly heard the message of Jesus clearly. How is this a fulfillment of Ezekiel 37:15-28?

Verse 42 says that they devoted themselves to this new community of faith. They heard the message, they responded with faith, and then they dedicated themselves to this new community. Why was that important, and why is it still important?

Applying Truth

God fulfills His promises. The events in Acts 2 undoubtedly shocked and surprised all who saw it, but God had planned this long ago. The prophets had foretold this moment would come and that God's kingdom would break forth in a new way. Those who saw it responded with joy, worship, and generosity. They committed themselves to God's Word and lived with the simple purpose of being a part of God's coming kingdom because God's people respond to God's promises.

Too often this simplicity of purpose and the overflowing life of worship that it brings gets buried by the worries of everyday life. What has overshadowed your commitment to the community of believers? What has robbed you of joy or complicated your purpose in living? Give it to God and reconnect with the thrill of seeing God's kingdom come in and through you.

Acts 3: Jerusalem

Overview

In Acts 3, we find that it's not just the work of Jesus that is continuing through people who are led by the Spirit, but the miracles of Jesus are continuing as well. In the Gospels we find numerous accounts of Jesus healing the sick and the lame. Now, we see His disciples doing that same work to confirm their message of salvation through the risen Jesus.

~Read Acts 3~

Key Questions

What were the stated reasons that Peter and the lame man were at the temple? What is the deeper significance of this event happening at the temple? (Hint: what is the purpose of the temple?)

The pious onlookers were shocked when they saw the work of God on display. Peter challenges their reaction. Why were they shocked, and why are we so surprised when we see the work of God in our midst?

Peter states that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has glorified Jesus and yet their descendants (the Israelites) have rejected and killed Him. How is it that you can inherit a tradition of faith and still miss it? What does this imply about how we can or cannot pass along our personal faith to others?

Verse 24 states that the prophets in the Old Testament spoke of Jesus even though His name wasn't specifically mentioned in the text. What does this say about a "Christian" reading of the Old Testament?

Applying Truth

"We believe that all the Scriptures center about the Lord Jesus Christ in His person and work in His first and second coming, and hence that no portion, even of the Old Testament, is properly read, or understood, until it leads to Him."¹

God's plan of redemption was set in motion from eternity past. All of creation praises and points to Him. All of scripture speaks of Him and leads us to Him. Our lives should do the same. Just like creation and the Word of God, our lives should point to Jesus.

What is your life pointing to? May it be said of each of us that our lives center around the Lord Jesus Christ in His person and His work in His first and second coming, and that the story of your life can't be fully understood until you see that it points to Jesus.

¹ <https://www.dts.edu/about/what-we-believe/doctrinal-statement/>

Acts 4: Jerusalem

Overview

In the previous chapter, we saw the surprising work of Peter healing a lame man on the steps of the temple. While many marveled and celebrated this amazing intervention of God, not everyone was so pleased. The established leaders of the temple and the religious community were fearful and attempted to stop Peter's words and, more significantly, the work of God in their midst.

~Read Acts 4~

Key Questions

In the last chapter, the pious crowd was amazed at Peter's act of healing. This chapter begins with the temple rulers being disturbed (verse 2) by Peter's words. Why were they not focused on what happened, and what did they find so disturbing that they placed him in jail?

In verse 7, they ask Peter by what power and by what name (authority) did he do this? Since they heard him speak previously and surely know his answer already, why are they asking the question? What does this imply about their attitude and belief?

Reread verses 11-12. Jesus is the foundation of our salvation and relationship with God. There is no other name by which men can be made right with God. The leaders listening to Peter were angry by the exclusivity of his claim and what that implied. Many are still angry with that claim and what it implies. What does that imply, and why does it make people angry? What do you believe about the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus?

The leaders were astounded by the power, wisdom, and composure of Peter. Their only explanation was that he had been with Jesus. Think back to chapter 1 during the 40 days of being with Jesus and listening to His words. Why does it matter that we spend time with Jesus and His words today? How can that change us? Do you know of anyone who has made a radical change because of their relationship with Jesus?

In response to persecution, the early church doubled down and dedicated themselves to hearing God's Word and growing together. How committed is the average believer to their church today, and how does this challenge us?

Applying Truth

The spiritual life that Jesus calls us to can put us at odds with popular religion. When a religious system is more concerned with temporal power and historic precedent than with responding to the work and Word of God, then that system should be rejected.

The religious nationalism of the day led people away from the true message of Jesus. After all, the thinking went, isn't it better that one man (Jesus) die rather than ruin the power structure the Jewish leaders had negotiated with Rome?

The words and works of Jesus have always challenged popular religion. It still does today. May we be committed enough to follow the leading of God's Spirit even to places that set us at odds with some of the religious and political systems around us.

Acts 5: Jerusalem

Overview

The disciples continue the work of Jesus with the authority of Jesus. Acts Chapter 5 details the cost of dismissing divinity when it comes wrapped in humanity. Ananias and Sapphira thought their deception would win them points with their peers and didn't stop to consider how a Holy and Righteous God would see their actions. The religious leaders attempt to imprison, intimidate, and contain God's work only to find themselves working against God. The chapter concludes with the disciples praising God that they were counted as worthy to suffer for God's kingdom, just as Jesus had done.

~Read Acts 5~

Key Questions

What do you think the conversation was like between Ananias and Sapphira when they were coming up with their lie? What motivated them? How do lies like that happen today?

Peter notes that they have lied to the Holy Spirit when they believed they were just talking with Peter. How is that possible?

Does their punishment seem harsh to you? Consider Luke's focus on the true temple (believers with the Holy Spirit versus brick and mortar). How does this reflect stories in the Old Testament, and why was that connection important to make for the early church?

Why do you think it is hard to see divinity when it is wrapped in humanity? How does that play out in the church today?

Peter and the early disciples flatly refused to follow orders that would lead them to disobey God. Peter boldly says in verse 29 that we should obey God rather than men. The Bible often tells us to live peaceably and with respect to earthly authority. When do you think it is right to reject authority?

The leaders were so enraged by Peter's response that they literally wanted to kill the disciples. How does the early church's example challenge a conflict-avoidant Christianity? What are some ways we slip into that today?

Applying Truth

Many people struggled to accept Jesus as God because the Word became flesh. People dismissed the early Church as the temple of God which housed His Spirit because they looked so ordinary. People still dismiss the work of God because it doesn't look like what they expect. We run the danger of dismissing or denying the work of God when we mistake it for merely human. We are told to abstain from certain sins because the body is the temple of God. How do you view your body?

We are called to forgive and fight for our fellow believers because we are all part of the body of Christ. How do you think about those other believers who you don't get along with?

We are told to respect and give all honor to our spiritual leaders because they are led by Jesus. How do you view those leading the church? To fully live out the call of Jesus on our lives we can't dismiss the divinity wrapped in humanity.

Acts 6: Jerusalem

Overview

The rapid growth of the church left some basic functions of the community in disarray. In particular, certain widows were not receiving food each day, and this became a point of criticism within the broader community. The disciples gather and decide that while they must keep their focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word, others should indeed be appointed to fill this gap. A spiritual leader named Stephen is chosen who becomes both a model for the Spirit-filled life and a target for persecution.

~Read Acts 6~

Key Questions

Hellenists were those who embraced and embodied Greek culture. Luke notes that the Jewish Hellenists who are familiar with local customs point out that certain widows are being neglected. What do you think was motivating their comments?

Their critique was fair regardless of the reasons behind their words. The disciples recognize this and decide to act. Does godliness save us from mistakes and oversights? How should we respond to the frustrations and accusations of organizational problems?

The 12 disciples recognize that they should keep a laser focus on preaching the Word and on prayer. Why does it matter that the church keeps the main thing the main thing? What are some examples of losing focus and being imbalanced in the church today?

The feeding of the poor was daily practice. In that day there was not a separate government agency that provided a cultural safety net. How does this tie back to Luke's comparison of two temples?

If you were writing a job description for working in a soup kitchen and waiting tables, would you insist that the top requirements be having an excellent reputation in the community and also be known as uniquely wise and insightful? Why are the requirements so spiritual for such a mundane task? What does this say about how they view this role of service?

Was serving the marginalized less important than preaching the Word, or was it something else?

Applying Truth

The church is unlike any other group in the world. We are called to care for the poor, fight for justice, and promote righteousness, and yet the church is not primarily a humanitarian effort, a social justice cause, nor an anti-(fill-in-the-blank sin) lobbyist group. The foundation for all the church does is Christ.

However, since you are called to make a difference in this world as you live out your faith, do so with Christ at the center. The story of the early church is the continuing work of Jesus through people who are led by the Spirit. May He lead us, and may we follow with Him at the center of our lives.

Acts 7: Jerusalem

Overview

In our last chapter we were introduced to a man filled with the Spirit of God called Stephen. He spoke God's words and was innocent of any wrongdoing, and yet he was persecuted just as Jesus was. In Acts 7 Stephen gives a long speech recounting the people of Israel's longstanding pattern of rejecting the work of God. All of this leads to his final conclusion that Jesus is the true Messiah, and the church, not the temple, is now the centerpiece of God's redemption in the world. Enraged, they stone Stephen, and as the first martyr of the church, he is welcomed into eternity by the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

~Read Acts 7~

Key Questions

Why do you think Stephen chose that moment to give a speech about the history of Israel? Peter also referenced the patriarchs in his speech earlier in the book. What is the connection they are trying to make for the Jewish leadership?

Stephen emphasizes that the Jewish people didn't follow a sacrificial system when they were wandering through the wilderness. Why does that matter, and why do the listeners find it so upsetting?

Solomon's temple was one of the great wonders of the world in its time and yet God does not dwell in temples built by human hands. What happened at the inauguration of Solomon's temple? How did they misunderstand the symbolism of that moment?

Later, scripture records the symbol of God's presence departing from the temple. The current temple that existed was a newer construction, and we have no recording of divine fire or smoke to symbolize the presence of God. What is implied by that?

Stephen's controversial point is implied. What is it?

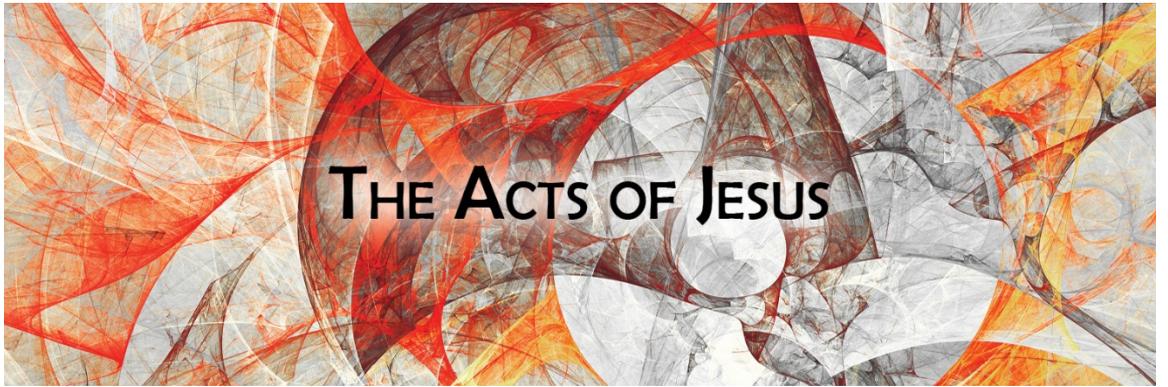
What is the irony of Stephen being filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit?

Jesus is standing at the right hand of the throne of God. In most descriptions of the ascendent Jesus, He is described as seated on the throne. Why is He uniquely described as standing here?

Applying Truth

The radical truth of the early Church was that God's presence now dwells in His people. David in the Psalms pleaded for God's Spirit and asked that it not be taken from him. The Prophets were led by the Spirit to speak God's truth and yet it was temporary. Men and women of God longed for the day when He would dwell with His people, and they would be changed from the inside out.

That happened in Stephen's day and continues until this very moment. Does it matter to you? The prophets longed for it, Stephen died for it, and we forget about it. May God remind us of the most precious gift of His Holy Spirit, and may we be caught up in the joy of walking in Him.



THE ACTS OF JESUS