

ACTS

Part 1 – “The Acts of the Risen Jesus”

Acts 1:1-5

The majority of the New Testament was composed by Luke. He is the author of what was, from the beginning, a two volume work consisting of his gospel account and the book traditionally known as “The Acts of the Apostles.” Acts picks up where Luke left off and traces the spread of the gospel through the ministry of the Apostles. The real hero of Acts however is the risen Jesus whose power and presence is made known through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the book of Acts can appropriately be called “The Acts of the Risen Jesus.”

Suggestions for reading Acts well:

1. Read Acts in light of the purpose of Luke.

What God has done in history through Jesus Christ is of utmost importance to Luke. Just as Jesus was the central concern of Luke’s gospel, so he is in the record of Acts. This is not a book intended as a manual for church governance or ministry policies. Certainly Acts is helpful in answering questions about such matters but this is not even close to Luke’s purpose. Acts offers the church today the record of the church under the leadership of the apostles and as such narrates details that were unique to that time. Nevertheless we are to read Acts with a heavy dose of anticipation that the same risen Lord whose presence comforted and empowered the first generation church empowers and comforts the church today.

2. Keep in mind the New Testament epistles.

Luke is a theological historian. He is keenly interested in historical details as they relate to God’s unfolding purpose. The epistles were being composed during the events narrated by Luke. The epistles differ from narrative (Acts) in that they are intended to further explain and apply the gospel as well as commend and/or correct particular behaviors within the church. In this way the epistles are able to help us apply what we read in Acts, properly differentiating that which is prescriptive from that which is only descriptive.

3. Don’t forget the Old Testament.

Luke’s narrative style echoes some portions of the Hebrew Old Testament. Of course the sermons he records often draw from the Old Testament text. Acts demonstrates how the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus fulfill the prophetic expectation. We will also see that the Old Testament expectations regarding the ministry of the Holy Spirit are fulfilled.

4. Notice the prominence of preaching.

The driving force in the narrative is the advance of God’s word through the preaching of the apostles. At least thirty percent of the Acts narrative is given to the preaching of the apostles. Many of the miracles performed by the apostles were strictly for the purpose of establishing the authority of the word being preached. For instance, while the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is recorded in 13 verses, Peter’s sermon explaining the event consists of 23 verses (chap. 2). It is followed by two more speeches from Peter (chaps. 3&4). The Holy Spirit is depicted primarily as empowering the apostles to preach boldly in the face of opposition and thus fulfill Jesus’ commission.

Two Crucial Questions in Reading Acts:

Dennis Johnson, in his helpful The Message of Acts, urges the reader to ask the following questions while reading Acts:

1. What is God’s moral verdict on the events narrated?

God does not condone every act that he caused to be recorded in the Bible. Some of the human characters in Acts behave in ways that God clearly condemns. Such recorded events are helpful in that they reveal some of the things God does not want for his church.

2. What is normative for the church in all ages?

This question is quite a bit more challenging. While reading Acts we will see events recorded that are clearly approved of by God. But does this mean that those same actions or phenomena are to be normative for the church in our own day? For instance, should any of us follow Abraham's example and attempt to offer one of our children as sacrifices to the Lord? I hope you answer with a resounding "NO!" We understand that what God called Abraham to do was singular. It was purposeful for his time in redemptive history. An example from Acts chapters 2 and 4 is that of the church in Jerusalem pooling all of their money and possessions and the apostles distributing those resources as they saw fit. Is this descriptive or prescriptive? Are we to repeat that action or apply a principle? The way we answer that question has enormous implications. Or consider the miraculous signs worked by the apostles. Should Christians today expect to work those same sorts of miracles?

Acts 1:1-5:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Luke points out at least three doctrinal building blocks to help us understand the unfolding narrative of Acts.

1. The Centrality of Jesus

Luke begins by referring his readers to the first volume of his work by which he makes clear that the story of the establishing of the church cannot be separated from the life and work of Jesus. Indeed, the life, suffering, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are of fundamental importance to the ongoing life and ministry of the church.

2. The Presence and Power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit

The ascension of Jesus was a significant moment in redemptive history for it made way for Jesus' rightful exaltation, his ongoing ministry as our heavenly intercessor, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit who mediates the presence and power of Jesus.

3. The Promise of the Father

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of the Father's promise first announced through the prophets (Joel 2:28-32 / Isaiah 32:15-20; 44:3-5). Luke's words in verse 4 anticipate Pentecost when the apostles will be filled with power from on high. The promise of the Father is certainly connected with the new covenant whereby He will give his people new hearts to replace their hearts of stone. It is the reality of the new birth and union with Christ. Jesus speaks of these very blessings to Nicodemus in John 3:1-8.