

# Exploring Acts

## The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

### Lesson 1

#### Day One: The Church is Born

Imagine if you will what it would be like if the book of Acts wasn't in the Bible. You would open the pages to see the ministry account of Jesus ending in the Gospel of John; and next you would read about a man named Paul writing a deep treatise to the followers of Jesus living in Rome. But who was Paul? And how did the gospel get all the way from Jerusalem to Rome? The Book of Acts answers these questions and many more. It is in fact the only historical account in the entire New Testament describing the first three decades of the church's existence. And we have Luke to thank for it.

Luke's book of Acts picks up where his Gospel left off, giving us the details of the church that Jesus had earlier promised would be built. Luke's Gospel is his *first account* of the life of Jesus and Acts is his *second account*. In Acts 1:1–2, Luke states that he wrote his Gospel to contain “all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up.” His Book of Acts then, is the record of the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ—after His ascension—by the power of the Holy Spirit through His chosen apostles. Together, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts form a complete, all-inclusive seamless account of how the followers of Jesus were able to “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

Who was Luke? A close friend and traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, Luke was a physician, a researcher and a meticulous record keeper. He had an educated knowledge of law, culture and customs and the region's geography. He relied on previous written sources and no doubt personal interviews with leading figures such as Peter, John, and others. But we also see him using the first person plural pronouns of “we” and “us,” revealing that he too was an eyewitness to many of the events recorded in Acts. He wrote both of his accounts to Theophilus, whose name meant “lover of God.” Whether this man was a believer already or someone Luke wished to win to Christianity we don't know. Luke's reference to him as “most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3) suggests that he was a man holding a position of importance.

As we study the Book of Acts, we will see in the first generation of the church, ordinary men and women doing extraordinary things! They were capable of miracles, signs and wonders because “*they were filled with the Holy Spirit.*” Herein lies the key to every believer's success in the Christian life. The Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity, acts as the divine source who creates, sustains, and purifies the faith of all those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. We will discover He is not merely an influence or power emanating from God—rather He is God. He functions with purpose, emotion, and will. He can be grieved, quenched, resisted, tested, and blasphemed. But He loves the saints, teaching, guiding, comforting, correcting, and blessing them. He seals, fills, and indwells believers, illuminating their understanding and application of God's Word so they can resist sin and obey God.

Read Acts 1 in its entirety. Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Record your first impressions of the book. Make note of what you personally hope to gain from your journey this year.

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### Deeper Discoveries ~

The opening scene of Acts 1 reveals the previews of coming attractions. This is the beginning of the church. The apostles and disciples were gathered together for a season of prayer. Jesus had commanded them to wait for the fulfillment of the promised indwelling Spirit. The fact that these individuals did not have a building of their own in which to meet, did not diminish their passion or deter their purpose.

1. What does it tell *you* about what the church really is?

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2. If you were to describe to someone else what the church looks like, what would you say?

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3. How long have you been an active part of the church? What in particular has blessed you about being a member of God's family?

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The Apostle Paul would later add perspective and principles to the early believers on how they should regard their position as a Christian and behave in like manner. What do the two following passages from Paul's letter to the Ephesian church reveal to you about . . .

- The Church's foundation: Ephesians 2:19–22

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- The Church's goal: Ephesians 4:11–16

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## Day Two:

## Power to Change the World

1. According to Acts 1:1–3, list the words and phrases Luke uses to describe the reality of Christ's resurrection.

Before ascending to the Father, Jesus made many appearances to the believers over a period of forty days. Luke is the one who emphasizes the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. You may find it helpful to read the last chapter of the Gospel of Luke to appreciate the transition into this first chapter of Acts. It was during this time that Jesus gave many “infallible [convincing] proofs” that He was alive, speaking about the kingdom of God.

Then being assembled together with them, “He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me . . . you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (vv. 4–5). Still believing that Jesus had come to restore an earthly kingdom to Israel, they asked Him about it. This was a question they had asked many times before; but now Jesus was about to ascend, and they probably felt He would leave them to oversee it. The verb *restore* reveals that they anticipated the establishment of an immediate political rule over a territorial kingdom. Jesus’ final word on it: *It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority* (v. 7).

*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* (v. 8). How would these men carry out such a plan? They still weren’t ready and there was much they yet did not understand. They would do it with the enablement of a divine power they had never known or experienced before—a power that would change the world!

2. What do you think Jesus meant when He told His followers they would be “witnesses” to Him? Look up the word; write a definition. (Think about what a witness does and says.)
  - a. Most believers will not be called upon to address a large audience with the gospel message. Give an example of a way in which *you* might be a witness for Christ?

When it comes to being a witness for Jesus, we cannot depend on our natural abilities, the power to effectively witness comes from the Holy Spirit. It is the supernatural outpouring of God that provides the empowering for believers to take the gospel message to the world.

### Look Closer ~

During His three and a half years with them on earth, what did Jesus want His followers to know about the Holy Spirit?

- John 14:16–17
- John 14:26



## Day Three: What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do

Only Luke records the Lord's ascension in both his gospel and his Acts historical accounts. It is a brief mention but the emphasis is not on Jesus' departure, rather on what His followers are to do as they await His return. Although the Holy Spirit had not yet come, the family of believers met in the upper room and, standing in the middle, Peter took the lead in choosing another disciple to take the place of Judas. Peter quoted from two passages in Psalms, relying on God's Word to lead them in determining God's will. They prayed and cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias to be numbered among the eleven apostles. Today, we would consider the method of casting lots an imperfect way to discover God's will, but to them it was tradition and what they knew. It may not have been perfect, but their method drove them to look to God's voice in scripture rather than rely on their own feelings and emotions in difficult circumstances.

Have you ever been in a holding pattern, just praying and waiting and watching eagerly for God to do something? Are you in one right now? Sometimes the hardest moments are right before the answer comes! Press on dear believer and continue in prayer—the answer will come.

Below is an exercise that will encourage you as you wait on God's will. Look up the references keeping your situation in mind. Consider the lesson in each and then how you can apply that lesson to your life.

1. *Wait on the Lord*: Philippians 4:6. What does the verse say? What do you learn from it?

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2. *Watch for God to speak to you through His Word*: 2 Timothy 3:16–17. What do the verses teach you? How can you make practical application of the lesson in them?

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3. *Walk worthy of your calling* as a Christian where God has placed you in His church: Ephesians 4:1–3. What is the lesson here and how can you apply it this week?

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4. *Witness for Christ wherever He takes you*: 2 Timothy 4:1–2. What do these verses say to you? How can you apply them to your present circumstances?

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## Day Four:

## Luke

The Bible is rich with the lives of men and women who represent the heartbeat of Acts—real people—whose hearts were filled with the Spirit of God in loving obedience to Christ. It was these ordinary individuals who became extraordinary by turning their world upside down! Each week we'll take a closer look at their lives in the hope of enriching our own.

Aside from what is mentioned in the introduction to this lesson, what we know about Luke the man is very little. In fact, there are only three direct references mentioned about him in the New Testament and these were written by the Apostle Paul. Look up each reference below and challenge yourself to select one word that summarizes what it says about Luke.

1. Colossians 4:14 \_\_\_\_\_
2. Philemon 24 \_\_\_\_\_
3. 2 Timothy 4:9–11 \_\_\_\_\_

From Luke's style of writing we can assume he received a Greek education, most likely studying in the schools of Tarsus, as did Apollos and Saul. Greek students placed a high value on excellence, striving to achieve in their chosen field. In such a culture, to set aside one's own personal drive and embrace the teaching of Christianity that meant "in humility consider others better than yourself," was not only distasteful, it was considered shameful. But in coming to Christ, Luke found that which embodied the highest while at the same time set the plumb-line to everything that was worldly in his thinking. Scripture doesn't tell us when, where, or how Luke was led to Christ, but he found in Jesus the One who fulfilled his dreams and ideals.

Luke's background in education and his chosen profession equipped him to become Paul's personal doctor—"beloved physician." He was educated; he was faithful; but it was the Holy Spirit who made Luke the right man for the job. He is an example to us of someone who allowed his gifts and talents to be used for God's glory.

When was the last time you did an inventory check of your own life and what makes you the right person God needs for the job? Perhaps you never have. Are you aware of the areas in which God has gifted you and the purpose for which He carefully designed you to serve Him? Take a few minutes and ask the Lord to lead your thinking in the personal questions that follow. Don't worry if your answer is *unknown*. As you become better acquainted with the Holy Spirit this year through your study of Acts, you will also gain a deeper understanding of *who you are in Christ*, and how He wants to gift you and use you for His glory!

- a. What do you recognize to be your "natural abilities" (i.e., your God-given talents)?
- b. What character qualities and spiritual gift(s) has God added since you received Christ as your Savior?
- c. In what way are you using these talents and gifts in your service of Him? Will you ask Him to fill you afresh today with the Holy Spirit and thank Him for doing so?

**Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review**

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

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2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

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3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

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4. Personal: Compose a prayer of thanksgiving for what you've learned this week.

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**Prayer Time:** Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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