

Acts Pt. II

Village Church Studies

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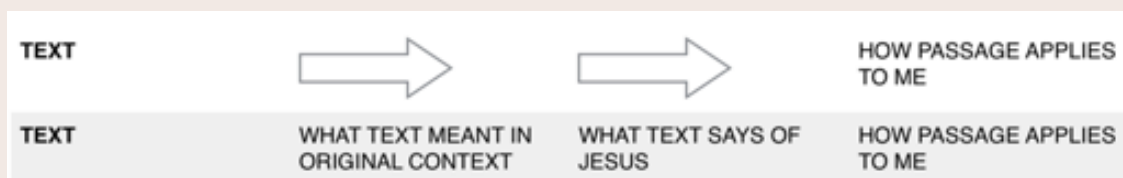
READING THE BIBLE

Because Jesus is the centre of the Bible, we read everything through the lens of his life, death, and resurrection. If all God's words point to Jesus then we have to see Christ before we can see ourselves.

UNDERSTANDING

Because "everything written... in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44) is about Jesus, we can't expect that the Bible would speak primarily to us.

Because the Bible was written to an original audience, we need to understand what it was saying to them. And because all of scripture is speaking of Jesus, we need to understand why, and in that we can see how the passage speaks to us.



What is this passage saying to its original readers? How is this passage speaking of Jesus? What is this passage saying to Christians today?

KNOWING IT, FEELING IT

Because we might want to connect with God and know Him better we could want everything He says to be immediately relevant to our lives. But the Bible is about God. The wonder of the gospel is that, by grace through faith, we are "in Christ," as the New Testament often puts it. And if we are "in Christ" we have received every spiritual blessing that Jesus received (Eph.1:3).

Because the Bible is all about Jesus, and because those who believe in him are "in Christ," the most powerful truths of reading the Bible come from seeing how the words are speaking of Jesus.

A LITTLE HELP FROM YOUR FRIENDS

There are many confronting, many culturally-offensive and many confusing parts in the Bible. Even Peter, one of the writers of the Bible, considers Paul, another writer of the Bible to be "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). That's why God gives us His Spirit and a community. Asking God and asking those who have been around the Bible for a bit longer, and have maybe thought through and wrestled with these questions as well, is invaluable when trying to grow in your understanding. As well as that, Village will be running a How to Read the Bible course starting on the second Sunday of this month, and every odd-numbered month.

BACKGROUND

WHO WROTE ACTS?

Acts is the second part of a two part record that Luke the Physician (Col 4:14) wrote, the first being what we know as the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:1-4). Whereas for the Gospel Luke interviewed eyewitnesses to build an account of what happened, Acts is a combination of both his research and his personal experience, as can be seen when the narrative changes from third person to first person in Acts 16:10.

WHY & WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?

At the start of both his record of Jesus' life, and the life of the early Church, Luke indicates that he's writing this for someone named Theophilus (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1). We don't learn much more about Theophilus, but it seems like Theophilus sponsored Luke to research & record Jesus' life, and the effects of his resurrection on those who witnessed it and then those who heard about it. It's hard to know exactly when it was written, but because there's no reference to the destruction of the Jewish temple (70AD), it's most likely that the Gospel of Luke was finished and sent to Theophilus sometime after AD 61, and what we have as Acts not long after that. It's hard to know, but what we can be certain of is that Luke did his research with those who saw the risen Jesus with their own eyes.

WHAT'S ACTS ABOUT?

In short, Acts is about what Jesus continued to do after his ascension. It records the expansion of the early church from Jerusalem, to Samaria and right into the heart of Rome. While there are probably many reasons Luke wrote Acts, from the material he included it seems clear that Luke was keen for everyone to know that this Jewish Messiah is not just for Israel, but is the Saviour of the whole world. It's a book about the first witnesses to the resurrected Saviour and how through God's Spirit those witnesses took the Gospel right into the heart of the most powerful empire the world had known. The world was being reshaped around Jesus.

A DELIBERATE LIFE ...

Paul the Apostle carried the message of Christ with every fibre of his being. In Acts 20 he says, *"You yourselves know how I lived among you ... serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials ... But I do not account my life of any value or precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."* God's love for him shown in Jesus shaped and directed his life. He felt compelled to pour out his life so that others might know the same good God that he'd come to know. And so he prayed, spoke, and lived in such a way that people would have the best chance of hearing and seeing the message of the gospel.

We want those around us who don't know Jesus to come to know him. And we want to be sensitive, wise, and loving in the way we give them the opportunities to hear the gospel.

But the place it's got to start is with prayer.

So each week we meet, we're going to pray for each other and the friends that we're hoping to share the gospel with. On the first night, **consider who you're going to pray for this term.** If you want, write down their name and don't forget to share anything encouraging that develops.



GOSPEL PROGRESS IN ACTS

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1:1 - 6:7

THE GOSPEL STARTS IN JERUSALEM

1:1-26

The risen Lord Jesus promises his gathered disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them and they will be his 'witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (1:8).

2:1-47

Many Jewish people, gathered from 'every nation under heaven' to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem, hear the gospel of Jesus. More than 3000 people receive the good news and are baptised as believers (2:41, 47).

3:1 - 4:31

Many of the Jews who heard Peter and John preach the gospel in the temple believe, in total about 5000 men (4:4).

4:32 - 6:7

Despite much persecution, the word of the Lord continues to increase, with multitudes of both men and women in Jerusalem being added to the Lord, including a great number of the priests (5:14-15; 6:7).



6:8 - 9:31

THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO JUDEA & SAMARIA

6:8 - 7:60

The gospel continues to be powerfully preached by Stephen, until he is executed by the Jewish leaders.

8:1-40

In God's sovereignty, the terrible persecution of the church leads to the spread of the gospel throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1), fulfilling the first stage of Jesus' mission (1:8). Philip preaches in Samaria, with many locals joyfully embracing the gospel, including Simon the Magician (8:6, 12-13, 25). Lastly, Philip sees an Ethiopian eunuch come to faith in Jesus (8:35-38).

9:1-31

Saul, the great persecutor of the Christian church, comes to faith after being confronted by the risen Lord Jesus (9:17-22) and is commissioned to evangelise 'the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel' (9:15). To the shock of the Jews, Saul (now Paul) immediately proclaims Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus (9:20) and the church multiplies, with newfound peace throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria (9:31).



9:32 - 12:24 THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO THE GENTILES

9:32 - 11:18 After Aeneas is healed, residents of Lydda and Sharon turn to the Lord (9:35). Likewise, after Tabitha is raised, many in Joppa trusted in Jesus (9:42). Finally, to the shock of the Jewish believers, the Holy Spirit converts the Gentile Cornelius and all his household to the gospel (10:44). The doors are now open for the Gentile mission to begin!

11:19 - 12:24 On account of the persecution, the gospel spreads to the Jews as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Uniquely, the gospel is preached to the Gentiles as well in Antioch, with many coming to faith in Jesus (11:21-24). The church is fully established through the preaching ministry of Barnabas and Saul (11:26), and Antioch becomes the new base for Paul's three missionary journeys into Asia-minor, Macedonia and Greece. Back in Jerusalem, the word of God 'increases and multiplies, despite the imprisonment of Peter and execution of James (12:24).



12:25 - 16:5 THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO ASIA-MINOR

12:25 - 14:28 After being commissioned for gospel mission (13:2-3), Paul and Barnabas sail from Antioch (in Syria) to Cyprus and then onto Pisidia and Galatia, visiting the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Along the way they face much opposition to their preaching from both Jews and Gentiles, culminating in Paul almost stoned to death (14:19). Nevertheless, by God's grace, a Roman leader (13:9), and many Gentiles believe and the gospel spreads through the whole region (13:48-49; 14:1, 21, 27).

15:1 - 16:5 Despite the call for Gentile believers to be circumcised, the Jerusalem Council sends delegates to the largely Gentile church in Antioch to encourage them in their faith (though urging them to not be a stumbling block to the Jewish believers). Furthermore, though Paul and Barnabas part company, the apostles revisit and strengthen the churches planted on their previous mission together (15:39-40; 16:1), and the number of believers continue to grow (16:5).



16:6 – 21:16 THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO EUROPE

- 16:6 – 17:15** Guided and empowered by the Spirit, Paul and Silas bring the gospel to Macedonia, namely in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Despite them being imprisoned, beaten and lynched, many come to faith in Jesus: Lydia and her household (16:14-15), the Philippian jailer and his family (16:30-34), a few Jews, many devout Greeks and several leading women (17:4-5, 12).
- 17:16 – 18:22** Despite Paul being mocked for his belief in the resurrection in Athens, some men and women join him and trust in Jesus (17:34). Likewise in Corinth, despite strong opposition from the Jews, Crispus the ruler of the Synagogue, his whole household and many Corinthians believe the gospel and are baptised (18:8).
- 18:23 – 19:41** Paul speaks for two years in Ephesus 'so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks' (19:10). After Paul performs extraordinary healings and exorcisms in the name of Jesus, fear falls on the residents, who praise the name of Jesus and many repent of their evil practices. 'So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.' (19:20)
- 20:1 – 21:16** Paul travels throughout Macedonia and Greece, encouraging, instructing and farewelling the churches of these regions, as well as the Ephesian elders, on his way to Jerusalem.



21:17 – 28:31 THE GOSPEL ON THE WAY TO ROME

- 21:17 – 23:35** In the face of hostility, arrest, imprisonment and an assassination plot, Paul still manages to speak the gospel to all the gathered Jews in Jerusalem, to the Jewish council and to his Roman captors.
- 24:1 – 26:32** Again during his self-defence, Paul explains the gospel to the Roman Governors, Felix and Festus, and Agrippa, King of Judea in fulfilment of Jesus' promises to him (Acts 9:15-16).
- 27:1 – 28:31** Despite being bound on a ship, shipwrecked on Malta and imprisoned in Rome, Paul witnesses to the sailors and soldiers, the Maltese people, and the Jews and Gentiles in Rome. The book of Acts concludes with Paul 'proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.' (28:31). From Rome, over many centuries, the gospel continues to spread to 'the ends of the earth'.

Study One: Unstoppable

“The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing.”

Big Idea

God is glorified through the spread of the gospel as it overcomes secular and religious boundaries. He deals decisively with those who oppose Him.

1. James' martyrdom has one verse dedicated to it (12:2), compared to Stephen's 75 verses. Why do you think Luke devotes so little time to James' death (6:8-7:60)?

2. How was Peter set free (12:5)?

3. In 12:7-11 an angel rescues Peter, in 12:15 they think it must be Peter's angel, and in 12:23 an angel struck down Herod. Do you think there's a significance to their role here?

4. In what way does Herod's death teach us about the spread of the gospel?

5. What does this chapter teach us about the power of prayer?



Acts 11:18-12:25

6. Dark days come to all of us. What reassurance do you personally find in this chapter?
7. Acts 12:12-16 describes a scene where the church's prayer is answered, but the *pray-ers* themselves find it unbelievable! When do you personally find it most difficult to believe in the power of prayer?
8. When the angel was rescuing Peter he was sleepy and groggy and wasn't sure if he was dreaming. Have you ever seen God's kindness to you when you were barely aware of what was happening?
9. What hope does this passage give you for those you're praying for who don't yet know Jesus?

What comes out of this passage that you can take to the Lord in prayer?

Study Two: Worthless Things

“There is no advance of the gospel without opposition. Indeed, so clear is this truth that sometimes, paradoxically, it’s only when an apparent disaster threatens, or when the church is suddenly up against confrontation and has to pray its way through, that you can be quite sure you’re on the right track.”

Big Idea

The gospel is good news because it connects us with the living God. But it is always going to be religiously and culturally offensive.

1. How do you think the Jewish audience may have felt about Paul’s “word of encouragement” recorded in 13:16-41?
2. Acts 13:30-36 focuses on the resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. According to vv. 38-39, what does the resurrection guarantee for us today (see also Rom. 4:25)?
3. False expectations that go unfulfilled are often the leading cause of doubt. Does Paul’s straight-forward encouragement to the church in 14:22 display loving concern? Why or why not?



Acts 13-14

Proclaiming Christ to those we love involves faithful, sensitive, and loving communication of all that Jesus has done for us. Yet one of the things this passage teaches us is that there will be times when we are personally opposed; sometimes being a faithful witness will mean antagonism for you.

4. When this happens to you at the hands of those you're praying for, how might you respond to such antagonism?

5. Part of what marks Paul's ministry is his ability to switch between different modes or methods of proclaiming Christ depending on who he's sharing the gospel with. When you think of those you're praying for, what's one way this week you can live the gospel of Christ to serve them or share a small part of God's love with them?

What comes out of this passage that you can take to the Lord in prayer?

Study Three: Saved by Grace

“This chapter has been called the centrepiece, the watershed, and the turning point of the book of Acts.”

1. Does God treat all people the same?

2. How were the saints of the Old Testament saved (15:11)?

3. The Jewish leaders had no difficulty with the concept of Gentile converts, but what did they find particularly difficult (15:5)? Why do you think they wanted them to act in this way and why is this such an important issue (see Gal. 2:1-9)?

4. Do you think the issue of ‘Christ plus’ (that is, that we’re saved by grace plus some good things we do on the side) is still an issue today? How do you think this might play out in your own life?

5. If good works don’t save us or keep us saved, what’s the point of doing anything good at all?

Big Idea

Everyone is saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in order to live graciously.



Acts 15:1-35

6. One of the beautiful ways the gospel affects us is by allowing us to reflect the same grace God has shown us. What's one particular way you can live graciously or adjust your lifestyle for the benefit of your non-Christian loved ones?

What comes out of this passage that you can take to the Lord in prayer?

Study Four: Special Delivery

“The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved’? They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’.

Big Idea

God delivers his people from unbelief, from the enemy, and from danger – but this does not guarantee a safe or easy life void of conflict.

1. Acts 15:36-41 records an embarrassing disagreement. How can you still see the work of God’s hand through it?

2. Why do you think Paul circumcises Timothy (16:3) when just one chapter ago the Apostles unanimously agreed circumcision wasn’t necessary?

3. Why do you think the Holy Spirit kept Paul and his companions from preaching within certain regions (16:6)? What’s up with that?

4. What changes from 16:9 to 16:10? What do you think that means?

5. In 16:27-28 Paul and Silas were freed from prison, but stayed to save the jailer (in more ways than one), and in doing so his whole household was saved. What kind of an attitude do you think this shows?



Acts 15:36-17:15

6. Luke speaks very highly of the Berean people. Why? What is it about them that's so attractive (17:11-12)?

This passage speaks of incredible deliverance from unbelief, from demon-possession and from prison yet also talks about sharp arguments between the Apostles, "resistance" from the Holy Spirit, and opposition from religious leaders.

7. What encouragement, if any, does this bear on your own life in your own day to day situations?

8. When the slave girl was freed from the evil spirit (16:19) the main sticking point with the owners was that they'd now lose a significant source of income. What potential loss tempts you to hold back from what God is calling you to do?

9. At the same time, there's a real fear with our non-Christian friends that becoming a Christian might involve all sorts of loss – relationships, certain levels of comfort or freedom, respect. How can we be sensitive to these real fears? How can we practically support our friends who are exploring Christianity?

What comes out of this passage that you can take to the Lord in prayer?

Study Five: Where You're At

***"Many people are** rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial."*

1. Paul was distressed by the false religiosity that he saw in Athens, but the people still seemed drawn to his message. What was it that attracted the Athenians to what Paul was talking about (17:16-23)?

Big Idea

The gospel is unchanging and timeless but applies differently to different people.

2. How does Paul show his sensitivity as a communicator of the gospel?

3. Skim through Paul's speech in Athens. When speaking to the Athenians, what aspect of the story of Jesus is central to Paul (see vv. 18, 31, 32)?

4. In 1 Corinthians 2:2-3 Paul says that he visited Corinth with fear and much trembling. What did it take for Paul to be comforted in his ministry there (18:9-10)?



Acts 17:16-18:22

5. Paul shows in his preaching at Athens that he has a deep understanding of their culture and their beliefs. To quote John Stott: "Christ calls human beings to humble, but not to stifle, their intellect." In our witnessing of the gospel, how might we do one without doing the other?
6. How do God's words of comfort in 18:9-10 apply to your heart towards sharing the gospel?
7. What unique hope does the resurrection of Jesus give those who aren't yet Christian?

What comes out of this passage that you can take to the Lord in prayer?

Study Six: Explosive Gospel Power

“We live in a day both of trivialisation of weighty issues and exaltation of the trivial.”

1. How do you picture Apollos from his description in verses 18:24-28?

2. Why were the Seven Sons of Sceva so powerless against the evil spirit (Acts 19:13-16; see also Acts 8:20-23)?

3. Paul’s claims to the Ephesian elders are quite bold. From verses 19, 26-27, 31 and 35, what kind of a life did he live among the Ephesians?

4. How does Paul react to the pleas of those who wanted to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem? What does this reveal about his priorities (21:13)?

Acts 20:18-38 paints a beautiful portrait of the kind of man Paul was. A man who, with tears, lived out the message of the gospel as he had understood it, “the word of God’s grace” (20:32). When he left the Ephesian church there were many tears from them, too (20:37).

5. This wasn’t just a theory but an image-bearing way of life. Read 20:35. What inspiration, challenge, or conviction can we take away from this for our own lives?

Big Idea

Living for Jesus opens you up to real evil – both spiritual and material.



Acts 18:23-21:17

6. Spend some time discussing what it'd look like to live as one bearing a message of grace for your friend who aren't yet Christian?

What comes out of this passage that you can take to the Lord in prayer?

Study Seven: Always Time to Speak

*"I **only know** that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."*

Big Idea

Paul knew he had to speak the gospel in every situation.

1. Does 21:26 represent a compromise on Paul's part? What principles might have guided his response?
2. In 22:21-22 what was it that sent the crowd into a rage?
3. Why do you think this was so upsetting for them?
4. Why would Acts 23:11 be such an encouragement for Paul?
5. Throughout these stories of danger, Paul is seized, beaten, threatened, stripped, and is the object of a binding oath to be killed. Yet each time, when things look dark, he is rescued. What does this tell you about the sovereign hand of God?



Acts 21:18-24:27

6. Why do you think Felix sent for Paul and why was he fearful (24:24-26)?

7. God has a plan and a purpose for each and every one of you. How do these verses and narrative in Acts encourage you to trust God and the life you're meant to live?

8. In your own experience, what usually holds you back from speaking words of truth or sharing about Jesus with your friends?

What comes out of this passage that you can take to the Lord in prayer?

Study Eight: Story Unfinished

“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent out to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

1. Paul is repeatedly put on trial despite his (true) three-fold declaration of innocence (see 25:8). Yet his primary concern at trial isn’t his own safety or acquittal. What is Paul’s primary purpose and mission in these passages (for some help, see 24:21; 26:7-8, 23; and also 28:28)?

Big Idea

The gospel mission is to see Jesus proclaimed to every person.

2. How would you describe Paul’s manner in chapter 26? Why did the king finish the hearing at verse 30?

3. From the human opposition in chapters 25-26, Paul faces natural opposition in chapters 27-28. How can we be encouraged by his experience?

4. In what ways is 28:31 an appropriate ending to Acts?

5. Has God given you unexpected blessing in times of difficulty?



Acts 25-28

6. Paul's trials remind us of Christ's words: "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). How does this affect the way you share the gospel with your friends?

7. God's Word of promise to you is that you will never testify alone (John 15:26-27). As our series in Acts wraps up, how might the promise of God's Spirit within us bolster our work in the "unfinished business" of proclaiming Jesus to every person?

What comes out of this passage that you can take to the Lord in prayer?

