

Route 66

Acts: The Power to Witness

Part 44 - November 21, 2010

Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke.

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven ... - *Acts 1:1-2 NIV*

Apparently, because of Luke's friend, "Theophilus", we have nearly one third of the New Testament! In his Gospel, Dr. Luke wrote to Theophilus about Jesus' life and death ... and life. Now, in the Acts of the Apostles, he documents the first 30 years after Jesus leaves the planet.



When Acts opens, Jesus has been appearing and speaking to His disciples for 40 days since His resurrection. And just before He ascends into Heaven, He tells them to go and wait in Jerusalem. Then comes the key verse in the book of Acts:

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. - *Acts 1:8 NIV*

This is an outline for what Acts records: the coming of God's Spirit and the spread of the Gospel from "Jerusalem" into "Judea and Samaria", and the "ends of the earth".

Jesus died on the same day and even hour (9th hour) that all the Passover Lambs were slaughtered throughout Jerusalem. (*John 19:14-18; Luke 23:44*) He rose three days later as the *Feast of Firstfruits* began. This is when the first sheaf of grain is presented to God for His acceptance and His pledge of a full harvest to come. Fifty days after Passover, the *Feast of Weeks* occurred; it was a celebration of the day God revealed His Law at Mount Sinai. And it was known as 'Pentecost' (which is Greek for *50th day*). And Doctor Luke tells us that it's during this commemoration of God revealing His Law, that God suddenly releases His Spirit.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. - *Acts 2:1-6 NIV*



Charles Poerson, 1642

This is the kick-off in *Jerusalem!* This is a total game-changer for the disciples. They're suddenly emboldened and empowered!

Peter, who publically denied Jesus just 50 days earlier, now proclaims Him to the masses of Jews who've come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost; and 3000 *Jews* accept Jesus as their Savior!



Bernardo Strozzi, 17th Century

Later, Peter and John, on their way to the temple, heal a well-known, old beggar, lame since birth.

While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel ... The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus." – *Acts 3:11-13a NIV*

Long story short, Peter preaches a second sermon and ...

... the number of men grew to about five thousand. – *Acts 4:4b NIV*



Raphael, 1516

Rich and poor worship together. Wealthier Jews sell property to help the unfortunate. But one couple, Ananias and Sapphira, are greedy for glory and lie about giving all they have to God. Apparently they think this newly revealed grace gives them some kind of license. And when Peter miraculously confronts them with what they've done, they each in turn, drop dead. Grace doesn't give us a license to sin.

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. – *Acts 5:11 NIV*

God is demonstrating to those early believers that He's still a righteous, jealous, and holy God. And, the power in our witness can only come with complete surrender and absolute honesty. What are you still holding back? Is it time to surrender it?



Gerard van Honthorst, 1616

The religious leaders are threatened by all these events and the popularity of this new movement, so they quickly try to crush it.

They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. – *Acts 5:18-19 NIV*

And they were rounded up once again, and beaten. But they left *rejoicing* for suffering in Jesus' name! (5:41) You see, they had prayed about their persecution. *Not* for protection or deliverance, but for power in their witness!

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. – *Acts 4:29 NIV*

Instead of praying, “Lord, make it stop!” They asked for help to bravely demonstrate His truth and grace *during* their hardship. Is that how it is with you? Do you see suffering as an occasion to express the peace and joy inherent in our faith? Suffering reveals the legitimacy of our claims. Our greatest opportunities to display God’s grace, power, and peace will come while we’re being slandered or mistreated, or ravaged by disaster, disease, or tragedy.



Rembrandt, 1625

The persecution *and* the power to witness while suffering peaks when a man named Stephen is publically executed for his faith.

While they were stoning him ... [Stephen] cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” ... And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. – Acts 7:59-8:1 NIV

Even though Jesus gave them marching orders, it took *persecution* to push the Gospel from “Jerusalem” into “Judea and Samaria”. Jews despised Samaritans and viewed them as a mongrel remnant of the corrupt and idolatrous northern kingdom (called Israel). But now the Apostle Philip travels there and proclaims Christ. (8:5) Even with the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, there’s hesitancy and a bent toward complacency and comfort. What does God have to do to move *you* in the right direction?



Caravaggio, 1601

Look at “Saul”, chief persecutor of the early church. Jesus had to knock him off his horse to get him going the right direction!

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. – Acts 9:3-5 NIV

Saul (in Greek, Paul) was spreading the Gospel before he was converted, by *scattering* believers. Then he gets saved on the road to Damascus and spreads the Gospel by *gathering* believers. We will fulfill God’s sovereign plan, our only choice is whether or not we’re going to do it willingly or unwillingly.



Peter has this choice to make when God gives him three visions of a large sheet filled with “McRibs” and pork rinds and all things un-kosher, and commands Peter to eat. He says, “No”.

The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” – Acts 10:15 NIV

This really isn’t about food. It’s about us *impure* gentiles! And the Lord was preparing Peter for the *second* Pentecost. Peter wakes up and God tells him that three men are coming, and to go with them. They go to the house of Cornelius, a gentile believer instructed by an angel to send for Peter. Peter says:

"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ..." While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. - Acts 10:34-35 & 44-46 NIV

They were likely speaking in un-learned foreign languages that the shocked *disciples* could understand; the reverse of Pentecost! The New Covenant Church has arrived! And God was miraculously declaring the unclean now clean, and the un-chosen now chosen! And Saul/Paul makes it *his* life's mission to reach out to them.

The first half of Acts ends with Peter being thrown in prison again, and miraculously released by an angel ... again. The second half of Acts centers on Paul's missionary journeys, founding churches and fulfilling Jesus' command to go "to the ends of the earth" (like Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus). And it provides a great framework for the 21 following epistles (letters) that Paul writes to the people he visits (like the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, and the Ephesians).

You can tell when Dr. Luke is with Paul and his foreign-missions entourage. Whenever Luke uses the pronoun "we" it means he's *with* them - otherwise he uses "they".

Paul lands in jail ... twice. An earthquake opens the doors of the first, leading to the salvation of the jailer's entire family. His second imprisonment comes during his last visit to Jerusalem. He's rushed by a mob who accuses him of the same things he'd accused Stephen of, in the same place, 26 years earlier.

In the closing chapters, Paul is imprisoned for two years before being shipped off, and shipwrecked on his way to Rome. And when Acts ends, "we" are under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial. But, through every *literal* trial and tribulation Paul finds the opportunity to share the Gospel with those around him.

Jesus said: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses". If we have *no* desire to tell others what Jesus means to us, it's strong evidence that we don't know the fullness of His Spirit, we're holding back, and maybe using grace as a license. Now, there's a difference between having no desire and allowing our fears to *overwhelm* our desire. But, that's another sermon.



Suffice it to say, when you sense the Spirit prompting you to share with someone, it's because He's been working in their heart and making it ready to receive *your* words of grace. I just want us to be able to say what Paul said, *and mean it*:

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. - Acts 20:24 NIV