



ACTS

GLAD HEARTS, BOLD CHURCH



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AN INTRODUCTION

These days, it seems as if any conversation about the church is marked with letdown, angst, tension, controversy. Most of us have mixed feelings about the church, which we experience uniquely in one way or another. It's become common to talk about *church hurt* and *church flight*. Generally, the narrative goes that the church is in an unstoppable free fall of decline. Some wildly speculate that the church must change or die.

But what if this trend actually moved us toward a spiritual awakening?

What if this particular moment in church history led us to clarity about the fact that the church's advance should never have been about celebrities or marketing or technology or politics or emotional hype?

What if we experienced an encounter with God and his people that made our hearts truly glad to be a part of Christ's church?

In Acts, the second chapter of the book describes the launch of the church. Three separate times within this foundational chapter the word "glad" is used to describe the people of God. It is fascinating that, in the beginning, the term which was used repeatedly to characterize those in the church was *glad-hearted*. Because their hearts believed Jesus and his grace, they experienced a new joy that was apparent to all. In this, we see an important truth for the

church today: if we are going to experience church as God intended it, we must be a glad-hearted people!

"I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad." - Acts 2:25-26

"You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence." - Acts 2:28

They had "glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people." - Acts 2:46-47

The book of Acts is trying to show us what happens when people are cut to the heart by the gospel in an encounter with truth and grace from Jesus. God changes everything. Glad-hearted people love to worship God. Glad-hearted people want to be together. When people have glad hearts, serving and giving and sharing life isn't a burden but a joy. Glad-hearted people tell others about Jesus. *Glad hearts create a bold church.*

Acts tells the story of how a very small group of unimpressive followers of Jesus in a very small region of the world, armed with the goodness of God's grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit, became witnesses to Jesus, adding more and more people to their number, and spreading the way of Jesus with ever-expanding reach. In spite of opposition, they refused to back down and their cause continued to advance. They faced rejection, mockery, bullying, hostile crowds, imprisonment, beatings, stoning, and even death, yet they refused to quit.

Because their hearts were glad *in God*, their lives were bold *for God*. The term for "boldness" shows up over and over throughout Acts (Acts 4:31, 9:27-28, 13:46, 14:3, 19:8, 28:31, etc.). In fact, the last line in the book of Acts tells how the church continued "...proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

Empowered by the Spirit, these men and women changed the entire world.

SO, WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Maybe you are new to church and just trying to figure things out. Maybe you've given up on church and are ready to walk away. Or maybe you love the church and are filled with hope for its future. Wherever you are, we believe

this series will help you see how the church can be life-giving for your soul, strengthening for your faith, and honoring to your Lord.

As we journey through the book of Acts, we will see that as hearts become glad by the gospel, the church becomes bold in the mission of God. And all along the way, we will be encouraged to join God on this mission.

*"When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad,
and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord
with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man,
full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.
And a great many people were added to the Lord."
- Acts 11:23-24*

THOUGHT QUESTION

The book of Acts shows that the early church was intensely devoted to telling people about Jesus, adding new believers to the church, and helping them thrive as disciples. How is our mission as Christians today the same as the 1st century? How is it different? What obstacles stand in the way of our mission?

IMPORTANT TOPICS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

In our study of Acts, we will deal with questions like:

- How did the church receive its beginning?
- What is a church supposed to be doing?
- How is Jesus' death and resurrection a continuation of God's promises and purposes in history?
- Why are doctrine and truth essential for everyday Christians?
- How does the Holy Spirit relate to ordinary people?
- How does the power of God advance a movement from a small group of primarily Jewish followers of Jesus to a worldwide movement that extends to all peoples?
- What dangers exist for the church?
- How should the church relate to the non-Christian, secularized world that surrounds it?
- What role should faith play in the public square?
- Why does the truth of the gospel message raise the status of women, minorities, the poor, and people on the fringe of religious acceptance to a place of spiritual equality as brothers and sisters in Christ?
- How is the gospel inclusive of all people while remaining exclusive of other faiths and false ideas?
- Why is faith a necessary response to the gospel, expressed openly through repentance, baptism, and the embrace of Christ's church?

THOUGHT QUESTION

Have you ever really put much thought into "church" – what it is, how it started, what purpose it serves, what it means to be a part of the mission of God? How is your church experience similar or dissimilar to the church we see in Acts?

What can you learn from these early days of the church?

VERSES TO MEMORIZE

Putting Scripture to memory is a wonderful spiritual aid for growth and resiliency in the journey of life. We've included a few verses from the book of Acts which you might want to hide in your heart.

"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

"Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

- Acts 2:37-38

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

- Acts 2:42-47

"This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

- Acts 4:11-12

"In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

- Acts 20:35

AN IMPORTANT REALITY CHECK

As we read through Acts, one stark reality presents itself in the life of the church: people must be weaned from their personal preferences as they learn to prefer the way of Jesus. This pattern of discipleship becomes normative for followers of Jesus. From a Christian perspective, wrong-headed ideas are normal in our lives and false beliefs are a constant distraction to those of us who are called to follow the way of Jesus. The cultural norms and commonplace behaviors of any city where we live will push against the teachings of Jesus. This reality always stretches those who put their faith in Christ.

For you and me, it is important for us to recognize that we too are products of the city and culture in which we live. We are not immune to the push and pull of our world, and it is common for Christians to be tossed around by wrong-headed thoughts and habits. Part of growing toward maturity is to learn a new way of thinking and of living. The early church was often referred to as “The Way,” because they were wholly committed to the way of Jesus. Of course, this didn’t happen overnight but required them to learn a new way of life.

When we are made alive in Christ, our lives change—we become different from what we once were. Inevitably, the very nature of being set apart from the city where we live is going to create tension, both *internally* in our hearts and *externally* with some of our friends and neighbors. This means that we should expect to find ourselves in conflict with some of the thoughts and morals and beliefs of our world.

THOUGHT QUESTION

The Holy Spirit shows up over and over again in the book of Acts. What kind of things does the Spirit do in Acts? Do you feel like the Holy Spirit has an active role in your life or is he more like the forgotten third person of the trinity? How can you cultivate a sense of the Spirit in your life?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR ACTS

Although we have four gospels telling the all-important accounts of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, only the book of Acts provides a historic account of the early church. In this sense, Acts is the historical link between the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, filling in lots of information about all that happens in the decades following Jesus' ascension to heaven.

The book of Acts was written by a Gentile physician named Luke. Between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, he wrote 52 chapters included in the Bible. That means Luke wrote almost 30 percent of your New Testament. That's more than John, Paul, or anyone else, for that matter.¹

In the initial verses of both books, we see that Luke is writing to a friend who obviously had questions about Jesus and the movement he began. Theophilus was apparently a Gentile skeptic and seeker who is unsure about whether or not to embrace Christian faith. It is believed that he was a middle to upper class, educated Roman citizen. The fact that Luke calls him "most excellent" likely indicates that he was among the high Roman officials who had become interested in Christianity during this time.² Luke tells Theophilus that he is writing "so that you may know with certainty what you have been taught." Luke's writing has a distinct purpose in helping a respected friend gain confidence in the truth about Jesus and discover all that this means for his life.

Luke shows impressive breadth and skill as a writer. His extensive knowledge of Greek vocabulary allows him to use 75 words which occur nowhere else in the New Testament. His book also mentions about 80 geographical locations and mentions over 100 unique individuals in addition to the crowds and general references to groups of people. He also cites 24 unique speeches given in different settings through the book.³

The most likely date for his writing of Acts is around A.D. 60-64. In the book of Acts itself, Luke fails to mention significant events such as Paul's death (typically dated in A.D. 66-68), Nero's persecution of Christians (after the great fire in Rome in A.D. 64-65), or the great destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70.

¹ Matt Smethurst, "Hinge Books in the Story of Redemption: Darrell Bock on Luke-Acts", October 1, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/hinge-books-in-the-story-of-redemption-darrell-bock-on-luke-acts/>

² Williams J. Larkin Jr.: Acts, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, 19.

³ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, Talk Thru the Bible, 354

Because of these omissions, it seems reasonable to assume that his writing was completed before those well-known events.

Luke's writing is a work of divine revelation, revealing God's word about what had been previously promised through the prophets, what was recently proven through the resurrection of Jesus, and what is now being advanced through the rapid gospel expansion throughout the world.

In accounting for the narrative flow of his book, it is good to know that historical writing in that time was often less concerned with providing chronological accounts such as we are used in our day. In general, writers in that period were more focused on providing historical vignettes which they grouped thematically to give a real sense of the events, ethos, character, philosophical grounds of a movement.⁴

Luke organizes his material to reflect the theme of the book. Acts 1:8 provides the thesis of the book: "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." As we progress through the 28 chapters in the book of Acts, we will see the church begin with a handful of people praying together in Jerusalem, grow as the message spreads and people are added to their number, until the ripples of influence move from Jerusalem throughout the neighboring regions all the way to Rome.

Acts is a book filled with action. While it is rightly called "The Acts of the Apostles" while telling about their efforts to take the gospel to the nations, we cannot ignore the actions of God in the church. It is God the Father who sends Jesus into the world as a Rescuer and Redeemer. It is Jesus, the Son of God, who is risen and reigning with his Father in heaven. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit "like a mighty rushing wind" (Acts 2:2) to give power to the witness of his people. It is the Spirit who opens new hearts to believe in Jesus, the Spirit who launches this new movement called the church, the Spirit who adds to their number, the Spirit who helps them endure fierce opposition, the Spirit who plants and strengthens churches throughout the world.

For us, the record of God's truth and power at work in the early church serves as a model for our witness and offers us fresh inspiration to join God on his mission today.

⁴ Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary, Volume 2: New Testament*, 376.

ON THE ROAD WITH THE APOSTLE PAUL

The Apostle Paul is a significant figure in the early church. He experienced a remarkable conversion from chief *persecutor* of Christians to the chief *leader* of Christians. Acts 8-9 tell his story of transformation. Paul, at one time, aggressively worked as a Jewish persecutor of Christians, but then he met Jesus and became the forefront spokesperson for the Christian faith. Paul authored 13 of the books in our New Testament.

Paul was a busy leader credited with three missionary journeys, which amounted to over ten years on the road covering twenty-thousand miles on foot or on sea. Along the way, he was robbed, beaten, abandoned by friends, betrayed by colleagues, flogged, imprisoned, weathered and worn from travel, and weary from the weight of leadership.⁵ As he journeyed, Paul helped to plant new churches in cities throughout that part of the world. When he left a city to continue his pioneering work, he typically appointed leaders in those new churches to protect and guide the people who had come to faith in Jesus. Many people consider Paul to be the great missionary in history.

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Dates: A.D. 44-46

Passages: Acts 13-14

Locations Visited: Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Southern Galatia (Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe)

Notable Companions: Barnabas and Mark

Key Events: Sergius Paulos believes the gospel, Mark leaves Paul and Barnabas at Perga, and Paul is stoned for the first time

New Testament Letters Written: Galatians



⁵ Charles Swindoll, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus* in *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary* Series, 3.

PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Dates: A.D. 50-53

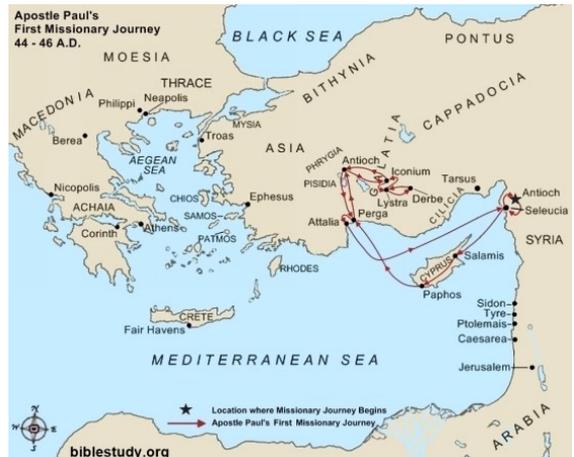
Passages: Acts 15:36-18:22

Locations Visited: Southern Galatia, Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea), Achaia (Athens and Corinth) and Ephesus

Notable Companions: Silas, Timothy, and Luke

Key Events: Paul meets Timothy, Lydia is converted, Paul and Silas are miraculously freed from prison and the Philippian jailer is converted, and Paul preaches at the Areopagus in Athens

New Testament Letters Written: 1st and 2nd Thessalonians



PAUL'S THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Dates: A.D. 53-58

Passages: Acts 18:23-21:15

Locations Visited: Ephesus, Achaia (Corinth), Greece, Macedonia (Philippi), and cities around Jerusalem (Ptolemais and Tyre)

Notable Companions: Luke

Key Events: A riot breaks out in Ephesus because of the presence of Paul and his companions and Paul raises Eutychus from the dead

New Testament Letters Written: 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians



KEEPING CHRIST AT THE CENTER

From beginning to end, the resurrected Savior is the focus of the book of Acts. Luke opens his book by mentioning that he had already written about "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), and then he introduces the major theme of Acts, which is given with the words of Jesus: "...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 rest of the book demonstrates how Christ's followers carry out this mission to make him known throughout the known world. The closing verses of the book show how Paul proclaimed this salvation in Rome as he sacrificially "welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:30-31). The book demonstrates how the Old Testament prophecies about the Redeemer, the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, the eyewitnesses of many who were with Jesus, the preaching of the apostles, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the life of the early church all proclaim that Jesus is the sacrificial Savior and risen Lord.

THOUGHT QUESTION

What are you most looking forward to in this study? What questions do you want to answer? What concerns or doubts do you have about church? What hopes do you have for our church?

A PRAYER FOR OUR CHURCH

Father, we pray that you would meet us in truth, beauty, and strength as we study your word in Acts. Strengthen your church with Christ as our leader. Help our witness to be clear in word and deed, by the power of the Holy Spirit. May our worship be glad-hearted, placing your greatness on display. Keep your grace at the heart of our relationships. Give us the boldness to break down dividing walls and share our lives unreservedly with one another. Help us live with a willingness to confront cultural idols, even in the face of opposition. Grant us perseverance to endure hardship and attacks of those who aim to quench the movement of God. May our hearts burn within us as we seek you day-by-day. Do all these things for your glory and for the good of our world. Amen.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Everyday Works (accessible to all)

Tim Keller and Redeemer Church: Evangelism: Studies in the Book of Acts Leaders Guide

Williams J. Larkin Jr.: Acts, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series

I. Howard Marshall: The Acts of the Apostles, Tyndall New Testament Commentaries

Intermediate Works (accessible to all, but more difficult to read)

John Calvin: Acts, The Crossway Classic Commentaries

Alan J. Thompson: The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke's Account of God's Unfolding Plan, New Studies in Biblical Theology

Scholarly Works (academic discussion including languages)

Darrell L. Bock: Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

David G. Peterson: The Acts of the Apostles, The Pillar New Testament Commentary

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