

Series Title: FOR ALL PEOPLE: A Journey through the Book of Acts, Part 6.

Sermon Title: Week 1: Christianity before there was Christianity: The Birth and First Steps of the Church.

An overview of Acts 1-9

Date: 01-31-21

- **Welcome! Today we return to our Journey through the BOOK OF ACTS.**
 - **We started a full year ago, and after taking a break in December and January, next week we will pick up the story with chapter 10. In preparation, today we are going to do a high level review of the essential events of Chapters 1-9.**
 - **SO! ACTS was written by Luke, it is a companion work to Luke's Gospel, and was likely written in the late 60's A.D, but not before AD 70.**
 - **Acts is the history of the birth and first steps of the Church, and in this first section, we see the unfolding of the Christian movement, before the term 'Christian' was even used.**
 - **There are many key characters in Acts, Peter and Paul chief among them, but the true protagonist and hero of ACTS is Christ Himself, working by the Holy Spirit to guide and direct these events.**
 - **Our Journey through Acts is EXEGETICAL- in other words, we are taking this ancient text, originally written in Greek, written by Luke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, with the goal of wrestling with the text to see not only the History of the birth of Christianity, but the timeless principles of TRUTH that God is speaking to us today.**
 - **So STRAP IN, put your trays and seats in their forward and upright positions, and we will begin!**
 - **BUT before we do, TODAY IS SUNDAY, January 31st, I'm Pastor Ethan, and this is T.O!**
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✠ Act 1: The ascension, the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the church.

- **Scene 1: The ascension. 1:1-12**

- **The curtain rises at Jesus's ascension. It's been around 40 days since the resurrection, and now Jesus has gathered his followers around him. He tells them...**

...wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

...But 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." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

...Suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

- **Scene 2: The upper room, waiting for the Spirit. 1:12-26**

- **And so the disciples return to Jerusalem to wait for the promise Jesus had given. There were about 120 men and women.**
- **During this time Matthias is chosen to replace Judas as the 12th disciple, as Peter put it "to be a witness with us of Jesus' resurrection.**

- **Scene 3: Pentecost, the Spirit, and Peter's first sermon. 2:1-41**

- **Pentecost was an existing Jewish holiday, and Jews from all around the known world had gathered in Jerusalem, representing many different nationalities and languages.**
- **Luke describes the event...**

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 (languages of people gathered in Jerusalem) as the Spirit enabled them.

- **Then Peter gets up and gives his first sermon.**
 - **Demonstrated from OT prophecies that everything they were witnessing was GOD AT WORK, just as he had said.**
 - **Jesus is the promised messiah, God has demonstrated this, and you killed him!**
 - **But death could not hold him, he is RISEN, and God has made Jesus to be both LORD AND MESSIAH.**
 - **What shall we do!**

Peter replied, “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.

- **Luke tells us that around 3000 people became followers of Christ that day.**

- **Scene 4: The church is launched! 2:42-47**

- **The central characteristic of these believers were they were a COMMUNITY.**

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... All the believers were together and had everything in common... Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

✠ Act 2: The early days in Jerusalem

- **Scene 1: Healing of the lame beggar. 3:1-10**

- **Peter and John are going to the temple, passed by a beggar, who had been lame from birth. He was looking for help to get him through the day, through Peter, God gave him something totally unexpected...**

Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

- **This drew a crowd, and led to Peters...**

- **Scene 2: Peter’s second sermon. 3:11-26**

- **We didn’t heal this man, it is by faith in Christ he was healed!**

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.

- **With this event more believed, and the total number of believers was approaching 10k. The religious authorities decided they had enough, and Peter and John are arrested....**

- **Scene 3: Pushback! Peter and John before the Sanhedrin. 4:1-22**

- **“By what power or name was this man healed?”.... BY JESUS.**

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

- **Authorities are impotent, because the healed man was right there. They viewed Peter and John as “UNEDUCATED, ordinary men, and took note they had been with Jesus!” So they**

commanded Peter and John not to speak of Jesus ever again, and they let them go. Peter and John replied...

“Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

- **Scene 4: The believers pray. 4:23-31**

- **Peter and John returned to the other apostles and a gathering of believers, and they prayed. But they didn’t pray for protection from the authorities, rather...**

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

- **Scene 5: The community of believers. 4:32-37**

- **Luke ends this section by again emphasizing the importance of the community of believers, as they continued to share their resources and cared for each other.**

All the believers were one in heart and mind... the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.

- **Here we are introduced to Barnabas, who sold a property and gave the money to the apostles for the benefit of the community. THIS sets the stage for first real crisis WITHIN the community of believers.**

† **Act 3: The Honeymoon’s over, struggle ensues.**

- **Scene 1: Ananias and Sapphira. 5:1-10**

- **Husband and wife who lied about their generosity, struck DEAD by the Spirit. Difficult passage, but key is their behavior represented a profound threat to the COMMUNITY.**
- **But even with this event, God continued to work powerfully through the Apostles, as the gospel spread out of Jerusalem to the surrounding communities. Luke says...**

- **Scene 2: Signs and Wonders. 5:12-16**

¹² The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people... more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number... Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

- **Scene 3: Persecution grows, apostles arrested, Gamaliel’s speech. 5:17-42**

- **This led the religious authorities to be filled with jealousy, and this time they arrested all the apostles and threw them in jail. But that very night an angel freed them, commanding them...**

Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.”

- **The apostles did just that, until they were hauled in again before the Sanhedrin. When they again commanded the apostles to stop preaching the gospel, the apostles responded**

“We must obey God rather than human beings! God raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed!... God exalted him as Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.

- **At this, the Sanhedrin wanted to kill the apostles, but one of their own, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, reasoned...**

“Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men.... For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

- **So the sandhedrin had the apostles flogged and let them go...**

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

– **So the church continued to grow, until their increasing numbers led to the next internal crisis in the community...**

• **Scene 4: Internal crisis, raising of new leaders. 6:1-7**

– **The believers continued to care for each other, but it happened that Widows from one part of the community were being overlooked. This was a potential powderkeg that could have caused great harm, but instead, the HOLY SPIRIT leads the apostles to raise up seven new leader to take on the administrative responsibilities of the community, while the apostles focused on their teaching.**

– **This step led the church to grow even more, even including some of the jewish priests.**

• **Scene 5: Enter Stephen! His arrest, speech and martyrdom. 6:8-7:60, 8:1**

– **ONE of the seven men raised up into leadership was STEPHEN. Luke describes him as a “man full of God’s grace and power”, and like the apostles, he performed signs and wonders as he preached the gospel.**

– **But some people told lies against Stephen, he too was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin.**

– **HERE, Stephen gives the longest speech in the entire book of Acts. He essentially tells the history of Israel, demonstrating that the religious authorities holding him captive themselves were guilty of disobeying the very law they were trying to use to condemn him.**

– **In response, the Sanhedrin loses control of their anger, they drag Stephen outside the city and stone him to death. At the point of his death...**

Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

– **Stephens death leads to the next big section of our story, where...**

† **Act 4: Persecution and the church is scattered.**

• **Scene 1: Saul’s persecution begins. 8:1-3**

– **Observing Stephen’s murder was a young zealot by the name of Saul, and he began to destroy the church, dragging many believers to prison.**

– **The believers flee, many heading north into SAMARIA. One of these men is the apostle PHILIP.**

• **Scene 2: Philip in Samaria, Simon the Sorcerer. 8:4-13**

– **Philip goes to the primary city in Samaria, and the Gospel is received by many. One of these was a sorcerer named Simon, who was blown away by the miracles he witnessed.**

• **Scene 3: Peter and John come to Samaria. 8:14-25**

– **Meanwhile, word got back to Jerusalem that even the Samaritans had received the Gospel, and Peter and John and dispatched to check things out.**

– **There they also meet Simon the Sorcerer, who asks to purchase the ability to give people the Holy Spirit. Peter and John strongly rebuke Simon, then return to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages as they went.**

• **Scene 4: Philip and the Ethiopian. 8:26-40**

- **NEXT, an angel tells Phillip to travel from Samaria (north of Jerusalem) to the region of Gaza, which is south of Jerusalem. After making the journey, Philip comes up on a court official from Ethiopia, who is reading the book of Isaiah.**
- **Philip explains the prophet and shares the gospel to the Ethiopian, who believes and is baptized when they approach a small body of water.**
- **After he is baptized the SPIRIT picks up Philip and deposits him on the Mediterranean coast... Philip then made his way up the coast, preaching the gospel, all the way to the city of Caesarea.**
- **AT THIS POINT, we realize that the gospel has now been preached in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and through the witness of the Ethiopian, to what was then considered the ‘ends of the earth’. GOD IS AT WORK. NEXT BIG STEP IN STORY...**

✠ Act 5: Saul’s conversion and Peter’s journey

• Scene 1: The road to Damascus. 9:1-9

- **As we begin chapter nine, Saul is traveling to Damascus to arrest the believers there, when Christ himself appears to him. Jesus said...**

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.⁶ “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

- **Saul is struck blind, and let by hand into Damascus.**

• Scene 2: Saul and Ananias. 9:10-19

- **In Damascus, Saul is met by a believer named Ananias, who places his hands on Saul, and his vision is restored.**

• Scene 3: Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem. 9:19-31

- **Saul begins to preach the Gospel in Damascus, and at some point he travels west into Arabia, where he remains for about THREE years. Returning to Damascus, he realizes there is a threat on his life, and he escapes the city and travels to Jerusalem.**
- **The believers in Jerusalem are afraid of Saul, but Barnabas intervenes, advocating for him. Saul then preaches the gospel in Jerusalem until once again people are trying to kill him. Saul escapes the city, travels to Caesarea, and then catches a boat back to his home city of Tarsus.**
- **At this point those opposing the gospel have run out of steam, and Luke tells us...**

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

- **As we move toward the end of Act 5, Luke turns back to Peter as he travels about the country.**

• Scene 4: Peter heals Aeneas and Dorcas. 9:32-42

- **He travels to the towns of Lydda where he heals a paralyzed man named Aeneas, and then to Joppa, (near modern day Tel-Aviv), to a very dramatic encounter where a woman named Dorcas (Tabitha) is raised from the dead.**

• Scene 5: Peter stays with Simon the tanner. 9:43

- **Finally, we end chapter 9 with Peter staying in Joppa, on the Mediterranean coast, with a man named Simon who is a TANNER. Significant because Simons work would have made him ceremonially unclean- including his household- and for an observant Jewish man such as Peter it would have been almost unthinkable for him to stay in Simons home. AND YET HE DID, which SETS THE STAGE for the next great event in our history, where Peter will**

receive a vision from God that changes everything, leading to a pivotal meeting with a man- A Roman Centurion no less- named CORNELIUS.

✠ The stage is set! Next week: Peter and Cornelius. Acts 10:1-23

– **SO, for next week, read ACTS 10:1-23. BUT TO WRAP UP NOW....**

✠ Essential themes so far:

- GOD is at work
- The disciples lives were TRANSFORMED
- The disciples experienced their faith in COMMUNITY