

## Lesson 6

# Acts, Epistles and Revelation

The Gospels were written to tell the story of Jesus' teachings and miracles, of His life, death and resurrection. Mark and Luke both recorded the fact that, after Jesus appeared to the disciples following His resurrection, He was taken back up into heaven. This event is known as the ascension. It would appear, then, that Jesus' job on earth was finished: He came, died for the sins of man, then returned to the Father. But this wasn't the end of what God intended to do, it was just the beginning. Whom did God plan to send and what would He do?

John 14:16-18, 25-26

John 15:26-27

John 16:7-14

Luke 12:12

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to empower and guide His followers. You may have noticed that in John 14:16, Jesus said that He would ask the Father to send them another Counselor to be with them forever, and then, just two verses later, He announced, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." Though the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

are all separate persons, they are all One (a concept Christians call the “Trinity”: God in three persons). Jesus’ presence would be with them forever through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world. And that is exactly what happens in the book of Acts.

### **The Book of Acts**

Acts was written by Luke, the physician who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. Whereas the Old Testament contained 12 books of history, the book of Acts is the only historical book in the New Testament. It covers the first 30 years in the life of the church. Luke and Acts were both written to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1), with the purpose of providing an accurate history of everything that took place. Luke wrote, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach...” (Acts 1:1). The book of Acts is a record of all that Jesus *continued* to do and teach through His apostles empowered by the Spirit.

What promise did Jesus give to His disciples in Acts 1:4-8?

Read the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-4, 40-41. This was the only time in history that the entire church was together in one place. The Holy Spirit came in a miraculous way, with visible and audible manifestations to verify the gift (remember, at this time there was no New Testament Scripture written down by which to judge the authenticity of the experience). The Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost were amazed — they heard the message proclaimed by the apostles in their own languages. The Holy Spirit had enabled the apostles not only to speak the message with boldness, but also to speak it in such a way that those who had gathered from all parts of the world could understand it. What was the message they proclaimed? (Acts 2:22-24, 36-39)

What was the result? (Acts 2:41)

Many people regard the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 as the “birth of the church.” The Greek word translated “church” means “the called-out ones.” From the very beginning of the Old Testament God called men and women out from the world to be separate and to be, in a sense, His church. God has always had a people who followed Him in wholehearted obedience. In the Old Testament they were referred to as the “remnant.” In the New Testament, they are the “church.” The church wasn’t born in the book of Acts; it was empowered.

What was the early church like?

Acts 2:42

Acts 2:43

Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35

Acts 2:46

Acts 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7

It is obvious from the description of the intimate fellowship, selfless giving, committed discipleship and rapid growth of the early church that this was no ordinary group of people — they were empowered by the Holy Spirit. Acts also records that the

apostles were empowered to perform miracles as a confirmation of the message they preached. What miracles did they perform?

Acts 3:1-10

Acts 4:29-31

Acts 5:12, 15-16

Acts 5:18-19

Where did the power to perform such miracles come from?

Acts 3:12, 16

Acts 4:7-13

Acts 4:28-31

At first glance, it seems as if everything was wonderful for the early church. The number of converts was growing, miracles were being performed, the Gospel was being preached. But whenever God's people are faithful in following Him, persecution always results. The Sadducees, who didn't believe in a bodily resurrection, were upset because the apostles were teaching that Jesus rose from the dead. Others were jealous. The message of the Gospel always incites action: either people will believe and accept it, or they will reject it and fight against it. In Acts 4:2-3, Peter and John were imprisoned. In chapter five, Peter and the other apostles were put in prison. But even in the face of persecution, "they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42); they rejoiced because "they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41). After Stephen was stoned in Acts chapter seven, a great persecution broke out. What was the result of this persecution? (Acts 8:1-4)

God used the persecution of the early church to spread the Gospel outside Jerusalem to the regions of Judea and Samaria (see Acts 1:8). Where else did they go? (Acts 11:19-20)

From the very beginning, it was God's intention that the Jews would be the vehicle through which His blessing would be given to the entire world. But He never intended for them to be the sole heirs of that blessing. Up to this point in the book of Acts, the Gospel has been spread almost exclusively among Jews. Of all the thousands of converts to Christianity, most (if not all) were Jewish. Read Acts 10-11. What did God do to convince the early Christians that the Gospel was for everyone — even Gentiles? Write down your insights from the following verses.

Acts 10:10-15, 27-28

Acts 10:34-35, 44-47

Acts 11:1-3, 15-18

The first half of Acts is primarily concerned with the ministry of Peter. Peter is often seen as the leader among the apostles. In Acts 9 he healed the bedridden Aeneas and raised Dorcas from the dead. In chapter ten, while the apostle James (the brother of John) was put to death by Herod Agrippa, Peter was miraculously released from prison. But from this point on Acts focuses on the man who would take the Gospel to the farthest points of the empire — even to Rome itself. Read about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (also known

as Paul) in Acts 9:1-19. What was Paul like after his conversion? What did he do and where did he go?

Acts 9:20, 22

Acts 9:26-30

Acts 11:25-26

The remainder of Acts describes Paul's three missionary journeys. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul was changed from a murderer and enemy of Christianity to its most profound example and proponent. On the first missionary journey, described in chapters 13 and 14, Paul and Barnabas, accompanied for a short time by John Mark (the writer of the Gospel of Mark), visited Salamis and Paphos on the island of Cyprus, Perga and Psidian Antioch in Asia Minor and the southern Galatian cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Then they retraced their route, skipping Cyprus, and sailed back to Antioch in Syria. Timothy, a native of Lystra, was converted on this first journey. What kind of reception did they get in these cities?

Acts 14:2, 5

Acts 14:11

Acts 14:19

Each time they visited a new city, they began preaching in the synagogues (13:5, 14; 14:1). But when the Jews and God-fearers (Gentiles who believed the Jewish message but didn't become proselytes) who met there rejected the message, Paul went to the Gentiles. Gentiles had heard the message before, but it was always within the context of Judaism. What Paul was doing was radical — he was offering the Gospel to Gentiles apart from any understanding of (or adherence to) Old Testament Jewish Law. This aroused some concern within the church, and a council was called in Acts 15 to deal with the issue. What was the conclusion of the council? (Acts 15:19-21)

Paul's letter to the Galatians may have been written prior to this council in 49 A.D. What does Paul say about following the Law in Galatians 5:1-6?

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and, sometime later, decided to embark on another missionary journey. Because of a disagreement, Barnabas left with John Mark and Paul traveled with Silas. Not only did they revisit cities from their first journey (where they were joined by Timothy), but they also travelled into Europe at the urging of the man from Macedonia in Paul's vision. The second journey is described in Acts 15:36-18:22. They picked up Luke in Troas and traveled to the Macedonian cities of Philippi, Apollonia, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth before going to Ephesus in Asia Minor. Write down some of the important events that occurred on this journey.

Acts 16:13-15

Acts 16:16-34

Acts 17:16-33

This second journey was much longer than the first. Paul spent 1½ years in Corinth, working as a tentmaker until Silas and Timothy brought a gift from the Philippians (Acts 18:5; 2 Corinthians 11:9; Philippians 4:15; 1 Thessalonians 3:6). While Paul was in Corinth, he sent Timothy and Silas to find out about the Thessalonians, prompting his two letters to the church there. What praises did Paul have for this newly founded church?

1 Thessalonians 1:3-10

1 Thessalonians 3:1-8

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4

On Paul's third missionary journey, recorded in Acts 18:23-21:15, Paul revisited cities from his first and second journeys, strengthening the converts there and taking up a collection for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. At the beginning of this journey, Paul stayed for two years and three months in Ephesus. From there, he wrote letters to the church at Corinth. What were some of the problems in the Corinthian church that Paul wrote to correct?

1 Corinthians 1:10-12; 3:1-4

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

1 Corinthians 6:1-8

1 Corinthians 11:17-22

1 Corinthians 14:1-12



What important events took place on Paul's third journey?

Acts 19:17-20

Acts 19:23-34

Acts 20:7-12

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from Corinth on the third missionary journey. How did Paul sum up the effectiveness of his ministry on his three missionary journeys?

2 Corinthians 11:23-12:10

When Paul finally arrived back in Jerusalem (amid warnings that to do so would mean imprisonment), he was arrested almost immediately. Although the angry mob listened intently as Paul shared about his conversion experience, they tried to kill him when they heard he was proclaiming salvation to the Gentiles (who were considered unclean and hated by the Jews). When the commander ordered him flogged, Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship, since it was illegal to flog a Roman citizen. Paul was questioned by the Sanhedrin then was transferred by night to Caesarea because of a plot to kill him. What was the conclusion of the trial before Felix and then before Festus and Agrippa two years later?

Acts 24:13-16, 22-27

Acts 25:18-20, 25

Acts 26:30-32

Paul was sent to Rome and, after a severe storm that left him shipwrecked on the island of Malta, he finally arrived at the apex of the empire in 60 A.D. From Rome the Gospel would quickly spread throughout the world. Paul spent two years in prison in Rome, from which he wrote the "Prison Epistles": Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon (to a prominent member of the church at Colossae). Write out the final verse of Acts to remind you that what often looks like defeat, is really the greatest triumph.

Acts 28:31

Though the story of Acts ends with Paul's imprisonment in Rome, that is not the end of Paul's story. The purpose of the book of Acts was to show the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), which was accomplished with the arrival of the Gospel in Rome. Paul was eventually released and embarked on a fourth missionary journey that may have taken him as far as Spain. On this journey, he left Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus. During his trip he wrote the first letter to Timothy and the letter to Titus. He was imprisoned again in Rome around 66 A.D., by the wicked emperor Nero. Shortly before his death in 68 A.D., he wrote his final letter to Timothy.

## **The Epistles**

The section of the New Testament known as the epistles, contains letters written to various churches or individuals. Most were written by Paul, which have already been mentioned: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon. The General Letters are named for their authors (with the exception of the book of Hebrews, whose authorship is unknown): Hebrews; James, the half-brother of Jesus; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2 and 3 John; and Jude (also a half-brother of Jesus). James may have been written as early as 50 A.D. (which would make it the earliest of all the epistles, with the possible exception of Galatians). Peter wrote his letters from Rome in the early 60's. Jude wrote around 80 A.D. and John wrote near 85 or 90 A.D.

## **The Revelation of John**

The New Testament contains only one book of prophecy: Revelation. It was written around 95 A.D. by the Apostle John while he was exiled on the island of Patmos, a small island in the Aegean sea about 50 miles from Ephesus (where John had been ministering).

The letter is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. During this time, the wicked Emperor Domitian was nearing the end of his reign and was demanding to be worshiped. Hostility was increasing. Faith was wavering. John wrote to encourage the churches with the message that Christ would indeed come again in power and great glory and would execute justice. They needed to be reminded that it was God who held their destiny in His hand, not Domitian. God was ultimately on the throne, and though Domitian might kill them, death was not the end for the Christian. They needed to stand firm and not compromise. What promises do these verses hold for those who overcome?

Revelation 2:7

Revelation 2:11

Revelation 2:17

Revelation 2:26, 28

Revelation 3:4-5

Revelation 3:12

Revelation 3:21

In Revelation, John is taken up to heaven and is given a glimpse of the heavenly realities. In bizarre imagery, he is given insight into the things of the past, present and future. The images in Revelation, most of which are not in chronological order, have been the subject of much speculation and interpretation. The wise student of Scripture will keep in mind that much of what was written was understandable to the intended readers — it was meant to encourage those undergoing persecution from Domitian. Symbolism was

used to hide the true meaning from those who weren't Christians. But there is also a futuristic element to it, since the author's purpose is to help his readers see the end of the story. People from every century have been encouraged by its message that Christ will return as the ultimate victor.

What encouragement do you receive from these verses?

Revelation 5:8-10

Revelation 7:9-17

Revelation 12:10-11

Revelation 21:22-22:5

What insights do these verses add concerning Christ's coming?

Matthew 24:29-31

Luke 21:25-28

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 (compare Revelation 11:15)

Matthew 13:39-43 (compare Revelation 14:14-20)

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

2 Thessalonians 2:8

Revelation 22:12-16

The message of Revelation is that Christ is in control now and He is returning to reign forever. There will be trials and tribulations on the earth before He returns, but He is able to strengthen us and protect us so that we can endure and stand firm until the end.

Interwoven throughout the book are seven blessings. Write them out as a reminder of the purpose of this book.

Revelation 1:3

Revelation 14:13

Revelation 16:15a

Revelation 19:9

Revelation 20:6a

Revelation 22:7

Revelation 22:14