

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 23

Acts – Part One

I. BACKGROUND

Acts is the second of two books the physician Luke wrote to Theophilus accounting for the gospel message of Jesus Christ and its spread throughout the Roman world. We have covered the first book, Luke, in previous weeks. Rather than rehash the core issues of authorship and purpose of the two-book set, we refer back to the notes produced for the gospel of Luke. Additionally, we will bring to the forefront those passages that indicate peculiarities of Luke's authorship.

Similarly, we should note that Acts itself has certain distinctions that mark it as a highly accurate account of the world at the time it was written. Sir William Ramsey, a Biblical scholar with particular archeological acumen, started his scholastic career convinced that Acts was written around 150 A.D. Ramsey's archaeological discoveries in Asia Minor compelled him to change his mind and date the Acts contemporaneous to the events recorded or shortly thereafter in the first century. Luke's accuracy is not only limited to geography, but also the names and titles of certain governing individuals are dead on accurate. This is even more amazing in light of the constant changes that titles would have in the first century as provincial governors changed.

We will emphasize here, however, certain sources that seem to form the basis of Luke's accounts given in Acts. As noted earlier in the introductions to Luke, there are passages in Acts commonly referred to as the "we" passages. We can assume these passages allowed Luke to write of things on a firsthand observational basis. Because those "we" passages have Luke accompanying Paul, we can have certainty that Luke would have had considerable time with Paul as a source of information to those matters known and experienced by Paul. Luke also writes of contacts with Mark. That lets us in on another source for Luke either directly or indirectly – Peter. Peter was the source of Mark's knowledge. As Luke was close to Mark, Luke would have had contact with Peter either directly or at least through the intermediary of Mark. We also read in Acts passages that clarify that Luke spent time with Phillip, who would have served as a source not only for the passages about Phillip but also for much of what happened in Jerusalem. We also are aware from the "we" passages that

Luke was in Jerusalem among the church for a time period that would have given him multiple sources from whom to learn history.

II. TIMELINE

A reasonable timetable of key New Testament events relevant to Acts¹ is:

Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost	April-May 30
Conversion of Saul of Tarsus	c. 33
Paul's first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem	c. 35
Death of James, son of Zebedee; imprisonment and escape of Peter; death of Herod Agrippa I	Spring 44
Famine in Judea; Paul and Barnabas sent with relief from Antioch	c. 46
First Missionary Journey (Paul and Anabas to Cyprus and Asia Minor)	47-48
Paul writes Galatians	c. 48
Apostolic Council at Jerusalem	c. 49
Second Missionary Journey (Lystra, Derbe, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth)	c. 49-50
Paul writes Thessalonian Epistles	late 50
Paul in Corinth	Fall 50-Spring 52
Gallio becomes proconsul of Achaia	July 51
Paul's hasty visit to Palestine	Spring-Summer 52
Paul at Ephesus	Fall 52-Summer 55
Paul writes First Corinthians	Spring 54
Paul's sorrowful visit to Corinth	Spring or Fall 54
Murder of Silanus, proconsul of Asia	late 54
Paul writes Philippians	late 54 or early 55
Paul sends Titus to Corinth and Timothy to Macedonia	early 55
Paul in Troas	Fall 55
Paul in Macedonia and Illyricum	Winter 55-Fall 56
Paul writes Second Corinthians	56
Paul in Corinth	Winter 56-57
Paul writes Romans	Early 57
Paul's arrival and arrest in Jerusalem	May 57
Paul detained at Caesarea	57-59
Paul sails for Rome	Sept.-Oct. 59
Paul in Malta	Winter 59-60

¹ The timeline is derived with modification from that given by F.F.Bruce in his commentary, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1951.

Paul arrives in Rome	February 60
Paul writes Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians	c. 60-61
Death of James the Just in Jerusalem	61
End of Paul's Roman detention	Late 61 or early 62
Destruction of Jerusalem	70

Our approach to Acts will first be in overview of major sections. We will attempt to divide the lessons into the following natural divisions:

1. The Birth of the Church (1:1 – 5:42)
2. Persecution and the churches' expansion (6:1 - 9:31)
3. Actions of Peter and the entrance of Gentiles (9:32 – 12:24)
4. Paul's first missionary journey and the Apostolic Decree (12:25 – 16:5)
5. The Church grows around the Aegean Sea (16:6 – 19:20)
6. Paul's unexpected route to Rome (19:21 – 28:31)

III. THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH (1:1 – 5:42)

Acts takes up where the gospel of Luke left off – the resurrected Jesus is appearing to his non-understanding apostles promising that the Holy Spirit will come to them. The disciples are wanting to know if Jesus was going to be restoring to Israel at any time soon (1:6). Little did they know what God was really up to! Reminiscent of the teaching Jesus gave in John 14-16, the Holy Spirit was promised to come offer power and illumination to those who still did not understand what God was doing.

Jesus promises the apostles that with the Holy Spirit they would become his “witnesses” in Jerusalem, but not only there. They would spread the message beyond Jerusalem to all Judea, even to Samaria. The spread would not stop in the land of the half-Jew; however, the spread would continue to the very “ends of the earth” (1:8).

Jesus was then taken up into heaven before their eyes. An angel assures them that Jesus would one day return in much the same way as he ascended (1:11).

Peter stood before the believers (numbering about 120) and told them his understanding from two passages out of Psalms that a replacement for Judas should be found. Luke adds information about the wretched demise of Judas. Luke then sets out the narrowing down to two men for Judas's replacement. After praying over the two, lots were cast and the lot fell on

Matthias, who was then designated to take the twelfth spot as an apostle to the ministry of Jesus (1:26).

In Acts two, the day of Pentecost comes. The Apostles are all together in one place when a sound like a rushing wind from heaven filled their house. The apostles saw something similar to tongues of fire resting on each of the apostles. The Holy Spirit then had them speaking in other languages.

Because of the Pentecost celebration, a number of out-of-town Jews were in Jerusalem. Hearing the sound, the crowd came together bewildered. Each was able to hear what was going on in their own language (Some see this as a second miracle beyond the speaking in tongues referenced earlier; some find this indicating a “hearing” in tongues). While some were amazed at the declaration of the wonders of God in their own languages, others just wrote it off as drunken carousing.

Some assume that the folks making fun of the apostles were mocking the speaking in tongues. I might suggest that the real mocking came over the content of what was being said, not that it was coming out in different languages native to the listeners. No doubt the wonders of God being recounted concerned the nature and work of Jesus, including his death and resurrection with repeated appearances before those speaking. Now that would lead one to believe the speaker was a bit past tipsy!

At this point, Peter stands and addresses the crowd. Peter says the men are not drunk. Indeed, it was only 9 in the morning. Instead, Peter explained that certain Old Testament Scriptures were coming true right before the eyes of those there. Peter starts by quoting Joel 2:28–32 that “In the last days, God...will pour out” his Spirit “on all people...and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Peter then explains to the people that Jesus of Nazareth was no ordinary man, but was one sent specifically for a purpose from God, attested to with miracles and signs. The people were then reminded that with the help of evil men, the people had killed Jesus. Peter set forth that Jesus was not dead any longer but resurrected. Peter explained that Jesus was the Lord (Messiah) that David had prophesied about. Jesus was the Holy One who would never see decay. God made Jesus both Lord and Messiah.

This message cut straight to the heart of those listening. As they were told they had killed the Messiah, who had ascended and lived eternally at the right hand of God, the people were stunned and lost. They asked Peter and the Apostles: “What shall we do?” (2:37)

Peter tells them to repent (*μετανοια*) and be baptized “everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). The word for repent means to change one’s mind. It involves a turning from their sin with contrition to God. The baptism would not have seemed unusual to those familiar with the ministry of John the Baptist or even other Judaist religious sects at the time. The cleansing symbolizes the baptism washing event was not at all unusual. There was an added element here, however. Peter was promising the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Luke tells us that about 3,000 accepted the message, were baptized, and were added to their number that day. These converts “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

The fellowship was like nothing seen before or since! The apostles did miracles, signs, and wonders. The people held everything in common, met daily in the temple courts, and ate together daily. They praised God and found favor in the eyes of people. Daily, God was adding to their number those being saved (2:47).

One day later, Peter and John were headed to the temple at three in the afternoon (prayer time). They came across a man crippled from birth who was begging for alms. Peter told the man that Peter had no silver or gold to give the crippled but there was something else he could give. Peter then said “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” And, the man did. He walked right in to the temple clinging on Peter and John and letting go to jump for joy.

Peter uses the healing to teach about Jesus. With powerful words, Peter challenges the people not to be amazed. After all, the healing came at the power of Jesus, the very author of life (3:15). Through faith in Jesus, healing is found. This is the Messiah and Holy One that the people had killed, albeit in ignorance.

Peter explained that the Old Testament had forecast such treatment of the Messiah. Peter then challenged the people to turn from their ways and accept Jesus. This was disconcerting, to say the least, to the power structure of the temple, the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin had Peter and John locked up for a day, but more and more people were putting their faith in Christ and the numbers swelled to 5,000. After a day and night in jail, Peter came before the high priest and others

for interrogation. When asked how they healed the crippled man, Peter “filled with the Holy Spirit” explained that the healing came from the power of Jesus of Nazareth, the very man that the questioners had wrongfully killed.

The courage and speech of Peter (including the quoting of Psalm 118:22 concerning the stone rejected by builders becoming the cornerstone) stunned the powerbrokers. Peter and John were unschooled ordinary people who were talking with power and authority. The Sanhedrin had a private session where they reckoned the best course was to send Peter and John on with an instruction not to talk about Jesus anymore.

Peter challenged the order and asked whether the Sanhedrin really thought Peter should obey them rather than God. Eventually, the Sanhedrin released Peter and John who then returned to “their own people and reported all” that was said to them. The believers spoke out in prayer to God and the Holy Spirit continued to work through them to proclaim the truth of Jesus.

The apostles were charged with the common possessions of the people. Every one spent their days seeking God and his purposes as opposed to the slavery of making money for money’s sake. Everyone, that is, except Ananias and Sapphira. This married couple sold a piece of property and pretended to give it to the Lord (bringing the profits to the apostles) when in fact they secretly kept part of the money out for themselves.

Peter confronted their sin of lying to God and the Holy Spirit. Upon hearing that he had not sinned against man, but God, Ananias fell down dead. Three hours later, Peter asked Sapphira whether the money was the full sale money. Not knowing what had happened to her husband, Sapphira repeated the lie. That was followed by her death as well.

More and more came to faith as Peter and the other apostles continued to heal in the name of Jesus. This continued to upset the religious elite who had the apostles arrested again. In the middle of the night, an angel came and opened the cell releasing the apostles. Following the angel’s instructions, the apostles were back in the temple teaching about Jesus the next morning.

When the Sanhedrin were unable to get the apostles from the cells the next morning, they got word from the soldiers that the men were out and already preaching again in the temple courts. The Sanhedrin had the apostles brought before them again and challenged them. The Sanhedrin accused

the men of violating explicit instructions not to talk anymore about Jesus. “You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood” (5:28). The apostles’ answer was simple – they were obeying God rather than men.

This caused many of the Sanhedrin to vote for putting the apostles to death. Gamaliel then spoke up and talked about others who claimed “to be somebody” (5:36) and suggested that with time nothing would come of the apostles and their teaching. Gamaliel said that if the teaching were a fad, then it would fade. If the teaching were truly from God, then it would not matter how many were killed, the teaching would continue. This speech persuaded the Sanhedrin who then settled for flogging the apostles and repeating the order to cease the teaching.

The apostles went home rejoicing...not because they were spared death. They were rejoicing over the flogging. “They had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (5:41). Needless to say, they were not a fad...and they did not quit preaching of Jesus.

IV. POINTS FOR HOME

1. God is exciting.
2. Work on fellowship.
3. Be honest with God.
4. Let God be your Life.
5. Rejoice in Him.