

Study 1: The Book of Acts - Introduction and Chapter 1.

Introduction

The book of Acts of the Apostles is the only substantial history we have regarding the mission of the emerging church in the New Testament. From Paul's letters we know a few more details but not many. From the introduction and themes of Acts we can be reasonably certain that Luke also wrote Acts. In Acts Ch 1 verses 1 to 11 we note the following common references to Luke:

1. A reference to writing an earlier work of Jesus' life and many others who have written of Jesus.
2. Addressed to the same person Theophilus.
3. Luke ends with a reference to the ascension of Jesus and begins with this in Acts.
4. An emphasis on the Holy Spirit.
5. The command to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit is mentioned in both Luke and Acts.

The book of Acts can be divided into 3 sections concerning the way Jesus commissioned the disciples in Acts Chapter 1 verse 8:

“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.”

Section 1 In Acts Chapters 1 to 7 we have the coming of the Holy Spirit and the gospel being proclaimed in Jerusalem and the establishment of the church there.

Section 2 In Acts Chapter 8 as a result of persecution in Jerusalem, the gospel goes throughout Samaria. Though only a small section, its significance should not be lost in uniting the 12 tribes of Israel in the gospel.

Section 3 From Acts Chapter 9 to the end, the story of how the gospel is proclaimed to the Gentiles first through Peter, then Paul, beginning with his conversion and ending in Rome the Capital of the Roman Empire.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 is neatly divided into 2 sections.

1. The first is an introduction to the book followed by a recollection of the 40 days Jesus spent with his disciples after he rose from the dead culminating in his being raised to heaven.
2. The second is in the mention of the early group of Christians numbered about 120 in Jerusalem waiting as Jesus said for the Holy Spirit to come and choosing a replacement for Judas.

Section 1 Verses 1 to 11. This includes a reference to an early work on the life of Jesus and the recipient of the book Theophilus, a man of some standing by the reference in Luke. Luke indicates his second volume continues the life and ministry of Jesus through his disciples. He then ties his 1st and 2nd book together via the ascension of Jesus, writing in Acts what Jesus did during the 40 days after his resurrection – speaking of the kingdom of God.

Jesus tells his disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit as promised. When the Spirit comes they will continue the ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Jesus leaves them with 2 angels telling them he will return one day.

Questions for Reflection

1. *What is it like for you to realise the church continues the life and ministry of Jesus?*
2. *Christians often feel powerless to share their faith, do you think this power is just for leaders or evangelists or for everyone?*
3. *How do you think we can recover the priority of spreading the gospel and what is needed to help a secular world consider God again?*
4. *What does the Kingdom of God mean to you and how does this relate to being the church?*

Section 2 (verses 12 to 26) Returning to Jerusalem and replacing Judas.

The major concern of this section is in finding a replacement for Judas after the disciples return from Jerusalem and meet together for prayer. Luke gives us some details about Judas and his death that is difficult to reconcile with Matthew's account. Having 12 disciples was important from a symbolic point of view in ministering to Jews who were made up of the 12 tribes of Israel. Matthias was chosen after prayer and casting lots.

Of interest is also the number of the church (120) including some women, the family of Jesus and others.

Luke also lists the names of the other disciples and it is unusual that we know nothing about their ministries apart from John, James, Phillip and Peter in Acts.

Questions for reflection

1. *What is the significance of the church for you of 120? Reflect on the others besides the disciples of Jesus and who they might be?*
2. *The death of Judas again raises the dilemma of Judas' own will and God's will working as one. How do we reconcile this?*
3. *Eye witnesses were very important to the disciples in the replacement of Judas. Why is this so?*
4. *Prayer is something we are familiar with, and voting for certain people, but casting lots? Why do you think they did it this way?*