

The Message of Acts

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Date: 29 August 2021

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[0 : 0 0] So now we're going to turn to God's Word for our reading. Paul Brennan is rounding off our series through the Acts of the risen Lord Jesus. And it might seem strange to finish a series at the very start of the book, but all will be revealed.

And we're going to be reading together this evening Acts chapter 1, verses 1 to 11. The continuing Acts of the risen Lord Jesus.

Chapter 1, verses 1 to 11. In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And while staying with them, he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, You heard from me, for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

[1 : 2 7] So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority, 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.

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were there, gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Amen. Well, amen.

This is God's word, and we'll return to it again shortly. Well, it would be helpful to have the book of Acts in front of you. We're going to be jumping around a wee bit as we think about this evening, sort of the big message of the whole book.

We're not focusing on one particular passage, but trying to get a sense of what the message of Acts as a whole really is for us today. Now, indulge me in a bit of geekery.

[2 : 5 9] One of my lockdown projects was a book by a writer called Robert Caro. He is the winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, one of the most celebrated biographers of the 20th century.

And recently he wrote a short book where he talks about his approach to writing. And it really is a fascinating insight. I found it really interesting. And I went on to buy one of his big biographies.

It took me all of lockdown to get through. But I'll happily bore you to death talking more about that. But here's what he said about the writing process. And it's really a very interesting insight.

He said, I can't start writing a book until I've thought it through and can see it whole in my mind. So before I start writing, I boil the book down to three paragraphs.

So that's a thousand-page book boiled down to 300 words. And that, he says, is when it comes into view. That process might take weeks. And then I turn those paragraphs into an outline of the whole book.

[4 : 0 0] And if you saw me during this process, you'd see a guy in a very bad mood. It's very frustrating. It's a terrible time for me. I sometimes think you're never going to get it. There's just so much stuff to pack into this book.

You're never going to get a unified book with a drive from beginning to end, a single narrative, a single driving theme from beginning to end. There's just too much stuff. But of course, I finally get the narrative theme.

And then when I'm writing the book, every time there's a digression, I have an easier time bringing the digression back to my theme and keeping the theme in the digression. So the unity, there's a story.

There is a narrative all the time. And that's a brilliant insight from a brilliant writer on how he pulls together a biography. And he's won many awards.

And what he describes there as the central narrative theme is really what we're trying to get at as we look at the book of Acts this evening. That's our task. What is the great theme of Acts?

[5 : 03] What was Luke's purpose? Why did he write? And in essence, he is writing to give clarity, to give certainty, and therefore confidence about what Jesus began to do in his earthly ministry and what he continued to do after his ascension.

And that's absolutely key for us to grasp that reality. How do we know that that is his main aim?

Well, he very helpfully tells us at the very start of volume one, Luke's gospel.

Here's how he introduces Luke's gospel. Familiar words. He says, Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things that you have been taught.

And then, at the introduction to volume two, the book of Acts, here's what Luke writes. In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day that he was taken up.

So, putting those two introductions together, we can summarize and say that Luke is writing to give clarity and certainty, and therefore confidence, about what Jesus began to do in his earthly ministry, and then continue to do after his ascension through his apostles.

[6 : 51] Now, why does that matter? Why does it matter that Luke has gone to this great effort to pull together these two huge volumes, making up a quarter of the New Testament?

Why does it matter? Why does what I've described there as Luke's main aim, his great narrative theme, why is that significant? Well, it's significant because the Bible teaches us that Jesus was not merely a man.

He's not like one of the subjects of Robert Caro's biographies. He's not just a man, but divine, fully God, fully man. He was there at the very creation of the world.

In fact, all things, we're told, were made through him. And the Bible teaches us that one day, the man that Luke describes and details in his narratives, he will one day come back as judge of all the earth.

It's not just a biography about a man. This is the God-man. And so it is therefore vitally important for all of us to grasp, and to grasp with confidence and certainty, what he did during his earthly ministry, and what he continues to do as he reigns at his Father's right hand.

[8 : 07] It's quite important, isn't it, to know about his life and what he continues to do. And we need to align ourselves accordingly. If this is who Jesus is, if this is what he did and what he does, then we must align our lives in accordance with what we see in these books.

Because these things have eternal implications. They're not just interesting information. These are the accounts of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so Luke is writing so that we would have certainty and clarity and confidence about who Jesus was and what he did and what he continues to do.

And three things we're going to notice from the book of Acts tonight. Three things about the gospel which Luke sets out for us in his accounts. First, what the gospel does.

What the gospel does. And what Luke shows us is that the gospel multiplies. Reading through Acts is almost like watching a slow motion gospel explosion.

It begins small and just begins to grow and grow and grow. At regular intervals through the book, Luke notes the massive growth of the gospel again and again and again.

[9 : 34] It might be good just to turn to these as I read them to you. Little markers Luke makes all the way through his account. This is the key structure for the whole book. So in chapter 2, verse 47, we get the first of these markers.

The last sentence there. Flip over to the page, chapter 4, verse 4.

But many of those who had heard the word believed. And the number of men came to about 5,000. Look on to chapter 6, verse 7.

And the word of God continued to increase. And the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Look on to chapter 9, verse 31. Chapter 12, verse 21.

[11 : 02] And multiplied. Chapter 13, verse 49. And the word of God was spreading throughout the whole region.

Chapter 16, verse 5. So the churches were strengthened in the faith. And they increased in numbers daily. Chapter 19, verse 20.

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. And then the very last two verses of the whole book, which we looked at last week.

Paul eventually makes it to Rome. And what does he do there? He lived there two whole years at his own expense. And welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Do you get the idea? The gospel is multiplying. At every key stage. It goes out geographically. But it grows and multiplies and increases over and over again.

[12 : 11] And it's a slow motion, over 30 years, gospel explosion. And by the end of the book, the gospel is there right at the very heart of the Roman Empire, ready to spring out across the whole Roman Empire, across those famous Roman roads.

It's clear, isn't it? One of Luke's key messages, the gospel multiplies. And it's clear that the main driver behind that growth is not human agency, but it's the Lord.

It is he who is bringing the growth. It is he who is powerfully at work through his word, bringing people to salvation. In several of those little summary verses we just read, it says that it was God's word which grew.

And so it locates the growth in God's plans and God's purposes, not man's. God is responsible for not only the message, but also the growth that comes from his word.

And that simple reality, that simple fact, it must give us and bring us real comfort and confidence, mustn't it? We don't need to tamper with the word to make it more palatable.

[13 : 21] In every age, from the very beginning, the gospel message has jarred with the society of the day. And yet, through the centuries, right from the very beginning, the gospel grew and continued to grow, despite that opposition, despite it being out of kilter with the values of the day.

Now, that's not to say that we don't give any attention to how we go about things from a sort of human point of view.

It would be foolish. And actually, that would be to dismiss other things we see in the book of Acts. Just read over the start of chapter 6, how the church organizes itself, how it delegates responsibilities.

That is very important. And actually, the result of that reorganization was greater growth. But to think that growth is all down to that, to think that growth is all down to what we do and how we organize, that's utterly mistaken, isn't it?

It's God's gospel. And he will see to the growth. It's one of Luke's repeated themes through the whole book. He's showing us, telling us, demonstrating to us over and over again that it is inevitable that true Christianity will grow, even though the price of that may well be the suffering of Christians.

[14 : 45] And the pattern that was set in Acts has proved to be the pattern throughout all history, hasn't it? There are people in this room from every corner of the earth. We would not be here unless the gospel multiplies.

It does. That's what it does. It continues to grow and it will keep growing, despite whatever opposition will come. As David Cook, the Australian minister, put it, the gospel messenger is not promised an easy road.

Jesus' messiahship involved him taking up a cross. And the pattern for the disciple, whether the apostle Paul or you or me, is cross-bearing.

So yes, there is great growth. You see that. But alongside that, there is a reality of suffering. And that's a reality that Acts affirms over and over again. But despite that reality, despite that ongoing suffering and hardship, the overarching theme is growth and multiplication.

And we can be assured and take great comfort from the fact that the gospel multiplies. We feel the opposite, don't we, sometimes? But stand back, read Acts, and look at history.

[16:08] The gospel multiplies. It grows and grows and grows. It cannot be stopped. It cannot be contained. The gospel cannot be chained up or locked down.

It cannot be. The gospel will never be silenced. It will continue to grow to the ends of the earth until Christ returns. God's plans, as we've seen again and again through Acts, God's plans are always fulfilled.

And his plan to see his gospel witnesses go to the end of the earth will also be fulfilled. Nothing's going to stop that. So what does the gospel do? Well, Luke says it progresses inevitably. Progress is inevitable. But that's not the only thing that interests Luke. As David Gooding points out in his book about Acts, those key structural markers we've just looked at, those repeated refrains about gospel growth, they are the key markers in the book.

And they divide the book up into six key sections. And he points out that in each of those six sections has a repeated pattern of gospel progress, but progress is quickly met by some crisis or round of opposition.

[17:27] Over and over again, you get this repeated pattern. And through dealing with those crises and opposition, Luke describes for us what the gospel was and how it came to be defined.

So he's not just interested in noting the progress of the gospel, but also what the content of that gospel really was. He wants his readers, he wants you and I, to be clear and confident about the gospel itself.

So the first thing we've seen is the gospel grows. That's what it does. But second key thing, what the gospel is and isn't. That's the second key thing we must see from the book of Acts, what the gospel is, but also what it isn't.

Now, as you read through Acts, Luke records some major speeches throughout the book, and each of them has the very same core content. Despite being given to very different sorts of audiences, the same core message is always present.

So whether it's the Jews from many nations in chapter 2, or whether it's the Jewish ruling elite in chapter 5, or Jews and Gentiles together in a synagogue, or the Areopagus in Athens in chapter 17, despite the different audiences, the core message of those speeches remain the same.

[18:52] All of them cover the essentials of the gospel, and by recording it in this way, Luke is defining for us what is the essence of the message of the gospel.

And here are those key features of those messages. First, they always emphasize and are clear about the events of Jesus' life, his death, his resurrection.

They set out the facts. Second, they offer forgiveness of sins, because there is a judgment coming, and they offer the Holy Spirit.

So forgiveness and the promise of the Holy Spirit are offered. And thirdly, the required response, being repentance and faith. Always those key aspects, the facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the offer of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, and the required response.

Just read through those speeches. Every time, you have those same features. And as you read through Acts, there is that consistent pattern.

[20:00] There's a crystal clear focus on God's saving purposes in Christ's death and his resurrection, so that forgiveness of sins can be offered. It's the events of his life and the implications that are spelled out over and over and over.

But it's not just a sort of positive setting out of what the gospel is. Luke also goes to great lengths to emphasize what the gospel isn't.

There's a positive setting out, but there's also saying what it is not. And that's almost as important as it clarifies misunderstandings, misconceptions.

And in each of those six key sections in the book, Luke draws attention to some of those key things and draws out ways in which the Christian gospel departs from some of the prevailing worldviews of the day.

So he defines for us Christianity over and against Judaism. Christianity over and against pagan religion or against Greek philosophy.

[21:04] How is the Christian gospel distinct and different from those worldviews? I'll look at two examples. We could go on a lot and look through all six sections, but two examples.

And the first is in chapters 9, 10, 11. Don't turn there. There's too much to look at. But it's that story of Peter, the apostle Peter and Cornelius, the Roman centurion.

He was a Gentile. And as you read through that extended story in chapter 10, in a sense, you see two conversions happening. The conversion of the Gentile centurion, Cornelius, but Peter too has a seismic shift in his thinking.

Through that episode, he comes to realize that the gospel is truly for all. His understanding at the beginning, at the outset, is that there's a clear distinction between Jew and Gentile.

And it's not permissible for Jews and Gentiles to mix. That can't happen. So he perceives a big barrier in terms of those who he is able to bring the gospel to. But through that chapter, his understanding has totally changed on its head.

[22 : 17] Here's what he concludes in chapter 10. Peter opened his mouth and said, truly, I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, everyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

And he goes on to say that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. So he comes to realize that the essence of the Christian gospel is grace.

Grace alone, in Christ alone, by faith alone. It's the very essence of the gospel. The Lord makes no distinction. None of us are here by merit.

None of us are included in the family of God because of any particular traits inherent to us. It's easy, isn't it? Once a part of the church family to feel religious pride creeping in.

It's easy to start believing the lie that I'm here because of such and such, or I'm here because of some quality that God perceives in me. Tempting to think, isn't it?

[23 : 28] The Lord is really quite lucky to have me on his team. And we're so prone, aren't we, to erecting barriers to the gospel. Certain categories of people that we consider to not really be up to the mark, we unwittingly exclude.

Certain groups we'd rather not see come through the church doors. But Luke knocks that sort of thinking on its head. At a key moment in the growth of the church, he spends lots of time there in chapters 10 and 11, setting out, what the gospel isn't.

And so bringing great clarity to what it really is. The age old, but always temporary barrier between Jew and Gentile is brought crashing down in that particular episode.

It's clarifying who the gospel really is for by dispelling some myths and wrong thinking. That's the first example where Luke defines what the gospel is by saying what it definitely isn't.

The gospel truly is for all. There's another episode in chapter 15, where a key question is brought to the Jerusalem council. And the question before them at that stage was, what requirements, if any, are placed on Gentiles if they are to become followers of God?

[24 : 55] Is salvation for any who believe in Jesus Christ, or is it for those who do that and also become Jewish? So the particular question was, do Gentiles have to become circumcised?

And their answer, the Jerusalem council's answer, is articulated by James. And here's what he says. My judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.

In other words, the Jerusalem council speaks with real clarity. Those people who have been troubling the Gentiles with ideas about circumcision, they are wrong.

And the Jerusalem council was prepared to stand for the gospel by saying what the gospel wasn't. Circumcision was not required. Salvation is through Christ alone, by faith alone, for anyone who repents and believes.

That is the essence of the gospel. You don't need to become a Jew to be saved. But you do need to be saved by grace alone, through faith in Jesus.

[26 : 08] Now those are just two examples of where Luke is drawing out for us key moments where the gospel is being defended and being defined by what it isn't. And that's key.

That is why Acts is such a crucial book to read, to understand, and to teach. And Luke's task here of very clearly saying what the gospel isn't remains a task for the church today.

Because as well as setting out what the gospel is, as well as positive statements about what the gospel really is, we will have to carefully say what it also isn't. And that means drawing distinctions. And that means becoming unpopular and controversial. Because people don't like that. It's drawing distinctions. It's saying the negative that has to be said.

And that is why Luke's account is so key. Because he sets up what the gospel is very clearly, but also what it is not.

[27 : 13] Now there's a lot more we could say on that. But we must move on. We've seen what the gospel does. It grows. It brings eternal salvation to more and more and more people.

We've seen what the gospel is, but also what it isn't. But lastly, Luke emphasizes over and over what the gospel demands. What the gospel demands.

And we'll think about it in two parts. First, for those who are Christians, what does the gospel demand for Christians? And second, what about those who don't yet follow Jesus? What does it demand of you?

So firstly, if you're a Christian here tonight, the first thing that Luke emphasizes is the commitment to the task. That's the first thing the gospel demands. One of the key implications of the book, we've seen it over and over again, is that our task is clear.

The task for the church today remains what it was then. Namely, proclaiming the truth about the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and doing that to the very ends of the earth.

[28 : 21] That is crystal clear. From the very start, we are called to be witnesses. There is no other message by which men and women can be saved.

Only this, only the gospel set out in Luke's account. There is no other gospel. And we do this together as a church.

We invite folk to come and see for themselves and hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ here at church, the life course, whatever it might be. But we also go about this task individually, don't we?

As we go out into the world, as we go and tell others about Jesus and those conversations that Mo was talking about over lunch or in the middle of a night shift, we tell our friends, our neighbors, we share something of the gospel with them.

And that is the key task that is emphasized over and over and over again. And we're thrilled to do it. It is terrifying at times.

[29 : 20] But the gospel that we have is the only way by which men and women can be saved for all eternity. There is no alternative. Only in this gospel can men and women be saved.

That's the first demand, commitment to that task of witnessing. The second is the endurance of suffering. alongside the proclamation of the word comes suffering and opposition.

You see that pattern all over the account of Acts. We're not to be naive. We're not to be surprised if and when suffering comes.

That is part of what it is to be a witness. Just read through Acts at some point this week and again and again and again you see opposition after opposition after opposition.

And if that's how it was for the apostle Paul it's how it was for Jesus. It's the same for all who would follow in his way. So Luke is very clear about that.

[30 : 26] We have a commitment to the task but also the gospel demands that we suffer. Third, the gospel demands that we are a people marked by generosity, despite that reality of suffering and opposition we are still to be a joyful people.

We belong forever to the king of the universe. Jesus is returning one day to claim his people. It will be alright in the end. There's an eternity with him to come.

And so we are to live now in light of what is to come and be a people marked by joy and generosity. Just think of the example. I love this little chapter in the middle of the book where Paul goes to Philippi and remember Lydia the merchant there in Philippi the seller of purple goods.

It's such a touching account as you read that. But you read there in Acts 16 you read this the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

And after she was baptized she urged us saying if you have judged me faithful to the Lord come to my house and stay and she prevailed upon us.

[31 : 40] Luke shows us her response to the gospel not just in receiving it and being baptized but also in the outworking of her faith.

Straight after coming to faith she instinctively realizes that all she has earned by her commerce in particular her home has been given to her by God and must now be given to the Lord and used for the furtherance of the gospel.

And she shows real kindness and generosity to Paul and her fellow believers. She implores them to come and stay with her that she can look after them feed them and home them.

Real generosity and kindness. And just think about the impact that church in Philippi would have down through the years partnering closely with Paul.

Just think about his letter to the church in Philippi full of warmth and affection for their partnership over the years. And the root of that generosity of that church no doubt was Lydia and her attitude of generosity.

[32 : 46] And that's just one example but it's all over the book. The demand the gospel places on us to generosity. One more we could point to many others but here's another demand that Luke sets out.

For those who follow the Lord we are to be committed to prayer. Now the example of the church in chapter 4 of Acts is very striking. At that point Peter and John had been dragged before the council threatened and the church was to be found at prayer.

What did they pray? in the face of great opposition the threat of prison what were they praying?

Well they prayed and we ought to pray too to the sovereign God who is in control of all things and pray as they did that even in the face of hostility that we would keep speaking about Jesus.

That was their prayer. That was their greatest concern. in all the face of the pressure and opposition that they would keep speaking about Jesus. And that is a prayer that he will answer.

If we pray that prayer he will absolutely answer that prayer. It's a prayer we must pray as we gather on Wednesday evening to pray for our gospel partners around the world that they would keep on speaking about Jesus.

[34 : 14] Well there's a lot more we could say about the demands that the gospel places upon Christians but there's a few. We keep on with the task of witnessing we endure suffering we are marked by generosity and we keep praying.

But what about the demands the response that Luke presses upon those who do not yet follow Jesus? What does the gospel as Luke presents it demand?

Well it demands that all would repent and believe in Jesus. hear the words of the apostle Peter preached some 2,000 years ago on the day of Pentecost Acts chapter 2 here's his great conclusion he says let all the house of Israel know therefore for certain that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified 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 for the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself and so if you're not yet a follower of Jesus tonight this is what you must do if you would know forgiveness of sins the promise of eternal life repent and believe and turn to him this account of Acts is here so that you can have certainty and absolute confidence that as you do that you will not be turned away and the Lord will forgive your sins and grant you everlasting life let's pray

Father we do thank you for your word we thank you for this account that Luke has put together and we pray that we would take it seriously help us to come away from reading your word with greater confidence greater certainty about who the Lord Jesus is and about what he demands of us his creatures so we ask that you would help us each of us to respond in faith to the message of Acts we ask it in Jesus name amen amen Okay.