

Intro to Acts

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, folks. It's great to see you, and Happy New Year. So, this morning, we kick off our new preaching series in the Book of Acts.

! Today I'm going to be doing an intro, really. So we're going to go right across the Book of Acts, but very quickly.

And it's funny, because we've probably all read lots of bits of Acts. Most of us maybe read it through many times.

But I was just thinking that, actually, I don't recall ever doing a proper series where we dug in deeply to all of the Book of Acts. And I'm just excited, as I've been prepping for this morning.

There's so much in here, all that the Holy Spirit did in the early church. And I believe that God's going to use this to excite all of us and reveal more of his plans for us as a church in the coming months and years.

[1 : 1 4] So, if you're reasonably familiar with your Bible, especially the New Testament, you know that it starts with the four Gospels.

So, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And then straight after those four Gospels comes the Book of Acts. And it's a continuation of the story of Jesus, of all that he did, and then goes straight from there into the Book of Acts and what the disciples did next.

And along with the four Gospels, I would say that, to me, the Book of Acts is probably the most important book in the Bible. So, you've got the four Gospels and the Book of Acts.

Those five, in a way, are probably the most important books in the Bible for us today. And, okay, so, I would also say that contained within those five books are the three greatest events in history, certainly in my mind at least.

And so we start with this one. And this is obviously one we've been celebrating over a week or so ago, the birth of Jesus.

[2 : 3 4] And as we've, I hope, as we've spent time with family and friends and all the different, the eating and the presents, actually, we've given time to consider the birth of Jesus.

If we go all the way back to the Book of Genesis, right back to the start of the Bible, we read why we needed the birth of Jesus.

And that is because when God created Adam and Eve, he created them for relationship with him. In fact, that was God's plan for the whole of mankind, that there would be a relationship between the created being and the creator God, and a close relationship at that.

We see a snippet of it in Genesis, where it talks about God walking in the garden that Adam and Eve were in, that they communicated together.

And yet this relationship that God had planned was broken through sin. I know you probably all know the story, but it's good to remember that actually we were created both for relationship with God and to have authority on this earth.

[3 : 48] And yet the snake came, the serpent came, the devil came, and he tricked Adam and Eve into sin. And so both the relationship was gone and the authority was gone.

And yet, even at that point, God had a rescue plan, and that started in the birth of Jesus. And having been born, Jesus grew into a man, and he spent 33 years, or thereabouts, on this earth, and he revealed that restored relationship with God and the love of God to all that he met.

And he did that in the power of the Holy Spirit. And then, the second greatest event in history.

We know that in a few months' time, we will be celebrating Easter, and that Jesus was nailed to a cross, a brutal death, and yet he chose that death so that he could not only die, be resurrected, and conquer sin and death.

So this is, you know, another greatest event in history. And the four Gospels explain all of this, how Jesus was born, how he lived, how he demonstrated that relationship between God and man.

[5 : 24] He revealed that love of God, and we see the power of the Holy Spirit at work through him. But then, it comes to the end of the Gospels, and then we head towards the book of Acts.

And so, the third greatest event in history, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And we'll obviously spend a lot more time looking at that in the coming weeks.

But, it wasn't all just about a restored relationship. God wanted a transformed people. People who would be more like Jesus, who would live like Jesus did.

And so, we, are part of that, needed the Holy Spirit. So that we could be his hands, and his feet on the earth.

And so, at the start of Acts, we come across the day of Pentecost. How the Holy Spirit came, totally transforming lives.

[6 : 39] And how, through all of this, that authority that was lost, that relationship that was lost, way back in the Garden of Eden, could be restored.

Let's just, look at what it says in the Gospel of John. This is Jesus' words. He said this. John, chapter 14, verses 12 to 17.

Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.

Because I am going to the Father, and I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. If you love me, keep my commands, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate, so that is, the Holy Spirit, to help you and be with you forever.

[7 : 50] The Spirit of truth, the world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him, but you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

This is an incredible statement that Jesus has made. It's hard to really get our heads around it, but we'll see as we look through Acts some of these greater works that Jesus was talking about.

So what, so what's Acts all about? What's this book all about?

Well, I would say it comes under this heading, establishing the church, and as we look through the book of Acts, we will see the restoration of men and women, the growing of God's family, the enemy driven back, God's kingdom coming.

So, you know, that's what this book is about, the establishment of all of that relationship restored, of that authority regained on earth.

[9 : 12] And we're going to just briefly look at four areas, very broad areas this morning, and as I said, we'll be digging in to this over the coming months. more closely.

The first one, as I've mentioned, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. So, Jesus has been crucified, he's been in the grave three days, then he's been raised to life, he's met with his disciples on a number of different occasions, and then he's been taken up to heaven having said that he will pour out the Holy Spirit, but he said, wait, pray, until that day comes.

And the day of Pentecost arrived approximately 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. resurrection. It occurred in Jerusalem, and you can, I guess, maybe picture a bit of the scene, the disciples, it's not just the twelve, there are, you know, many who are following Jesus, they're there waiting and praying, there's this promise from Jesus, you need to stop and wait, and so they're doing that in Jerusalem, and then the Holy Spirit comes.

And just for those of you who aren't sure, this is a picture of Israel, New Testament Israel, and the arrow points to Jerusalem, and there's a bit of a zoom in, so it's not too far from the Dead Sea.

But so in this small country, really, we've seen Jesus being born, he's lived, and now we've got the disciples and the Holy Spirit has been poured out onto them.

[11 : 04] And we read in Acts chapter 2, verse 4, the following passage. So this is talking about this day of Pentecost, this incredible greatest day.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. So the Holy Spirit came in power on men and women.

That was the promise that Jesus had said. I will pour out my Spirit. But this was just the beginning.

So they've now been praying and then suddenly the Holy Spirit comes. We read this picture of the tongues of fire and suddenly they're speaking in different languages and praising God.

God. But this was just the beginning of the book of Acts. And this book is all about what happened from there. What those early disciples did, what the Holy Spirit actually did through them and how he empowered them and enabled them to do all that God wanted.

[12 : 14] And the first thing that they did, having received the Holy Spirit, they caused a scene.

So it's obviously spilled out now of the upper room or where they're staying. It's out in the streets and they're all proclaiming God in different languages. languages. And in the book of Acts we read that because it's a festival time there are devout Jews from many nations around and suddenly they stop and think, oh there's a load of drunk people over there, what are they going on about?

But then they hear in their own language the glories of God being proclaimed. And Peter stands up and addresses the crowd. Now many of you having read through the Gospels will know that Peter is a bit of a character.

You know, he's rejected Jesus, he's told Jesus that he mustn't do, go to the cross, and yet, and so Peter is very much a character and yet here he stands up as the mouthpiece for the rest of the disciples and he addresses the crowd.

crowd. And we know it's a crowd because many are saved, but actually he addresses them, he tells them the Gospel, he tells them about Jesus, he even tells them off, he says to them, you crucified Jesus.

[13 : 49] It was you, you were the ones who stood and said, we want Barabbas, we don't want Jesus, crucify him. And yet Peter stands and says Jesus has risen, Jesus has defeated sin and death.

And then as we go on in the book of Acts, we see the church is born. So this is what's happening here, this first sermon if you like, this first preaching event, the church is being born and it says this in Acts 2 41, those who accepted his message were baptized and about 3,000 were added to their number that day.

Isn't that incredible? It's even more incredible because he was talking to devout Jews. These were people who had lived their lives thinking that the Torah, the Old Testament, was the only way.

There was no other God but Yahweh. And yet Peter has addressed them and they have turned in their thousands to accept the one that they had seen crucified.

It is incredible what has happened here. This wasn't to a bunch of people who'd heard the gospel for many months and were on the edge.

[15 : 14] They were devout Jews. And so the church grows rapidly. Not only is there a huge number added, to their number straight away.

But actually if you consider that these Jews were from many nations, we've suddenly got a whole load of missionaries appearing on the scene straight away as well. And so the gospel is going out.

And the Holy Spirit is at the centre. Because it wasn't Peter speaking in his own abilities, it was Peter speaking through the power of the Holy Spirit. it. And in fact, as you go on through the book of Acts, we come to a little passage in Acts 5.

I'm not going to read it, but what was happening was that the disciples were making a right news of themselves in Jerusalem. The church is growing, people are being healed, and the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees, were getting seriously annoyed about this.

And so they bring the disciples in, they tell them they shouldn't be doing it, and then a man called Gamaliel, who's an honoured Pharisee, respected teacher of the law, said this, if it is of human origin, it will fail, but if of God, you will not stop them.

[16 : 39] Funny that, 2,000 plus years later, it definitely has not stopped, and so it is of God. And so the church grows within Jerusalem and the wider area, but then about 10 years later, after Pentecost, suddenly there is a going to the Gentiles, if you like.

So the gospel is for the Gentiles as well, not just for the Jews. Jews. And this is Peter again.

Peter is directed by God. Now, the story is that Peter has gone to Joppa, and he has, during the time there, he has raised a widow to life, a woman named Dorcas.

Jesus. And so we see, you know, this miracle happening, and then Peter is up on the roof of a house, and he has a vision.

He's praying and seeking God, and he has a vision. And the vision is this, that he sees a sheet come down from heaven, and on it is all sorts of different animals, and there are many animals on there that as a Jew he's not supposed to be eating.

[18 : 11] And yet, he hears this voice which he believes and knows to be God, saying, Peter, eat. And obviously Peter, knowing it's God, has an argument with God, because this is Peter.

No, no, no, I've never eaten unclean animals, and yet this happens on a number of occasions, God saying, take and eat. And meanwhile, at the same time, a Gentile, so this is a non-Jew, called Cornelius, meets an angel who says, I want you to send to Joppa for Peter and to ask him to come here.

And just so you're aware, again, there's a little map that we showed earlier and there's two arrows on the left, Joppa is at the bottom, Caesarea, which is where Cornelius is, up on the top, and there we go, a little bit closer there.

So Joppa, which is where Peter is, and Caesarea, where Cornelius is. So, having Peter experience the vision, and Cornelius meeting the angel, Cornelius does what he's told, he doesn't seem to have an argument with God, he sends people to Joppa to speak, to ask Peter to come.

Now, Peter really wouldn't have gone to a Gentile stage, but because of this vision, because of what the Holy Spirit was doing here, he went, okay, I'm going to go, I don't know what this is all about, but I'll go.

[19 : 39] And it was a 30 plus mile walk, so a day and a half journey, as I said, as a Jew, he's not supposed to be associating with the Gentiles at all, these non-Jews, they're not God's people, but because God has told him to go, he's gone.

And when he arrives, Cornelius doesn't know what he wants, Peter doesn't know what he wants, but he starts to present the gospel. And it says this in Acts 10, 34 and verse 44, then Peter began to speak, sorry, I'm going too quickly.

So Peter has presented the gospel and the Holy Spirit has been poured out on these Gentiles. Suddenly, it's no longer just for the Jews.

Salvation has come to the Gentiles. And then Peter says this, and Peter began to speak, I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism. And while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

So the Holy Spirit has now fallen upon the Gentiles as well, revealing salvation is for all. That Christ died for everyone, not just for the Jewish people.

[21 : 00] Okay, I am nearing the end here, so I'm going to jump forward another seven years and we meet up with Paul.

Now, Paul, who was originally called Saul, was a great persecutor of the church. He was a very devout Jew and he felt that the church was completely wrong and that he was out to destroy it and he'd put many in prison, he'd seen others, stoned.

So, in a sense, Paul was a very bad piece of work for the church and yet, when he was on the road to Damascus, when he's coming to bring more misery to the Christians in Damascus, Jesus met him and his life is transformed forever.

And so, this Paul now is saved and after a period of time of seeking God, he arrives on the scene as one who's going to reveal the gospel to many.

And so, we come to a point seven years after the gospel has gone to the Gentiles, where Peter has gone to Cornelius, and 17 years after Pentecost, the good news starts to go to the ends of the earth.

[22 : 28] Now, Paul is in a church in Antioch, which is about 300 miles from Jerusalem. is in modern-day Turkey.

And he says this in Acts 13, verses 1 to 3. Now, in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manian, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul, for the work to which I have called them. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Now, Paul is the one that wrote many of the New Testament letters. So you probably, if you've read much of the New Testament, you'll be familiar with Paul's teachings.

journeys. We've lost it. So Paul went on, it talks about four missionary journeys within the book of Acts, and he ended all the way up to Rome where he was in prison.

[23 : 38] But during that time, churches are being established throughout the known world, so the gospel is now going to the ends of the earth.

And, no, oh dear. So I was going to show you a picture of the four missionary journeys, just showing you that it's actually based all around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, but actually there's good historical evidence that although it doesn't say in Acts, Paul actually ended up in Spain as well.

And so the book of Acts concludes roughly 32 years after Pentecost. So you've got Jesus' life, the gospels was roughly 33 years, and the book of Acts roughly 32, maybe 33 years as well.

And during that time as we look through it, we'll be looking at the first deacons, we'll be looking at miracles, prophets, spiritual warfare, church building, but actually it's how the Holy Spirit establishes the church and the examples that we are to follow.

Oh, there's the picture. There we go. Yeah, so, it's up there. Oh, dear.

[25 : 04] I'm going to go to the, see if we can get to the finally bit. So, the book of Acts shows ordinary people empowered by the Holy Spirit changing the world.

So, ordinary people like us. You see, it's the Holy Spirit that works in us as it did in them to transform the world to see the gospel spread.

The disciples thought Jesus had come to storm the gates of Rome, but the Holy Spirit came to enable them to storm the gates of hell, and we are still called to do that, to stand against the enemy, to drive him back out of people's lives, and to see the gospel come into their lives.

And then finally, our act shows us God's plan for the church to reveal his love and to grow his kingdom.

The plan is still the same. The lost still need to be saved. God is still to be glorified, and the enemy is still to be defeated.

[26 : 22] I'd like to just pray, eh? You've been sat for a while. If you'd like to, please do stand. They prayed and fasted at Pentecost.

They were praying for the Holy Spirit, and I think it's a good place to finish this morning, is to be praying for the Holy Spirit. Lord Jesus, I thank you that when you went back up to heaven, you said that you would send the promised Holy Spirit poured out upon men and women, and we see that in the book of Acts, how having poured out your Spirit, lives were completely transformed.

even Peter transformed to someone who withstood the authorities, who proclaimed healing over sick people, who spoke the gospel and thousands were saved.

We see Paul transformed from someone who was killing to someone who was presenting the gospel. Such transformation, such a wonderful, wonderful story of what your Holy Spirit does.

So Lord, as we stand here 2,000 years later, we thank you that it's the same Spirit. Your Spirit is the same, the plan is still the same, to see the lost saved, to see you glorified and see the enemy driven back.

[28 : 00] So we cry out to you Lord, pour out your Spirit once again upon us, because we need him so much. We are ordinary men and women, but we're willing to be transformed, through your power, to be more like Jesus.

Help us to do that, Lord, to trust you in this, and to see your kingdom come, your will be done.

Amen.