

# GOD WITH US

## Part 9: ACTS

### Message 1 – The Birth of the Church

#### Acts 1 & 2

#### Introduction

The book of Acts was composed by Luke as volume 2 of his narrative concerning the history of Jesus and the early Christian movement. In Acts, Luke narrates how after the ascension of Jesus back into heaven His disciples obeyed His commission (they ACTED, thus the name ACTS) to take the gospel, in the power of the Spirit, to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:8 serves as the outline:

*“But 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” (1:8).*

The Holy Spirit fell from heaven upon the first Christians (ch.2). Then, they proclaimed the gospel in stages: first in Jerusalem (chs.2-7); second in Judea and Samaria (chs.8-12); third to the ends of the earth (chs.13-28). The overall theme of Acts can be summarized as follows:

#### **The Spirit-empowered proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth.**

In this first study, we will look at the “birthday” of the church, which took place in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead.

#### **Luke’s review and bridge: Acts 1:1-5**

Luke composed his two-part narrative for a man named Theophilus (Acts 1:1 and Luke 1:3). In this brief introduction, Luke connects volumes 1 & 2 by resuming the story where Luke’s gospel account of Christ’s birth, ministry, death and resurrection left off – with Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances to His disciples. He focused on one occasion where Jesus ate with His disciples and told them to “wait” in Jerusalem for the bestowal of the Holy Spirit from heaven (see Luke 24:49). Then, he picks up the story in Jerusalem as Jesus makes His final appearance to His disciples before returning to heaven.

## Jesus' commission to His disciples and ascension: Acts 1:6-11

Perhaps stirred by Jesus' second coming discourse (Matthew 24,25), the disciples were wondering if Jesus would now "*restore the kingdom to Israel*" (establish God's kingdom on earth, with Israel at the center, thus fulfilling the O.T. plan of God to make Israel a witness to the nations). Jesus replied:

***"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But 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."*** After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight (1:6-9).

This final commissioning was similar to "the great commission" given earlier, when the risen Christ appeared to His disciples in Galilee (see Matthew 28:18-20). While they stood staring in amazement into the heavens, two angels suddenly appeared and asked them why they were standing there staring upwards. The angels reassured the disciples that someday Jesus would return in the same fashion that He left, descending from the heavens to the Mount of Olives. It was as if they were saying to the disciples: *What are you standing around here for? Didn't He give you your assignment? Now get going!*

*This final commission from Jesus makes the mission of the church so clear. Our job is to take the message of Jesus across the street and across the world, as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. The church should continue with this task until Jesus returns and tells us to stop. The book of Acts records how the first generation of Christians "acted" to fulfill this mission. By telling this story, Luke has also given the church in every generation a pattern to follow. So, the question is: How are WE doing fulfilling the commission of Jesus in our day? How are WE taking the good news across the street and across the globe? (P.S. The message of Jesus is that God the Son came to earth as the promised One, to live as a human being, to identify with humanity and ultimately die in our place, bearing the sin of the entire human race for all time, to bring mankind back into relationship with a Holy God. God raised His Son from the dead, thus proving HE had satisfied the judgement of God for sin and was indeed the Son of God. Those who receive Him as their Sin-bearer and Savior, would become His children through the indwelling of His Spirit, and have eternal life.)*

## Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas: Acts 1:12-26

After Jesus departed, the disciples (about 120 total) returned to an upper room where they remained in prayer over the next 10 days, awaiting the bestowal and actual “*indwelling*” of the Holy Spirit from heaven, as Jesus promised in John 14:17, “*But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you*”. The promise Jesus gave to His disciples was that His Spirit who had been ‘with’ them, yet not truly empowering them (remember their fear on the night Jesus was arrested), except under His bidding, would be ‘IN’ them.

***“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers” (1:14).***

Note that the disciples of Jesus included ‘Mary, the mother of Jesus’ and ‘His brothers’. She was an active follower of her Son, her ‘LORD’. She was part of the early Christians, from the death and resurrection of Jesus, through the history and witness of the early church. She was committed to PRAYER, as were the other disciples, which included some of her natural born sons, ‘His brothers’, who believed in Christ after His resurrection. PRAYER was the foundation of the movement of the Spirit-empowered witness of these first believers. WHY PRAY? Prayer is a posture of dependence before God. The mission of telling others about Jesus Christ was predicted to be a challenge, just as it was for Christ Himself to proclaim that He was the Messiah, the promised One, and was crucified for it. Only through His indwelling power would believers be bold and willing to accept the consequences to their own lives, for their message.

Luke devotes considerable space describing how Peter led the process of selecting a *qualified* replacement for Judas Iscariot. The key qualification was that the new 12<sup>th</sup> apostle had to have been *with them* from their very first encounter with Jesus to the last.

***“Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection” (1:21,22).***

For Luke, *the historian*, this was an important scene, for it spoke to the credibility of the eyewitnesses who would be advancing the testimony concerning Jesus in the book of Acts. The testimony of

these key apostles could be trusted precisely because they were actual firsthand eyewitnesses to the events recorded in the gospel narrative. (This was important to Luke even though Mattathias, who was chosen, never actually appears as a character in the Acts narrative. Luke's point is about *historical accuracy and witness credibility*, not about Mattathias as a character per se.)

*Mattathias was chosen by the casting of lots, along with concerted prayer; Joseph was not. This does not mean that something was wrong with Joseph. It simply means that God had a specific and unique plan for both of their lives. So, it is with us today – God has a specific and unique plan for each of us – a path of good works that He has already prepared for you to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). Are you seeking God and asking Him to lead you in the plan that He has for your life? When you pray: “God, what do YOU have for me?” God sees your heart and will begin to lead you in new ways, as He sees fit. He will do His modern day “Acts” in your life.*

### **The Holy Spirit Comes on the Day of Pentecost: Acts 2:1-41**

The Jewish Festival of Harvest (also called the Feast of Weeks) was in process. This was a celebration of the first fruits of the harvest season. How fitting, then, that the first fruits of the Spirit's work in forming “the church” should occur during this Feast.

**2:1-4 The Spirit falls on the 120.** The disciples were gathered in prayer, still waiting for the promise of the Spirit to come from heaven upon them. Suddenly, it happened. They were filled with the Holy Spirit, Who instantly gave them the miraculous ability to speak in ‘tongues’, other known languages of the Jews who had travelled from far-away lands to celebrate the feast.

*The experience of these 120 believers was incredible. What preceded the powerful change in each of them to be bold and have the ability to speak in tongues and be used by the Spirit? Their OBEDIENCE to not move ahead of God. They remained in a posture of dependence on God and Jesus' command to “wait”. To wait on God, especially not knowing exactly what will happen is hard! They occupied their ‘waiting’ with much prayer over those 10 days. This is God's desire for every believer. To be in a posture of waiting and praying until we feel the Holy Spirit moving us into action. It is a learned skill to wait and pray. Ask Him (pray) to keep you sensitive to His nudges, then trust His power to move you into action.*

**2:5-13 Visitors from every nation hear the 120 speaking in their native languages.** The Jewish Festival of Harvest was attended by faithful pilgrims from all over the Roman Empire. They were amazed when they suddenly heard the 120 disciples speaking “*of the mighty deeds of God*” in their own native tongues. Some wondered what this miracle meant; while others accused the disciples of being drunk with wine so early in the day!

**2:14-21. Peter explains the coming of the Holy Spirit.** Peter stepped forward and gave the first gospel message in the book of Acts. He explained that the miraculous language abilities were due to the Holy Spirit, not sweet wine! He cited the O.T. prophet Joel (2:28-32) who had prophesied of a day when the Holy Spirit would give God’s people such miraculous tongues.

***“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:28-32).***

The prophecy from Joel combines images from the coming of Spirit (Joel 2:28,29 - the present Pentecost event) and the second coming of Christ (Joel 2:30-32 – the end-times events). The final appeal is what Peter emphasized: ***Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!***

**2:22-36. Peter explains the death and resurrection of Jesus.** After explaining the arrival of the Holy Spirit, Peter went on to describe the basic events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

***“This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him” (2:23-24).***

Peter made the crucial connection between the *exaltation of Jesus*

to the Father's right hand, and the *bestowal of the Holy Spirit* Jesus had promised would come in His place from heaven. He was trying to show His fellow Jews that the ministry of JESUS and the present ministry of the SPIRIT were part of the same unfolding plan of God for His people.

***“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah (Christ)” (2:32-36).***

His message is well summarized in his last line: *The man you crucified is the exalted Lord and Messiah! And WE are witnesses to this risen and exalted One.*

#### **2:37-41. The crowd responds to Peter's message.**

***When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart (with remorse and conviction) and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (2:37-39).***

***“Repent” means to turn from going one direction and go the other. These people (the religious leaders were instigating it), had been going the direction of unbelief in Jesus as the true Messiah of Israel, wanting Him crucified as a criminal, although He had done no wrong. Their response to Peter's words, which were prompted by the Holy Spirit, was a conviction in their hearts and desire to change direction. This is God's will for each of us throughout our entire lives. The Holy Spirit will tap us on the shoulder and want us to consider something we are doing in a relationship, in our work, in our beliefs, our behavior etc... He is desiring that we “repent” and go a different direction. We need to pay attention to His nudges that will come in a variety of different ways. Ask the Holy Spirit to make you aware of something He wants you to repent of. Then ask, “What shall I do?”***

It was a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that opened people's hearts to respond to the words of Peter. About 3,000 people believed in his message of salvation, and they were immediately baptized as a symbol of their identification with Jesus. They were likely baptized in one of the many pools within the city of Jerusalem, such as the Pool of Siloam.

**Note on “Believer’s baptism”:** For these Jews, the baby boys had been circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, and infants (male and female) were dedicated to God. This believer’s baptism was in response to their belief in Jesus Christ as their Savior and crucified and risen LORD. They chose to be baptized as an outward expression of their new faith in Jesus. They identified with Jesus’ death and burial by going under the water, and with Jesus’ resurrection by being raised back out of the water, symbolizing a new person in Christ. Baptism does not save us. But it does fulfil the command to ‘*believe and be baptized*’.

*If you have been baptized as an infant by your parents, they were sincerely following certain church traditions that have taken the original ceremony of circumcision as a symbol of their faith and replaced it with Christian baptism. Now as a believer who understands the symbolism of baptism where you are immersed into the water, identifying with Christ’s death and burial, you can be baptized as an expression of your own faith, like these first Christians.*

### **The Habits of the First Christians: Acts 2:42-47**

Luke gives summaries throughout the book of Acts as he narrates the movement and expansion of the gospel. His first summary focuses on the habits of the earliest group of Christian believers.

***“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (2:42-47).***

We learn many things about the first Christians here:

- They continued to feed on the apostles' teachings concerning the life, works and words of Jesus. They met in the Temple courts for these early meetings, as these courts could hold large crowds. (Acts 5:12 mentions "Solomon's porch.")

- They pursued "fellowship," which means *tight knit community*. They centered their fellowship around their faith in Jesus Christ, and desire to grow to know Him better. They met in smaller home-groups so that they could *know* and *care for* one another.

- They were *breaking bread* and *praying* together. 1) They were regularly celebrating communion as a way of honoring the death of Jesus, who said, "*do this in remembrance of Me*" (1Corinthians 11:23-26). 2) They were having regular meals together daily. 3) They were praying together- for each other, and for others whom they cared about, both spiritually and personally.

- They were selling possessions to free up money so that they could meet pressing needs. Note: Because of early persecution of the Christians by both the Jewish and Roman authorities, it is likely that many of these first believers lost their jobs, thus their sources of income. (See Acts 4:32-35 for another summary where Luke emphasized the selling of possessions for the common good.)

- The gospel was advancing quickly in Jerusalem because the apostles were given the ability to perform *many miracles* (see Acts 5:15,16) to authenticate their authority and their message about Jesus who alone saves and heals. Many new believers were added to their numbers daily.

- They were filled with JOY because of the amazing ways that God was working in and through them.

*Large group gatherings, small group fellowships, charitable giving, loving one another, displaying God to their world through good deeds and good news, praising God together. Those were the basic practices of the first Christians. Acts 2:42-47 is still the model framework for Christian community and activity. Take a close look at that passage, and the notes we have provided explaining the various elements. How do your habits (in the context of the life and ministry of Oak Pointe Church) measure up against theirs? What do you need to change in order to live more like these first Christians did?*

## Discussion Questions

1. Look again at the geographical outline for the book of Acts (1:8). How do you see this outline being worked out in the ministry of OPC today? In what aspects of the ministry are you most interested in being a part of?
2. How do you think it felt for all the visitors in Jerusalem when they suddenly heard the 120 disciples speaking of the mighty deeds of God *in their own native languages*? What kind of impression do you think this made on them?
3. Luke has provided only a summary of Peter's Pentecost sermon (otherwise it was the shortest sermon in history!). What strikes you the most about Peter's message? Concerning the Spirit? Concerning Jesus? Concerning the people?
4. Over 3,000 people were saved and baptized on that first day. Do some Google research. See if you can find information about the largest baptism service *ever* (Hint: In Rwanda). Watch the video. Prepare to see something amazing. Have you been baptized yet?
5. Think about the habits of the first Christians (Acts 2:42-47). "*They devoted themselves*" ... How are we living out those same habits today, at OPC? What could we do better? How do you imagine it could look like in our cultural context? Eg. 'meeting together every day' is not realistic but connecting by phone with another believer each day for connection and prayer is doable!