



SCRIPTURE SHARED
UNSTOPPABLE
THE BOOK OF ACTS

Week 1: Holy Spirit

Week 1, Day 1 – The Commissioning and the Ascension

Acts 1:1-11

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Understanding the Passage:

The book of Acts, which derives its name from the longer *Acts of the Apostles*, is a history of the early church in the months and years after Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. But unlike a typical historical account, Acts doesn’t just record what happened and demand nothing else from us. The book of Acts is meant to encourage believers in every era to carry on the work of the early apostles and followers in making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Acts is written by the author of the Gospel of Luke. His address to Theophilus (which also occurred in Luke 1:3) implies that Luke was commissioned to write the account of the early church for Theophilus, who many scholars believe is a person of Roman ranking based on the Lukan description of “most excellent.” Acts is informally divided into two parts: chapters 1-12 follow the ministry of Peter and chapters 13-28 follow Paul and those with whom he traveled planting churches and spreading the gospel.

The account opens by telling us that Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples before his ascension. This reminds us of the Israelites who received teaching from Moses for 40 days on Mt. Sinai. Imagine how the disciples must have felt, especially after the tortuous weekend following the

crucifixion until the resurrection. They were crushed in spirit, thinking that their Messiah was gone. And then, not only does he reappear, but he stays with them for 40 days to extend their teaching and relationships.

The disciples, of course, are curious about the kingdom of God. “When will you restore the kingdom to Israel?” they want to know. Like all Jews, they’d been taught that the kingdom would be established when the Messiah came – Isaiah 65:17-25 taught that it would be a time of a new heaven and a new earth, there would be no more crying or weeping, and the lion would lay down with the lamb. They want solid answers, but instead of giving a timeline, Jesus reminds them it’s in God’s hands – but in the meantime, he has a task for them: to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Jerusalem is the seat of the Jewish religion. Jesus wants them to start with their own people, but to focus on those most caught up in the religious system. Then Judea, the area in which Jerusalem sits – still a relatively comfortable group. Then Samaria. Oh no, those folks were sworn enemies. Hated neighbors. And then, the ends of the earth. Strangers, foreigners, Gentiles. We’ll see throughout the rest of Acts how this plays out.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What does it mean for the disciples to be witnesses? What does it look like in your daily life to be a witness for Jesus?
2. What do you think Jesus means when he uses the word “power” to describe what the disciples would receive from the Holy Spirit?
3. God calls us to reach out to the Samaritans in our own lives – those who we perceive to be enemies – with the good news of Jesus. Is there someone on your heart that you’ve been reluctant to share God’s grace with? How might you take steps toward them?

Week 1, Day 2 – Judas’ Replacement Selected

Acts 1:12-26

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶ “Brothers and sisters, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus, ¹⁷ for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹ This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ “For it is written in the book of Psalms,

‘Let his house become desolate,

and let there be no one to live in it’;

and

‘Let another take his position of overseer.’

²¹ "So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." ²³ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Understanding the Passage:

In the previous passage, the apostles are given the task of witnessing about Jesus to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. That's not a small feat; one might think they'd take an active approach and immediately jump into the work. We've seen that happen in our own contexts and churches: the pastor or lay people feel called to a new ministry and immediately jump into planning and execution and skip the most vital step. The apostles take seriously Jesus' instruction that the Kingdom will be given in God's timing, and so they choose to begin in prayer to prepare themselves for the work ahead.

In an age of instant gratification and a pervasive "go get 'em" mentality, waiting is a tough task. When we think of waiting, we summon images of irritating and impatient memories related to waiting rooms at doctor's offices, being stuck in long traffic jams, the space between hope and fear before biopsy results are announced, hanging out in the checkout lane at the grocery. Waiting in the world is unnecessary and frustrating. We shouldn't have to wait when the world is at our fingertips. We are accustomed to instantaneous results due to the fast-paced technology of computers.

In our spiritual lives, waiting can be just as frustrating. We want the end result right away without struggling to get there. We want spiritual maturity without the prayers and discipline required each day. This spiritual waiting and preparation is hard work, and few of us are very good at it. Waiting reminds us that we are not in charge. It reminds us that we don't know best. This wait instills in us a very real need for our God. True waiting is a steadfastness of hope in God who keeps promises. In our waiting we do not despair. In our waiting we trust that God is up to something.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Do you tend to jump right into things, or do you begin each new task or project with prayer?
2. Is there anything for which you're waiting right now? Are you trying to control it or are you letting God take charge?
3. Recalling that Peter denied Jesus after he was arrested, do you think the disciples struggled to follow his leadership? Why or why not? Are there leaders you've reconsidered after making a judgment about them?

Day 3 - Pentecost

Acts 2:1-13

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

Understanding the Passage:

Though the holiday of Pentecost is remembered by us as Christmas as the day the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, it was actually recognized as a Jewish holy day long preceding the time of Christianity. Pentecost marked the 50th day after the Passover festival each year. It was a harvest festival – this is when farmers collected and offered their first sheaf of wheat as a sign of gratitude. But it symbolized more than that to the Jews, for it was originally celebrated following the Passover after which the Israelites escaped from Egypt. On the 50th day after leaving Egypt, they arrived at Mt. Sinai and God gave Moses the 10 Commandments and the law.

Notice the parallel: for the Jews, Pentecost marked the time when God showed the Israelites a new way of living. For Christ's followers, it marks the same thing – except this time, instead of living by the law, followers of Jesus live by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is often called "the birthday of the church." There were gatherings of Christ followers before the Holy Spirit descended, but they weren't really considered a church until they were enlivened by the Spirit. The Spirit comforts, challenges, and guides the body of Christ, helping us live as faithful witnesses. Most critically, the Spirit keeps the church connected to God in a living way.

Without the Holy Spirit, the church may not actually exist today. Imagine for a moment how hard it would be to keep the momentum of an organization going for 2,000 years. As it is, there have been 2 millennia of squabbles, schisms, and wars in the name of the church. But they have not broken it. The church still stands. And the reason the church – the body of Christ – is still the most powerful earthly force is because of the Holy Spirit.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. The outsiders claimed that Jesus' followers were drunk on new wine because they were so filled with the Holy Spirit. What about your life shows other people you're filled with the Holy Spirit?
2. How do you think the disciples felt when the Holy Spirit descended on them and they all began understanding one another? What might it have been like for them?
3. Take some time to reflect on the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. How do you see the Holy Spirit at work *in* and *through* you?

Day 4 – Peter’s Testimony

Acts 2:14-17, 22-24, 29-36

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

²² “Fellow Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— ²³ this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴ But God raised him up, having released him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

²⁹ “Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,
‘He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.’

³² “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,
‘The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,

³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.”’

³⁶ “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Understanding the Passage:

Peter addresses his “fellow Israelites” who are in disbelief about the work of the Spirit. He quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel, who announces the messianic reign, when God’s righteousness will be fully revealed and enacted. Joel prophesied that God would “pour out my Spirit upon *all flesh*.” The Holy Spirit is not just for a few, but for everyone!

In the primeval narrative in Genesis 11, everyone in the world spoke one language. All of the people settled near the land of Shinar (Babylon). They decided to build a tall tower that stretched to the heavens as a way of declaring their might. They were trying to play God, or worse, declare themselves more powerful than and independent of God. So God “confused their language so they will not understand each other.” The people, now speaking many languages, scattered and divided into people groups and tribes and nations. They no longer saw themselves as united or as brethren.

Pentecost is understood as a *reversal* of the Tower of Babel. Instead of the people being confused by the many languages, they are united in what they can hear on Pentecost. But more importantly, they are united through the Holy Spirit. All flesh. That means young, old, men, women, traders,

fishermen, Republicans, Democrats, rich, poor. When he quotes Joel, Peter is saying, “it’s happening now! The messianic reign is upon us and *all flesh* can take part in it.”

God’s deepest desire is for unity. Jesus prays that all believers will become one, just as Jesus and the Father are one. Paul tells the Ephesians, “there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Peter denied Jesus three times between his arrest and crucifixion yet he’s the one preaching the gospel at Pentecost. What lesson is there in Peter’s turnaround for you?
2. Think about people with whom you’re not united. Is that by choice or by circumstance? How could you change that?

Day 5 – The First Converts

Acts 2:37-41

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” 38 Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

Understanding the Passage:

Peter finishes his sermon (yesterday’s reading) with the climactic statement confirming that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah and that it was at the hands of his fellow Israelites that he was crucified. Peter said, “this man... you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.” The immediate reaction is that some are “cut to the heart.” The Greek word - *katanusso* - used here has a physical connotation of stabbing. The people are literally hurting from the devastation of this news. They have begun to grasp the depth of their complicity and guilt. Surely they are thinking, “what will become of us who killed our savior?”

What changed? How is it that many of these people had witnessed Jesus’ life and, at least part of, his ministry and were still the ones who called for the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus at the crucifixion?

Their hearts were so hardened that they could not see the error of their ways – their unstoppable slide down a hill into death – without the power of God’s prevenient grace, which opened their hearts to Peter’s message. There’s a scene in CS Lewis’ 3rd Narnia novel, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, in which a boy is turned into a dragon. He lives alone in the forest until Aslan, the lion king, tells the boy that he will remove his dragon skin. The boy recounted the story to others:

“I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now...The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt.”

We can’t peel the dragon skin off of ourselves. We can’t rid ourselves of our guilt and sin. Only God can do that – and the good news, if we are willing to accept it, is that God has already done that through Jesus! That is what Peter is telling those folks.

Even better, Peter isn't just preaching to those who are gathered there. The promise of the good news - the gospel - is that forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit is not just for those present during Jesus' earthly ministry. In verse 39, he says, "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Can you think of a time when God broke through your hardened heart to convict you of your sin?
2. What kind of dragon skin do you need God to remove? Consider whether your leading edge is currently grace or whether it's something like pride, bitterness, jealousy, cynicism, greed, anger, hunger for power, selfishness, or callousness.
3. How do you feel when you read verse 39?

Week 1 Video Questions

1. Pastor Colin described Acts as a history book. David Tracy describes Acts as a classic - "a story to which the faith community assigns authority and to which it returns again and again as a guide for its life." Which of those descriptions resonates with you? Why?
2. Willie Jennings wrote, "Acts has as its purpose the equipping and formation of disciples... Jesus did not come to bring an interesting philosophy of life, but called people to a new way of living." Talk about this with your group. Why do we sometimes get stuck on the philosophy instead of the living part of our faith?
3. Pastor Colin talked about recognizing the work of the Spirit through our understanding of Jesus' character. How did his explanation help you see the Holy Spirit in a new way?
4. The Holy Spirit is the main character of the book of Acts and the primary actor of the early church. Do you think the Holy Spirit is still the primary actor of the modern church? What are some of the ways the church listens to the guiding of the Spirit? How could the body of Christ do that better?
5. The Holy Spirit's power doesn't always manifest itself in wild and sensational ways. Sometimes it's subtle and simple. When and where have you seen evidence of the Spirit's power in your own life?
6. In what area(s) of your life do you wish you had more of the Spirit's power?
7. Jesus instructed the disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. What does it look like in your daily life to be a witness for Jesus?

Prayer requests and other notes.