

- ***READ Acts 2:1,2*** If someone has read the Gospel accounts for the first time then they very well might reach the end and think to themselves, "Well now what??" This is a great question, and thankfully we are able to answer that question based upon what we find within the fifth book of the New Testament, the Book of Acts.
- This book that we refer to as Acts begins in a way that might sound very familiar to us. In the first verse, we read of author addressing this book to someone named Theophilus. Where have we seen this name before? If you're thinking of Luke's Gospel account then you would be correct! This faithful doctor and disciple makes it clear in **Luke 1:1-3** that the purpose of His Gospel account was to give a detailed narrative of the happenings surrounding the life of Jesus and the work He accomplished on this earth. Luke was truly all about the details, and he sought to leave no stone unturned. This is likewise seen in Acts which is short for the Acts of the Apostles for this is truly a book that contains the acts of those whom Jesus had left to care for His kingdom and its citizens.
- There is so much that is packed into this twenty six chapter book, and therefore this evening we are going to help prepare ourselves for a reading of this text as we close out the year by focusing on five main themes that run throughout its pages. We will note these themes and take a few moments to give the importance for them, and it is my hope that as we read over the coming weeks that we will keep these themes in mind while at least making mental notes of how they tie together or maybe even make notes in the margins of our Bible if we are able to do so. These themes continue to have an impact within our own lives, and we would do well to consider them this evening as we begin to read those this great book concerning the Acts of the Apostles.

5 Major Themes In Acts

1) The Gospel Message

- A. The focus on the Gospel in Acts is a theme that shows up time and time again. The simple message of men being sinful and being in need of a Savior is the very message that Peter first preached to those Jews who were gathered in **Acts 2**. What the Jews were seeing concerning the Holy Spirit was directly connected with the Gospel and its work in reconciling mankind back to God through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. It was Jesus who now served as Lord and Christ, and it was only through faith in and obedience to Him that mankind could be saved. This was the message preached by Peter in the beginning of Acts and we continued to see it as the message preached throughout the book.
 1. We see this message continued to be preached by Peter in **Acts 3:12-26**. *"For you first, God raised up His servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways."* (**Acts 3:26**)
 2. This was the same message that Peter and John preached in **Acts 4:8-12**. *"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven the has been given among men by which we must be saved."*
 3. Peter again finds himself facing authorities who wanted for this Gospel message to be stopped, but once again we see him boldly proclaiming the truth of Jesus and what He had done. *"The God of our our fathers raised up Jesus, home you had put to death by handing Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins."* (**Acts 5:30,31**)
 4. Peter wasn't the only one who was busy sharing this Gospel message. Philip also gets into the work in **Acts 8** as he goes down to Samaria *"proclaiming Christ to them."* (**Acts 8:5**) This work continued as he made his way into the path of an Ethiopian Eunuch who had been in

Jerusalem to worship. Philip preached Jesus to this man in the same manner, and he was also baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of His sins. **(Acts 8:35-38)**

5. Then of course we can't forget about Paul's experiences with the Gospel. He himself first being obedient to its message in **Acts 9:1-18** and then his own efforts in spreading its message to countless peoples in countless places throughout the remainder of the book.
- B. No matter where we look within this book, we continue to find a consistent message of Jesus being the avenue through which mankind can be saved from their sins. This was the foundational substance of their message in the beginning and it ought to continue to be the foundation of our message today. Let's additionally notice that there was another constant presence as the Gospel message was being spread to the populace around the Apostles...

2) The Work Of The Holy Spirit

- A. The promise of Jesus concerning the Holy Spirit fully comes to light within this book. We can look back in texts we read during our reading of the Gospels and be reminded of Jesus's promises to the Apostles concerning the coming Spirit and Helper who would guide them in their efforts for the Gospel's sake. The most noted text would certainly be that of **John 14:26**, *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you."* This promise Jesus made before His death, but He further reiterated this promise after His death and prior to His ascension at the beginning of Acts in **Acts 1:4-8**.
- B. Jesus's words came to fruition just as they always had for we see that just prior to Peter standing up and preaching the Gospel message, he and the other Apostles received the Spirit of promise that had been sent by the Father to aid them in their work. **(Acts 2:1-4)** This by no means is the last time we see the Holy Spirit at work in Acts. In fact, many of the texts we have already looked at also contain mentions of the Holy Spirit being at work.
 1. The Holy Spirit was with Peter and John in **Acts 4:8-12**. *"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them..." (Acts 4:8)*
 2. The Holy Spirit served as a witness in what the Apostles were doing for the Lord. *"And we are witness of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."* **(Acts 5:32)**
 3. The Holy Spirit was most definitely at work with Philip as he went about preaching the Gospel. Luke tells us in **Acts 8:6,7** that signs accompanied Philip in the work he was doing in Samaria. The Holy Spirit also at work with Philip in his going to the Ethiopian eunuch. An angel of the Lord originally told Philip to go to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, but it was the Spirit who prompted Philip to go up into the chariot to converse with the eunuch. **(Acts 8:26,29)** Additionally, it was the Spirit that snatched Philip away to take him elsewhere to continue his work in the Gospel.
 4. Last in our examples, let's consider the work the Spirit did in helping Peter to know that it was time for the Gentiles to receive the Gospel. Peter was able to know for certain what he was to do in **Acts 10:44-48** based upon these Gentiles having the Spirit come upon them just as He had done with the Apostles all the way back in **Acts 2:1-4**. *"Surely no one can refuse water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" (Acts 10:47)*
- C. The Holy Spirit was not simply a bystander in the early work of the Gospel being spread. Instead, it was a major player in the efforts that were being put forth by the earliest of disciples. Most notably, though, we must point out how instrumental the Holy Spirit was in doing exactly what Jesus had promised and helping the Apostles spearhead the efforts of growing the church. All of this great work that was done was done under the Apostle's leadership and guidance.

3) The Apostle's Leadership

- A. It was the Apostles that Jesus foretold in **Matthew 19:28** would *"sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."* This certainly came to be the reality for it was the Apostles who stood upon pentecost and preached the truth concerning the Gospel and the people's need to respond. Further, let's notice that the Apostles and their teachings were the focal point of what helped the early disciples to grow. *"They were continually devoting themselves to the Apostles' teaching..." (Acts 2:42)*
- B. But why was it that they were the leaders? I believe they were the ones that led the efforts in the early church because of what we have already seen concerning them working hand in hand with the Holy Spirit who had been sent down upon them. It was for this reason then that they were the ones who shared the teachings. It was for this reason that they handled the issues that arose among the church. I think specifically about what we see in both **Acts 6:1-8** & **Acts 15**.
1. In **Act 6:1-8**, we find there being an issue of a particular group's needs being neglected. The issue is brought to the Apostles and they come to the conclusion that men should be appointed to this task so that they might not be hindered in their work in the ministry of the word. Their leadership in solving this problem led to the people having their needs sufficed and the Gospel continuing to be preached.
 2. In **Acts 15** we find an even bigger issue concerning what needed to be done in order for Gentiles to be saved and added to the body of Christ. Some of the Jewish teachers demanded that they be circumcised and follow the works of the Law, but through the steady leadership of the Apostles and even some other leaders within the church such as the elders of Jerusalem and Barnabas, they were able to come to the understanding that nothing additional was necessary for them and that all people would be saved in the same way.
- C. Even beyond these two examples we could look to the work of Paul in so many different places helping to lead God's people in the right direction. I am especially impressed with Paul's work among the Ephesian church in helping them to grow in so many different ways. His work in leading the eldership in their growth serves as such a great example of just how vital the Apostle's leadership and work was among the early church, and that leadership and work only led to continued growth among God's people during their day.

4) The Church's Growth

- A. While it is normal for most ventures to have slow starts and it take time for success to be experienced...the church started off with quite a bang in **Acts 2**, and we don't see it really slowing down in the work that it was doing. We are well familiar with the 3,000 that were added on Pentecost. (**Acts 2:41**) We then skip over just a couple chapters and read in **Acts 4:4** where the number of men who believed came to be about 5,000.
- B. Not only were Jews increasing the numbers of the disciples, but the church was growing even outside of the Jewish community. Starting with Cornelius in **Acts 10**, Gentiles were being added to the body of Christ. Of course as we have already noted, this brought about a new set of challenges. Yet, that didn't stop the church from continuing to be a force wherever the Gospel message was taken. This is particularly evident when we get to Paul being in Thessalonica in **Acts 17**. In the first few verses of this chapter we find a mob being stirred up on the market place in order to disrupt the work that is being done by Paul and those who were with him. The mob ends up dragging Jason and some other brethren out before the city authorities and accusing them of aiding the men who had *"upset the world."* (**Acts 17:6**)
- C. The church was growing so mightily and the Gospel was prevailing so much that it was as if the world itself had been turned on its head. However, this growth didn't come without its own set of difficulties. Everything wasn't great for the Christians because they often faced persecutions.

5) The Sufferings Of Saints

- A. It doesn't take long at all for the Apostle to find themselves in trouble with the authorities over their peaching of the Gospel in the name of Jesus Christ. This shouldn't be all that surprising seeing as how their message was one that truly cut people to the heart. **(Acts 2:37)**
1. In **Acts 4:3-22**, Peter and John are interrogated by the rulers, elders, and scribes.
 2. In **Acts 5:12-18**, the Apostles are arrested for preaching Jesus and doing many signs.
 3. In the following verses they are set free, but they are quickly detained again after being found preaching in the temple. **(Acts 5:19-33)** The Jewish leaders want to kill them, but Gamaliel saves their lives by extending patience towards them and allowing the Lord to deal with them. After a beating they are released and again commanded to stop teaching in Jesus's name.
 4. In **Acts 6 & 7**, Stephen is stoned for preaching convicting the Jewish people and leadership of their sins. This persecution is only furthered by Saul of Tarsus who went about from place to place *"ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."* **(Acts 8:3)**
- B. We could continue to go on, but I think these few examples sufficed to show that there was real persecution that was taking places among the saints for the work that they were doing for the kingdom of God. They were doing good work, but that good work didn't come without its difficulties. Yet, let's recognize that in spite of these difficulties, the church continued to grow and expand from place to place. The Lord was even using their trials to bring about great success.

What are we to do with these themes as we notice them during the upcoming weeks as we're reading through Acts? My hope is that we will allow for this narrative recorded by Luke to serve as a source of encouragement for us as we go about our work within this church. These themes continue to be alive in our lives and our work as disciples. We continue to preach the same message aided by the Holy Spirit. We continue to look to the Apostles for guidance in hopes of experiencing growth in this place. And then we'll see that we face difficulties and even persecutions in our work, as well. May this portion of God's Word and our consideration of it only lead to great success and growth in this place and in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.