

## The Continuing Acts of Jesus: What Jesus Did Next

Acts 1:1-11

March 5, 2017

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~God's *power* fills God's people with *purpose* to fulfill God's *plan*~

Please open your Bibles to Acts chapter 1. You will find it on page 770 in the pew Bible.

Today we are leaving the Value Driven series behind and starting something new. Acts is one of the most exciting stories in the Bible. It is a story about God working through natural people, like you and me, to accomplish His supernatural mission in the world.

Now any time God shows up in someone's life it is exciting, but Acts is particularly exciting because this isn't just a story, it is a story written for churches. And Luke's desire as he writes is to encourage and inspire us by telling us about some incredible stuff He saw God do through himself and his friends.

Now as we start this series I want to give you some insight into how to read Acts. And that's because probably more than any other book in the Bible, except Revelation, there has been confusion about what we actually get in this book.<sup>1</sup>

And the confusion starts right at the very beginning with the title. So the traditional, but not original, name for this book was "The Acts of the Apostles." If you've got a King James Bible this is what you will find. But that's misleading because the majority of the Apostles don't have anything to do with the story.

So for example, while tradition tells us that most of the Apostles were martyred, Acts only tells about James' death. And then yes, Acts does spend some time on Peter, but if you consider that the 11 chapters he is featured in take place over 11 years there is a lot left out. Then Philip gets an honourable mention, but the rest of the Apostles are almost completely ignored. The only character named throughout the book is Jesus. So the Acts of Jesus would perhaps be a more accurate title for the book.

Then in chapter 1 verse 1, Luke introduces the book saying "In my former book I wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach."

So Acts is part two. Part one, of course, is the Gospel of Luke which was all about what Jesus *began* to do. And then Acts is what Jesus continued, to do after His death and resurrection. So, I've titled my series "The Continuing Acts of Jesus."

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<sup>1</sup> Outline of sermon adapted from Matt Chandler's "The Beginning of the Church" <http://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/sermons/the-beginning-of-the-church> (Accessed March 1, 2017)

Now if the confusion ended there that would be one thing, but it goes deeper. And so as we get started we need to talk about genre. “Genre” is a word that describes different kinds of writing. Poetry is a genre, history is a genre, fiction is a genre, and science is a genre. And in order for a person to read something correctly they need to understand what kind of literature they are reading.

So if you pick up a novel you know that its dialogue has no actual historicity to it – it is all made up. And that’s okay. So if your friend says to you “I just read George Orwell’s ‘Animal Farm’ and it was terrible. Everyone knows pigs can’t talk!” You would say “You missed the point. Animal Farm is an allegory about the Russian Revolution” – allegory is a genre. You need to read literature the way it means to be read.

And if you want to read the Bible correctly you need to understand that it is full of different genres of literature. It has history and poetry and lament - just to name a few. And each of these genres has different rules for how you are to read it.

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Now the major genre in Acts is narrative. And narrative contains dialogue and tells a story about what happened. But when people read the Bible they often do something funny, and so some come to Acts expecting narrative to be 100% prescriptive. Prescriptive means it prescribes what we should do. Other people disagree and say, no, Acts is 100% descriptive. It is just a story that describes life in the first century. And we can be encouraged by it, but we aren’t supposed to do what it says.

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Now I want to put my cards on the table and say the book of Acts is both prescriptive and descriptive. It is certainly full of descriptive sections. There are great stories about God working through natural people to accomplish His supernatural plans. And these sections are for the building up of our faith, but they aren’t for us to emulate.

Let me just give you one example that I hope will make this clear. At the end of chapter 1, which we are going to get into next week, the Apostles get together and find a replacement for Judas. And they draw lots to make their decision.

So let me ask you, if we need a new Care Group leader here at Fort George is this what we are supposed to do? I just put your names in a hat, grab some dice and see who comes out? No! That’s not the way we do it. This is what they did – Acts 1 describes this – but the text is not telling us this is what we should do.

Now very briefly here is the way we are going to differentiate the prescriptive from the descriptive. And this is something you have to do with every narrative in the Bible. When you read narrative you need to ask whether the story has a parallel within prescriptive scripture.

For example, the Epistles are largely prescriptive. Paul writes letters to the church and tells us what we are supposed to do. And so, if there is something in the Epistles that lines up with a story in Acts, then we can be safe to say “yes, this is something we should implement into our lives.”

Alternatively, if the story has no parallel anywhere, like there is no spot where Paul says “Christians should draw lots to see what God wants them to do.” Then these elements of the story are probably descriptive.

But hear this: just because something is descriptive doesn’t mean it is irrelevant for us. Paul tells us: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> Inside the descriptive sections there are prescriptive truths that we are supposed to apply to our lives and obey. And so throughout the narrative of Acts we are going to constantly be discerning this and mining the descriptive parts to find what God wants to say to us. That’s genre and prescriptive/descriptive.

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There are two other issues I need to address up front because they are on your mind if you have been around the church for a while. The first is whether the book of Acts is a model for how the church is supposed to run, and the second is what we are to do with all the miracles in this book?

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So first, you’ve probably heard people say things like “We just need to get back to the way the early church did things.” Have you heard people say things like that?

The idea here is that the Acts gives us a picture of the pure church before it was distorted over time. The problem with this is that as you read Acts it becomes obvious that there was some impurity even then, and more than that Luke spends no time giving us any kind of systematic model for church. Actually he leaves out church polity issues all together.

So in chapter 6 we hear about the 7 who get chosen to wait tables. But they aren’t called “Deacons” in the text. And then they don’t even stick around Jerusalem. And then we never hear how the church transitioned from Peter being the leader to James being the leader. If polity was the point that would be an important thing to include. And then other than a brief mention that “elders were appointed” in each city there is no word about how these churches governed themselves.

On top of this several of the pictures of the early church Acts paints conflict. So when some people become Christ-followers they receive the gift of the Spirit and get baptized. But sometimes the order is reversed. Then sometimes there is a laying on of hands, and sometimes there isn’t. Sometimes there is a mention of repentance, sometimes there isn’t. And while we make a huge deal out of the Acts 2 church, there is no evidence that any of the other churches in Acts ever experienced communal life in a similar way. Luke obviously isn’t giving us a model for church.

And so when people say “We need to get back to the way church was done in the book of Acts” really these people are just picking their favorite verses in Acts and saying let’s make our church look like this. That’s not the way to read a book. Acts is not about church polity.

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

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Well, what about the miracles? The book of Acts is full of incredible and awesome signs and wonders. There is prophecy and miracles like raising the dead, the ground shakes when people pray, and we are going to talk about all this because it is in the book.

But at this some of you are saying “Finally, Dan is going to give us the Holy Spirit goods – you get ‘em Dan!” And others of you are saying “Oh no, Dan is going to give us the Holy Spirit goods – run for the hills!”

But the reality is something else. Hear this: while there are all sorts of incredible miracles in this book, the miracles are not the point of the book. Acts is not a manual for how the Spiritual gifts work.

Now I believe the gifts are active today. And there are texts that talk about how the gifts are supposed to work in church – I’m thinking 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12 for example.

And so when I go to the hospital to pray for people I lay my hands on them and pray for healing. And I pray believing and expecting God to move. But I pray like this because of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians and James not Acts. Acts gives us descriptive stories about God answering prayer, James tells us – prescriptively – that the elders of the church are to pray for God to heal their people. And so I am encourage by Acts, but I pray because of James.

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Alright, so that is a lot about what Acts isn’t. What I’d like to do now is get into Acts chapter 1 and find out what Acts *is* about. Verse 8 is the thesis of the book, so keep an eye on that one.

[Read Acts 1:1-11]

Now there are three things in verse 8 that tell us exactly what we are going to read for the rest of the book. Jesus says “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” So this is a book about the **power** of God filling His people. And then He says “And you will be My witnesses.” So Jesus isn’t just giving His power out for fun, we have a **purpose** to fulfill. And finally Jesus says “You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” So Jesus has a **plan** for how this is going to work. It is going to start at home among the Jews and move out to the gentiles in the four corners of the earth.

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So first, Acts is a book about the power of God in the lives of God’s people. And Jesus says the power comes from the Holy Spirit.

Now the Spirit is the “wild-card” of the Trinity. We all know about the Father. While we can never fully understand the extent of His love, His title as “Father” gives us a framework to understand what He is about. And we get the Son. We get that He

became a person and learned our language, so that like a cross-cultural missionary, He could help us understand the Father's message. But the Spirit, now He is tricky to nail down. Jesus said:

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

The Spirit is unpredictable. And human institutions have a hard time with that. Institutions like denominations were built up around how we "know" God interacts with us. But Jesus says, you can't nail God down any more than you can nail down wind. And so there are hundreds of denominations that have a hard time getting along because we have all seen God work one particular way, and we can't fathom that He could do something different. We have a hard time with the Spirit.

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So there are two mistakes that we can make when it comes to the Holy Spirit. We can underestimate His importance, or we can over emphasize His importance.

Some people just leave the Spirit out all together. For them Christianity is about believing some right facts and doing some right things – it's about moralism. And there is very little power in their lives.<sup>3</sup> This is not the picture Acts gives us.

But other people go to the opposite extreme and make too big a deal about the Spirit – they talk more of Him than of the Father or the Son. But this isn't right either. Jesus said the Spirit plays a very specific role within the Trinity. So in John 15 we read:

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—He will testify about Me (John 15:26)

Jesus says the Spirit's job is to point people to Jesus. And so while it is impossible to make too much of Jesus or the Father, the Spirit can be over emphasized. And when this happens we end up fixated on what the Spirit can do for us. We end up desiring the power of God more than we want God Himself.

And in Acts 8 we are going see that Simon the sorcerer wanted exactly this. He saw the power of God in the lives of the Apostles and wanted that power for himself.

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I used to have a friend named Ben who told me that when he was training his dog to do tricks he was continually telling her "Seek my face, not the treat in my hand." It's the same idea here. God wants us to want Him, not just what He can do for us.

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So what is the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

Well the first job the Spirit does is allow people to respond in faith to Jesus. So in 1 Corinthians Paul tells us:

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 3:5 "Having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people."

Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:3)

Now this doesn’t mean that it is impossible to utter the words “Jesus is Lord” without the Spirit – we know that’s not true. Rather the point is that it is impossible to live your life to God’s glory without being drawn and empowered by the Spirit. The Spirit plays a pivotal role in the process of coming to faith.

But the Spirit also fills Christians after they come to faith. In our text today Jesus is talking to the Apostles. These are men who already believed. And yet Jesus says “You don’t have what you need yet, there is something more. Wait until the Spirit comes on you,” or in verse 5 “baptizes you.” Then you will have the power you need to be my witnesses.’

Jesus is talking about something that happens after coming to faith. So is this a second baptism? “Yes and no.” Yes, it is obviously after salvation, but no, it isn’t something that happens to a person that levels them up from an ordinary Christian to a Spirit Filled Christian. The reality is throughout Acts we don’t see just a second baptism, but a third and a fourth and a fiftieth baptism in the Holy Spirit. There is no limit.

Once a person becomes a Christian they have the ongoing potential to experience being baptized or clothed in the Holy Spirit. And when that happens they are clothed in power again and again.

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The commentator Martin Lloyd Jones has a great quote on this. He describes being clothed with Holy Spirit power to being like a son holding his dad’s hand and walking down the street. And this is something I resonate with except I don’t have enough hands for all my kids, so they have to take turns. But picture this.

I’m holding Jaxon’s hand – he’s one of my 3-year-olds – and we are going for a walk. Now Jaxon knows I love him. He has confidence in my ability to provide for him and keep him safe. So he isn’t nervous as cars drive past, he knows I’m not going to push him under the bus. But he’s not ecstatic about my love, he is just calm and confident in this moment.

Now sometimes mom wishes things would just stay calm, but there is something else I love to do with my kids – actually I think of it as my fatherly responsibility – and that is to surprise them with my love.

So while Jaxon and I are walking. Or perhaps when we are just hanging out in the house, all of a sudden I will grab him and throw him into the air and tickle his tummy and kiss his neck with the whiskers Jesus gave me for such a time as this, and flip him around and hold him close.

And in this moment calm is not the word to describe his response. There is shrieking and laughing, and then begging for more once I put him down. In this moment, he is enraptured with my love.

And Lloyd-Jones says when we are clothed with power by the Holy Spirit we experience this overwhelming sense of God's love. We are stunned by it. He says: "The fuses of love are so overloaded they almost blow out.... [And in place of the subconscious nagging doubts we all have] is utter and indestructible assurance, so that you know that you know that you know that God is real and that Jesus lives and that you are loved, and that to be saved is the greatest thing in the world. And as you walk on down the street you can scarcely contain yourself, and you want to cry out, 'My father loves me! My father loves me! Oh, what a great father I have! What a father! What a father!'"<sup>4</sup>

Now this isn't an everyday experience, it is an occasional thing.

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I've told you before about the time, as a 19-year-old, I was working at the Oil Refinery here in town and was walking by myself around the Tank Farm at 2am one night when out of the blue the Spirit fell on me and told me I was loved and forgiven and could confidently approach the throne of grace in spite of my sin because of the blood of Jesus. And in that moment my composure changed and I went leaping and shouting and running all over the place in my blue overalls and hard hat. That's what happens when the Spirit fills you. But this doesn't happen every day, and it doesn't have to.

The fact is, the miraculous is not what sustains our faith and Israel proved this. They had all sorts of encounters with God – think the crossing of the Red Sea. And then only a month later they were wallowing in doubt and disobedience – think worshipping the golden calf.

So the miraculous isn't what sustains our faith, Jesus sustains our faith. And so between experiences with the Spirit we are called to obedience and faithfulness. But when the Spirit sweeps you up it is an incredible blessing.

Now we don't control these encounters. The Spirit isn't a genie in a lamp. He blows wherever He is going to blow. But when He blows we are filled with His power that leads to an experiential assurance of His love. Maybe you've experienced that before.

And so in Acts 1 Jesus gives us a picture of power, and then He talks about the purpose of this power, and that is that we would be His witnesses. So what does this look like?

In John 14, in a passage where Jesus talks about the promised Holy Spirit, He says:  
 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. (John 14:12)

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Lloyd-Jones. Quoted by John Piper in <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/you-shall-receive-power-till-jesus-comes> (Accessed March 4, 2017)

Now some people have taken this to mean that whenever you go out for lunch you should just expect to pray for the food and feed the whole restaurant. And every time you attend a funeral you should just put your hand on the casket and claim “she is just sleeping.” After all these were things Jesus did.

But Jesus’ point in this passage is not that we will do more impressive miracles than He did, but that with His Spirit inside us we are going to have the same kind of ministry He had; and we collectively are going to go all over the world with it – that’s the “greater things” part.

And of course the ministry Jesus had was one that confounded everyone He encountered. When you have been filled with the Spirit you do things that don’t make sense to the people around you. So you do things like give sacrificially in order to take care of the needs of others. The world can give, but it can’t give sacrificially because this life is all they get. But when the Spirit fills you, then you start laying up treasure in heaven and you can do stuff that doesn’t make sense to the world.

And when Christ-followers live in ways that doesn’t make sense to the world, we become Jesus’ witnesses. So the power is the filling of the Holy Spirit, and the purpose is that we would be Jesus’ witnesses, and the plan is that the Apostles would move from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth – that’s the plan.

Jesus told them start where you are. Your first mission is to the people I have placed right beside you. But don’t stay there, move out to the people who despise and reject you – that’s the Samaritans. And from there go to the very ends of the earth. And the Holy Spirit accomplishes this plan in Acts. This is the story line.

Now none of this plan has changed. The Great Commission is a plan that is ours just as much as it was theirs 2000 years ago – that’s prescriptive. Descriptive is that it started for them in Jerusalem, and God doesn’t expect us to start in Jerusalem – see the difference?

We as individuals and as a church have a responsibility to shine Christ’s light into the place we have been put, and then head out from here. And we are to do this, like them, in the power of the Holy Spirit, without thought or worry about the opposition we will face.

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Now something interesting happens to institutions and individuals as we age; and that is we become more careful with risk taking. I’ve been going to the gym with my dad who is 69 and my brother who is 11 years younger than me. So there is some pretty big diversity in our abilities.

Don’t tell my brother this, but I compete against him when we lift. I try to lift as much as he can, and I love this challenge. But this is a battle I can’t win because the day after we lift I feel like I got run over by a bus and he is ready to go again.



My dad on the other hand is careful when he lifts weights. He doesn't let us push him farther than he wants to go because he's got nothing to prove and he knows that if he pulls something he is going to be out for the count.

There is physical wisdom to being careful with risk, but not spiritual wisdom. As a church Acts inspires and calls us to push the envelope in faith rather than hanging back and playing it safe. John Piper says the church needs to be a battleship not a cruise ship because we don't want to miss out on the power God wants to fill us with, or the purpose He has for us or the plan He has for our city. We want to be part of what God is doing to increase His glory and expand His kingdom here.