

JEREMIAH
BIBLE STUDY SERIES



ACTS

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

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Prepared by Peachtree Publishing Services



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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction to the Acts of the Apostles</i>	v
LESSON 1 The Day of Pentecost (<i>Acts 1:1–2:47</i>)	1
LESSON 2 Suffering in Jesus’ Name (<i>Acts 3:1–4:37</i>)	13
LESSON 3 Complete Commitment (<i>Acts 5:1–6:15</i>)	25
LESSON 4 Persecution and Trials (<i>Acts 7:1–8:40</i>)	37
LESSON 5 The Hunter Becomes the Hunted (<i>Acts 9:1–43</i>)	49
LESSON 6 The Gospel Comes to the Gentiles (<i>Acts 10:1–11:30</i>)	61
LESSON 7 The Power of Prayer (<i>Acts 12:1–14:28</i>)	73
LESSON 8 The Church in Conflict (<i>Acts 15:1–16:40</i>)	85
LESSON 9 A Courageous Life (<i>Acts 17:1–20:38</i>)	97
LESSON 10 Persevering for Christ (<i>Acts 21:1–23:35</i>)	109
LESSON 11 The Trials of Paul (<i>Acts 24:1–26:32</i>)	121
LESSON 12 The Voyage to Rome (<i>Acts 27:1–28:31</i>)	133
<i>Leader’s Guide</i>	145
<i>About Dr. David Jeremiah and Turning Point</i>	150
<i>Stay Connected to Dr. David Jeremiah</i>	151

INTRODUCTION TO

The Acts of the Apostles

“You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The vision was inspiring. The goal was lofty. How could the disciples act on these final words from Jesus and make them a reality? How could they undertake such an ambitious assignment to become the kind of witnesses that Jesus had called them to be? In the Acts of the Apostles, we discover the answer from those who literally wrote the book on the subject—and discover one of the greatest success stories in the Bible. We are inspired by their boldness and marvel at their adventures. Yet we also catch glimpses of their moments of weakness and doubt. We see major setbacks, poor decisions, and petty squabbles . . . and quickly come to realize these heroes of the faith—who spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and laid the groundwork for the church—were *very* much like us. We also come to realize the same Holy Spirit who guided them dwells within followers of Christ today. And we start to wonder what God might accomplish through our lives if we just gave Him the opportunity.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The writer of Acts does not identify himself by name. However, he refers to a “former account” and dedicates his book to a man named Theophilus (see 1:1). Scholars believe this former account refers to the Gospel of Luke—also dedicated to Theophilus (see Luke 1:3)—and given that the language, style, and structure of the two books are so similar, it is clear both books were penned by the same author. The early church fathers—including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen—all concurred

both Acts and the “former account” were written by Luke, a second-generation follower of Christ who was in a position to investigate the history of the early church and recount firsthand his travels with Paul. It is likely Luke wrote Acts when Paul was under house arrest in Rome awaiting his trial before Caesar, as Luke does not recount any further information after that point. This would place the date for writing sometime after AD 70, when the Gospel of Luke was composed, from the city of Rome.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

The persecution of Christians was intensifying at the time Luke wrote both his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Stephen and James had been executed, Peter and John had been arrested on many occasions, and Paul had faced imprisonment, false accusations, riots, beatings, and attempts on his life. Luke wrote his Gospel to record the acts of Jesus and provide an overview of what the apostles had seen and heard. Luke wrote Acts to provide a record of the acts of the apostles in the early church and to show how they sought to fulfill the Great Commission that had been given to them by Christ. Luke’s recap of the first three decades of the church would have encouraged believers to consider and take comfort from the brief but rich history of Christianity. His message was unmistakable: God had blessed the efforts of His people to spread the gospel . . . and would continue to do so, no matter who tried to stop them.

KEY THEMES

Several key themes are prominent in the book of Acts. The first theme is that *the apostles focused on evangelism*. Luke witnessed the most fertile period of outreach in the history of Christianity. Churches were planted near and far, and believers were added to the ranks daily. The excitement, and danger, surrounding this evangelism explosion was palpable. Acts follows the early church through its infancy to its emergence as an agent of change in the world.

A second theme is that *the apostles had experienced personal transformation*. The men and women who spread the gospel and established the early church were thoroughly changed individuals. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lives of the two central figures in the book. In the Acts narrative, Peter, the disciple best known in the Gospels for denying Jesus three times, embraces the role of fearless leader that Jesus envisioned for him. And Paul, the staunchest enemy of Christianity, becomes its greatest defender.

A third theme is that *the apostles faced opposition with boldness*. The early church faced two enemies: the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman Empire. The book of Acts contains story after story of the attempts of these two groups to suppress, undermine, and kill off the Christian faith by any means. The courage of individuals such as Stephen, James, Peter, John, Paul, Silas, Barnabas, and others in the face of such attack galvanized the church. The body of Christ became a force to be reckoned with by its enemies.

A fourth theme is that *the apostles relied on the power of the Holy Spirit*. The arrival of the Holy Spirit, as recorded in Acts 2, provides the catalyst for everything that follows. Peter, John, Paul, and the other disciples were able to perform miracles as part of their ministry through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul was guided in his missionary journeys by the Holy Spirit, who forbade him from entering certain places and warned him of the consequences of visiting others. The convicting, nurturing, empowering, and guiding work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers runs like a constant thread throughout the book of Acts.

KEY APPLICATIONS

Luke reveals how God places a premium on the *spread of the gospel* and blesses the efforts of those who seek to make disciples of all nations. He reveals how the *Holy Spirit* guides believers' words, gives them wisdom, and bolsters their courage. And he shows how God doesn't shield His followers from opposition but *accompanies them through it*—using trials and obstacles to sharpen their faith and make them more effective instruments for His work.

LESSON *one*

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

Acts 1:1–2:47

GETTING STARTED

How do you respond to times of waiting in your life? Why do you think God so often calls His followers to wait before He directs them to the next steps to take?

SETTING THE STAGE

The Gospel of Matthew records that after Jesus' death and resurrection, He gathered His followers together and instructed them to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have

commanded you” (28:19–20). In the Acts of the Apostles, we are given a glimpse into how these followers of Christ began to act on these words and spread the gospel “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (1:8).

Jesus knew, however, that His followers would not be able to carry out this great commission in their own strength. So, before He ascended into heaven, He told them “not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father” (1:4). Once Jesus had left the earth, these followers dutifully gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem . . . and waited. Little happened until the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit suddenly descended on them, inflaming their hearts and transforming them into bold witnesses of the gospel.

The power of the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost must have been both terrifying and exhilarating for those who experienced it. The sound of the rushing wind and the appearance of fire served as physical evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power among the believers. However, as we will see later in Acts (and in our own lives), the Holy Spirit often works quietly, subtly transforming the lives of believers without great fanfare.

It is clear from Jesus’ own words that God longs to share His Spirit with people, if only they will ask: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:13). It is also clear the Holy Spirit can transform the trajectory of our lives and enable us to glorify God.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Jesus Ascends to Heaven (Acts 1:4–14)

⁴ And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; ⁵ for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many

days from now.” ⁶ Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. ⁸ But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

⁹ Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, ¹¹ who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

1. John the Baptist had said, “I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). What promise concerning this baptism of the Holy Spirit was Jesus now giving (see Acts 1:7–8)?

2. What did Jesus' followers do after He ascended to heaven?

What evidence does Luke provide that they obeyed His final command to them (see verses 12–14)?

The Arrival of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–13)

¹ When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

⁵ And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. ⁷ Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." ¹² So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "Whatever could this mean?"

¹³ Others mocking said, "They are full of new wine."

3. What signs accompanied the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the upper room in Jerusalem (see verses 1–4)?

4. How did the people in Jerusalem respond when they heard the followers of Jesus speaking in their language (see verses 7–13)?

Peter's Sermon (Acts 2:14–24)

¹⁴ But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. ¹⁵ For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God,
That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your young men shall see visions,
Your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ And on My menservants and on My maidservants

I will pour out My Spirit in those days;

And they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ I will show wonders in heaven above

And signs in the earth beneath:

Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned into darkness,

And the moon into blood,

Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.

²¹ And it shall come to pass

That whoever calls on the name of the Lord

Shall be saved.'

²² "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—²³ Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; ²⁴ whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it."

5. Peter had been so fearful when Jesus was arrested that he denied even knowing his Lord three times (see Luke 22:54–62). How would you describe Peter at this point? What do you believe caused this radical change in him?

6. How did Peter link Joel's prophecy with the death and resurrection of Christ? What promise is given for those who call on the name of Jesus for salvation (see Acts 2:21–24)?

The Birth of the Church (Acts 2:36–47)

³⁶ “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

³⁸ Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”

⁴⁰ And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” ⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness

and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

7. Those who heard Peter’s message were “cut to the heart” and asked how they could be saved. What instructions and promise did Peter give them (see verses 38–39)?

8. How does Luke describe the birth of the church? What did this first fellowship of believers look like (see verses 41–47)?

REVIEWING THE STORY

The followers of Jesus gathered together in an upper room in obedience to His final command and waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on them with the sound of a rushing wind. Tongues of fire appeared above their heads, and they were suddenly able to speak in the languages of the foreigners who had also come

to Jerusalem. Peter seized the opportunity to deliver a sermon, in which he connected the Old Testament prophecies of Joel and the writings of David to the risen Jesus. Some 3,000 people responded to Peter's message. The early church grew not just in numbers but also in fellowship. Believers pooled their resources and shared what they had with each other.

9. What was the angels' message to the believers after they had watched Jesus ascend into heaven (see Acts 1:9–11)?

10. What did the believers do that both amazed and confused the multitudes (see Acts 2:5–7)?

11. What did Peter say that the people had done to their Messiah (see Acts 2:22–24)?

12. How did God reward the efforts of His servants to spread the gospel (see Acts 2:47)?

APPLYING THE MESSAGE

13. What caused you to respond to the message of the gospel and receive the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in your life?

14. How can you, like Peter, present the gospel message in a way that will open others to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit?

REFLECTING ON THE MEANING

On more than one occasion in the Bible, the filling of the Holy Spirit is mistaken for drunkenness. It is understandable. When people are drunk, they are no longer in control. They usually speak louder than they normally would and say and do things they would never typically say or do. When the Holy Spirit fills our lives as believers, the same thing happens—but in a good way. We begin to act supernaturally. We say and do godly things because we are empowered and controlled by the Spirit of God.

This should be the goal of everyone who is a Christian. We should desire that the Holy Spirit—who was poured out on the Day of Pentecost and is now living in our hearts—would be the controlling influence in our lives. Our prayer should be the same as Jesus spoke over His followers just before He left the earth:

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and
Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

God wants to work in our lives—to give us power and authority to boldly proclaim the message of the gospel. But we need to be willing for Him to work through us and use us as instruments of His grace. We must be open to saying, “Lord God, fill me. Control me with Your Spirit.” Furthermore, we cannot do this in a false way. We cannot say, “Lord, control me,” if we know in our hearts there is something we want to hang on to for ourselves. We have to totally release whatever it is to the Lord and say, “Lord God, I’m Yours. Come and fill me. Dictate everything that happens in my life. Make me sensitive to Your voice today. If someone comes across my path and I’m supposed to talk to them, tell me, and I’ll do it.”

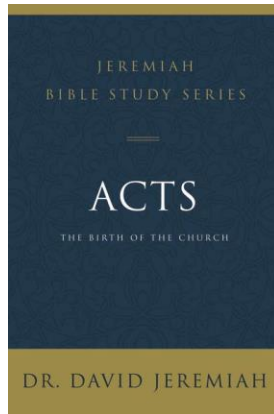
When we do this, we can expect an adventure! We may find ourselves doing things we never expected we would do—because God is *in* us and doing His work *through* us. This was the secret to the early church, and it’s the secret to any church or individual that God uses.

JOURNALING YOUR RESPONSE

What role does the Holy Spirit play in your life? How are you surrendering control to Him?

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God guides our witness and our walk.

In the book of Acts, we have a record of the most fertile period of outreach in the history of Christianity. Churches were planted near and far as Jesus' followers proclaimed the message of Christ. Luke's record in Acts reveals that God places a premium on the spread of the gospel. "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). He blesses our efforts to make disciples of all nations, one person at a time, and sends us His Spirit to guide our words, give us wisdom, and bolster our courage. We also learn that God is with us even during times of persecution and opposition . . . and He uses those times to sharpen us and make us effective instruments for His work.

The *Jeremiah Bible Study Series* captures Dr. David Jeremiah's forty-plus years of commitment to teaching the Word of God. In each study, he will help you understand what the Bible says, what it meant to the people at the time it was written, and what it means to you today. Along the way, you will gain insights into the text, identify key stories and themes, and be challenged to apply the truth you find in your life.

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