

Acts - Lights, Cameras, Action

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This morning we are going to begin a new series on the book of Acts and I've called the message this morning Acts - Lights, Cameras, Action.

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Because it really is an excellent book of the bible that tells movie like detail the birth and expansion of the early church.

The year was around AD33 and Jesus had not long been crucified and reportedly had risen from the dead.

There were a significant number people who were testifying that they had seen him alive, (over 500 in total) and at least one of them who had physically touched him.

The Romans and the Jews were hoping that this Jesus who they crucified as a blasphemer and lawbreaker would just go away and fade into a distant memory with his followers disbanding and returning to their synagogues.

But what was about to take place at the celebration of Pentecost in Jerusalem that year was to forever change the world as they knew it.

And this begins the story of the book of Acts.

A book that tells a story that God himself is narrating through the lives of the first believers in Jesus.

We are going to begin working our way slowly through the book of Acts and from this will get a glimpse of the birth of the church and the advancement of the Kingdom of God.

Acts is one of the most exciting books for believers to read because in essence it describes our spiritual ancestors, our first parents in the faith.

Many people spend countless hours working their way through historical records tracing their family history, contacting people all over the world and scouring sources of information regarding their heritage.

For us as believers the work has been done by the Holy Spirit having given us an account of our spiritual family in Acts.

So, this morning the first thing I need to do in beginning this series is to provide an overview before we start getting into the specifics.

What we are going to see in the book of Acts is in essence about the Acts that were done by God through men and women that resulted in a forward movement that saw the spread of the gospel take place all across the world.

From Jerusalem to Rome, from the capital of the Jewish world to the capital of the Gentile world.

If there is one overriding theme from the book of acts - it is this incredible sense of the forward movement of the believers taking a message that transformed people, cities, regions, and essentially the whole world of that time.

Now, could you please do me a favour and hold together with your thumb and index finger the book of Acts in your bibles - all 28 chapters.

It is often an easy mistake to make that when reading the book of Acts that all of the events found in it - took place in a couple of years, because one event rolls easily into another and it gives the appearance of this history taking place in rapid succession.

But from Acts 1 to Acts 28 a period of approximately 25 years had elapsed. On one hand that may seem like a long time when you read through the book, but when you consider what was accomplished by God during this time it is nothing short of miraculous to the point where even in the book of Acts itself we have this description that the disciples were turning the world upside down.

Acts 17:1-6

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

3 explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

5 But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

6 And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also

What these men were proclaiming and reasoning with them was the gospel or good news that the promised messiah was here and that he was not only for the Jews, but for the whole world.

This is the message about Jesus that must be declared so that faith can come by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.

When a person receives this gift of faith a dramatic shift takes place in their spirit by which a new, fresh burst of God life is given to them causing them to be born again.

Of this experience Jesus said that no-one could neither see nor enter the Kingdom of God without being born again.

Acts tells this story not for just one or two individuals but for the many, many individuals who were ushered into the Kingdom of God via the new birth. Who were connected relationally with each other through the regular assembling of themselves together for prayer, worship, bible teaching, spiritual gift operation, fellowship.

These assemblies were not left on their own but were also connected relationally to teams of Apostles who either got the churches started or through visits and letters continued to encourage the churches. It was not individual churches just doing their thing, but rather individual churches connected to God's mission in the world through these teams - the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

Overview of Acts.

So, let's take a brief overview of Acts. Let's get up in our helicopter and look down to get a bird's eye view.

There are a number of ways that Acts can be viewed and here a few examples.

From the ESV study bible the introduction to Acts says this:

Following the story line becomes easy when one realizes that the book of Acts is structured on a cyclic principle in which a common pattern keeps getting

repeated: (1) Christian leaders arise and preach the gospel; (2) listeners are converted and added to the church; (3) opponents (often Jewish but sometimes Gentile) begin to persecute the Christian leaders; and (4) God intervenes to rescue the leaders or otherwise protect the church. While this pattern is most obvious in the first half of the book, it extends in modified form to the journeys of Paul, whose repeated buffetings are followed by the expansion of the church.

The book of Acts is noteworthy for its narrative qualities. It is the report of an adventure, replete with arrests, imprisonments, beatings, riots, narrow escapes, a resurrection from death, a shipwreck, trial scenes, and rescues.

In the book, *How to read the bible for all its worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart they also have provide a couple of different overviews.

The first one they mention is that Acts is often divided by Luke's interest in Peter that covers chapters 1-12 and his interest in Paul chapters 13-28.

The next one they mention is the geographical expansion from Jerusalem to Rome as found in Acts 1:8

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

And the divisions of this geographical expansion are:

- Jerusalem, chapters 1-7
- Samaria and Judea, chapters 8-10
- The ends of the earth, chapters 11-28

But the one I find interesting is their overview based on Luke's brief summary statements found at Acts 6:7, Acts 9:31, Acts 12:24, Acts 16:4 and Acts 19:20.

And they have this to say about those divisions:

In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction of some kind. On the basis of this clue, Acts can be seen to be composed of six sections or panels that give the narrative a continual forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem, with Peter as its leading

figure, toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal.

Once Paul reaches Rome, where he once again turns to the Gentiles because they will listen (Acts 28:28), the narrative comes to an end.

Now what does that all mean to us 2000 years on?

For us as believers the first thing to recognise is that God is not finished in writing his story and while Acts may have finished at chapter 28, chapters 29 onwards are being written by the lives of men, women and kids down through the ages to our present day and through us even now.

So how are we to live as Acts 29 onwards people?

First, the thing that we notice not only in Acts but in the whole bible is that God is the only one who never disappears from the story.

Men come and go, but it is God who is knitting the story together through people down through history as it says in Acts 17:26

Acts 17:26

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place

We are here by no sheer accident or luck. God has a plan and each one of us has a part to play in that plan - what's yours?

Second, just as in the Acts, it was in fact the Acts of God through the apostles and it is no different for us today.

They were never out to make a name for themselves but rather to make his name great and God was pleased to work through them.

Are we prepared to make his name great and to allow God to do the same in and through us?

And finally because we are only on earth for a very brief period time what should our response to be toward God and others. Acts 13:36 has this to say.

Acts 13:36a

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers

Will we be like David and serve the purpose of God in our own generation or will we succumb to the push of the world to serve ourselves only and to forget about the rest.

Will our mantra be like that of the world's "we are here for a good time not a long time"?

Or will they say of us that he/she served the purpose of God in their own generation by following Jesus wherever and however he was to lead and as a result touched the lives of many people?

The great danger we face as believers is trying to figure out where we may end up in God and second guessing him either to run ahead or to run away, rather than just enjoying him each day and letting him tell his story through our lives.

Which one will you be?

Let's pray.