

# **FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS:**

## **A LOOK AT THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**

### **Section 1. Acts Chapter 1**

The Acts of the Apostles begins where St. Luke's Gospel finishes. It is Volume 2 of St. Luke's writing, outlining the growth of the church from the time that Jesus completes his work on earth, until the church is firmly established in Rome, and across the Empire.

The first chapter of the book deals with the transitional phase between these two epochs. It begins in the final days before the Ascension of Jesus, with him giving his disciples their final instructions. The rest of the book describes how the early Christians applied this teaching and put it into practice. Hence, here is a book based around 'Following Instructions'.

In chapter 1, we see the final departure of Jesus on Ascension Day, his final instructions and promise to the disciples and the finding of a replacement to become one of the Twelve Apostles, to replace Judas Iscariot.

We can learn a number of lessons from this chapter.

- There is final evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. 'He gave ample proof that he was alive'. (v.3)
- The disciples are taught to be patient. They must wait in Jerusalem for the gift to be bestowed upon them. God gives His gifts in His own good time.
- They are given the promise of the Holy Spirit. They will receive 'power' when the Spirit comes upon them. This power will enable them to fulfil their vocation as God's people.
- They are instructed to be witnesses to their faith. Significantly, this is a direct command, 'You will be my witnesses'. It is our calling, as God's people, to witness to our faith.
- We are assured that Jesus will, one day return to earth. Hence we are given the parameters of the era in which we live. Time is finite. We live in the Apostolic age – the age between the Ascension and the return of Christ, the age in which God gives us work to do, 'in the power of the Spirit'.
- We see the importance of prayer and unity within the group of followers.

Like those first disciples, the call for us is not to stand gazing up at the sky, day dreaming, but to get on with the task of being God's people.

The story of the choosing of Matthias to replace Judas seems strange to us. Is it really suggesting that the casting of lots is an appropriate way to discern God's will? There is more to this incident. To begin, Peter identified the need. The twelve disciples have a position of leadership within the community. Judas is no longer part of that group, and a replacement for him must be found. Peter used Scripture to assess the situation, 'Let his charge be given to another.' (Psalm 109:8). He also applied common sense – the new member of the Twelve should be one of those who knew Jesus well, with them from the beginning, and a witness to the Resurrection, and be well respected. They prayed together, for discernment, and only in this context did they leave the final choice to God – by casting lots – a method of discerning God's will which was sanctioned in the Old Testament, but which we never see again after the coming of the Spirit. St. John Chrysostom writes 'for the Spirit was not yet sent.'

So we see various elements at work in discerning God's will: identify the need; use of Scripture; common sense; prayer; seeking to hear God's voice. Here are some useful guidelines for us to apply to our own attempts to discover God's will.

By the end of chapter 1, the disciples are waiting, with eager anticipation, for the promised Spirit to come.

## Section 2. Acts 2: 1 – 41

The story of the Day of Pentecost must surely be the most well read and best known sections in the whole of the Acts of Apostles. It tells the story of how the Holy Spirit was given to the first disciples and we then hear Peter's amazing sermon which resulted in the conversion of 3000 people.

The word 'Pentecost' has become so much a part of the Christian story, and is so familiar to us that we can easily forget that it first and foremost refers to a Jewish festival. The Feast of Pentecost is a celebration of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Every year it is celebrated fifty days after Passover – the festival that marks the exodus from Egypt.

And it was no accident that God should use the Feast of Pentecost as the occasion upon which He gave the Holy Spirit to the disciples. The gift of the Spirit represents a new kind of law, not written on tablets of stone, but on the flesh of human hearts: no longer a law of strict 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not's', but the law of the Spirit - the law of love, which challenges us to consider our attitudes and behaviour. This law is about more than mere obedience to the letter of the law, but instead focuses upon our relationship with God. Quite literally, it challenges us to consider the *spirit* of the law, not just the *letter* of the law.

So what is significant about this story for us?

- It is the final act of the saving ministry of Jesus. He lived, died, rose again, ascended on high, and now he sends His Spirit to be with His people so that they may become the Body of Christ, continuing His work in the world. Pentecost marks a new beginning, and can be seen as the actual 'birth' event of the church.
- Pentecost brought to the apostles the authority they needed for their new role. Christ had appointed them to be His witnesses, and now He gives the Spirit in order that they may have the strength, courage and wisdom to fulfill this responsibility.
- Pentecost was the inauguration of a new era of the Spirit. His coming on this occasion was clearly unique, but from now on, all people everywhere can benefit from this ministry. We too, as we receive the Spirit into our lives, can be equipped to be witnesses.
- The Day of Pentecost can be seen as the first revival – an occasion when there was an unusual visit from God, in which a whole community was overwhelmed by His presence.

## THE DAY OF PENTECOST            2: 1 - 13

We see three phenomena that accompanied the gift of the Spirit:

- A sound like violent, blowing wind
- Tongues of fire
- The disciples speaking in other languages.

These represent: **power, purity, and universality.**

The power of the wind is unseen, yet it is a mighty force.

Fire can be seen as a cleansing agent – it burns away impurities.

The gift of tongues represents that the gospel is for all people, of all nations.

What is especially significant about speaking in tongues?

Pentecost is the opposite of the story of the tower of Babel. The people in Babel are split apart by different languages, now we read of people with different languages coming together, hearing Peter speak to them in a way that they can understand. He says that God is the answer to all our deepest needs. All the wisdom and knowledge of humanity can't offer the answers to the problems of life, just as all the kings horses and all the kings men can't put Humpty together again. We need more than human wisdom. True meaning in life is not about being clever - it's about discovering God, and allowing God to fill us with His Spirit, and meet us at our deepest points of need.

## PETER'S SERMON                    2: 14 – 41

In his first great sermon, Peter sets the events of the Day of Pentecost in the context of the Old Testament. He quotes the prophet Joel to show how the Old Covenant points the way forward for the coming of the Spirit.

Note the six stages of the story of Jesus to which Peter draws attention.

- His life and ministry. (2:22) He was accredited by God through: miracles, (God's power breaking in to the human history); wonders (Events intended to produce astonishment) signs (occurrences intended to signify spiritual truth)
- His death. (2:23) Through Christ's death we see God's saving purpose being worked out. It is brought about by God's set purpose, and because of the actions of wicked men. Peter offers us the first ever attempt to seek to explain the meaning of Christ's death in a sermon.
- His resurrection (2: 24 – 32) 'It was impossible for death to keep its hold'. Peter confirms the truth of the resurrection by looking back to David.
- His exultation (2: 33 – 36) From his position of supreme honour and absolute power, Jesus can now pour out the Spirit on His followers.
- His salvation (2: 37 – 39) The hearers were 'cut to the heart', and totally convicted of sin. Repentance is followed by two free gifts: forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift is for all who respond.
- His new community (2: 40 –41) Large numbers accepted the message, and were baptised.

The challenge that we must consider is, how can we present this gospel message for our world, today? Like those first disciples, we live in an age in which the good news of the gospel is not automatically received by all who hear it, and yet there is widespread spiritual hunger all around us.

The events in the gospels are the foundational facts of our faith - especially the cross and resurrection. We are called to consider carefully how best we can present them to the world. Like the first disciples, we don't preach in a vacuum. The OT prophets pointed towards the coming of the Messiah. Peter testified to the truth that he had seen and heard. We too have the witness of the reality of Christ in our own hearts.

We also have the promises of the gospel to share. Not only do we have what Jesus did, but what he offers as a result: forgiveness, the gift of new life and the promise of the Holy Spirit – God's own Spirit, to come and live inside us. The Spirit offers us freedom from guilt, judgment and self-centredness; freedom to be the people who God wants us to be.

But there is a condition: 'repent, and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ'. Baptism is the outward sign of our response to God. Through repentance and faith, we change our allegiance and are transferred into the community of Christ.

Peter spoke with such authority that no fewer than 3000 of his hearers responded and believed his message. The church was born in a dramatic way!

## Section 3. Acts 2: 42 – 47

Coming straight after the Day of Pentecost, this week's small section offers us some useful insights into the life of the early Christians. The story so far has rushed on at lightning speed. We, the readers, as much as the apostles in the story need a little time to draw breathe. No plant can continue to grow unless it puts down roots. Now we see a consolidation period.

After the amazing events of Pentecost, the church must take stock, find a way of assimilating its new members and ensuring that the fragile new faith of the first converts is deepened and consolidated. We see four elements:

- teaching the faith
- breaking bread together
- sharing in fellowship
- prayer

As a result of all this, many miraculous signs were done. There was a deep sense of unity and friendship. Everything was held in common, and the less well-off were cared for. The church was an attractive community to belong to. The four elements of its common life still provide the basis for our corporate life today.

We too need to meet together to learn and grow in our faith.

We too are called to share together in the breaking of bread. Jesus himself commanded us to do this as a way of remembering what he has done for us. Here we not only learn our faith, but allow it to speak into our hearts.

We too are called to share together in unity and fellowship. As we provide a secure sense of belonging, in a loving, non-judgmental environment, we will attract more members.

We too are called to pray. This is our spiritual life-line. As we pray we put ourselves at God's disposal, in line with His plans.

And the result? Day by day, the Lord added to their number. We must take heart. At a time when we hear so much about church decline, here we see a picture of a living, growing church. We are given a template for success. We are challenged to follow this model:

- a learning church
- a loving church
- a worshipping church
- an evangelistic church

These six verses offer a respite from the action, yet they are vitally important. Action is not just about new initiatives – it is about living out our faith in practical ways.

This section concludes with a refrain which appears throughout the book, rather like the chorus of a popular hymn which is repeated between each verse: 'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved'.

## Section 4. Acts 3: 1 – 26

As We turn to chapter 3 of Acts, we move out of the comfort zone. The stories in chapter 2 are familiar. We hear them read aloud at least once every year as we marvel at the story of the beginning of the church and the utter dedication of its first members.

Now we move to the story of Peter's first miracle: the healing of the lame man.

Here is the story of a man who has been crippled since birth. Every day his friends carried him up to the temple gate where he could sit and ask for money from the passing crowds. Peter and John must have seen him many times before. But on this occasion, the man got more than he was bargaining for! He asked them for some money, expecting a few small coins to be dropped into his pot. Instead, Peter looked at him and said, 'I have no silver or gold, but I will give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk.'

Peter sets the scene for the rest of the story. Whatever is done in this story, it is all done in the name of Jesus Christ. Peter is merely the agent of the healing. God is its author. This miracle reminds us again that it is only as we fix our attention upon Jesus that things will happen. There is power in the name of Jesus Christ.

The location of the miracle is also significant. St. Luke's Gospel finishes with the disciples worshipping God *in* the Temple. This healing takes place *outside* the Temple. For centuries, the Temple has been the solid symbol of God's presence amongst His people. Now, the focus of God's work is moving, out of the Temple, into the city. God's home is now amongst His people, wherever they may be.

This healing was unexpected, instantaneous, and complete. In many respects this miracle offers a perfect picture of the effect of the gospel:

- The man could not help himself (we cannot save ourselves)
- The man could not be helped by what the world had to offer (silver and gold)
- It was only in the name of Christ that He could be healed
- The first step was to look to the Saviour and respond to His invitation
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The cripple who sat outside the Temple became a worshipper who entered into the community of God's people.

The miracle caused such a stir that it prompted Peter's second sermon. As with his first sermon, it is totally Christ centred. He uses scripture to demonstrate the truth of his message: Moses, Samuel and Abraham all foresaw the time of Christ.

Peter outlines the blessings that result from repentance and turning to God.

- Your sin will be wiped out. The word used here means to erase . . . especially in terms of writing. In other words, when we turn to Christ the record of our past is erased. The debt we have incurred is gone. It is like a mortgage being burned or a bank note being ripped up. The debt is cancelled.
- "Times of refreshing will come from the Lord". This is just the opposite of what most people think. Most people seem to resist trusting Christ because they think they will no longer be able to have any "fun". They would become a Christian but "they want to have a little fun" first. But when we turn to Christ we find love, direction, purpose, strength, and hope for living. And most of all, we find peace with God that leads to joy. Turning to Jesus is not a matter of missing out on life . . . it is finding it.

- We take one step closer towards a hope and glory in our future that we cannot yet begin to imagine. This is the message of the gospel. What Peter offered the lame man was much better than gold. He not only offered him the ability to walk . . . He offered him eternal life through Christ.

This message, that

And in this world that clamours after riches and power, the gospel offers us the same thing: a new beginning and a secure tomorrow. May God open our ears so we may hear and believe, so that our sin might be erased and the freshness of God's grace might sweep over us and lead us home.

This message, that brought healing to the crippled man, and was offered to the crowd outside the temple, is the same gospel message that is offered to us today. In the name of Jesus, we too can be healed and we too receive the call to repent and turn to God.

## Section 5. Acts 4: 1 - 31

There are consequences to our actions. Chapter 3 tells the story of the healing of the lame man, and Peter's bold proclamation to the crowd. Chapter 4 continues the narrative, as we discover how the Jewish authorities reacted to Peter and John. They didn't like what they saw, didn't like this bold assertion that Jesus, whom they had crucified was not just alive and well, but that his following was growing at an alarming rate, and his followers were performing miracles in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter and John are arrested and brought before the high priest to give account for themselves. 'By what power or by what name do you do this?' they were asked.

Names have influence. Sometimes a person will say, 'Just mention my name, and you will be accepted.' For the Jews in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, names had a far greater significance than we give them. Peter was not just name-dropping, he was asserting the God-given power that was freely available to all of Christ's followers. Peter must have remembered Jesus saying, *'I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:12)* The name of Jesus carries a power, so when Peter asserts that the lame man has been healed by the name of Jesus, it is a clear affront to the leaders who had caused Jesus to be crucified. Peter then quotes from the Book of Psalms (118:22), using their own scriptures against them, before broadening his argument out to show that the name of Jesus is the only one through which salvation may be found.

Here we have one of the most unambiguous statements in the whole of scripture concerning the uniqueness of Jesus. The healing has come in the name of Jesus, who was crucified, yet who God raised from the dead, and is now the only name by which we can be given salvation.

The authorities simply couldn't answer Peter's argument, so they rather tamely let him go, after instructing him not to preach this new doctrine again. Peter, with great boldness, challenges them. He fears God more than he fears man. *'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'* (19-20). The lesson for us is clear – put God first. Do what God tells you and do not be swayed by human reasoning. Salvation is in the name of Jesus, and no other. St. John records Jesus own saying, *'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No-one comes to the Father except by me.'* (John 14:6)

Such is the challenge that we face: fear God, not man. Proclaim the truth of the Gospel.

It's impossible to read this chapter without being impressed by the unity and devotion of the early Christians. They prayed, they served, they suffered together. In verse 31, we read again that they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word with boldness.

## Section 6. Acts 4: 32 – 5: 42

### ***'We must obey God rather than men.'* (5:29)**

If there's one verse which sums up Christian discipleship, it must be this one. If we believe that we are made by God, that we have been put on earth by God for a reason, and that ultimately, we will be answerable to Him for the way that live our lives here on earth, then it surely follows that our prime responsibility is to obey God, rather than worry about the latest human fashion.

Peter and the apostles had no option but to proclaim the truth of Jesus crucified and risen again, despite the opposition of the authorities, despite even the threat of death. In fact we even learn that they left the Sanhedrin rejoicing, because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the sake of their faith.

The end of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of Acts provide some interesting insights into the life of the early church. The scene is still set in Jerusalem. The previous section ended with the release of Peter and John following their first arrest, with the believers united in prayer. Now we learn more about the life of the church.

Chapter 4:32 – 35 is a passage that is remarkably similar to the last few verses of chapter 2. It speaks about the common life of the believers. They were completely one in heart and mind, sharing with each other, as they had need. Luke paints a utopian picture – there were no needy persons amongst them.

Next, we meet Barnabas for the first time. His name means 'Son of Encouragement' and he appears to have been given this name because that is precisely what he was. We badly need encouragement within the fellowship of the church. It is so easy to find fault, to complain when things aren't precisely as we would like them to be, to criticise and grumble. The story of Barnabas reminds us just how important a word of encouragement can be. It is a much needed ministry within the church! We will meet Barnabas in later stories.

Chapter 5 begins with the strange story of Ananias and Sapphira. Their crime is not that they wanted to keep the proceeds from their sale of property for themselves – there was no compulsion upon anyone to give to the common purse - rather their crime was that they lied about the money. They gave a part and pretended that it was the whole. Their sin is hypocrisy. *'They wanted the credit and the prestige for sacrificial generosity, without the inconvenience of it.'* (John Stott: *The Message of Acts*). This episode reminds us of the importance of keeping a clear conscience before God and man. As Christians, we must live lives of absolute integrity. We cannot lie to God.

We then read of a further group of healing miracles (5:12 -16), which so impressed the crowds that still more people came to faith. We also have the first account of people coming into Jerusalem from the surrounding towns to meet them. The apostles' reputation was growing.

But alongside this terrific growth, the threat of persecution was always present (5:17-42). The apostles are arrested, but are miraculously released, and continue with their preaching. Arrested again, and given orders to keep quiet, we come to Peter's great assertion that he simply cannot stop preaching. Nothing that the Jewish authorities do will prevent him from speaking out. His reason is clear: he fears God more than anything that man can do to him. The authorities are nonplussed: they want to kill him, but fear reprisals from the crowd. So we come to the Pharisee Gamaliel, who puts some common sense into the argument. His solution is simple - leave the apostles alone. If what they say is of human origin, then it will fail. If, however, it is really coming from God, then it will never be stopped, because we cannot fight against God.

Gamaliel's speech convinced them. Yet they still had the apostles flogged. Even this did not deter them. We read that they 'rejoiced because they had been found worthy of suffering for the sake of the Name' (42). And with their bodies badly bruised and lacerated, they continued to preach boldly.

We have now witnessed the first two waves of persecution against the early church. Such persecution increased in intensity over the next three centuries, yet the church never lost heart, and continued to grow. The lesson is clear for us. Persecution has always been a part of the Christian story. We too must expect to suffer for the sake of the gospel. In many parts of the world today, persecution is the norm for members of the church. Jesus himself warns that the way will not always be easy. *'Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'* (Matthew 5:10) But we can take heart: God will always have the last word. We, like Peter and his colleagues, are challenged to put our absolute trust in God, and not to worry about what man can do to us.

## Section 7. Acts 6: 1 - 7

### Keeping your eye on the ball

I've recently had the privilege of spending a day at Lord's Cricket Ground, watching a Test Match. As a fast bowler comes hurtling in and delivers the ball, it's very difficult to see what's actually going on. It all happens so quickly. I can just imagine what would happen if I was out there, facing the world's fastest bowlers!

Of course, if you're going to score runs, the only way is to keep your eye firmly on the ball and make sure that you hit it, as far as possible, as far away from the surrounding fielders as you possibly can. Lose sight of the ball, and you don't stand much chance.

Something similar is going on in this short section of Acts. We are now at the end of the first main section of the book. In the next passage, the arrest of Stephen, the scene will be set for the advance of the Gospel out of Jerusalem. But first, we are told about further problems that the young church was facing in Jerusalem.

In chapter 5, the story of Ananias and Sapphira has highlighted the problem of moral integrity - an attack upon moral values within the church. Their sin is not keeping money back, but lying about it and thus displaying hypocrisy. This is followed by further accounts of persecution from the authorities - physical attack from outside, now we encounter a third problem to face the church - distraction. The apostles are tempted to take their eyes off the ball!

Chapter six begins with an argument raging: 'It's not fair! Why are they being treated differently to us?'

The church has grown, at an alarming rate. There are different groups within the church. The Greek speaking Jews are complaining that their widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, by the Hebrew speaking Jews. Sound familiar? It's the problem of a growing church: different groups, different expectations, different requirements. The danger in all this is that the apostles will get distracted from their proper task. Rather than proclaiming the Word of God, they will end up as social administrators, sorting out the daily life of the church.

It's a similar situation to the one faced by Moses in Exodus 18 - he couldn't do it all. His father in law advised him to appoint officials to oversee the people, leaving him free to be the people's representative before God.

Now the apostles must be given a similar sort of freedom. The daily distribution of food to the widows is an important issue. Twice thus far we have read about the importance of mutual sharing and support in the young church. Faith must be lived out in practical ways. But the apostles haven't got the time to sort it all out. In a growing church, their task is to preach the word of God, and bring others to faith.

How could the church ensure that the apostles were left free to do their job?

A sensible solution was found - the appointment of seven deacons to oversee the growing practical needs of the church, thus freeing up the apostles to get on with their proper job of preaching and proclaiming the gospel. Here we see the first practical example of differing gifts being used within the body of Christ. The apostles and the deacons had different responsibilities, each was essential, and together they built up the Church.

The Greek word, *deacon*, literally means *servant*, and is an important reminder to us that *servanthood* lies at the heart of Christian leadership.

This section concludes by telling us that the word of God spread. The church in Jerusalem increased rapidly.