

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS





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AND YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES, TELLING PEOPLE ABOUT ME EVERYWHERE - IN JERUSALEM, THROUGHOUT JUDEA, IN SAMARIA, AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH. ACTS 1:10-11

WEEK ONE: WHAT NOW?

At the end of His time on earth. Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of His Father and to act as our mediator But He didn't leave us on our own He left us with three sources. of help for walking as He walked: His life example, His Word as recorded by His followers, and the Holy Spirit. Through these three means, we have everything we need to live as He has called us. In fact, 2 Peter 1:3 says, "By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence."

So, we have everything we need to live godly lives and to extend His kingdom, but don't we often do exactly what the apostles did? They



stood still, looking up into the sky, waiting for Jesus to come back, forgetting that He just gave them a command: to be His witnesses everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout



Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Only after two white-robed men (angels, perhaps) appeared with an admonishment did the apostles appear to come to their senses and begin to wait for Jesus' promised gift: the Holy Spirit. More than likely, they felt a sense of loss, bewilderment, and perhaps, fear. The One who had led them, who taught them what eternal life means, who was the Son of God, had gone back into heaven, and now, they had new lessons to learn and a message to proclaim.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. When you read this passage, what does it say about Jesus' character and how He felt about His apostles? Do you think He feels the same way about you?

2. Jesus gave the apostles a mission, something that was incredibly dear to His heart that He entrusted to those He loved. That same mission belongs to us today. How are you being a witness for God in your daily life and helping bring the gospel to the ends of the earth?

3. Is there anything in your life that is holding you back from fully engaging in sharing the gospel with those around you? What will you do this week to begin loosening the enemy's grip on your life so that you can do all that God has called you to do? THEN, LIKE A WILDFIRE, THE HOLY SPIRIT SPREAD THROUGH THEIR RANKS. ACTS 2:1-13

WEEK TWO: JOIN US IN THE WIND

Jesus has just ascended into the heavens, and the Holy Spirit begins to throw a dramatic, creative party-not a tea party (although I love those) but a loud and confusing party that draws the attention of the neighborhood. It is Pentecost, the fiftieth day after Passover, a festival of first fruits. Fifty days after the first Passover, the law came to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Jesus has ascended but is "coming down again, not with a written law carved on tablets of stone, but with the dynamic energy of the law, designed to be written on human hearts."* God has come to this place at Pentecost in a loud voice, a voice heard by all in their own specific language.

The Holy Spirit was launching a movement, a radical movement full of life and redemption to reach all the peoples of the world. N.T. Wright says, "When it comes to Pentecost it's far more important that you are out in the wind, letting it sweep through your life, your heart, your imagination, your powers of speech, and transform you from a listless or lifeless believer into someone whose heart is on fire with the love of God."*





Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. What images come to mind when you hear the word Pentecost or even Pentecostal?

2. What is happening in your life right now that does not need translating in order to convey the love of Jesus? Where have you seen others convey the love of Jesus to you in ways that did not need translation or possibly didn't even need words?

3. Reread that last quote from N.T. Wright and then answer: Are you out in the wind? Can you feel it?

THE PROMISE IS FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN AND FOR ALL WHO ARE FAR OFF. ACTS 2:14-21

WEEK THREE: WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

At the time of Pentecost, God's chosen people had been waiting for two thousand years in the midst of prophecies and prophets and had lived every part of their lives looking forward to the Messiah and the hope that the Messiah would offer. Peter's opening remarks at this momentous and life-changing Pentecost would be about prophecies that they were waiting to be fulfilled.

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on every kind of people Your sons will prophesy Also your daughters."

They were looking for the promise that "heaven and earth would be joined together in the great coming renewal of things."* God's promise was not just heaven, an afterlife, but ever-present salvation, a rescue from



the darkness and a call to new life. As you can see from Peter's opening remarks, our God is inclusive and wants to use all to bring salvation to all. "God's spirit has been poured out upon a lot of people all at once. There is no discrimination between slaves and free, male and female, young and old. They are all marked out, side by side, as the nucleus of God's true people."* So, take yourself to Pentecost, be baptized, be covered in the waters of the kingdom (of Jesus, the Messiah), and join the radical movement.



Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. The Jews were waiting for prophecies to be fulfilled. What are we waiting for in our time?

2. Pentecost shook those present to the core of their beings and many jumped at the chance to change their lives. What parts of society, or culture, or the church need to be shaken to the core in order to bring about change?

3. How are we as God's people being inclusive, as God is inclusive, and where are we not exhibiting inclusivity?

4. How can we still experience (or feel) the waters of baptism daily? How and where do we find the spaces to remind ourselves that we are constantly swimming in those waters?

CONTINUING DAILY WITH ONE ACCORD... ACTS 2:43-47

WEEK FOUR: THE CHURCH FAMILY

As the church begins, it embraces the family dynamic. The people see each other daily, eat together, and praise God together. They were even happy to share their possessions. N.T. Wright says, "The breadwinners in the household don't see the money they bring in as 'theirs' rather than belonging to the whole household. That's part of what it means to be a family."* The bond among members was strong enough to resemble a true family.

We've heard the term "church family" in reference to the love a congregation is supposed to have toward its members. In a world of broken people and broken families, some view the church as their only family, while others find themselves disappointed with the lack of closeness they feel with the church. How can we get back to a church where "we stop



clinging on to everything we can get and start sharing it, giving it away, celebrating God's generosity by being generous ourselves"?*



Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. What ways has the church reached out to you as a member of the family? In what ways have you reached out to others in the church as family members?

2. How does your experience with family affect the way you view your church family?

3. What are you clinging to that is keeping you from engaging in a family relationship with the church? How can you share it with your church family?

WHY HAVE YOU CONCEIVED THIS THING IN YOUR HEART? YOU HAVE NOT LIED TO MEN BUT TO GOD. ACTS 5:1-11

WEEK FIVE: HOLDING BACK

Not long after the communal family of the church is formed, sin enters and leads people into temptation. Ananias and Sapphira make a conscious choice to withhold part of their proceeds from



the community, and their deception doesn't last long. Peter immediately confronts Ananias, and he calls Sapphira's bluff soon after. Although the couple worked together to solidify their lie, they could not deceive the Holy Spirit. The lies directly cost them their lives, communicating just how strongly God feels about lying.

We lie to ourselves and each other all the time. We even lie to ourselves about how God feels about lying. N.T. Wright says that "the real, deep-level

problem about lying is that it misuses, or abuses, the highest faculty we possess: the gift of expressing in clear speech the reality of who we are, what we think, and how we feel."* When we continually say "I'm fine" or keep our communities from knowing the reality of who we are, we are abusing the beautiful gift of expression that allows us to grow closer to Christ. When we truly believe that God overlooks the well-meaning lies that we tell, Peter asks, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" Our lies indicate our lack of trust in the Lord

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. Is there an appropriate time for Christians to lie? Should lying play a role in the lives of Christians?

2. How do lies (to ourselves and others) affect the lives of those around us?

3. What lies are you telling yourself or others? How can you work to eliminate those lies from your life?

SELECT SEVEN WHO ARE WELL RESPECTED AND ARE FULL OF THE SPIRIT AND WISDOM. ACTS 6:1-7

WEEK SIX: ENGAGING GOD'S MENTALITY

When we become a part of God's family, we have to learn how to do life differently. Jesus doesn't call us to go with the flow. In fact, He often asks us to do the opposite. He isn't interested in our comfort level, and many times, He asks us to do something that might not make sense. After all. He calls us to pick up our cross, to join Him in His sufferings, and to live as He lived, fully committed to the will of His Father. On our own, living as Jesus lived is impossible, which is why the Holy Spirit is one of His greatest gifts to us. An advocate, a comforter, a teacher – with us through every day of our lives, guiding and directing us as much as we will allow Him. In this passage, God's new bride – the church – had a hard time seeing itself as one body. The Hebrew-speaking people were neglecting the Greekspeaking widows by not giving them rations equal to that of the Hebrewspeaking widows. They still had an

"us" and "them" mentality rather than God's mentality: You are all my children, and I love vou. Love one another. When the apostles stepped in to deal with the situation, they called for men "filled with the Holv



Spirit" to ensure that all widows were taken care of fairly and equally. This peaceful resolution, made with God and His Spirit at the heart, caused God's message to spread and His followers to increase.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. What does this passage mean for you as an individual? In what ways do you view others through an "us/them" lens? For example, do you actively engage with people at church who are of a different demographic (age, status, race, phase of life, etc.) than you, or do you see them as too different from you to successfully engage with? Think of other ways that we segment each other into groups rather than living as one church.

2. Why do you think that God's message spread after the situation with the widows was resolved? What do you think non-Christians saw in the situation that made following Christ so appealing?

3. You are a part of God's church – an important part. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says that we are all parts of just one body – some an eye, some an ear, and so on. What can you do in a practical way today to ensure that you are being a part of the body of Christ by treating others fairly and spreading the message of God?

MAY YOUR SILVER PERISH WITH YOU, BECAUSE YOU THOUGHT YOU COULD OBTAIN GOD'S GIFT WITH MONEY! ACTS 8:5-24

WEEK SEVEN: NEW CHALLENGES

Up to this point in the Acts of the Apostles, the early Jesus-movement has remained within the bounds of both Jerusalem and Judaism. But now the story shifts—the persecution which has scattered the Christians from Jerusalem leads to proclamation in new lands, in particular, Samaria. But with this new proclamation come new challenges and misunderstandings.

When Simon the Magician—who has already believed the good news of Jesus—sees Peter and John laying their hands on converts so that the converts might receive the gift of the Spirit, he attempts to bribe the Apostles into giving him the same "power" of granting the Holy Spirit. Peter, however, responds with a scathing rebuke: Simon and his money deserve to perish for seeking to manipulate God! Simon's mistake seems to be twofold. First, he has mistaken the power of the Gospel for



a bigger, better version of the magical powers he previously wielded. Second, and more problematically, he has desired not to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, but the ability to give the Holy Spirit to others. What Simon seeks in the Gospel is power

and influence, not the merciful gift of a loving God.

Commenting on this passage, New Testament scholar N.T Wright observes, "the story of Simon... reminds us that wherever the gospel makes its way, there will be new and often unexpected challenges."* Although the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a divine revelation, it is always carried forth and received by fallible humanity. As such, both those who carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and those who hear the Gospel, will be tempted to misunderstand, distort, and even manipulate what is meant as a free, generous, and uncontrollable gift.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. Place yourself mentally in the position of Simon for a moment. What are some ways that you are tempted to turn the free gift of God's good news into an opportunity to gratify your own desires and goals? How could you combat these temptations?

2. In the text, Simon needed a spiritual authority like Peter to rebuke him and correct his misunderstanding. Who is a spiritually mature person in your life that has the authority and wisdom to speak truth into your life and help you grow in faith?

3. What are some practices you could undertake this week to prepare yourself for meeting the "unexpected challenges" of spreading the Gospel to new places?

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING?" HE REPLIED, "HOW CAN I UNLESS SOMEONE GUIDES ME?" ACTS 8:26-39

WEEK EIGHT: GUIDANCE

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is a story about guidance. An angel of the Lord guides Philip to the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. The Spirit directs Philip to the Eunuch's chariot. Philip



instructs the Ethiopian Eunuch in understanding the scriptures and the good news of Jesus. And the Spirit snatches Philip off to another region to continue proclaiming the Gospel. The story is both mysterious and serendipitous (how many of us happen upon people casually reading the Bible in their cars, waiting for someone to explain a passage?). However, it also illustrates the mixture of divine and human initiative that often accompanies the spread of the Gospel. Through his angelic messenger and the Spirit, God guides Philip toward opportunities to extend the reach of the good news of Jesus Christ, and Philip seizes these opportunities to partner with God.

In his divine wisdom, God has chosen to invite His people to be coworkers in the bringing of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. We must therefore be like Philip, open to the promptings of God, ready to go where he leads, and ready to spread the good news of Jesus to those who have ears to hear. Like

* Dallas Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 67.

Philip, we must lead spiritual lives, that is, lives attentive to and permeated by the Spirit of God who leads us. As Dallas Willard writes, "a 'spiritual life' consists in that range of activities in which people cooperatively interact with God—and with the spiritual order deriving from God's personality and action."* The story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch thus invites us to delve more deeply into the spiritual life, so that we may cooperate with God in the bringing of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. Philip was ready and willing to share the Gospel with the Ethiopian Eunuch when the moment arose. Imagine for a moment that you encountered a person eager to know about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In just a few sentences, how would you describe the Gospel to someone?

2. To whom might the Holy Spirit be leading you to be a bearer of the Good News of Jesus in your daily life?

3. What practices could you engage in this week to be better prepared to bring the Gospel to those around you when the Spirit calls you?

BROTHER SAUL, THE LORD JESUS, WHO APPEARED TO YOU ON YOUR WAY HERE, HAS SENT ME SO THAT YOU MAY REGAIN YOUR SIGHT AND BE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT. ACTS 9:1-22

WEEK NINE: TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

There is perhaps no story more iconic in the book of Acts than the story of Christ's appearance to Saul on the road to Damascus. For many Christians it has become the model of the conversion experience: a sudden, world-altering revelation of Christ that sends a once sinful and misguided life along a new trajectory. Because we are so familiar with this story, and so influenced by the man who would soon be known as Paul, it is easy to forget how utterly unexpected of a plot twist it truly is. God takes the most vocal, violent, and zealous opponent of the Jesus movement and transforms him into an instrument through which the Gospel will travel to the ends of the earth

But another important part of this story is often overlooked: the role that



Ananias plays in Saul's conversion. Saul, left alone with his awe-inspiring revelation, is helpless: blind, penitent, and lacking mission. So, God calls out another believer to lay hands on Saul, restore his sight, and to act as physical

* Luke Timothy Johnson, The Acts of the Apostles, Sacra Pagina 5 (Collegeville, MN: The Litrugical Press, 1992) 169.

confirmation of Christ's message. While Ananias responds to the Lord's call by echoing the words of great forbearers of faith ("Here I am, Lord!"), he nevertheless grasps how absurd God's plan appears, reminding the Lord of the evil and violence Saul has afflicted on the Christians But Ananias's fear and questioning of God's plan only serves to remind us that God's purposes transcend human concerns. As Luke Timothy Johnson remarks, "Ananias... serve[s] as the community's spokesperson in voicing reluctance and fear at so rapidly accepting into fellowship this murderous fellow, thus providing Luke with the opportunity to have the divine voice override such human resistance to his work."*

God knows no limitations in bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth. He can and will use the most unlikely of methods to redeem his creation. Sometimes He accomplishes this redemption with blinding, transformative experiences. But just as often, He spreads the good news of Jesus through the faithful assent of those like Ananias who are willing to go where the Lord leads them, even in the midst of doubts.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. Reflect on a time when you had a "Damascus Road" conversion experience that radically altered to course of your faith.

2. What fears and anxieties do you bring to partnering with God to spread the Gospel in your world?

3. How can we cultivate receptiveness this week to the promptings of God in bringing the good news of Jesus to Abilene?

WE BRING YOU GOOD NEWS, THAT YOU SHOULD TURN FROM THESE WORTHLESS THINGS TO THE LIVING GOD. ACTS 14:8-18

WEEK TEN: HEALING THE WORLD

As Jesus did, so his church does. This is the gist of the Book of Acts—the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, now carries on the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. As if to really drive this point home, many of the stories about the apostles in Acts closely mirror stories about Jesus in the Gospels. The text at hand contains one such story, with Paul healing a lame man, which, of course, Jesus was known to do.

The apostles are preaching in Lystra, but the commotion was apparently caused by something Paul did rather than something he preached. Paul notices a man who was physically unable to walk and heals him with a word. When this man, disabled from birth, springs up and walks for the first time in his life, the crowd takes notice. But as they

attempt to comprehend what they just saw through their own Greek worldview, they conclude that Paul and Barnabas must be gods incarnate! And what do you do when you think gods are in you midst? You try to worship them, of course!

When Paul and Barnabas finally make sense of what's going on, they protest

immediately and try to reroute the people's undue adoration toward the God who deserves their praise. (And in doing this, they wisely avoid the fate of King Herod, who in a similar situation in Acts 12:20-23 basked in such attention and was swiftly struck down by an angel.) In the church's present-day mission of spreading the gospel to the world, we would do well to take notes from Paul and Barnabas here. Healing an ailment—providing for a physical need—is often the best way to garner attention. From that point, the task becomes to deflect that attention away from ourselves and point it toward the living God who enables us to take up this mission and ministry.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. Is preaching/teaching the only way to spread the good news of Christ? What other activities may serve to bring the gospel to the world?

2. Most people cannot heal a physical disability by word alone, like Paul did here. But are there other ways that churches and/or individual Christians today can heal the ailments of the world?

3. What is some specific ailment that you can heal, some need that you can provide for, that could garner the type of attention that you can pivot toward God?

PAUL AND SILAS WERE PRAYING AND SINGING HYMNS TO GOD, AND THE PRISONERS WERE LISTENING TO THEM. ACTS 16:23-24

WEEK ELEVEN: PROCLAMATION

The night would end with two prisoners baptizing their jailer and his entire household. It began in an equally strange fashion. Those two prisoners, who had just been beaten and shackled in the innermost cell, were spending the evening in song. It's no wonder they had the other prisoners' attention. Singing was surely not the kind of sound this crowd was accustomed to hearing from that part of the jailhouse.

Singing hymns is certainly unexpected behavior from prisoners, but what happens next borders on the unbelievable. Miraculously, an earthquake causes all the cell doors to fall open and every prisoner's chains to fall off. But even more unbelievable was that everyone sat tight; not a single prisoner bolted. Perhaps they were influenced by the apostles' singing; maybe Paul and Silas convinced them to stay put. The narrative doesn't specify why they



stayed, but when Paul assures the jailer that no one has left, the strangest scene of a very strange night unfolds: a jailer falls at the feet of two of his own prisoners, and he begs them for his life.

Notice how the apostles participate in the spread of the gospel in this story.

It isn't their street-corner preaching or their calls to repentance that catch this jailer's attention; it's their strange and unexpected actions that open a door for them to share the good news. There is something so different about Paul and Silas that draws the jailer to them. Surely they know something he doesn't. Those of us who aren't gifted preachers or missionaries can feel like we aren't able to spread the gospel because we don't have the right words to say. But in this story we see that we don't need persuasive speech to convince people to come to Christ. Before Paul and Silas said a word to the jailer, they were already proclaiming the gospel by their unusual way of life, showing by their actions that they had something special. This is the sort of evangelism that any Christian can do.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. Have you ever known someone who lived so distinctly that you could notice their faith without them talking about it? What was it about this person that made them stand out in this way?

2. What sorts of faith-motivated actions would mark someone as distinct today? How could/should Christians operate in their day-to-day lives to stand out from the cultural/political/societal crowd?

3. What is something specific that you can do to proclaim the gospel by your way of life? How can you live in such a way that your faith is noticeable to others, even without talking about it?

WHAT THEREFORE YOU WORSHIP AS UNKNOWN, THIS I PROCLAIM TO YOU. ACTS 17:16-34

WEEK TWELVE: REDIRECTING

What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? This was a question posed by an influential secondcentury Christian named Tertullian, who was pitting Greek philosophy against the Christian faith. His answer, in brief, was:



"Nothing, the two are incompatible." About a century prior, the Apostle Paul had already faced this question head-on as his missionary journeys brought him to the epicenter of Greek culture and thought: the city of Athens. Paul, however, took a different approach than Tertullian.

When called before a group of philosophical elites to give an account of his teachings, Paul did not denounce their beliefs or dismiss their Athenian ideas as fundamentally opposed to the Good News. Instead, after perusing the various temples of the city and taking note of the handcrafted deities housed within, Paul actually commends their religion—in principle, at least. Paul claims that God created all people with a natural inclination to search for God, and he quotes Greek philosophy and poetry to show that the Athenians are doing just that. Their search is merely misguided; they think divinity is found in gold or silver or stone images in temples made by human hands. Paul's aim, then, is simply to redirect their search toward the true God, the Living God who created the world and everything in it.

We live in a world not so different from Athens, a place with a rich and diverse marketplace of ideas in which many people are seeking transcendent truth. If the Church takes its cues from Paul, we see that God is the God of truth, and perhaps "non-Christian" ways of thinking do not need to be defeated or condemned in the name of the Gospel but rather redirected toward the Truth they already seek. So does Athens have anything to do with Jerusalem? Maybe so, after all.

Discussion Questions

(Feel free to use any or all of these before and during your group time.)

1. What's it like to converse with someone who thinks differently? Have you ever been able to find common ground with someone who holds a different worldview from your own, or do you find it difficult to connect with someone who doesn't think like you? Why or why not?

2. Can you think of any contemporary "philosophies"—any bits of knowledge or wisdom—that are not necessarily "Christian," but could be redirected toward the Christian faith? Are there any ways of thinking that could not be redirected toward the God of Truth?

3. Is there a specific way, big or small, that you could embody Paul's strategy for evangelism in your own life? For example, is there a certain way of thinking you could try to find common ground with? Do you know someone with a different worldview with whom you could try to make a connection?

