

ACTS

THE UNSTOPPABLE MISSION OF JESUS



8 STUDIES IN ACTS 1 - 7
FOR INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS & 1:1

Introduction

Acts is action-packed. Of course, every part of the Bible is full of the drama of God's work in the world. But there's something about Acts that connects particularly vividly with the drama of our own lives. We see the coming of the Holy Spirit. We see the sending of the Apostles. We see the beginnings of the church, and the miraculous growth and spread of the church. We see Christ's name being proclaimed initially in Jerusalem and then fanning out to distant corners of the earth. And we see miraculous power, both in the extraordinary works performed by the Apostles and the extraordinary boldness of the church to proclaim Christ without fear.

And so the question is, what does the mission of the church in Acts tell us about the mission of the church today? What's changed? What's the same? How much is Acts *describing* what the early church looked like, and how much could it be said to be *proscribing* what today's church should look like?

Many of us instinctively jump to one conclusion or another on questions like this. But we need to look at the text of the Bible carefully, because it is God's word to us, not our word to each other, even though we may be a great help to each other as we undergo our study and reflection. That's why it is good to do Bible study with the Bible as our teacher. Even the most experienced Bible study leaders sit under the word. We seek to help each other wrestle with what we believe it is found to teach. But all of us remain open to the challenge of God's word. And we walk together humbly, knowing that although God's word never changes, we change and so do our circumstances. What is its message for us today?

Two particular points to make about Acts by way of introduction to this series:

1. **The mission of the church is Jesus' mission.** Going to all the world with the message of Christ was never the church's idea. The church is never portrayed as being the instigator, nor the one resourcing and enabling the mission. It is the mission of the Triune God with Jesus as the One who does the actual commissioning. He is the One who

sends the Apostles (“the Sent Ones”), which includes waiting for the Father’s “gift”, the Holy Spirit, who powerfully transforms, intervenes, empowers, heals and unites, enabling the church to do as Christ has commanded them to do: to bear witness to him. So, let’s not approach Acts as if Jesus has disappeared. Jesus is far from absent in the Book of Acts. The whole thing is his mission, which should give us pause for thought about our mission today... is that any different?

2. **The mission of the church is unstoppable.** There is lots of opposition, there are many disappointments and struggles, uncertainties and hardships. There is even corruption within the church. But what Jesus does by setting in motion the Spirit-empowered proclamatory witness of the Apostles and the church as a whole is not thwarted, nor even slowed, by anything, not even our own failings. But what does it look like for us to get on board with the unstoppable gospel? Are there ways that Jesus has to work around us rather than through us, due to our shortcomings or resistance?

As we study Acts, let’s continually ask God to guide us to understand his truth, to equip his church afresh, and to renew us in our bold involvement in his glorious work in the world. May we humbly serve his eternal glory.

General note about the studies:

Many of the questions have multiple sub-questions. These can be read out all at once as the group comes to that question, or staggered as the discussion of the question unfolds. But they are meant to be reflected on as a cluster of questions each addressing the same issue. Rigid, laboured answering of each individual sub-question may not be the best approach. Sometimes the sub-questions provide some degree of ‘answer’ to a previous question in the cluster. In every case, the role of the leader is not simply to ensure answers every question, but to stimulate discussion about the issues raised. Leaders can exercise discretion about how best to use this Bible study resource.

Timings are suggestions only. The goal is two-fold:

1. Grow in understanding of God’s word as revealed in its original context.
2. Consider deeply and prayerfully the implications of God’s work for our lives today.

Note about prayer:

Prayer after the study should include praise and thanks to God fuelled by the biblical ideas in the particular text that has been studied, asking his help in applying the passage to each other's lives. In addition, the group can support each other in prayers for particular life/family/work/ministry circumstances.

Note about Study 1:

These notes are designed to align with the sermon series on the same passages. The sermons cover chapter 1 over two Sundays. But depending on whether the group begins meeting before or after the commencement of the sermon series, the leaders may wish to cover chapter 1 in either one or two Bible study sessions. They are labelled as Studies 1a and 1b. If covering them in only one session, you may choose either to cover the questions more briefly or to omit various questions.

Note about Study 5:

Study 5 is also in two parts. It can be studied over one session or two.

Study 1a

Acts 1:1-14

Introductory Question (3-5 mins)

- What are the sorts of things that make your sharing of Christ more confident and bold? How often do you feel confident and bold? What do you find to be the greatest obstacle to confidence and boldness?

Read Acts 1:1-14

Jesus Taken Up Into Heaven

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

¹² Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. Luke's "former book" is The Gospel of Luke. In Acts 1:1, what is the significance of the word "began"? What might this suggest to us about the second book (Acts) in relation to Jesus?
2. In verse 3, why do you think Luke mentions the "many convincing proofs" that Jesus was alive? What would have been the result if Jesus hadn't given them these?
3. What is the primary instruction to the Apostles in verse 4? What alternatives may have been tempting them, and why?
4. John's baptism was by water and was to symbolise repentance in anticipation of the forgiveness of sin. Jesus now (verse 5) promises a baptism by the Holy Spirit, which we know would be symbolised by tongues of flame over each of their heads. What would this baptism be initiating?

5. Is the Apostles' question in verse 6 about the kingdom a silly question? (Why/why not?)

6. Does Jesus answer 'yes', 'no', or 'yes but'? What have they got right, and what have they got wrong (in their understanding of the kingdom)?

7. List all the ways Jesus describes the Holy Spirit and his impact when he comes.

8. Verse 8 is a key introductory verse for the whole of Acts. If you knew only that, but hadn't read Acts, what would you be expecting to find as you read through it?

9. What do the 2 men in white tell the Apostles about what to expect in the future?

10. When the Apostles return to the city, what do they spend their time doing?

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. How important is it to our message today that Jesus is alive now?
How could this affect the way we tell and retell the message?

2. From this passage, what do you think Jesus wants us to know about the kingdom of God?

3. What do we learn about the different roles played by the Father, the Son and the Spirit in the mission of God? How might this shape our prayers?

4. In light of the Apostles' immediate response to Jesus' words and ascension, what would it look for Christians today to be joined together "constantly in prayer" like in verse 14? What would we pray for?

Pray

- In light of what this passage has shown us, pray to God for our own role in his mission and for the growth of his kingdom.

Study 1b

Acts 1:15-26

Introductory Question (3-5 mins)

- Why do we accept the authority of the New Testament?

Read Acts 1:15-26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)¹⁶ and said, “Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus.¹⁷ He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”

¹⁸ (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.¹⁹ Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

²⁰ “For,” said Peter, “it is written in the Book of Psalms:

“May his place be deserted;

let there be no one to dwell in it,’

and,

“May another take his place of leadership.’

²¹ Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us,²² beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”

²³ So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias.²⁴ Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen²⁵ to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.”²⁶ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. In what ways does Peter describe the crisis of Judas's betrayal of Jesus?
2. Why must there be 12 Apostles? (What's wrong with 11? What do we then make of Paul the 13th Apostle? – See Rom 11:13, 1 Cor 15:7-10a)
3. What is the primary criterion Peter is seeking for Judas' replacement? What would the role entail, and why would this criterion be critical?
4. Given that a large number of those present would have already 'witnessed' what happened to Jesus and through Jesus, what particular meaning do you think Peter has when he says "**become** a witness" in verse 22? What does this tell us about how the Apostles understood witness?
5. The Apostles pray for God's guidance for which of two candidates should be appointed as the 12th Apostle. Then they cast lots. Was there any perceivable difference in the qualification of these 2 men? Would we cast lots in a situation today where spiritual wisdom and understanding might lead us towards a clear indication of the will of God? (See Rom 12:2).

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. Are there crises that we're tempted to think are outside the sovereign control of God? Given that the Bible predicts trouble and hardship for the church and even divisiveness and betrayal, how should we respond?
2. Even though we weren't there to see Jesus in the 1st Century, can we call ourselves witnesses today? What do we mean by that, ie what does witnessing involve? In what way does our witness build on the witness of the Apostles?
3. Given that the New Testament is the written testimony of the Apostles' witness (documents either written by Apostles or by those writing down what the Apostles shared with the church) how should we view the New Testament? What relationship is there between the authority of Jesus and the authority of the New Testament?
4. How does the authority of the Apostles help us in our witness?

Pray

- In light of what this passage has shown us, pray to God for our own role in his mission and for the growth of his kingdom.

Study 2

Acts 2

Introductory Question (3-5 mins)

1. What is the power of the Holy Spirit in us intended for?

Read Acts 2:1-47

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Peter Addresses the Crowd

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ *“In the last days, God says,*

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ *Even on my servants, both men and women,*

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy.

¹⁹ *I will show wonders in the heavens above*

and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰ *The sun will be turned to darkness*

and the moon to blood

before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹ *And everyone who calls*

on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

²² *“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by*

God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you

through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by

God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked

men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from

the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for

death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵ David said about him:

“I saw the Lord always before me.

Because he is at my right hand,

I will not be shaken.

²⁶ *Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;*

my body also will rest in hope,

²⁷ *because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,*

you will not let your holy one see decay.

²⁸ *You have made known to me the paths of life;*

you will fill me with joy in your presence.’

²⁹ *“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died*

and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰ But he was a prophet and

knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. ³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. ³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, “The Lord said to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand

³⁵ until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”

³⁶ “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

The Fellowship of the Believers

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. Pentecost was also known to the Jews as the Feast of Weeks, which was a harvest festival. Why is it significant that the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost?
2. What are the two components of the miracle that accompanies the giving of the Spirit? Both have to do with tongues... what are they telling us about the gift of the Spirit to the church?
3. Find a Bible map and note the geographic regions represented by the people who hear the gospel that day spoken in their own language. What would have happened to the gospel message as a result of all of these people returning home after the festival? How is Acts 1:8 being fulfilled here?
4. What is miraculous about Peter proclaiming the gospel to an enormous crowd that day and calling on them to repent? How does this picture of Peter differ from the picture we see in the Gospels? What has happened to him?
5. Peter cites the prophet Joel's prediction of the Spirit being poured out in the last days, where "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved". What does this tell us about what we should expect during these "last days" in which we live?
6. Peter accuses the crowd of putting Jesus to death "with the help of wicked men". How does this all fit with the sovereign plans of God (verses 22-24)?

7. Peter cites a psalm of David to show that God's chosen one would not be abandoned to the dead. How does this help us to understand his statement (v24) that "it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."?

8. Peter tells the people that they have crucified their Messiah. They are "cut to the heart" and ask what to do. What are the 2 responses required? What does Peter promise would follow this?

9. In light of verse 41, what kind of impact has the Holy Spirit had? Why is this so significant on the birthday of the church? What does that tell us about what the church has been called and empowered for?

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. Do you feel you have the power to proclaim Jesus? How do we exercise this power, especially if we feel uncertain, ill-equipped or unmotivated?

2. To what extent would we call the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost a miracle, and to what extent would we call it the beginning of a new era in salvation history? What aspects of this might we try to see repeated today? What aspects should we not expect to see repeated, and why not?

3. Is it right to pray that God would give us power as we speak the gospel? What might this power look like?

4. If speaking in tongues was the gift demonstrating the inauguration of the last days and God's enabling the church to speak the gospel to all, regardless of their native tongue, how should we view the gift of tongues today? How can we ensure that we neither muzzle God, nor set up unhelpful expectations for people?

5. What can we learn from verses 42-47 about the day to day priorities of the early church? In what ways does this picture challenge our priorities today, both as households and as the household of God?

Pray

- In light of what this passage has shown us, pray to God for our own role in his mission and for the growth of his kingdom.

Introductory Question (3-5 mins)

- What are the things you'd most like to see restored by God?

Read Acts 3:1-26

Peter Heals a Lame Beggar

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer— at three in the afternoon. ² Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. ⁴ Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” ⁵ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

⁶ Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” ⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. ⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Peter Speaks to the Onlookers

¹¹ While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon’s Colonnade. ¹² When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We

are witnesses of this. ¹⁶ By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

¹⁷ "Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰ and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. ²¹ Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. ²² For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. ²³ Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.'

²⁴ "Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. ²⁵ And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.'²⁶ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. What details does Luke record for us about the situation in which this miracle would happen (verses 1-5)?

2. What is significant about the fact that Peter is able to perform the kind of miracle Jesus had performed?

3. It seems that in the first century, blind and paralysed people were prohibited from entering the temple (see Matthew 21:14 – 15), probably because their disability was seen as ritual impurity or caused by their sin. What is the significance that this man can now enter the temple with Peter and John?

4. According to Peter, the miracle shouldn't really have been a surprise for the people. What is his explanation for the miracle (verses 11-16)? What is the connection between the work of God through Christ and the healing of the lame man?

5. What will be the result of the people repenting and turning to God (verses 19-21)?

6. What are we waiting for (verse 21)? How does the miracle work as an illustration of this point in Peter's sermon?

7. Peter refers to God's promise of blessing to Abraham in verse 25. What is that promise? What does verse 26 say about how that blessing is being realised?

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. How do these kinds of healing miracles give people a taste of the kingdom of God?

2. Since the healing was a sign pointing to the fulfilment of God's kingdom plans through the gospel of Jesus, what should be the focus of our ministry today? What should we be seeking?

3. If ever we hear a story of, or encounter a miraculous healing, what are some ways we might we follow Peter's example?

4. What work of God for you gets you closest to "walking and jumping, and praising God"?

5. How do your prayers reflect a yearning for God's restoration of all things?

Pray

- In light of what this passage has shown us, pray to God for our own role in his mission and for the growth of his kingdom.

Study 4

Acts 4:1-31

Introductory Question (3-5 mins)

- What do you think is the most important thing we can pray for the persecuted church?

Read Acts 4:1-31

Peter and John Before the Sanhedrin

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴ But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

⁵ The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶ Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. ⁷ They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'

¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that

these men had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ¹⁶ “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” ²¹ After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

The Believers Pray

²³ On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.’

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

³¹ *After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. Peter and John are arrested in the middle of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus to the people. Why are the religious leaders so disturbed?
2. What was the impact of their proclamation of the gospel after the healing of the lame man (verse 4)?
3. After being imprisoned overnight, Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin (the assembly of the elders of Israel) and questioned by the 'top brass'. Who was the last person we heard about being questioned on this spot by this group (Matt 26:57-68)? What happened as a result of that trial? Where was Peter on that occasion?
4. What is striking about the kind of response Peter gives in verses 8-12? How is it different from Matt 26:69-75? What is the best explanation for this change?
5. What are the details he gives the Sanhedrin about Jesus (verses 10-12)? How does the response of the council differ from the response of the crowds to which they'd been preaching (note verses 13-17)?
6. Express the key elements of verse 12 in your own words.

7. What is the evidence that both stops the Sanhedrin from punishing Peter and John and empowers Peter and John's witness (verses 16-22)?
8. When Peter and John are released, what do the believers do? Break up their prayer into its key components.
9. What is the immediate result of the prayer? What can we take from that?

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. What challenge does verse 12 present for 21st Century ministry? How do we approach this?
2. Can we expect that the Spirit will make us bold like Peter and John?
3. Is there a formula for involving the Spirit like this in bearing fruit from our ministry? What should our expectations be for witness today?
4. Is there a case for civil disobedience by Christians? How do we reconcile Acts 4 with Romans 13:1-7?

5. (If time, revisit the introductory question in light of the believers' prayer).

Pray

- In light of what this passage has shown us, pray to God for our own role in his mission and for the growth of his kingdom.

Study 5

Acts 4:32 – 5:42

Introductory Questions (3-5 mins)

1. What's the biggest lie you've ever told? Have you been found out yet?

2. Why do you think Christian people often seem to consider sin not very serious?

Read Acts 4:32 – 5:11

The Believers Share Their Possessions

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"),³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Ananias and Sapphira

***5** Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.*

³Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. What is inspiring about 4:32?
2. In verses 33-34 God's grace is doing more than saving people. What else is it doing?
3. Barnabas sets an example in 4:36-37. And it wasn't the first time (see 2:44-45 – note that although verse 44 indicates that they "had everything in common", verse 45 indicates that they sold possessions in order to give. That is, property ownership is established by Exodus 20:15 and 17). Was there an obligation on Ananias and Sapphira to sell their property (see 5:4a&b)?

4. What is the sin of Ananias (5:1-2)?

5. Is the sin of Sapphira the same? What does the confrontation in verse 8 add to our understanding of the problem?

6. What do you make of the fear that is reported in verse 5 and verse 11? Isn't fear bad?

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. In what ways is the Christian community distinct from both communism and capitalism? (use dictionary or Wikipedia definitions if helpful).

2. What do we learn about money and possessions through this passage?

3. Do Christians ever attempt to lie to God today? What does this look like?

4. What sin or untruths need to be eliminated from the church today?

Read Acts 5:12-42

The Apostles Heal Many

The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. ¹⁵ As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. ¹⁶ Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

The Apostles Persecuted

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."

²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. ²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, ²³ "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." ²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

²⁵ Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." ²⁶ At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

²⁷ The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³ When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

⁴⁰ His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. What strikes you about the fruitfulness of the ministry of the Apostles from verses 12-16? Could these be the sort of “greater things” Jesus was referring to in John 14:12-14?

2. What are the religious leaders feeling about the flourishing of the Apostles' ministry? How do they act this out?
3. What does the angel of the Lord do (and instruct!) in response?
4. What is the significance of the Temple as the place of proclamation of "this new life"?
5. As well as jealousy, the leaders express fear (verse 26) and fury (verse 33). On the other hand, there are no indications of the emotional state of the Apostles at this point. What message do you think Luke is conveying (in this particular passage) by emphasising the leaders' emotional state, but not even mentioning that of the Apostles?
6. What are the Apostles indicating (in their short defence in verses 29-32) about their accusers' stance in relation to God? What do you make of this?
7. How is Gamaliel contrasted with the other leaders? Why do you think Luke has quoted him at length, even though he is no supporter of the Christians?
8. In verses 40-42, Luke finally shares a reference to the emotions of the Apostles. What stands out to you about their state of mind?

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. Verses 21-28 paint a picture of the establishment scrambling to manage an out-of-control public relations situation by trying to silence Christian witness. But as readers of Acts, we don't see the situation as being out of control at all. How is this an encouragement for Christians today?
2. The passage shows an instance of God intervening when the Apostles were in strife (verse 19) and an instance of God not intervening (verse 40). Were there any differences in how these 2 situations played out? Should we expect miraculous intervention when we face opposition and hostility for our faith?
3. If you were "rejoicing because [you] had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name," what sort of an understanding of suffering would you have?
4. What does perseverance in witness look like for us today? How does this passage guide us?

Pray

- In light of what this passage has shown us, pray to God for our own role in his mission and for the growth of his kingdom.

Introductory Question (3-5 mins)

- What divisions have you seen arise within a church community? How have they been handled well or poorly?

Read Acts 6:1-15

The Choosing of the Seven

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Stephen Seized

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. A tension develops among the early Christians along cultural lines. What priorities do the Twelve Apostles identify for sorting this out?
2. Most of the names of the seven indicate that they are from a Hellenistic background. Would this have been your solution if you were faced with this problem?
3. Why is spiritual wisdom and maturity important for practical tasks within the church?
4. Why do you think Luke repeatedly uses a phrase like verse 7, "so the word of God spread" (ie 12:24, 19:20, etc)?
5. What do we learn from the fact that two of these seven are engaged in the public proclamation of the gospel in the following chapters (Acts 6:6 – 10, 8:4 – 8)?

6. What do Stephen's opponents have to resort to in order to gain an advantage?

7. What is the point being suggested by reporting that Stephen's face was "like the face of an angel"?

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. Why is disunity such a serious problem for the church?

2. Is it wrong for pastors of the word to be involved in practical, physical tasks? What are the challenges for pastors today that potentially distract from the ministry of the word? How should a leader (or leadership team) approach the question of distribution of labour around the church?

3. Should we sign up new believers to serve in practical ministries in the church? Is there a difference between leading and serving in terms of the suitability of a new believer?

4. What should our response be when our opponents use dirty tactics?

Pray

- In light of what this passage has shown us, pray to God for our own role in his mission and for the growth of his kingdom.

Introductory Question (3-5 mins)

- What would be the ultimate test of your faith? Is there a way to prepare for that?

Read Acts 7:1-60

Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin

Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

²To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. ³'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

⁴"So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. ⁵He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. ⁶God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. ⁷But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.'⁸ Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

⁹"Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him ¹⁰and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

¹¹"Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. ¹²When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. ¹³On their second visit,

Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. ¹⁴ After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. ¹⁵ Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. ¹⁶ Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

¹⁷ "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. ¹⁸ Then 'a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.' ¹⁹ He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

²⁰ "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. ²¹ When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. ²² Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

²³ "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. ²⁴ He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. ²⁵ Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. ²⁶ The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'

²⁷ "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?' ²⁸ Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

³⁰ "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. ³¹ When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'^[1] Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

³³ "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have indeed seen the oppression of my people

in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'

³⁵ *"This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.*

³⁷ *"This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.'³⁸ He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.*

³⁹ *"But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. ⁴⁰ They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' ⁴¹ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. ⁴² But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:*

*"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?*

⁴³ *You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek
and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.*

Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

⁴⁴ *"Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, ⁴⁶ who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him.*

⁴⁸ *"However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:*

⁴⁹ *“Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord.*

Or where will my resting place be?

⁵⁰ *Has not my hand made all these things?’*

⁵¹ *“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”*

The Stoning of Stephen

⁵⁴ *When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”*

⁵⁷ *At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

⁵⁹ *While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

Understand the passage (1-2 mins each)

1. Scan back to Acts 6:11 & 13-14. What are the charges that are made against Stephen?
2. What are the key components of God’s promises to Abraham that Stephen lists in verses 3-8? What is the impact of starting his defence with reference to God’s promises to Abraham?

3. How does the treatment of Joseph by his brothers differ from his treatment by God? What does God do for Joseph? And what does he do through Joseph?
4. How does God provide for Moses (20-22)? How does he provide for Israel through Moses (see verses 30-38)?
5. How is Moses' ministry to Israel challenged (see verses 23-29)? What is the effect on Moses?
6. What does God do to re-establish Moses as God's authorised prophet? How do the people respond to this (verses 39-43)?
7. Scan over Stephen's speech and estimate the proportion of the crucial acts of God's promise and blessing that occur outside of the promised land. What is the point being made in verses 48-50? How would this emphasis and climactic point have been received by Stephen's accusers?
8. Is Stephen's defence primarily defensive or something else? How might we describe what he is doing, making particular reference to mention of the betrayal and murder of the Righteous One (vs 51-53)?
9. What is the relevance of his vision of the glory of God and the exalted Christ standing at the right hand of God? Who is the judge and who is the defendant in this court?

10. Stephen portrays rejection of Jesus as part of a continuing pattern of rejecting the word of God throughout Israel's history. List as many examples as you can from the Old Testament where prophets are rejected, persecuted and even killed?

Apply the passage (3-5 mins each)

1. Stephen is the first non-Apostle to testify to the gospel in the book of Acts. He is also the first Christian martyr. How do you feel about the idea that significant suffering for the faith is something that the Bible anticipates will extend beyond the immediate eyewitnesses of Jesus?
2. What are the implications for our witness today knowing that Jesus was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God, as seen by Stephen in his vision? What sort of confidence can we have? What sort of courage?
3. Millions of Christians have been martyred for their faith. Martyrdom has not slowed with the modern age... perhaps only intensified. Suggest a number of ways your group can keep up to date with and support the persecuted church and gospel workers in dangerous parts of the world.

Pray

- In light of what this passage has shown us, pray to God for our own role in his mission and for the growth of his kingdom.



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Trinity Church Mount Barker

www.tcmb.church

info@tcmb.church