

Lesson 2: Take Action

Bible Study of the Book of Acts

In the previous lesson, we explored the essence of what it means to be a witness and examined important passages from the Gospels where Christ commanded us to be witnesses for Him. Now we will explore how the apostles applied the teachings of Christ in shaping the early church by studying the Book of Acts. Here, we witness the apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, embarking on the mission that Christ assigned to them at the end of the four Gospels. It was through proclaiming the Gospel to all the nations and the witnessing of the apostles that the early church was formed.

As we look into the first 12 chapters of the Book of Acts, we will uncover invaluable insights about the impact of bearing witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we explore this book, we can discover how we, too, can be inspired to proclaim the Good News in our lives today.

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Acts 1:

The Book of Acts is the second book of a two-volume work written by St. Luke the evangelist to Theophilus. It describes the very beginning of the church:

- Christ teaches the disciples for forty days “the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” (Acts 1:3). This was to prepare them for their mission to spread the Gospel.
 - **40 is usually a symbol of completeness, preparation, and transformation.** see examples of 40 days and 40 years throughout Scriptures)
 - Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24: 18, 34: 28): Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.
 - The Israelites in the Wilderness (Exodus 16: 35, Numbers 14:33-34): The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. This was a period that served as preparation before entering the Promised Land.
 - Jesus’ Temptation (Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke): Before beginning His public ministry, Jesus prepared himself by fasting in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights where He faced temptation from the devil.
 - The disciples obey the Lord “not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father” (Acts 1: 4)

According to St. John Chrysostom, this was done so that the disciples do not start their mission without first the descent of the Holy Spirit, that they might not be in a poor condition and easily defeated. In addition, there were many in Jerusalem who are yet to believe as we will see in the later chapters.

- After Jesus spoke these things, He ascended into Heaven.
- They cast lots in order to choose who replaces Judas Iscariot. (Acts 1: 26)
- The lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the 11 apostles.

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

Chapter Reflection:

- In the same way the disciples prayed before they were sent out on a mission, we also ought to put on the whole armor of God and prepare ourselves before starting our mission.

“Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11)

Acts 2:

- The Holy Spirit comes on the church on the Day of Pentecost.
- In the New Testament, St. Paul says:

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1Cor 15: 20)

- In the Old Testament the feast of Pentecost (Greek word meaning the 50th) was called the Feast of Harvest and it fell on the 50th day after the Feast of the Firstfruits. The Life-Giving Spirit descending upon the church fills her with a life which can't be overcome by death.
 - That is why death is now seen not as an end, but as a departure. **(In the Litany of the Departed** the priest prays “For there is no death for Your servants but a departure.”
- The Spirit is the Spirit of oneness. They were gathered with one accord and in one place.
- When the Spirit descended upon the *gathered* disciples, He also gives them the power to unite so that those who were scattered because of speaking different languages were able to *gather* around the apostles and understand what they were speaking.
- The Spirit gives St. Peter both boldness to preach the Gospel and clarity on what to say, fulfilling the promise of Christ.

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.” (John 14:26)

Chapter Reflection:

The apostles did their part:

1. Continuing daily with one accord in the temple.
2. Breaking bread from house to house.
3. They ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.
4. Praising God and having favor with all the people.

Let's contrast the character of the apostles before and after they saw the resurrected Lord. As we will see below, their transformation proves the power of God that dwells in us through the Holy Spirit.

Before seeing the resurrected Lord

Fearful and Doubtful

- On the day of Jesus' arrest, we learn in Matthew 26, that the disciples forsook Jesus and fled.
- St. Peter denied knowing Jesus 3 times.
- The disciples hid in the house of St. Mark lest they also be crucified.

Lacked Understanding

- They had limited understanding of Jesus' teachings and mission and misunderstood Jesus' messages about His death and resurrection.

Not Bold in Faith

- Initially, the apostles were hesitant to proclaim the Gospel.

After seeing the resurrected Lord

Filled with Boldness

- On the other hand, we see in Acts that they were gathered in one accord.
- St. Peter, boldly preached on the day of the Pentecost leading to thousands of conversions (It is written in Acts that 3000 souls were added to them).
- The disciples went breaking bread from house to house and were active and seen in the temple not fearing what would happen to them.

Deep Understanding

- It was only after the resurrection that their understanding of the Scripture was enhanced.
- They began to see the fulfillment of the prophecies and the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Performing Miracles

- Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles started performing miracles and signs in the name of Jesus.

Acts 3:

- Acts 3 starts with St. Peter and St. John performing a miracle as they went up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the Ninth hour.
- When St. Peter and St. John, healed a man lame from his mother's womb, he enters the temple with them "leaping, walking and praising God".

"Then Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." (Acts 3: 6)

- The man who was healed knew that this was the work of God. As he held on to St. Peter and St. John and praised God, all the people ran towards them in the porch which is called Solomon's, and they were greatly amazed.
- St. Peter used this opportunity to preach the Gospel to the Jews saying:
 1. It is God who healed this man, bringing the glory to God and not to himself.
 2. You sinned by denying Christ in front of Pilate.
 3. Return to God and you will be saved.
 4. Moses and the prophets all pointed at one person, our Lord Jesus Christ, and through Him only you can be saved.

Acts 4:

- In this chapter, we learn that St. Peter and St. John have been arrested due to preaching the resurrection. They interrogated them, insulted them, and commanded them to "be quiet".
- Clearly, the Gospel was a threat to the elders, scribes and rulers since it posed a threat to their authority. However, St. Peter and St. John knew that it was He who they rejected that became the chief cornerstone and out of whom comes out fountains of living water.

"This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.'" (Acts 4: 11)

- Their fear was increased when they saw the man who had been healed standing with them.

"What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name." (Acts 4: 16-17)

"But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."(Acts 4: 19, 20)

We also need to always ask this question “Is it right in the sight of God to listen to men more than God?”

After they were released, the apostles reported back to the rest of the believers (their own companions) what has taken place with them at the temple. Their response was two folds:

- They prayed for support and guidance to be filled with boldness and speak His word.
- They were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God without fear.

“And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4: 31)

Acts 5:

- **Ananias and Sapphira** sold their possession and appearing to perform a good deed, they offered the money to the apostles. However, they lied as they kept back part of the price for themselves.
 - Their divided heart led them to seek the praise of the people while keeping a portion of the money hidden.
 - In other words, Ananias and Sapphira worked together to come out of the situation with the most they can salvage for themselves. Their service was driven by self-love rather than genuine service to others.
- Also in chapter 5, the high priests rose up against the apostles and put them in a common prison.
 - The angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out. After being released, they went into the temple to speak to the people. When the officers came to the prison, they found the prison shut securely and the guards standing however there was no one inside.
 - As a result, the captain of the temple and the officers brought them and they were presented in front of the Jewish Council.
 - As they were interrogated, their answer remains unchanged “We ought to obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5: 29)

“So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.” (Acts 5: 41)

Chapter Reflection:

- As the chosen people of God, our actions must stem from good intentions. Any service, whether within or outside the church, should be selflessly performed out of love for other rather for personal gain.
- After being imprisoned, the apostles did not let fear or intimidation silence their proclamation of the Gospel. As Christians, although we are certain of our reward in heaven, we also know that we will encounter tribulations on earth. Therefore, as His witnesses, we should use suffering for Christ’s sake as an opportunity that can lead to spiritual growth and deeper faith.

Acts 6 & 7:

- In chapter 6, we have proof that the number of the disciples was multiplying. As the needs of the congregation grew, the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and asked them to seek out **7 men of good reputation**, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom to appoint over the business.
- This also included the needs with regards to the daily necessities (food and drink, etc.)
 - All the services of the church are empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit, even the things that we consider superficial or mundane.
- One of the seven servants (deacons) chosen for serving tables (food) is the first martyr of the church, St. Stephen.
 - He witnesses for the love of God towards His people and the Jewish council that was trying him and accused him of blasphemy.
 - St. Stephen disputed with individuals from the Synagogue (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, those from Cilicia and Asia).
 - In his discourse of witnessing, we see how closely he followed in the steps of his master, our Lord Jesus Christ.
 - They were angry towards him as he explains to them from the scriptures how they missed the coming of the Messiah.
 - As he was giving up his soul by being stoned, he saw the Lord standing at the right hand of God and with that vision he continues to follow in the steps of the Lord and his last words are echoing Christ's unending love even towards those who are killing him.

"Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Acts (7: 60)

Chapter Reflection:

- Chapter 6 is very applicable to our lives of service in the Church. As the needs of a congregation grow, some things should be taken care of to help sustain and support the congregation. On a surface level, this is an issue that is not directly related to the spiritual need of the new church. However, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were able to make decisions.
- It is important that we too, like the disciples include God in every aspect of our life and ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit when we make decisions.

Who were the 7 chosen to serve?

1. **Stephen**,
 - a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit
2. **Philip**
3. **Prochorus**
4. **Nicanor**
5. **Timon**
6. **Parmenas**
7. **Nicolas**,
 - a proselyte (from the Greek root, proselytos which means "one who converted to Judaism" or "one who has come over") from Antioch.

- We are God’s special people both by Him calling us to be His own and by us following His words and His example. Instead of viewing this as pressuring, we ought to view this as a responsibility and an opportunity to get closer to God.
- By imitating Christ, St Stephen used the situation he faced in an attempt to bring the Jews to the truth. We are also called to imitate Christ in any tribulation we face by being steadfast, patient and peaceful.

Acts 8:

- We know in Acts 1, that the Lord promised His disciples that they will witness for Him in the world.
- This promise is being fulfilled as St. Philip goes to a city of Samaria (Samaritans were historical enemies of the Jews) and preaches the Gospel of Christ to them.
 - The Samaritans were in darkness and were led astray by a sorcerer (magician). They were astonished by his showy works but as they heard the Gospel, they accepted the True Light, the Lord Jesus Christ.
- After leaving Samaria, St. Philip is led by the Holy Spirit to an Ethiopian official (a Eunuch), who was a Jewish believer, to guide him into the faith of Christ.
 - The eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53:7, which says:

“He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.” (Isaiah 53: 7)

- The eunuch asked St. Philip of whom is the scripture talking about? St. Philip answered his question by preaching Jesus to him.
 - The humility of the Ethiopian official allowed him to ask St. Philip to explain to him the passage he was reading.

St. John Chrysostom talks about this passage and says:

“Observe his [eunuch’s] piety; that though he did not understand, he read, and then after reading examines...he confesses his ignorance: wherefore also he learns...look how free he is from haughtiness, so desirous to learn and gave heed to his [St. Philip’s] words. The saying “He who seeks, finds” (Mathew 7:8) was fulfilled in him.”

- St. Philip led him to the faith and baptized him. This Ethiopian man stands in contrast to the Jewish scribes and Pharisees, whose pride hindered their understanding of Christ’s teachings and His true identity.

Chapter Reflection:

- The true love for the Lord and for preaching His Gospel uproots from the heart every hatred toward mankind. The light of the Holy Spirit in the heart makes one discern between hatred for sin and the hatred that is directed towards people.
- Humility opens the doors of the heart, allowing the light of Christ to illuminate our understanding, whereas pride blinds us to His grace, leaving us falsely convinced of our own insight. Like the Ethiopian Eunuch, we should be aware of our own ignorance, fostering a readiness to learn and accept the teachings of the church.

Acts 9:

The martyrdom of St. Stephen ushers in the conversion of Saul, the persecutor of the church.

- Saul was so determined to destroy the church.

“For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.” (Galatians 1: 13)

- He was zealous, but not in accordance with God’s will; his zeal was to destroy not to convert. However, the Lord met him on the road to Damascus and stopped him in his tracks.
 - Christ asks him “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4) revealing to Saul that he is not simply persecuting mere people, but he is persecuting Christ Himself.
 - In this chapter, we see Saul's transformation to Paul. After 3 days without his sight after a bright light shone around him from heaven, he was baptized by Ananias and received his sight once again.
- In this chapter, the disciples in the city of Joppa call upon St. Peter to come to them as a certain disciple, Tabitha (translated: Dorcas) got sick and died. She was full of charitable deeds and her death was felt amongst the widows and the poor as she was a great help to them.
 - By the power of the Lord and the intercessions of the poor and the widows, St. Peter raised her up from the dead.
 - Tabitha loved and helped the poor and in her death she was remembered by them. This shows how the believers are members of one body.

“So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” (Romans 12: 5)

- Many people believed in the Lord after this. So it was that St. Peter stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.

Chapter Reflection:

- Regarding the Lord’s message to Saul: Since we are created in His image and according to His likeness, the Lord identifies with His people. While in worldly kingdoms people are mere subject to the royals, in the kingdom of Christ, His people are not only members of His royal family but members of His very body.

“For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.” (Ephesians 5: 30)

- *Persecutor or persecuted:* Saul the persecutor of the church changes direction and becomes the one who calls others to the knowledge of Christ and His richness. Instead of persecuting, he himself is now persecuted for the sake of the Gospel.
- There is no neutral ground. When we are part of Christ’s kingdom, we are at enmity with the world, its lusts, and its ways of doing things. We are in a battle till the end.

“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” (Hebrews 6:11-12)

Acts 10&11:

- The conversion of Cornelius (a gentile) is a testimony of the love God has for everyone. He uses His disciples to call people from one end of the earth to the other.
 - Cornelius was a man from Caesarea.
 - He was a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household.
 - At the ninth hour of the day, a vision of an angel of God appeared to him and explained to him that he must send for Simon whose surname is Peter, to come and tell him what he must do.
- St. Peter also learns through a vision that the gentiles are also called to the Gospel.
- The church becomes the true Israel of God and His chosen people.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” (Galatians 6:15,16)

- Cornelius was seeking the Lord, and the Lord was calling him and in the due time, the Lord sends him St. Peter to proclaim the good news of the Gospel to him.
- The church in Jerusalem hearing of Cornelius conversion from St. Peter came to realize God’s mercy and rejoiced.

“When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.” (Acts 11: 18)

Chapter Reflection:

The preaching of the Gospel to the gentiles made it clear that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4) and He sends His disciples to call everyone. Since God’s desire is for all to be saved, we don’t tire from calling people into His Kingdom.

Acts 12:

The persecution of the church:

- This is seen as Herod lays hands on St. James (the brother of St. John) and kills him and when he sees that this pleased the Jews, he arrested St. Peter.
 - Now it was *during* the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.
- While St. Peter is in prison, the church fervently prayed for him. As he was sleeping, an angel of the Lord appears and miraculously frees St. Peter from his chains.
- From the events discussed above, we can see the different reactions of the church, the Jews, and the King.

Character	Reflection
The Jews	Their hatred towards the preaching of the word of God was evident as they saw it pleasing for the apostles to die.
King Herod	(According to St. John Chrysostom): He ministered to the senseless lusts of the Jews, for whereas he was supposed to control their rage, he instead made them more eager to take vengeance, thinking highly of himself as he gained the favor of the Jews. In this, Herod portrayed his incompetence as a leader.
The Church	Now we see the church truly acting as one body in Christ, praying for those that are afflicted. We also see that they are not shaken by the events that are happening around them (martyrdom of St. Stephen first, then St. James and now the imprisonment of St. Peter) but instead, out of love, prayed earnestly for deliverance.
St. Peter	He was sleeping, not in distress or fear, having cast all upon God. He later wrote in his first epistle “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:6-7)

Chapter Reflection:

- In the book of Matthew: Jesus spoke to the disciples and said, **“You shall indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with.” (Matthew 20:23)**
- We see that this is now starting to be fulfilled in the book of Acts:
 - Our first sight of martyrdom came in Acts 7 with the martyrdom of St. Stephen the first martyr witnessing for Christ through the shedding of his blood.
 - In the last chapter discussed in this lesson, we see St. James bearing witness to Christ also through the shedding of his blood.

St. John Chrysostom comments on this passage

“But should any raise a question, why God permitted this, we shall say, that it was for the sake of the Jews themselves; thereby first convincing them, that even when the apostles are slain, they prevail, just as it was in the case of St. Stephen... For that none may say that without danger or fear they (the apostles) brave death, as being sure of God’s delivering them, therefore He permits some to be put to death, and chief men too, St. Stephen and St. James, thereby convincing their slayers that not even these things make them fall away and hinder them”

Acts 1-12 Conclusion:

These 12 chapters give insight on the journey of the early church starting from the ascension of Jesus to the spread of the Gospel in Jerusalem and beyond building the foundation for St. Paul's missionary trips.

Here are some key points we can apply in our life:

- Just as the apostles were *filled with the Holy Spirit*, we too, need to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit to effectively witness for God.
- Although the early church faced threats and persecution, the apostles continued to show *unwavering boldness* and continued preaching Christ's resurrection. We can learn from their example to courageously share our faith, even in the face of tribulations.
- As the needs of the church grew, the disciples appointed deacons to take care of the early church. This highlights the importance of *servicing others*. One way we can witness for God is to serve our community and those in need so that we can show His love through our actions.
- The early church *relied on prayer and guidance*. We can depend on our ability to witness by prioritizing prayer and seeking God's guidance.

Acts 13 and onwards.

(Will be explored in detail in Lesson 3 as we discuss St. Paul's missionary trips and St. Paul's character):

- **Acts 13-14:** St. Paul's first missionary with St. Barnabas
- **Acts 15:** Council of Jerusalem.
- **Acts 16:** St. Paul begins his second missionary trip with Silas and Timothy.
- **Acts 17:** St. Paul preaches in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens.
- **Acts 18:** St. Paul ministers in Corinth and meets Aquilla and Priscilla.
- **Acts 19:** St. Paul ministers in Ephesus.
- **Acts 20:** St. Paul travels through Macedonia and Greece, visiting various churches and encouraging believers. He meets with the elders from Ephesus and gives them a farewell address.
- **Acts 21:** St. Paul travels to Jerusalem, where he faces opposition and is arrested.
- **Acts 22:** St. Paul addresses the Jewish crowd, sharing his testimony and defense.
- **Acts 23:** St. Paul appears before the Sanhedrin and then before Felix, the Roman governor.
- **Acts 24:** St. Paul defends himself before Felix and then before Festus, Felix's successor.
- **Acts 25:** St. Paul appeals to Caesar and appears before King Agrippa, sharing his testimony once again.
- **Acts 26:** St. Paul defends himself before Agrippa and shares his conversion story.
- **Acts 27:** St. Paul sails for Rome but encounters a shipwreck.
- **Acts 28:** St. Paul preaches and ministers in Rome, sharing the Gospel even while under house arrest.

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