

Read the Bible in a Year

Week 4 - June 27, 2021

Read on Your Own this Week:

Psalms 10-12

Matthew 13-16

Readings in Class:

Acts 4-19

A Brief Overview of Acts (1-3) 4-19

We shift gears this week into the New Testament book of Acts. Starting as a small movement in an upper room in Acts 1 (perhaps the same upper that they had gathered on the night when Jesus was betrayed), God takes his Disciples on a path that none of them could imagine. Starting from Jerusalem as Jesus tells them, by the end of our section, the Christian Church has found seed beds along the entire Mediterranean Sea and even in Rome herself. The Way of Jesus Christ consists first with the Jews but by chapter 15, a decision is made at the first church council in Jerusalem that God has opened up the way of repentance to life to the Gentiles. What begins with Peter ends now with Paul.

The Focus of the Book of Acts: Acts is Luke's part two that he began with his Gospel and is the only book of its kind in the New Testament. It is also the only documentation that we have of the Christian Church from the 30's-60's, and therefore is very treasured. The nearest information we have following that are letters written by Christians in the 90's AD.

The book of Acts deals with a lot of the early history of the Church, but it is not a history book per se. After all, 25% of the book is speeches/sermons. This lends to the official full name of the book, "Acts of the Apostles." This is an Acta, or a record, of the Church's doings as it relates to what the Lord, Jesus Christ, commanded them to do.

This is also not a book of the day to day life of individual congregations, it is a record of largely missionary activities. It focuses on Peter in the first half (1-15) and his ministry to the Jews and then Paul in the back half (16-28) of Acts as the Church's mission opens up to include Gentiles. What day to day life was like in the Churches can only get grasped in hints along the way. As such, don't look for prescriptive material on how a congregation is to live and operate day to day. For example, Acts presents Baptism in a unique way for many reasons. Instead see how the witness of the Church is formed and how the Church goes about teaching the ways of Jesus Christ.

General Outline:

1. Peter and the Church's Foundation 1:3-8:1
2. The Church Survives and Spreads 8:2-14:28
3. The Council of Jerusalem 15:1-35

4. Paul's Missionary Journeys 15:36-21:16
5. Paul's and the Church at World's End: Rome 21:17-28:31

Summary of 1-19: Luke begins the Book of Acts where Luke's Gospel had left off. Jesus gives his final instructions to his followers before he is taken up into heaven. Jesus tells them that their mission will take them to several places that serve as mile markers and transitions as the book goes along, so focus on where the Church is when these places are mentioned: "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the End of the World. By the end of the book of Acts, the Church has arrived at the end of the world: Rome.

Acts 2 is the pivotal moment that starts all the rest of the book. The Holy Spirit comes down upon the believers as Christ promised he would do. Immediately the apostles are emboldened and equipped for preaching, healing, and the proclamation of Jesus. We get a good handle on the early church's message to the world: You killed Christ, God raised him up, we are his witnesses, repent and believe that Christ is Lord and you will be saved.

This message converts many but also brings enemies. Christ's enemies now focus their dislike to the Church. One of the themes of the book of Acts is that the Church begins to look like her Lord. Notice how stories and people in Acts, such as Stephen and Paul begin to look and quote words that Jesus himself said when on the cross. A crucified Lord means that the church will also look cruciform.

The Church is challenged in Acts 8. Earlier the Pharisees noted that they should just leave the Church alone and soon they will scatter and fade away. But when this scattering caused by Saul/Paul happens in Acts 8, the opposite happens. The Church only grows, proving the case that this movement is not from men but from God. Soon Saul himself is converted by Christ.

As the Church spreads out something huge happens in Acts 10, Gentiles come to faith in Christ and receive the Holy Spirit in the same way in as he did in Acts 2. This creates a controversy that several books in the New Testament are written to resolve: Can Gentiles be partakers of God's kingdom? Can they be citizens of Christ's new world?

The answer to the dilemma comes in Acts 15. The first church council decides from the Scriptures and from the witness of the Apostles that God has tasked them with going to the Gentiles.

Saul, who goes by his Gentile name Paul for the rest of the book (Luke uses Hebrew colloquialisms when writing events in Jerusalem and Greek and Roman terms and phrases when in Gentile country. Luke is a brilliant man and writer). Paul goes on 3 missionary journeys which our reading for this week ends in the middle of his third and final one. During which though, he begins to understand that he will suffer indeed for the sake of Christ as Jesus told him he would. Next week, we pick up and conclude the action that Acts leaves us with.