



SAVED

EXPERIENCING THE PROMISE OF
THE BOOK OF ACTS



NANCY GUTHRIE

LEADER'S GUIDE

Saved Leader's Guide

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Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Acts

Nancy Guthrie

Saved Leader's Guide: Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Acts

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Author's Note

THIS LEADER'S GUIDE HAS BEEN prepared to equip you to plan and lead a group study of the book of Acts using the book or video series *Saved: Experiencing the Power of the Book of Acts*. Acts is the longest book in the New Testament. So it is a lot to cover! I'm hoping that what Amy Kannel and I have put together in this leader's guide will really help you at every step.

This study covers the twenty-eight chapters of Acts in eighteen sessions—an introductory session plus seventeen sessions on the entire text of the book. I have sought to keep the chapters and video teaching sessions relatively short in hopes that it will not be overwhelming. But it will require perseverance to work through all eighteen sessions together.

We've tried to make the elements of this study as flexible as possible to accommodate the various ways groups will use them. The personal Bible study questions are designed to get participants into the text themselves, becoming familiar with the flow of events while also beginning to grapple with the "whys" underneath the text. While there is usually one personal application question in each personal Bible study lesson, application is mostly reserved for the teaching chapter or video and the group discussion. By using

all three elements (personal Bible study + book or video + group discussion questions), we hope your group members will make discoveries in the word, grow in their understanding of the bigger picture, and have meaningful times together discussing what you're learning and how you want it to shape you.

It is likely that participants in your study will be familiar with the story of Pentecost in Acts 1–2 and with some of the other stories, such as Ananias and Sapphira (yikes!), Peter's vision of the animals on a sheet, Paul and Silas singing in prison, and perhaps the shipwreck at the end. We want to know and understand those stories. But we want more than that from our study of Acts. We want to gain a clearer sense of how the events of this book fit into the outworking of God's salvation plan. We want to see how he is at work by his Spirit through his word to build his kingdom, to gather a people for himself, a bride for his Son, made up of Jews and Gentiles.

As I have worked on this study, I've found that my understanding of Acts has made a difference in how I read the rest of the New Testament Epistles. I notice characters and situations in the Epistles that I first met or learned about in Acts. When I read the letters to the churches in Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, or Thessalonica, I read them in light of the history of Paul's initial work in bringing the gospel to those cities. When I read Paul's commendations at the ends of some of his letters, I recognize the names of people who traveled with him and supported him in the events presented in Acts. This has made the people and events in Acts and the Epistles so much more connected and real to me. It has given me more of a sense of what it was like to follow Jesus in these early days after the ascension of Christ—the wonder as well as the costliness of it. It has made me examine myself, looking for a similar commitment

to spreading the gospel and a similar willingness to suffer for the name of Jesus.

When we read Acts, we're not reading ancient history that is disconnected from us in the here and now. Rather, we're reading family history. We're reading the story of how our brothers and sisters first began to take the gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. And we're seeing what it cost them. I pray that as you meet the people in this book, they will become real to you and beloved by you. I pray that you'll have a greater sense of how the risen and enthroned Lord Jesus is directing the spread of his gospel from heaven, not only during the time period covered in Acts, but today. And I pray you'll become more aware of and grateful for the Holy Spirit, who empowers his people to boldly spread that gospel. I pray that this study of Acts will cause you to understand more fully and cherish more fondly the salvation that God is accomplishing in his world and in our lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nancy Guthrie". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "N" and a long, sweeping underline.

Planning Your Study

AS A LEADER, YOU HAVE THE FREEDOM to choose how to use these resources in a way that will work best for your group. Below we've sought to outline some considerations as you decide on the homework to assign, the length of your study, and how you'll divide up your time together.

How to Structure Your Study

This study can be done with or without the video version of the teaching. The content of the videos is the same as the chapters in the book.

For your first meeting, I suggest that you either have participants read the introduction in the book in advance, read the introduction aloud in your gathering, cover its content in your own words, or watch the introduction video, and then work through the discussion questions provided for the introduction session. You might also use this time to talk about how your time will be structured and clarify expectations. Your participants can then work on the personal Bible study for chapter 1 on their own prior to the next gathering.

If participants are working on the personal Bible study on their own, *we generally do not recommend that you plan to spend your*

time together going over all the personal Bible study questions. These questions are invaluable for laying a foundation of understanding and helping participants immerse themselves in Scripture prior to reading the chapter or watching the video, but they do not always lend themselves very well to group discussion because they often generate simply factual responses.

You will want to use the discussion questions as your primary source for generating thoughtful discussion. These questions are designed to lead you from the text of the Bible and the chapter or video presentation into real life, deepening your understanding of the text and its implications, and making personal applications. Questions from the personal Bible study are occasionally brought into the discussion questions where we think discussing them would be helpful.

Note: If you assign the personal Bible study as homework and have someone in your group who repeatedly does not complete it, you might see if she would be interested in meeting for lunch, coffee, or a study session to work through it together. Perhaps there is an intimidation or frustration factor that you can help with.

Using Your Group Time

Following are just two examples of how you might plan your group time together based on how long you meet, whether you're using the book or the video, and whether you want to work through the personal Bible study individually or as a group. Of course, these examples are not exhaustive, but we hope they will give you ideas as you plan your study in a way that will work best for your group.

If you are using the teaching videos in this series, you will find that they vary slightly but generally last 30–45 minutes.

Example 1: Sixty minutes using book only, with participants reading the chapter in between gatherings:

- 5 minutes: Welcome and prayer.
- 15 minutes: Leader talks through main points of chapter, asking participants to share parts of the chapter that were significant.
- 35 minutes: Work through discussion questions.
- 5 minutes: Prayer of response to material, close.

Example 2: Ninety minutes using video:

- 5 minutes: Welcome, get settled, announcements.
- 35 minutes: Watch video teaching.
- 35 minutes: Discussion using the discussion questions.
- 10 minutes: End with various participants praying in response to what has been presented and discussed. Each session of the discussion questions ends with an invitation to pray through what has been presented in the passage.

Using the Personal Bible Study Questions

Work through questions on your own first. We all know that it can be a challenge to resist looking for the answers to a crossword puzzle in the back of the book. As the leader, it may likewise be a challenge for you to resist using this resource when you work through these questions for the first time. *We strongly urge you to use a blank copy of the personal Bible study and complete the questions on your own first, just like your fellow group members, without reading the possible answers in this leader's guide until after you've completed it on your own.* After working through the questions yourself, you

can look over the leader's guide and add notes to your own answers as desired in preparation for the group discussion.

The possible answers to the personal Bible study questions found in this leader's guide are provided to assist you and other small-group leaders in facilitating discussion and dealing with difficult questions. *This guide should never be provided to group members.* Think of it as a reference tool. If you choose to discuss the answers to the personal Bible study questions when you gather, be sure to avoid referring to what is provided in this leader's guide as the source of the "right" or "best" answer.

The personal Bible study is much less focused on personal application and much more about laying scriptural groundwork. It doesn't tie up loose ends (we hope the book chapter or the video will help to clarify any confusing concepts) and doesn't always make direct application. Its primary purpose is to get participants into God's word to see for themselves what it says and begin thinking about what it means.

Depending on the Bible study experience, maturity level, or personalities of the people in your group, some may tend to get impatient with these "What does this passage say?" questions and want to rush to application: "What does this have to do with my life?" Often in our instant-gratification culture, women want to put in a few minutes of Bible reading and come away with a feel-good bit of encouragement or a clear to-do list. They're seeking a quick "How does this apply to me?" takeaway.

Applying the Bible to our lives is essential! But the appropriate application is not always immediately clear. It's good for us to press in and think deeply to gain clarity about what the text meant to the original audience (them/then) before we bring it into our own context (us/now). If we don't spend much time on

the “So what?” question in the personal Bible study, that doesn’t mean it won’t be addressed at all. Rather, we believe that the application will be deeper and more powerful (and more faithful to the Scriptures) when we get there if we invest the time to think carefully and understand what God’s word says first. Each chapter in the book and each video presentation will present some ideas for application. And much of the discussion guide focuses on getting practical and living out the truths presented. We should keep in mind, however, that the most important impact of the lessons may be less about “what I’m supposed to do” or “how I’m supposed to change” and more about leading us to wonder and worship in light of the magnificence of God’s salvation plan and the generosity of “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).

How Long Should It Take to Complete the Personal Bible Study Questions?

There is no set time frame. We all approach this differently. Some participants love to linger, think through, look up, and write out. Others simply look for the answers and make short notations. If you’re asked about the time commitment, we suggest you say that it takes as much time as they choose to invest in it. Some lessons include more passages to look up than others, but we would expect that you could read the Scriptures and complete the questions in thirty to sixty minutes. Certainly participants may have more time available some weeks than others, but we all know that we get more out of study the more we put into it. As the leader, keep in mind that the depth of thought given to the lesson is not necessarily reflected in the length of answers written on the page or the time spent according to the clock.

What is most important is not how much time it takes, but that each participant plan a time to work through the personal Bible study and keep that appointment. In fact, on the first week, you might go around the circle and ask each group member to share with the group when she intends to work on the personal Bible study in the coming week. This encourages planning and establishes some accountability, as well as providing ideas to others in the group for when they might make time for study. You might ask those who have done similar studies if they prefer to do it in one sitting or to break it up over several days.

It will be wise for you to affirm at the start why we are doing any of this: because we want to know Christ through his word. This is not like the busywork we did in school. This is the pursuit of relationship with Christ, which comes primarily as we open up God's word to hear him speak to us as we read it, think it through for ourselves, chew on it, discuss it, and pray through it. It is both elements—the personal Bible study and the teaching (either book or video)—that prepare participants to take part in the group discussion.

Using the Group Discussion Questions

You will find a copy of the discussion questions for each session beginning on page 203 of this leader's guide. You may copy and hand out these questions to your group members if you would like, though you don't have to.

The discussion questions don't always lend themselves to simple answers; they invite participants to interact with the themes and challenges of each passage and consider how we are called to live in light of these truths. You will want to spend some time going over the questions on your own prior to your group time. Looking

over the notes we've provided will give you a sense of the types of conversations we're hoping to provoke. But we hope you'll view this guide as a resource, not as a script. You might choose to add an opening question that will help participants warm up, or you might be selective about which questions you think will be most effective with your group and fit in your time frame. You may also want to encourage participants to share something that was meaningful or challenging to them from the personal Bible study, the book chapter, or the video presentation, determining ahead of time at what point in the discussion you will invite those comments.

We strongly urge you not to read answers from this leader's guide, as this creates a "right answer" environment rather than a genuine discussion among equal participants. Instead, we suggest you make some notes from the leader's guide onto your copy of the discussion questions and bring them in where needed, esteeming the input of your group. Their contributions may be different from what we've provided—and even more insightful!

Ideas and Resources for Discussion Group Facilitators

THANK YOU FOR YOUR WILLINGNESS to lead a group through this study of Acts! We pray that your extra investment of time and effort in preparation will not only equip you to lead effectively but will also fill you with wonder and worship of the God who is working out his salvation purposes in history.

Your Goal as Discussion Leader

What is your role as a discussion leader? We suggest you make it your goal to draw out the members of your group and guide them through a time of open and authentic discussion of the biblical truths presented in the text of Scripture and in the book or video. As you seek to clarify challenging concepts, solidify the group's grasp of the truths presented, and apply those truths to real life, work to create an environment that is safe for personal struggle, difficult questions, discovery, and even ambiguity.

Sometimes we are anxious about leading or reluctant to lead because we know we don't have all the answers. We're afraid someone will ask a question we can't answer or take the discussion in a

direction we can't handle. Don't allow yourself to be intimidated by the false expectation that if you step up to facilitate the discussion, you must have all the "right" answers.

Too often when people discuss the Bible, someone in the group (often the leader) feels he or she must sum up every part of the discussion with the "right" answer. As you lead your group, avoid the compulsion to come quickly to the "right" answer to every question. Don't be afraid to let some questions hang for a while. Allow members to struggle with the issues involved in the series of questions. Keep asking for the input of other participants who may be reluctant talkers.

There's nothing wrong with admitting that you don't know something or don't fully understand something. Perhaps you need to study it more, or you want to invite someone on the pastoral staff of your church to help answer the question. Determine to lead your group as a fellow learner, not as an all-knowing expert. Expect God to use his word not only in the lives of your group members, but in your life as well!

While you do not want to dominate the group, you do want to lead effectively. It's your job to create an atmosphere that fosters meaningful discussion. As the leader, you set the tone for authenticity and openness. Set an example of being a good listener and giving short answers so that others can talk. Being an effective leader also means that it is up to you to draw reluctant talkers into the conversation and to redirect the conversation when it has gone off track. Few people want to be part of a group that is inflexible, restrictive, or rules oriented, but they do want to be part of a group that is organized and purposeful, in which expectations are unapologetically communicated and guidelines are respected. On the following pages, we've provided some suggestions for dealing

with issues that commonly arise in small-group studies. We hope they will be helpful to you in leading well.

Using Your Time Effectively

As the leader, it's your responsibility to direct how the time for group discussion is used. While some participants may be very casual about this, others in your group will be very aware of the time and become frustrated when they feel their valuable time is being wasted. Several issues can have a significant impact on effectively using the time allotted for small-group discussion:

Getting Started

So often we run out of time because we are slow to get started. We are waiting for latecomers or chatting or enjoying some food together, and we simply let the time get away from us. All groups develop a culture, and members learn whether the group will really start on time or not. They will adjust their sense of urgency regarding arrival time accordingly.

Certainly you need to allow some time for participants to greet each other and to share their lives with each other, but you will want to decide how long that will last and give the group a firm start time for the discussion. If you establish a culture of starting on time regardless of whether everyone in the group has arrived, not allowing latecomers to interrupt your discussion when they arrive, you may likely find that group members become more punctual.

At the beginning of the study, you may also want to ask that any members who arrive late simply join the group and enter the discussion as unobtrusively as possible. When we stop the discussion while everyone greets the late arrival, perhaps hearing the story of what caused the lateness, it can be challenging to get started again.

You as the leader will need to manage this area with an appropriate blend of firmness and grace.

Prayer Requests

Many times we want our small-group discussion times to include sharing prayer requests, which can be a meaningful way of sharing our lives together and exercising our trust and relationship with God. But we also know that sometimes sharing requests can turn into long stories and lengthy discussions as other members offer advice or input.

If the use of time for prayer requests is a concern for your group, one way to handle this is to provide notecards for people to write down their requests. These cards can be shared at the end, or members can simply swap cards with each other. Alternatively, you may want to determine a time to bring your discussion to a close that will allow space at the end for sharing requests, praying together over those requests, and *praying through the truths presented in the lesson*.

And that is key—that your prayer time include praying through the truths presented, not solely praying over situations in the lives of participants. When we read and study God’s word, we don’t want it to be a one-way conversation. We want to respond to it in prayer. Rather than listening to him speak to us and then only talking to him about what we think is important, we should pray through the implications of what we’ve studied as an important way to respond to what he has said.

Getting Stuck Along the Way

It’s easy to give too much time to questions at the beginning and end up running out of time to cover everything. We strongly suggest you go over the discussion questions in advance to determine

how you will use the time. Mark the key questions you must get to. You may want to make a note beside each question that you want to be sure to include, indicating an estimate of how much time you want to give for discussing that question, and then watch your clock along the way to keep on track. As you do, however, don't be so rigidly tied to the clock that you rush the group along when rich discussion is developing. Perhaps some members found a different question particularly compelling, and a discussion that stays on topic but goes in a different direction than the one you planned can still be worthwhile and helpful.

Keeping the Focus on God's Word

People come to a Bible study for many reasons, from many situations and struggles, with varying levels of knowledge of and interest in the Bible. Sometimes a group can easily shift from a Bible study into more of a personal support group. Finding that balance between biblical study and relational connection is a challenge for every small-group leader.

Some group leaders feel that when a group member arrives with a significant struggle or sorrow, the leader must set the study aside to listen and care for that hurting person. In some situations, perhaps this is the best thing to do, but we must also remember that the word of God speaks into every need and situation in our lives. It heals; it gives perspective; it instructs, convicts, restores, and renews. Don't assume that the advice and input of group members has more power than your discussion of the truths of God's word to help that hurting person.

Keep in mind that while some participants may come more for the fellowship and sharing of their lives with each other, other participants are hungry to feast on biblical teaching and discussion

of God's word. If, over time, these participants find that the word is often set aside or given short shrift, they may look for somewhere else to study God's word with others.

Ending on Time

Just as starting promptly demonstrates that participants' time is valuable, concluding your study on time also shows respect for your participants. Be sure to wrap things up at the agreed-upon time, recognizing that they have other commitments and plans after your study. That way those who want to stay and chat can linger, but those who need to leave won't have to slip out one by one, or be unable to focus on the discussion because of the distraction of needing to be somewhere else.

Guiding the Discussion and Addressing Challenges

Sharing of Opinion without Regard to God's Word

It is only natural that group members will often begin their input in the discussion with the words, "Well, I think . . ." And in fact, some of the questions are phrased in a "What do you think" manner. This is purposeful, not only to get people thinking, but also to emphasize that there isn't necessarily a right or wrong answer.

But we also want to cultivate a respect for the authority of Scripture in our discussions. Though this is not a welcome perspective in our culture, every opinion does not have equal value or weight with every other opinion. The revealed truth of God's word must carry the greatest weight in our discussions. While you don't want to embarrass someone in the group setting who states something that is clearly unscriptural, it may be a good idea to gently challenge a questionable opinion with something like, "That's interesting.

I wonder how you would support that from Scripture?” Or you might want to find a time outside the group setting to discuss the issue, using biblical support to gently challenge error.

The Discussion Gets Lively but Off Track

Sometimes the discussion quickly gets away from the original question and onto an interesting but not directly related topic. When this happens, it may be wise to state the obvious and then turn the focus back to the content at hand by saying something like, “We could certainly talk a long time about _____, but we have so much important material to discuss in our lesson this week, so let’s get back to that.” If the first person to answer says something that seems far from the main point, you might say, “That’s interesting. How do you see that connecting to [restate the question/topic]?” If you haven’t gotten to some of the key truth involved in the question, go back and ask the original question again, perhaps adding, “Did anyone see it differently or have another idea?”

Group Members Are Quiet and Slow to Respond

For a leader to be effective, it’s essential for her to become comfortable with silence. Some people are slow to warm up or take longer to formulate their thoughts. Others are eager to participate but don’t want to appear to be know-it-alls or dominate the discussion time. Some fear having the “wrong” answer or revealing their biblical illiteracy, especially if they are surrounded by people they perceive to have more biblical knowledge than they do. Resist the temptation to fill the silence by continuing to explain the question or jumping in with your own thoughts. Waiting quietly allows people more space to contribute. One way to deal with an awkward silence is to make a joke about the silence without

coming across as chiding your group. Humor is a great way to defuse discomfort. One leader we know sometimes says, “I can wait you out!”

Be wise and careful about putting people on the spot, but where it seems appropriate, don't be afraid to call on specific people to answer questions. Some people simply don't like to answer a question unless they're invited to do so, and often these people have very thoughtful answers that will benefit the group. You might turn to the reluctant participant and say, “What do you think about that, Joan?” or, “Is that how you see it, Kim?”

Work to develop a habit of affirming the answers and willingness of those who share in your group. Set the example of being a responsive and attentive listener. Make a point of commenting on participants' input as insightful, something you've never thought of before, or personally helpful to you. Resist the temptation to sum up or add to every answer given, though it may be helpful to restate an answer if you can help to clarify something that someone is struggling to articulate. You can also generate genuine give-and-take by asking a follow-up question to someone's statement or by asking that person to tell you more about what she has said. Make sure you are focusing on the person who is sharing rather than on what you will say next.

One Person Dominates the Discussion

Almost every group has at least one person who tends to be quick to answer every question or dominate the discussion. When this pattern develops, you might begin the next question by saying, “I'd love to hear from someone who has not shared yet today.” Or you might direct your next question specifically to another group member.

Sometimes, when a participant is speaking too long, you serve the group and the discussion by discreetly interrupting, perhaps saying something like, “What you’re saying is helpful! I’d love to hear someone else’s thoughts.” Or you could summarize what she has said in a concise statement and use it as a transition to the next question. Another method is to jump in with a question such as, “What verse or phrase helped you to see that?” Remember, the other group members want and need you to take charge in this situation to keep the discussion moving and fruitful for everyone.

If the problem persists, you may need to pull your eager participant aside at some point. Invite her to be your ally in bringing more people into the discussion. She may not even realize that she is dominating. Tell her that you really appreciate her insights and want to create an atmosphere in the group in which everyone is sharing. Suggest that she could choose two or three of the questions that she really wants to answer and refrain from answering questions less important to her, so that others in the group might be more able and willing to participate.

Participants Habitually Do Not Complete the Homework

Everyone has times when life circumstances make it difficult to complete the lesson. But when group members are consistently not completing the personal Bible study or reading the chapter (if using the book only), it is a problem. Lack of preparation leaves little foundation for group discussion.

At the beginning of your time together in the first session, emphasize the importance of completing the assignments. Reiterate this the second time you meet. Without being rigid or lacking in grace, call participants to follow through on their commitment to the study rather than giving them an easy out every time. As

humans we all need accountability. But sometimes in Bible study groups, we are so afraid of offending participants that we do not fulfill our role as leaders by encouraging faithfulness, punctuality, and full participation. If someone struggles to get the lessons done, you might:

- Suggest that rather than merely hoping to find some time during the week, she should make an appointment for a specific time on her calendar to complete the lesson and commit to keeping the appointment, just like she would for a lunch date with a friend or a doctor's appointment.
- Ask how she tends to use Sunday, the Lord's Day. Could she find an hour during that day to spend in God's word?
- Explore the possibility of her setting a time during the week to meet in person or by phone with another group member to work through the material together.

If she continues to be unable to complete the work, don't worry about it if it does not adversely affect the rest of the group. We cannot always know what another person's life is like, and if the best she can do is get there, that may be enough.

Disagreement with What Is Being Taught

Sometimes seeing things a little differently can be very productive in a group discussion. We learn from each other as we discover and discuss the differences or nuances in how we see things. Many topics in this study allow for a breadth of perspectives, and some topics challenge what may be dearly held views. Having to reconsider your own convictions or assumptions in light of others' perspectives is a difficult but valuable practice that can help everyone to grow.

Give each other grace and space to land in different places or agree to disagree.

What is not welcome in the group is an argumentative spirit or combative approach to what is being presented. If areas of disagreement come up that cannot be productively resolved in the group, you could respond with, “I appreciate your perspective on that. We need to move on in our discussion, but if you’re interested, we could get together or meet with Pastor _____ and talk through this more. I’m sure we both have more to learn about this.”

Because we are humans dealing with other humans, we will have areas of disagreement. Our different experiences and preferences will lead us to different conclusions. But that doesn’t mean that we cannot have unity as we seek to submit ourselves to God’s word. Make this—and every other aspect of the study—a matter of prayer as you prepare to lead your group.

A Final Note of Encouragement

The best news about leading a Bible study group is that God always equips us to do what he calls us to do. Ask God to give you the wisdom to work through whatever may come up in your small group. Ask him for insight into the personalities of the people in your group and the backgrounds that have made them who they are and shaped their perspectives about the Scriptures. Ask God to fill your heart with love for your group members as you lead them through this study of his word. And join us in praying that as you and your group members see how the enthroned Lord Jesus is at work through his Spirit to advance his glorious plan of salvation, you will be amazed by his power and eager to participate in the spread of his gospel.

PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY
AND DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS WITH
POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Introduction

Acts of the Apostles?

Personal Bible Study

There is no personal Bible study to be completed prior to the introductory session.

Discussion Questions

1. Some of us may have studied Acts before, while others of us may be completely new to it. When you think about the book of Acts (the largest book of the New Testament), what do you already know—or think you know—about it?

Personal response.

2. As we trace the progress of the gospel in Acts, it will be helpful for us to consult various maps of the known world in the first century. Take a moment to explore your Bible. What map(s) do you find that might prove helpful during this study?

Personal response.

3. Nancy talked about the personal Bible study questions she has prepared to help us to get into the text of Acts. Are you planning to work through the personal Bible study prior to each session? Where can you make time in your schedule for completing it?

Personal response.

4. Nancy presented various possible titles for the book of Acts: Acts of the Apostles, Acts of the Holy Spirit, Acts of the Preached Word, and Acts of the Enthroned Lord Jesus. How are each of these “actors” significant in accomplishing the salvation of God?

The apostles are the vessels through whom God carries out his plan. May we never overlook how incredible it is that God chooses to work through humans—he doesn’t need us, but he grants us the privilege and joy of participating in his work.

The Holy Spirit fills believers, empowering them to proclaim the gospel and perform signs and wonders. The Spirit grants people repentance and draws them to believe in Jesus.

The preached word is the tool the apostles use to draw people to God. It almost seems to take on an identity of its own in Acts, repeatedly described as spreading, increasing, and multiplying.

And through the apostles, the Spirit, and the word, the enthroned Lord Jesus is at work. He is still active from heaven, providing for his disciples and adding believers to his church.

5. The central aim of Acts is to assure us that the Lord Jesus is at work by his Spirit, through the word of God preached and

written by the apostles, to save a vast people for himself. Why might Luke's original audience have needed that assurance? Why might we need that assurance today?

Immediately after Jesus's ascension, it would be natural to wish Jesus were still among you. "How amazing it must have been for those who got to see him and walk with him!" you might think. "Why couldn't he have stayed? Look at all we missed out on!" And two thousand years later, isn't it easy for us to feel the same? It seems like following him would be so much easier if he were physically present with us. But Luke writes to assure them then, as well as us now, that even though Jesus is not visible, he is no less active in our lives and in the world around us. He is in heaven, but he is not far off or disinterested. He loves and cares for us. He is committed to building his church. Knowing that he is with us and at work through us gives us confidence to join him in his work.

6. Salvation is past, present, and future, so we can rightly say, "I have been saved; I am being saved; I will be saved." How does this challenge your thinking about what it means to be "saved"? What are we being saved from in each of these three aspects of salvation?

Initially, at the point of regeneration, our sins are forgiven—entirely and completely. We have been delivered from sin's penalty. Through faith, we are reckoned to be righteous—as righteous as Christ is. Then as we learn to walk with Christ in this life, we are gradually being delivered from sin's power. Ultimately, in heaven, we will be delivered from sin's presence.

INTRODUCTION

We could also call this the three stages of salvation: justification, sanctification, and glorification.

7. What do you personally hope to get out of this study of Acts?

Personal response.

Let's close by praying that God will impress upon us the wonders of his salvation plan for his people as we work our way through this study of Acts.

Lesson 1

You Will Be My Witnesses

ACTS 1:1–26

Personal Bible Study

1. Read Acts 1:1–3, which serves as a summary of what Luke wrote in the Gospel of Luke and what he is going to write in this first chapter of Acts. When you read that Jesus spent forty days “speaking about the kingdom of God” with the apostles, what kinds of things do you think he might have discussed? (You might also want to read Luke 24:44–48, which provides another statement about what Jesus taught the apostles, or use your concordance to find other passages that refer to the kingdom.)

Ever since the beginning of Luke, which we could think of as part 1 of a two-part book (Luke-Acts), Luke has connected Jesus and his kingdom to the promises made to King David. The Lord promised David a son who would sit on his throne and

rule over a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam. 7:12–16; Luke 1:31–33). So Jesus likely helped the disciples connect all the Old Testament promises of a king and a kingdom of justice and righteousness to himself and his kingdom.

We can infer from the Gospels that Jesus likely spoke to them about the nature of the kingdom, perhaps reminding them of his parables (Luke 13:18–30, for example) and how he showed signs of the kingdom in his miracles (see Matt. 9:35). Perhaps he reminded them of the kingdom values he preached in Luke 6:17–49.

Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus repeatedly spoke of the many ways his kingdom is not like kingdoms of the world. So perhaps he continued to differentiate his kingdom from worldly kingdoms. Perhaps he reminded them of who could and could not be a part of his kingdom (Luke 6:20; 9:62; 13:29; 18:15–17, 24). He might have reiterated to them how he had taught them to pray, “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2), instructing them that they should continue to pray for it to come in all its glorious fullness.

He may have also reminded them of the parable he had told in response to their expectation that “the kingdom of God was to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11–27). This would have encouraged them to steward what he entrusted to them as they awaited his return.

And perhaps he emphasized the “all nations” aspect of the kingdom, helping them see how God’s plan all along was to include the Gentiles. Perhaps he took them to Isaiah 49 to explain that it was “too light a thing” that he as servant of

the Lord should raise up and preserve only the tribes of Jacob but rather that his intent was and is to make them “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6).

2. Read Acts 1:4. Jesus tells the disciples to wait for “the promise of the Father.” What do the following verses reveal about this promise?

Isaiah 32:14–15: *The Spirit will be poured out on God’s people, transforming them from being like wilderness to a fruitful field.*

Isaiah 44:3: *The Spirit will be poured out on Israel’s offspring.*

Joel 2:28–29: *The Spirit will be poured out on all flesh so that all of God’s people will prophesy.*

3. Read Acts 1:6–7. The disciples’ question, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” could be understood a number of ways. How would the following passages have shaped the disciples’ expectations of “restoration”?

Isaiah 49:5–6: *Restoration means bringing Israel back to God and making them a light to the nations so that his “salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*

Ezekiel 37:20–28: *The tribes of the northern and southern kingdoms will become one nation in the land again, with one king over them. Idolatry will be a thing of the past. God will dwell with them in a covenant of peace, claiming them as his own and identifying himself as their God. All nations will know that he sanctifies them and is in their midst.*

Zechariah 2:10–11: God will welcome Gentiles into the people of God.

4. Read Acts 1:8, which provides a rough outline for the entire book of Acts. Consider who Jesus was speaking to. Why might this statement from Jesus have been challenging for them to grasp?

Jesus spoke these words to twelve Galileans who had likely never traveled widely or interacted much with Gentiles. Their sense was that Jesus was a Messiah for the Jews. It probably never occurred to them that they would testify about Jesus to Gentiles, or that they would go “to the end of the earth.” They probably found it hard to grasp what it would mean for the Holy Spirit to “come upon” them.

5. Read Acts 1:9–11. What details do these verses provide about the ascension and return of Christ?

Jesus, in his human body, was lifted up from the earth. He was enveloped in a cloud. Two men in white robes stood by the disciples and spoke to them. Then men in white robes told them that Jesus was taken up into heaven and that he will return to earth in the same way.

6. Read Acts 3:19–21. What does Peter come to understand about the time of restoration?

The time of full restoration will come when Jesus returns to earth.

7. Read Acts 1:12–20. In verse 16, Peter says that the psalms of David he is quoting (Psalms 69:25 and 109:8) are fulfilled in

Judas. How do you think Peter has been able to come to that conclusion? (See Luke 24:25–27, 44–47.)

Over the forty days Jesus spent with his disciples after his resurrection, he had opened their minds to see how the Old Testament was most profoundly about him—specifically about his suffering and glory. Perhaps in “speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3), Jesus also showed them how to understand David’s psalms as not only speaking about David’s own experience but more profoundly about the experiences of his greater son, King Jesus. So where Psalm 69 speaks of the enemies of God’s king experiencing the curse of desolation, Peter sees Judas, who set himself as an enemy of God in his betrayal of Jesus. And when Peter reads in Psalm 109 that the life of the wicked man who responds to the king’s love with hatred should be cut short and “another take his office,” Peter discerns this to be about the wicked Judas, who responded to Jesus’s love with hatred.

8. Read Acts 1:21–26. What requirements do you find for the replacement apostle according to these verses? (You might also consult Acts 10:39–41.)

An apostle had to have been with Jesus throughout his three years of public ministry. He had to have been an eyewitness of the resurrected Jesus. He had to be chosen by Jesus.

9. The time the apostles spent with Jesus between his resurrection and ascension helped them to grapple with the ways the kingdom of Jesus was not what they had expected it to be. They had to make some adjustments in their understanding and expectations. Has your life, as a citizen of the kingdom

of God, been what you expected it to be? What truths from Jesus's teaching about the kingdom could help you adjust your expectations toward what Jesus has promised?

Personal response.

Discussion Questions

1. Luke begins by referring to his Gospel, which was about what Jesus "began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). This implies that Acts is about what Jesus *continued* to do and teach after his ascension. Why is it important for us to recognize that Jesus continues to "do and teach" from his throne in heaven?

While Jesus walked on earth, he said, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18)—and even though he is now in heaven, he is indeed building his church. Jesus's ministry was not limited to a few years in first-century Palestine! He actively continues to "do and teach" from his throne in heaven, and his purposes cannot be thwarted or resisted. Nothing and no one can stop his plans from coming to fruition.

We are not building his church, though in his grace he equips and uses us to be a part of his great mission. But it is not up to us. This means we do not need to be anxious in the face of opposition, persecution, or rejection. We never need to think that we are on our own in our mission to proclaim the gospel so that people from every nation will be saved. And we need not grow discouraged when the growth is slow to come. Jesus is on his throne in heaven, ruling over every aspect of God's salvation plan, and it will come about in his way and in his timing.

2. Why is the ascension of Jesus significant? Why do you think we give so much less attention to it than to his incarnation, death, and resurrection?

The ascension of the risen and glorified (and yet still human!) Jesus assures us that Jesus is still active on behalf of his people, ruling and reigning from heaven. It also encourages us to anticipate his bodily return to this earth. In the resurrection, Jesus conquered death; in the ascension, he was exalted to the right hand of the Father. When we focus solely on what he has done for us in the past in his life, death, and resurrection, we fail to realize the implications of his ongoing lordship and what he continues to do for us. We devalue his present ministry to us and for us in heaven.

Perhaps we give less attention to his ascension because we have less of a record of his ministry from heaven than we have of his ministry on earth. But while we don't have a lot of details, the New Testament gives us some powerful examples of what Jesus's ascension to the Father's right hand means for us. In his glorified human body, Jesus has gone to heaven "as a forerunner on our behalf" (Heb. 6:20). As a result of his ascension, we have "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain" (Heb. 6:19). From his place in heaven, the exalted Lord bestows gifts of repentance and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31). And he serves there as our mediator, interceding for us (Rom. 8:34).

3. What kinds of things do you think Jesus discussed with the apostles when he spent forty days with them "speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3)?

Jesus likely taught his disciples how he is the King at the center of the kingdom. Luke 24:44–48 tells us that he helped them see how all of the Old Testament points to him, how the prophecies have been or will be fulfilled in him—that he is God’s “yes” to all those promises (2 Cor. 1:20). He may have clarified for them why the cross was necessary, and how it was not the end but the beginning. He also probably emphasized the “all nations” aspect of the kingdom, helping them see how God’s plan all along was to include the Gentiles. Perhaps he took them to Isaiah 49 to explain that it was “too light a thing” that he as servant of the Lord should raise up and preserve only the tribes of Jacob, but rather that his intent was and is to make them “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6).

4. How would the Old Testament prophets have shaped how the apostles thought about the restoration of Israel?

The prophets repeatedly spoke of a day when the twelve tribes of Israel, who were separated when the northern kingdom split from the southern kingdom, would be regathered and restored to God and to each other. A regathered and restored Israel would be a beacon of light beckoning the nations to stream to Mount Zion to worship the one true God (Isa. 11; 60; Ezek. 37:16–19).

From Isaiah 49:5–6, they could have understood that restoration would mean that Israel was brought back into loving relationship with God and that he would make them a light to the nations so that his “salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

From Ezekiel 37:20–28, they could have understood restoration coming as the tribes of the northern and southern kingdoms became one nation in the land again, with one king over them. Idolatry would be a thing of the past. God would dwell with them in a covenant of peace, claiming them as his own and identifying himself as their God.

From Zechariah 2:10–11, they could have understood that restoration would include God welcoming Gentiles into the people of God.

5. If you were an ordinary Israelite in the Old Testament era, why might you have longed for the day when “the promise of the Father,” the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all believers, would become a reality?

We likely take the Holy Spirit’s indwelling of every believer for granted. We’ve never had to live as those who loved God and sought to obey his commands but did not have the Holy Spirit within them. The prophets had promised that the day would come when the Spirit would be poured out, cleansing them of idolatry and giving them a new heart for obedience (Isa. 44:3–4; Ezek. 36:25–28; Joel 2:28–29). Israelites under the old covenant must have longed for the power of the Holy Spirit to give them the “want-to” to obey God’s commands. They must have longed to have the Spirit work in their minds to guide them into truth. They must have longed for the Spirit to comfort them with assurance of salvation. They must have longed for the conviction of the Holy Spirit that would prompt them to confess and forsake sin.

The Spirit's work in all believers would form them into a true community, empowering them to love and serve each other and the world around them. Surely the Old Testament Israelites who so often succumbed to idolatry, apathy toward God, and conflict with each other would have longed for the Spirit to be at work among them to enliven their fellowship with God and strengthen their community life.

6. Jesus tells the apostles that they would receive power to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In what ways would they need divine power to accomplish this task?

To be effective witnesses, the apostles would first need to understand and remember all that Jesus had taught them. This is exactly what Jesus had promised in John 14:26 that the Spirit would do for them. Additionally, these men had just recently fled in fear when Jesus was arrested and crucified. Clearly they would need supernatural power to stand firm and speak boldly in the face of persecution and opposition. They would also need divine power to overcome their natural prejudice against non-Jews.

7. Can the statement “You will be my witnesses” be applied directly to us today? Why or why not?

It does apply to us today, but only derivatively, as we hold fast to the apostles' foundational gospel witness and build on that apostolic foundation (Eph. 2:20). Our calling is to proclaim what they have recorded for us in the New Testament. It is also important to recognize that, for most of us, our home base for

missionary activity is not Jerusalem. Instead, we are part of “the end of the earth” reached by the gospel in the period beyond its foundational spread.

8. Nancy suggests that instead of thinking of ourselves as “witnesses,” we should think of ourselves as “proclaimers.” What is the difference? How might this distinction impact how we approach our mission?

We can never be “witnesses” to Christ in the sense that the apostles were, as eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ. And our calling isn’t really to give a testimony about our own experience. That can often be a valuable part of our conversations about Christ, but it is not the focus of our message. Our calling is to proclaim the objective truth that the apostolic witnesses have recorded for us in the Gospels and Epistles about the Lord Jesus Christ. This should shape (and perhaps constrain) the content of our message. If our message is not drawn from, or does not conform faithfully to, what the apostles have recorded for us, we are not doing true gospel ministry.

9. Though we are proclaimers rather than witnesses, we need the same divine power these eyewitnesses needed to accomplish their task. And that power is available to us! In what ways do we need the Holy Spirit’s power to accomplish our task?

We need the Spirit to enlighten the eyes of our hearts (Eph. 1:18) so that we understand the word that testifies to him. We need him to convict us of sin and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9) so that we have integrity as we proclaim truth. We need his power to communicate clearly and boldly.

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES

We need him to give us courage in the face of opposition and wisdom to guide our steps.

Let's close by praying for each other to receive divine power for the task of proclaiming what the apostles have handed down to us.