

An introduction to the book of Acts

When you visit Japan for the first time it is very useful to make preparations in advance.

Most tourists buy a guide book and do some research. (put up slide of guide book)

However much reading you do it is impossible to live the experience of Japan unless you are actually here.

Nevertheless at least you know **what to expect**, and can **identify some of the things that you have read about**.

When my sister came to Japan for the first time last September the letter T seemed to describe all of her early experiences. To her it was Trains, Trees, Toilets, and Taiko Drumming.

For foreigners, toilets can be a problem. They are either squat toilets, or they are so technical that if you are not careful, you will get a shower, rather than a flush.

So what we are going to do today is to learn something from the **guide book** about the **book of Acts**.

As we go through this guide book today, we will know **exactly what to expect from this amazing book**. We are told by some of the best Bible teachers that where the Bible is faithfully taught, God's voice is clearly heard. Therefore, I need to be faithful and thorough in my exposition of this important book.

Although God's voice may be clearly taught and heard, that does not mean that it will be faithfully applied.

In the case of the book of Acts, we need to faithfully apply the things that God teaches us, because it is the foundation of the Christian Church.

If we apply what we will learn in the book of Acts, we should become a Church that will **honour God and His Son Jesus Christ**.

Jesus said, "**I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades(Hell) shall not prevail against it.**"

(Matt. 16: v. 18)

Let us look at the whole book of Acts and discover some things that will help us as we study it over the next few months.

To help us get the most from this introduction I have 5 headings for our guide book.

1. Why should we study the book of Acts?

There are 4 main reasons why it is important to study the book of Acts.

a) We need to see clearly the fulfilment of God's plans.

There is a connection between the end of Luke's Gospel and the beginning of Acts.

Luke's Gospel is volume one and Acts is volume two.

Luke 24: v.46-47. (N.K.J.)

⁴⁶Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

In v. 46 we find a summary of Luke's Gospel and in v.47 we discover a summary of the book of Acts.

The plan of God is the Salvation of all the nations in the world.

Jesus is the person who will carry out God's plan.

Jesus does this by His birth, death and resurrection, and by sending His Holy Spirit to empower the Church to reach the nations, starting from Jerusalem.

Acts 1: v. 7-8. (N.K.J.)

⁷And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. ⁸But 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."

Unless Luke had written his account in the book of Acts, we would not know of the fulfilment of God's plan.

b) We need to recognise that God, through His Holy Spirit is at work in our world.

It is very important that we recognise the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts.

The Holy Spirit is active baptizing the believers in Chapter 2, and filling them again in s chapter 4: v. 31.

The Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles in Acts 10: v. 44-45 and then set apart the missionaries in chapter 13: v.2.

God is actively bringing about His plan through the Holy Spirit.

God is doing this despite many oppositions.

Throughout the book of Acts, we notice different kinds of opposition.

External Religious opposition – Acts 4:1, 5: v.17, 6:8.

Economic opposition – Acts 16: v. 16, 19: v. 23.

Internal hypocrisy – Acts 5: v.1.

Church friction - Acts 6: v. 1-7, 15: v.36-41.

Persecution - Acts 5: v. 17, 8 v.1, 12: v. 1, 13: v. 49-52, 14: v.19-20, 17: v.1.

Martyrdom - Acts 7: v.54 – 8: v.4. 12: v.1-4.

Storms and Shipwrecks - Acts 27: v. 13.

Courts - Acts 4: v.5, 18: v. 12-17.

Imprisonment - Acts 12: v.5, 16: v.16.

This is very encouraging for us today. It is amazing that much of what we see in the book of Acts is experienced in our world today. However, God will carry out His plan in spite of all the opposition that I have mentioned.

(Quote a story from U.K. Christian Newspaper, Evangelicals Now – reported in March 2019.)

A miraculous rescue took place after 72 Muslim-background Christian women and children were captured by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

After being tortured, four male leaders of the group were told at gun point to renounce their faith in Christ and revert to Islam.

When they refused, the men were shot and killed in front of their families and friends.

The following week the wives of the four martyred men were also ordered to renounce their faith or their children would be executed.

At night the children said to their mothers that the Lord Jesus had appeared to them and told them not to fear, they would be protected.

The next morning the children were lined up against a wall by the terrorists and their four mothers were told that they could save them if they renounced Jesus Christ and returned to Islam. The Mothers refused.

The soldiers got their guns ready and prepared to take aim.

Suddenly the soldiers started to hold their heads, screaming and shouting; Snakes, Snakes. Some ran away and others dropped dead where they stood.

One of the mothers grabbed a gun and was ready to shoot the remaining soldiers.

The Mother was stopped by her child who said, **“You don’t need to do that- can’t you see the men in white fighting for us?”**

c) **We need to notice that Acts is all about a focus on Jesus.**

The focus on the preaching in Acts is all about Jesus.

At Pentecost Peter preaches about Jesus. (Acts 2: v.14-39)

At the healing of the lame man, Peter preaches about Jesus. (Acts 3: v.6)

Peter preaches Jesus to the God fearing people in Acts 10: v.34-48.

Peter preaches Jesus to the Conservative Jews and the sophisticated Greeks in Acts 14: v.3, and 17: v.31.

Paul preaches Jesus to the disciples of John the Baptist. (Acts 19: v.4)

d) **We need to study Acts in order to understand the important place that the Apostle Paul has in Church History.**

If we did not have the book of Acts, we might be very confused about this man Paul who writes letters to Churches and individuals and has been very involved in planting Churches.

We need to study Acts to fully understand the conversion, and ministry given to Paul by Jesus Christ Himself.

2. How should we apply the book of Acts to ourselves and to the Church here at O.I.C.?

The first important thing that I must say is that we need to apply the teaching in Acts in a way that is consistent with Luke's purpose.

Our task is to focus on **what is important to Luke.**

There are clearly at least 3 things that were important to Luke's purpose in the writing of Acts.

Firstly, to communicate to us the character of God's Mission heart.

Luke makes sure that we understand that God has a heart for lost people.

He makes sure that we notice how God is instrumental in directing His people in mission work. We will notice this as we go through the book.

So the application for us today is that we must be involved with God's mission to reach a lost world.

Secondly, to communicate to us the importance of the Holy Spirit.

Luke tells us that all that is accomplished in Acts is due to the direct involvement of the Holy Spirit transforming lives. The Holy Spirit is involved in the Salvation of souls, the growth of believers and the empowering people to serve.

It didn't matter whether it was in the form of practical work or as an evangelist.

Acts 11: v. 18,

¹⁸ 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 13: v. 48,

⁴⁸ Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

Acts 16: v.14,

¹⁴ Now a certain woman named Lydia heard *us*. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.

Acts 18: v.10.

¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city."

It is interesting to note that out of the 22 direct words of divine speech in Acts, 16 of these words are reminders to the Church of the need to keep reaching out to the lost people.

(By divine speech I mean where Jesus, the Lord, the Holy Spirit or an Angel speaks)

Thirdly to be realistic about our Mission task to a lost world.

Acts is an historical account of real Church history. Luke hasn't picked out all the good experiences and painted an unrealistic picture of world mission.

Doubt and discouragement usually comes from having unrealistic expectations about mission work.

What we learn in the book of Acts is that preaching the Gospel to a lost world is a tough job and often it can lead to the opposition which I have already outlined.

This opposition can come from inside the Church and outside of the Church.

Satan will work in and through anybody who gives him an opportunity.

What we need to be careful about is that we **don't allow Satan to work through us to hinder the work of the Holy Spirit.**

Acts is a book that **encourages us to keep going in spite of troubles and problems in communicating the Gospel.**

One commentator said that the extent to which a Church commits itself to the missionary task of reaching a lost world is a test as to whether it is a true Church in the heart of God.

This is a challenge for every Church to stay Gospel focused.

3. What to look out for when we study the book of Acts.

Acts is written in such a way to expose Luke's purpose in his writings.

We need to look out for a number of things.

Firstly, look out for repetition in Acts.

Repetition is used to highlight key events and major turning points in the story of the early Church historical narrative.

The examples are;

The coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, 8 and 10.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is so significant that **it is recorded 3 times.**

In Chapter 2 the Holy Spirit comes upon the Jewish believers.

In Chapter 8 the Holy Spirit comes upon the Church in Samaria.

In Chapter 10 the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentile Cornelius and his family and close friends.

Luke records the coming of the Holy Spirit **three times** to show that the Samaritan and Gentile Church are in no way inferior to the Church in Jerusalem.

Another example of repetition can be found in the **conversion of Saul.**

Saul's conversion is recorded fully in chapter 9, and then it is repeated in its entirety in chapter 22 to the crowd in Jerusalem.

Again Saul's conversion is repeated in chapter 26 to Festus and King Agrippa.

Luke could have chosen to refer the reader in chapter 22 and 26 back to his earlier account in chapter 9, but he chose to repeat the story.

Luke's repetition emphasizes the importance of Paul's conversion and his place in the movement of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

There are many other examples of repetition that we do not have time to cover in this introduction, but before we leave this section I just want to mention one more repetition. This is a repetition of the words **"The word of the Lord Spread"**

If you read chapter 6, 12,13,19 you will discover a repetition of this phrase.

As we go through the book of Acts I will identify all of these repetitions and I will stress the importance of these things, both in our understanding and application.

4. Understanding the book of Acts.

In order to get the most out of our study in Acts who need to have some knowledge about the society to which the gospel arrived in the first century A.D.

In many ways today's society is quite similar.

About 2,000 years ago the roman Empire was very multicultural.

There were many religions and cults.

The Greek gods – Artemis (Chapter:19: 27-28, 35) and Zeus and Hermes were very popular. (Acts 14: v.12-13 & 14: v.12)

There were many fortune-tellers, and even Jewish Exorcists.

(Chapter 16: v.16, 13: v.8 and 19:14)

There was a great diversity of language groups and cultures. This is identified clearly in Acts chapter 2.

In these days an individual had the ability and opportunity to pick and choose about what to believe concerning religion.

Within Judaism the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, while the Sadducees did not.

On top of this, there was diversity in the Greek philosophy schools.

The Stoics pursued knowledge, courage, wisdom and moderation.

The Epicureans sought happiness detached from reality. They maintained that pleasure was the greatest good and did not believe in any gods that prevented pleasure. (Acts 17: v. 18)

Overseeing all of these beliefs was a Roman empire that insisted on tolerance and peace.

For the Romans, religion was not about personal conviction. It was about superstitious ritual which did not affect everyday life at any significant level.

The Romans offered their sacrifices to their gods and then went away and lived their life the way they wanted. (Very much like many Japanese people who follow Shinto)

The Romans found the Jewish people rather interesting because the Jewish religion affected the way that they lived their lives.

The problem with the Roman Empire and culture was that your religion could be tolerated provided that you accepted Caesar, the ruler of the Roman Empire as your final authority and Lord. For true Christians, this was a problem because of the unique claims of the Lord Jesus. The way in which the Apostles confronted this culture provides us with a model for the Church today. The Church at that time made every attempt to communicate sensitively without being offensive. We can see this in the way that the gospel was preached in Jewish Synagogues, market places, and the countryside.

(Acts 4: v.19-20, 13: v.16-41, 14: v. 15-18, 17: v.30-31.)

The Gospel which focused upon Jesus was nevertheless preached without fear, calling upon people to repent and trust in Jesus Christ. (Acts 20: v. 21)

In trying to understand the book of Acts we also need to consider the writer and what kind of book he wrote.

Although Doctor Luke is not actually quoted as being the author, there is sufficient evidence in the book to convince most Bible theologians from the 2nd century, that it was Luke who wrote it.

If you compare the text, writing style, and interests of the author, both Luke's Gospel and Acts match each other perfectly.

Both writings have a focus upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Prayer, an interest in outcasts, and the fact that the Gospel is intended for the whole world.

The first chapter of Luke is very similar to the first chapter of Acts and the author refers to his "**former book**".

Both books are dedicated to "**Theophilus**".

It is also important that we understand **what kind of book** the Acts of the Apostles presents to us.

The book of Acts is what is called "**Historical Narrative**".

Luke has written an orderly account of what actually happened.

In **Acts Chapter 1: v. 8** Luke reveals the structure that will shape the book.

⁸ 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."

The story centres on Jerusalem and Judea in chapters 1-7, then in chapters 8-12 it moves to Samaria and then finally in chapters 13-28 it concentrates on the Gentile world, beginning in Asia and Europe and ending up in Rome.

When reading through and studying historical narrative in the Bible it is important that you realize that you are always moving forward in the story.

Different things happen at different times in different geographical places.

5. **What is the context of the book and why did Luke write it?**

Our final introductory notes concern the context and purpose of the writer.

Luke 1: v. 1-4

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

Acts 1: v. 1-2.

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, ² until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen,

The introduction to Acts shows that Luke's purpose is to provide a follow-on account from His Gospel of what Jesus continued to do and teach from His ascension onwards.

Luke 24: v. 46-49

⁴⁶ Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ And you are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."

and Acts 1: v. 3-8.

³ to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

⁴ And being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," *He said*, "you have heard from Me; ⁵ for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. ⁸ 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."

We now need to understand the bridge that crosses over from Luke to Acts.

Luke wanted "**Theophilus**" to be clear about the certain fulfilment of God's purposes.

Luke had three points of fulfilment in mind. First that Christ suffered, died, and rose from the dead. – **see v. 46.**

Second that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations.

(see v.47.)

Thirdly that power for witness will come through the Holy Spirit – **(verses 48-49)**

These same three points are made in Acts 1: v. 3-8.

The link between the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts is indisputable.

So the main purpose of Luke writing this account is to explain that Jesus continued to work through the preaching about His death and resurrection.

God expects His people to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ's name. In fact, God oversees His work through His people who preach the Gospel.

We will not fail to notice in the book of Acts that the fulfilment of God's plan to take the Gospel to all nations was fulfilled.

God's plan continues to be fulfilled today, through obedient Churches and individuals.

If we all want to be part of God's plan here at O.I.C. then we would do well to apply the teaching that we receive over the coming months in the Acts of the Apostles.