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# **Bible Study Material**

**St. John's Anglican Church Highton**

**Term 4, 2010**

# **Acts**

**9 Studies in Acts 1-9:31**

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## **Introduction and background**

Acts is Luke's second book to Theophilus. In the opening verses of Luke's Gospel, he notes the efforts of others to write an orderly account of the events that took place, "just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word". Luke himself, therefore, "having carefully investigated everything from the beginning", takes it upon himself to write an orderly account for Theophilus, "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught". From this we can gather that Luke has a strong desire to present the truth as based on the account of eyewitnesses and his own careful investigations. His motive is that Theophilus might know this truth with certainty. Whilst Luke gives no indication of being an eyewitness himself to the events recorded in the early chapters of Acts, he personally enters the story in chapter 16 as a companion of Paul (and is also referred to in Col.4:14; Phlm. 24; 2 Tim.4:11).

Acts records the growth of the early church in Jerusalem, and the extension of the gospel throughout the known world. But it is more just a history of the early church. For in it there is much for today's church to learn about the outworking of God's grace and power and purposes through the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus.

It is helpful by way of background to read Luke 24:36-53, which overlaps with the opening 11 verses of Acts, and emphasises some of the important themes of Acts (especially v.45-49).

Most studies have extra questions which can be done in the group “if time permits”, or followed up later.

The “Reflect and pray” sections are intended for private reflection on the passage, but may be used in the group if it seems appropriate.

## Study 1

### Acts 1:1-26

#### Starter

Have you experienced times of anticipation, when you have reason to expect something new or exciting is about to happen? How do you use that time well in the meantime?

Read through the chapter, noting the various scene changes. Briefly retell the story of this chapter to get a broad picture of the *main events* that take place.

#### v.1-11

1. In his gospel, Luke records Jesus' life from birth to ascension. What does v.1 reveal about Luke's attitude to the story of Jesus' life so far?
2. Verses 1-8 record Jesus' last earthly opportunities to speak alone with the apostles he has chosen to bear his message to the world. What does Luke reveal of Jesus' priorities in these last days? What does this mean for us in our understanding of Jesus and the message we proclaim?
3. Jesus' teaching specifically included the Kingdom of God. Briefly, what is your understanding of the 'Kingdom of God'?
4. How does Luke build the sense of anticipation about the coming of the Holy Spirit?
5. On his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, and Luke then records that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, and filled with the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:1 & 14) before he began his ministry. How does this help us to understand Jesus' instruction to wait in v.4-5?
6. When Jesus tells the apostles about baptism with the Holy Spirit, why do they respond with this question about the Kingdom (v.6) (See, for example, Is.32:15; 44:3-5; Ez.11:19-20; 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-32).
7. The apostles appear to have missed the point about the kingdom – in what ways are they misguided about the relationship between the giving of the Spirit and the Kingdom? How does v.8 help them understand the true nature of this relationship?
8. Verse 8 is often considered to act as a 'Table of Contents' or programme for the whole Book of Acts. What do the apostles learn about their own future

from this verse? How do Jesus' words in v.8 prepare them for his sudden and final departure immediately afterwards?

9. How is God's grace evident in the attendance and words of the angels?
10. Christians often (and rightly) focus on the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection. What is the significance of the ascension?

#### **v.12-26**

11. There were still ten days until Pentecost. The disciples were not inactive during their time of waiting for the Holy Spirit to come. What do they do to prepare?
12. Fulfillment of Scripture is a key theme in Acts. By speaking of Judas' betrayal and his replacement in terms of fulfillment of Scripture, what does Peter reveal about God's plans and purposes?
- 13a. How do the qualifications of the new apostle conform to the commissioning of the apostles in 1:8? What other qualifications for ministry are revealed in the believers' prayer in v.24?
  - b. Christians today do not have all the same qualifications as the apostles – what qualifies Christians for ministry?
14. What impressions have you formed from this chapter about the developing character and mission of the new community of believers in Jerusalem? How do they set an example of 'getting on' while trusting and waiting?

#### **If time permits**

Consider the various steps the believers went through in reaching a decision about Matthias (v.20-26). Is this a helpful model of decision-making? Does it make a difference that at this stage the Holy Spirit had not been poured out?

#### **Reflect and pray**

Christ visibly and physically leaves the apostles. All they have to hope in is a promise. Have there been times when things in your life have changed or been taken away and you have been thrown on the promises of God? How can we prepare for such times?

## Study 2

### Acts 2:1-41

#### Starter

Do you sometimes hope/pray that God would do something spectacular to persuade your non-Christian family and friends to believe?

Recall what has been said about the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:1-8.

Read v.1-41

#### v.1-4

1. Given the anticipation of the coming of the Spirit in chapter 1, comment on the actual report of the event in v.1-4. Is the focus on the apostles or on the Holy Spirit?
2. Where does the sound like the wind come from? What does this mean in view of 1:10-11?
3. What is the significance of the tongues like fire coming to rest “on each of them”?
4. Luke says that the disciples were “filled” with the Holy Spirit. Does this mean a special filling in order to complete a particular task (as, for example, the prophets in the Old Testament) or a permanent filling of the Spirit?

#### v.5-13

5. In v.5-13, how does Luke convey the wonder of the occasion?
6. In what ways are the promise and prediction of 1:8 being fulfilled already?
7. Consider the mixed responses of the crowd. Can you identify with the cynics? The miracle has certainly got everyone’s attention, but what more is needed?

#### v.14-41

8. Discuss the ways in which the presence and power of the Spirit are evident in this passage.
9. What is the purpose of the quotation from Joel? How is God’s abundant grace revealed in this prophecy?
10. After explaining the coming of the Holy Spirit, what is Peter’s immediate focus?

11. Identify the main claims that are made about Jesus in Peter's speech. If you were asked to tell someone about Jesus, what are the points you would include from Peter's speech? Why might your message need to be different?
12. To whom does Peter attribute Jesus' death (v.23 and 36)? How does this build on the idea of the fulfillment of God's plans (begun in chapter 1 with the betrayal by Judas)? Does Peter, then, 'let them off the hook'?
13. What is the impact of the word being preached in the power of the Spirit? What two things does Peter call them to do? Why both? What two free gifts will they receive? What is the significance of both gifts?
14. Can you remember the first time you heard the truth about Jesus preached? What was your response?

**If time permits**

What are the three phenomena that accompany the coming of the Spirit? Why might symbols like wind and fire represent the coming of the Holy Spirit (note, the same word in Greek can mean wind, breath or spirit)? Can you think of examples from the Old or New Testament in which wind and fire represent God's spirit/presence? (eg. Gen.1:1; John 3:8; Ezek.37; Ex.3:2-5; 19:18; 40:38).

How does this incident reverse the judgment and curse of Babel, in which humankind tried to ascend to heaven (Gen.11:1-9)? How does it foreshadow God's ultimate intention for believers (Rev.7:9)?

**Reflect and pray**

Everyone who turns to Christ is promised forgiveness of sins (wiping out the past) and the gift of the Holy Spirit (new life in Christ). Share/reflect on what receiving these two gifts meant to you; thank God for his grace in sending Jesus.

### Study 3

#### Acts 2:42-4:31

##### Starter

What does your name mean to you?

There are five 'scenes' in this passage. Recount briefly what happens in each.

##### v.42-47

1. This is our second glimpse of the community – this time, after the coming of the Holy Spirit. What evidence does it give of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit? In what ways are 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians called to follow the example of this 'model' community.
2. In 2:40, Peter calls on his listeners to set themselves apart from "this corrupt generation". What impact does the life of the believing community now have on the wider community?
3. Who is ultimately responsible for the growth of numbers in the community? How do we balance the tension between acknowledging that people's salvation is entirely in God's hands, and staying motivated to keep witnessing to Jesus?

##### 3:1-10

4. Describe this man's predicament. With whom does the initiative for the healing lie?
- 6a. Peter heals the man "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth". What does it mean to do something in someone's name? Is it equivalent to uttering some kind of magic incantation?
- b. What are they really saying about Jesus by healing in his name? What are we claiming when we pray "in Jesus' name"?
7. Again, the response of the onlookers is wonder and amazement (2:6-7; 12; 3:10, 11). Is this enough? What more is needed to move from wonder to understanding?

##### v.11-26

8. Peter quickly takes advantage of the situation again to witness by word. Where does he immediately focus the attention?

How good are we at deflecting attention away from ourselves to the risen Lord? What is the risk in giving our testimony, and how can this danger be avoided?

#### **v.4:1-22**

9. How does the Sanhedrin's opposition to the apostles affect the impact of the message among the people?
10. Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit – how is this evidenced in the speech that follows? What do you make of this 'filling' in view of 2:4?
11. The Sanhedrin want to discuss the physical healing of the man, but how does Peter move beyond this?
12. Do you ever feel that your words have been wasted, or threatened at the very idea of proclaiming the message to certain people in your life? Does this episode encourage you? Why/why not?

#### **v.23-31**

13. How does the first part of their prayer (v.24-28) form a basis for the second part (v.29-30)? Is this a model of prayer you use and find useful?
14. What two things do the disciples pray for? What does this teach about their view of partnerships in ministry? How does God's answer to their prayers affirm these partnerships?
15. Do you consider yourself to be a partner in witnessing with other Christians and with God? How does this partnership work out in practice in everyday life situations?

#### **If time permits**

Peter repeats a number of key themes from his first speech. What are they? Are they helpful in further defining the essence of the gospel message?

Note the number of references to Jesus' name in this passage (3:6, 16; 4:7, 10, 12, 17, 18) and discuss its significance in view of this emphasis.

#### **Reflect and pray**

What does Peter's emphasis on the responsibility of his listeners for Jesus' death (v.13-15) teach us about God's grace in enabling repentance (v.26) and offering the blessings flowing from repentance (v.19-20)? Do we have a sufficient view of our own sin before God to fully appreciate the extent of his grace and forgiveness in our lives?

## Study 4

### Acts 4:32-5:11

#### Starter:

How can internal distractions and strife affect the ministry and mission of a church?  
Can you think of specific examples in your experience?

#### 4:32-37

1. Luke progressively reveals to his readers what it means to be the community of believers. What further *principles* of community life are revealed here? Have you experienced this spirit of generosity in Christian communities you have belonged to?
2. V.33 appears to interrupt the flow of thought between v.32 and 34. How do you think the mission of the apostles relates to what is being said in these verses?
3. Why is Barnabas introduced at this point?

#### 5:1-11

4. What is the difference between the offering of Barnabas and that of Ananias and Sapphira?
5. What is the motive behind Ananias and Sapphira's sin?
6. The word for "kept back" actually has the sense of "misappropriate" or "embezzle" – to take what belongs to someone else and use it for yourself. Take a moment to reflect quietly on whether there is anything that you have knowingly kept back from God. How does being in a church/small group help us to be accountable for what we have?
7. What do you make of the timing of Satan's attack against the community?
8. What does Peter's response to Ananias' gift reveal about the real nature of the sin behind Ananias' action? How does Peter know? Is it common that our more obvious sins are in fact a reflection of a deeper sin that needs to be revealed to us by the Holy Spirit and confessed?
9. Note the charges that Peter levels at Ananias and Sapphira. When we sin, we may hurt others, but whom are we really sinning against? ?

10. Who is responsible for the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira? Why is such harsh judgment exercised in this instance without any opportunity for repentance?
11. For the first time Luke uses the word 'church' to describe the community of believers. Why would he reserve its use for this particular moment? What might he be trying to convey by using it at this particular time?
13. What was the effect of these events both within and outside the church? How do you understand the word 'fear' in this context? (Hebrews 12:28-29). Do you fear God?

**If time permits**

What does the story of Ananias and Sapphira teach about church leadership and the role of church discipline? Is there a place for church discipline today? Do you think the church still takes its role seriously in this regard?

**Reflect and pray**

When you think of 'church', do you think of the idyllic community described in 4:32-37, or the 'warts and all' version of 5:1-11? How can each of us make a difference to the character of the Christian community that we belong to?

When using God's gifts in ministry, pray that our motivation will always be to find favour with God not people.

## Study 5

### Acts 5:12-42

#### Starter:

Have you been in situations where things outside your control threatened to derail your plans?

#### v.12-16

1. When the believers pray in 4:29-31 they ask for two things. How has their prayer been answered, and with what effect? What is the relationship between proclaiming the word and performing miracles?
2. 5 or 6 different groups of people are identified in this short passage. Who are they, and what are their various attitudes to the church and the gospel message? Are they typical of people's attitudes today?
- 3a. Why would there be people on the one hand who would not dare to join the church, while others were coming to belief?
- b. Is fear a reason why people may not join the church today? If so, what might they fear, and how can such fears be addressed?
4. Where do the people who seek healing come from? How is Jesus' commissioning of the apostles (1:8) moving closer to fulfillment in these verses?

#### v.17-42

5. Who appears to be in control and who is actually in control? Have you seen God intervene/overrule in an unexpected way to further his purposes?
6. What purposes were served by the prison break, given that the apostles ended up back before the Sanhedrin the next morning?
7. The Sanhedrin put aside the evidence that is before their eyes. What are their primary concerns? How do these prevent them hearing the message of forgiveness and reconciliation that the apostles preach?
8. What sort of barriers do people put up to receiving the gospel today; take one and consider how the gospel addresses this issue?
9. Are the accusations of the Sanhedrin true? Isolate each element of what Peter says in v.29-32; note what is radical about it, and therefore why the authorities react so violently to the apostles.

10. What do you think of Gamaliel's advice? Is it likely to provide anything more than a short-term solution? Why/why not? What more do the Sanhedrin need to do to resolve this issue in their own minds?
11. Describe the reactions of the apostles to the orders and flogging of the Sanhedrin. Compare their reaction with Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5:10-12).
12. The idea of physical suffering for the gospel seems a remote possibility for Australian Christians. But have you experienced dishonour/disgrace for Jesus' Name? Or even embarrassment? Does it motivate you to go on witnessing, or does it deter you?

**Reflect and pray**

Reflect again on Peter's words in v.30-32. When we are familiar with the gospel, how can we continually keep alive our joy and gratitude for what Christ has done for us?

## Study 6

### Acts 6:1-7

#### Starter:

There are so many good things to be involved in. Do you try to do them all, or do you try to prioritize between what, for *you*, is good to do and what is best?

#### v.1-7

1. What views of the inner life of the church have we seen so far? What does v.1 add to this picture? What does the word 'complaining' suggest?
2. What is the problem that is presented to the apostles? Is it an important issue or a distraction – or both?
3. Note the timing of this problem – do you think this is a coincidence?
4. What are the potential dangers here for the ministry and mission of the apostles?
5. Note how many times "the word" is mentioned in these seven verses.
6. Is the passage suggesting that one ministry is more important than the other?
7. There are numerous commands in Scripture about caring for the needy and widows, so why are the apostles not willing to do this themselves?
8. How is the issue resolved in a manner that enables each ministry to flourish?
9. How do we know that the ministry of practical care was taken extremely seriously by the apostles?
10. How can a church maintain a proper balance between the two different types of ministry highlighted in this passage?
11. What does the passage show about the development of leadership within the early church?
12. What is the direct effect of the action taken by the apostles and the church to resolve this problem? Why?
13. Churches can lose their way either by being unwilling to change, or so adaptable to change that they lose their focus. How can good change take place in a church without losing sight of its main priorities?

14. What does the passage teach about the qualities that should be identified in those appointed to positions of leadership in the church?

**Reflect and pray**

Being sure of our own gifts and calling can help us to decide how to best use our time and energy. In turn, the church's ministry and mission will benefit from this. Recall Paul's teaching on gifts body life in 1 Cor. 12.

## Study 7

### Acts 6:8-8:1

#### Starter

Have you ever thrown caution to the wind and “hang the consequences”?

#### Read v.6:8-15

1. What is Luke conveying by his descriptions of Stephen in v.3, 5, 8,10 and 15?
2. What produces the conflict between Stephen and his accusers?
3. How are the promises of Jesus in Luke 12:11-12 and Luke 21:14-15 fulfilled in Stephen? Do you know of other Christians on trial for their faith who have experienced these promises? Have you experienced them in your own witnessing to others?

#### 7:1-53

4. Stephen’s speech is very different to the others we have had so far in Acts. Why does Stephen recount this history of the Jewish faith to people who knew it all too well? What do you think is the main purpose of Stephen’s speech?
5. The temple had come to be seen by the Jews as the place where God dwelt. What does each character in Stephen’s speech reveal about where God lives?
6. Stephen is charged with speaking against the law. How does he show where the real unfaithfulness to the law lies?
7. Ultimately, who forms the climax of Stephen’s speech? What principle can we learn from this? Stott says: “God’s church means people not buildings, and God’s word means Scripture not traditions. We must not allow [buildings and traditions] to imprison the living God or to impede his mission in the world.” How helpful is this warning? Are we at risk of the same errors as the Israelite leaders?
8. Why do the references to “our fathers” suddenly become “your fathers” in v.51?
9. Stephen is quite confrontational. Peter also in his speeches (2:23, 36; 3:13-15; 4:10). Is confronting people with their sins a necessary part of witnessing /proclaiming the gospel? Why/why not?

10. Why does Stephen accuse them of always resisting the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to resist the Holy Spirit? (cf.5:3). Can Christians resist the Holy Spirit?

**7:54-8:1**

11. Matthew 23:29-36. Why should we not be surprised by what happened to Stephen?
12. Bonhoeffer says: "When God calls a man, he bids him come and die." We are not all called to be martyrs; but discuss what the cost of discipleship and being an authentic witness to Christ means in your own context.
13. How does Stephen face death? How is this possible?
14. What is the effect of Stephen's death upon the church as a whole?

**If time permits**

How does Stephen's speech show that the members of the Sanhedrin are no different to their ancestors before them (see also Ex.32:9; 33:3, 5; Deut:10:16; Lev.26:40-42). Note also Jesus' words in Matt.23:29-36.

How important is the Old Testament background to our own understanding of the gospel? If someone asked you how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together, could you confidently answer?

**Reflect and pray**

Reflect on how being a Christian enables us to face both life and death differently to others. Thanks be to Christ who through his own death frees us from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15)

## **Study 8**

### **Acts 8:2-40**

#### **Starter**

Do you think people's thirst for spiritual experience and fulfillment is as real today as it was in the past? Where do people seek such fulfillment today? Are they interested in truth or experience?

#### **v.2-8**

1. As Saul begins to destroy the church, and all the disciples scatter, recall Acts 1:8. What do we know about the number of disciples so far (4:4; 5:14; 6:7), and therefore their potential impact?
2. Is it surprising that they immediately went out and preached the word? How have they been previously prepared for this (eg.4:31)?

#### **v.9-25**

3. Who is Philip?
4. Why were the Samaritans so easily won over by Simon, and then by Philip? How do Simon and Philip differ in word and deed? Ultimately, how do people learn the whole truth about Jesus?
5. The Samaritans had been genuinely converted (v.14). Why might the giving of the Holy Spirit be withheld in this instance? Why was it important for the apostles to be present and involved in this particular situation?
6. What draws Simon to belief (v.13)? In John2:23-24 Jesus seems to warn about the inadequacy of belief based purely on signs. What is lacking in Simon's conversion, and in his response to Peter's rebuke?

#### **v.26-40**

7. Who is the main actor in this story?
8. What scene is Philip taken away from, and directed to? Does this seem like a logical move for an evangelist? Have you ever had to obey God in a way that seemed contrary to logic? Or in which the reason was not at first (or ever) obvious to you?
9. The Ethiopian comes from the far reaches of the known world. Recall Acts 1:8.

10. How does Philip both obey the leading of the Spirit and use his own initiative?
11. Trace all the ways in which the Holy Spirit is directly involved in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch.
12. Joy is recorded as a result of Philip's ministry in both the city and on the desert road. Would you always expect to see joy accompany a person's response to Christ? Why/why not?
13. Consider the two different contexts in which Philip witnesses, and the 'types' of people evangelized by Philip. In terms of method and message, what changes, and what never changes? Practically, how can we learn from Philip's example?
14. When it comes to mission, is there room for both planning and following the leading of the Spirit? How do we ensure a good balance, and that the one does not 'quench' the other?

#### **If time permits**

Apart from their commissioning in Acts 1:8, how has the apostles' time with Jesus previously prepared them for mission in Samaria, amongst people that Jews traditionally despised (John 4)?

Simon sees something 'magical' in the laying on of hands. What do you understand by this action (6:6; 8:17; 9:17)?

#### **Reflect and pray**

Reflect on the role of the Holy Spirit in your own conversion or coming to know Christ; pray for reliance on his transforming power in the lives of those around us.

## Study 9

### Acts 9:1-31

#### Starter

Think of someone you know personally, or in public life, who is vehemently opposed to the gospel. Can you visualize/picture that person as a Christian?

#### v.1-31

1. What picture has been painted of Saul so far (7:58-8:3; 9:1-2)?
2. Saul has been persecuting the church. Why does Jesus say that Saul is persecuting *him*? What does this reveal about Jesus' relationship to his church?
3. Why was Saul persecuting the church? When Jesus reveals his name, how does he challenge Saul's whole basis for persecuting the church?
4. How does the narrative show that Paul has been humbled by his encounter with the risen Christ?
5. Ananias is a willing servant but is in a state of uncertainty. How does God graciously relieve his anxiety and enable him to obey?
8. Saul's conversion is unlike any other in Acts. Think back over the different ways people have been converted so far (2:38-41; 4:4; 5:12-14; 8:6-12; 8:34-38). What do they have in common/how do they differ? What does this indicate about the nature of conversion? What should we expect conversion to 'look like'?
9. What is the cause of Paul's conversion? How does this encourage you to pray for those who seem beyond redemption?
10. God brings two significant people into Saul's life at critical times of his Christian life and ministry. How does each one enable him in his next step? Have you experienced such a person in your Christian walk?
11. What does Paul do in both Damascus and Jerusalem before his preaching ministry begins? Why is this an important principle for all servants of the gospel?
12. What do you make of the expression in v.22 that "Saul grew more and more powerful"?

13. Paul leaves Jerusalem twice in this chapter; describe the difference in its nature and circumstances.
14. Luke concludes this section with a comment on the state of the church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria. How is God's grace and power evident in the character of the church?

**If time permits**

15. Acts 1-9 has shown the steady growth of the church in times of peace and persecution. Reflect on the causes of this growth. What are the threats to the growth of the church in long periods of settled peace such as we experience?
16. Note all the various terms Luke uses in v.1-31 to describe Christians (v.1, 2, 13, 14, 19, 21, 30, 31). How do they help to build a picture of the character and identity of the early church?

**Reflect and pray**

Reflect on the nature of the risen Christ. Pray that he might grant a greater understanding of who he is and what he has done for us. May we be humbled by his Lordship, and by his presence with us as we encounter him day by day.

Commit to pray regularly for one person you know who is resistant to the gospel, that they might experience God's saving grace.

