

## Introduction to the Book of Acts – Part 1

### Acts 1.1-3; 28.30-31

Intro: In this lesson, we shall explore the general theme of the Book of Acts. However, a few facts about the book are in order before we do that. Acts, or Acts of the Apostles, was written by Luke, the Gentile prophet, physician, evangelist, historian, and associate of the Apostle Paul. Luke names it a companion, or second volume to the historical testimony offered in his Gospel by calling the Gospel, “**the former treatise**” (Acts 1.1), and some believe that as a third part in this series, Luke oversaw the collection of Paul’s epistles as we have them today. The Book of Acts covers a history of about 30 years, from A.D. 30 – A.D. 63, and it was written during that final year. The recipient and original audience was a man named Theophilus. He is called “**most excellent**,” which was a title given to wealthy and powerful dignitaries in those days, and his name indicates that *he* was a Gentile as well. He may have been a Christian, or he may have been a man that Luke knew, loved, and hoped to convert – however, in the providence of God, this book and the Gospel that proceeded it were preserved, disseminated, read, received, and believed by Christians throughout the world to be forever included in the New Testament scripture – and thus we have it to this day. The Book of Acts is different from any other book in the New Testament. It is a book of historical theology. Its teachings are not presented in doctrinal dissertations and there are very few “commands” in the book. Instead it teaches by examples, some good and some bad, and in so doing it draws a picture of the practical application of the apostles’ teaching and the fulfillment of Christ’s instructions, especially those given in the Great Commission. There is a great deal of information in Acts that is found nowhere else in the Bible, and for that reason alone it should be highly prized. It also presents on several occasions the clearest pictures of how to be converted and become a Christian that one could find anywhere in scripture. However, Acts, for many years, has been an unpopular book. In the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, Chrysostom lamented that many people in the churches did not even know it was a part of the Bible! And he further explained that

several who had read it, did not enjoy it because it was “too plain” – that is, it did not give much room for mystical speculations, which have always been popular in religion and are, of course, the leading interests of self-styled religious people in *our* day. There is no doubt that a lecture on the Book of Revelation would draw more attention than one on the Book of Acts. And why do you suppose that is? Certainly, it is because the Book of Acts gives no refuge to those who prefer the doubtful over the certain and theories to facts. One author said, “This book is delightfully innocent of isms. It is not marred by a single one of our denominational names. It reverently refrains from mischievous attempts to measure the immeasurable.” There is a story from the life of Barton W. Stone that illustrates this very well. At a prayer meeting in Concord, Mr. Stone witnessed a chaotic, furious display of emotional anguish from “mourners” who had a deep conviction of sin. They were, as was the popular practice in those days, falling on the ground in convulsions, screaming, weeping, and begging God for salvation. Mr. Stone was a deeply sensitive man and as he watched the pitiful display, he said that the words of Peter in Acts 2.38 rolled through his mind, **“Repent and let of every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”** These were the words Peter spoke to men in his day who were “cut to the heart” and grieving over their sins, and he supposed that if Peter were present at that moment, he would say the same thing to those mourners. So, Mr. Stone called for their attention and quoted the passage, but it did not have a calming effect, as he had hoped. The record says: “Instead of comforting the mourners, it only perplexed and confused them by directing their attention to an untried course of procedure utterly unknown to ‘revivals,’ and for which they were wholly unprepared. ‘While their hearts were filled with ardent desires for special operations of the Holy Spirit and of fire, this unexpected presentation produced a chilling effect, and tended to cool the ardor of their excited imagination....’” In other words, it was too plain. However, when it comes to the salvation of my soul and my relationship and standing with God, I would much prefer the plain and certain, over the theoretical, the

speculative, and the doubtful. Thus, I think the *Book of Acts* is a treasure of inestimable value.

### I. The Theme of Acts – Kingdom of God

By way of introduction, it is important for us to establish the major theme of the book before we try to study it. The purpose or design of the author must be in the mind of the reader, or else the reader will almost certainly fail to understand the book! If you believe a book was written to instruct one how to bake a cake, but the author intended to write a spy novel, you will be confused in your reading, perhaps misled in your baking, and you will fail to understand the story the author was trying to tell! Unfortunately, very few Bible readers try to discern the different themes of Biblical books. Instead, the popular method today is to drop the scripture open and “let God speak to you” – treating the scripture like a compilation of disjointed statements with a different meaning for every person. No wonder there is so much division and confusion in the religious world! There is a relatively simple method to discern the theme of a book, especially a biblical book. Usually the author tells you. One of the clearest ways that Biblical authors identify their purpose in writing is a literary device called *inclusios*, or bookends, whereby the author will state a theme at the start of the book and again at the conclusion, and generally, this theme will be mentioned over and over again throughout the book as well. Luke does just that with the *Book of Acts*. In Acts 1.1-3 he says, “**The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, 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, 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.**” Likewise the last two verses of the book say, “**Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him**” (Acts 28.30-31). Six times between these two

passages we find “the kingdom of God” mentioned as the central theme of the Apostles and Evangelists in all of their preaching and teaching. So, it is safe to conclude that is the purpose of Luke in Acts, to explain and record the preaching of the Kingdom of God, but what exactly does that mean? What is the Kingdom of God?

## II. The Meaning of “Kingdom”

In the New Testament, the word kingdom is translated from the Greek word *basileia*. Normally, this word has, primarily, three shades of meaning. Sometimes *basileia* refers to a realm, the region, domain, or country governed by a king. In Esther 5.6, the King offered Esther “**up to half**” of his kingdom – that is the territories over which he ruled. In Matthew 4.8, Satan took Jesus upon a high mountain, and in an instant “**showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.**” That is, the Devil showed Jesus the vast territories of human rulers with their riches and resources. This is, by far, the most common sense in which the word *kingdom* is understood by English speakers today, and many people do not understand the word in any other sense. But there are other possible definitions: the word may also mean a rank, that is, the dignity, or authority, or power to rule. In Luke 19.11-27, Jesus told a parable about, “**A certain nobleman [who] went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return.**” This was in reference to a practice under the Roman Imperial system, in which a local ruler would journey to receive certification of his “right to govern” or his rank from the Caesar so that he could exercise ruling authority over a given territory. Then also, the word might refer to a reign, that is the duration or period of time when a particular sovereign is in power. Thus, we speak of the reign of King George III. Unfortunately, most modern English versions follow the tradition of the KJV and uniformly translate *basileia* as “kingdom” causing most English readers to think only of a territory or place where God rules. That is not the only meaning and, in some cases, it is not the primary meaning. For example, when the Immerser and the Lord Jesus announced that “the kingdom of heaven was at hand” or “drawing near” – they did not mean that a place or territory was getting close, but rather they meant that the time when heaven would rule over the

earth was getting close! Of course, even when one of these shades of meaning is in view, the other aspects are present because these are all co-dependent. One cannot be a ruler unless he has the rank and a realm, and unless the official and recognized time for his reign has begun and not yet ended – and all of this is explored in the Book of Acts as it relates to Jesus. How did He acquire the authority to rule? What is the territory of His sovereignty, how will it increase, and how far will it ultimately reach? When did His rule begin, and how long will it last? In light of this information, I think the most concise and correct theological definition I have ever heard or read for the phrase “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” was from Dr. Phillip Doddridge in his Exposition of the Gospels. He said, “[it] properly signifies the gospel dispensation, in which subjects were to be gathered to God, by His Son, and a society to be formed, which was to subsist first in more imperfect circumstances on earth, but afterwards was to appear complete in the world of glory.” It is noteworthy that on a few occasions, the expression “kingdom of God, or heaven” is used in reference to the final stage of Christ’s work in the glories of heaven, but the Book of Acts focuses on that period of what Dr. Doddridge called “imperfect circumstances on earth.” Yet even with the imperfections of the present system, it is still good news and joy to all nations that the Lord is come and earth may receive her king! You can enjoy good favor with God and the peace of knowing that under the authority of Christ you are well pleasing to your creator, and best of all, God – in His rich mercy and great love – has communicated to us the terms of salvation and participation in His kingdom in a marvelously “plain” way!