

ACTS

Preaching Christ to the World

18 studies

John E. Botkin

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The Bible for Life Study Guides

An Introduction

What is a *Bible for Life Study Guide*? As the name suggests, it's a study guide designed to let the Bible impact your life. As God's word, the Bible should change how we worship, think, interact with others, and more. In other words, the Bible should transform *how we live our lives*.

With this basic conviction, the Bible for Life Study Guide series is intended to get people into the Bible, book-by-book. Designed to be used by individuals or groups, each study includes a series of questions to help unlock the Bible for life. First, there are questions to get you thinking about the **meaning** of the passage. Then, there are questions to get you to thinking about how to **apply** the text to your daily life. Finally, there are questions meant to help you think through how to best **share** what you're learning with others, either for evangelism to unbelievers or for the encouragement of believers. We hope that all of these questions will drive you to **pray** over the truths and applications discovered in your study of God's word.

The best way to use this guide is to spend some time reading over the passage, asking God to help you understand it, and jotting down some notes as you think through it. The text of the passage is even included in this booklet so you can underline or otherwise "mark up" the text as you think through it. Reading, thinking, and praying ahead of time will allow you to come better prepared if you plan on using this book for group study and discussion.

We also encourage you to use the Notes sections at the end to record some concluding thoughts you may have after completing the study as well prayer requests that may be shared during a group study.

May God richly bless your prayerful study of his Word!

Study 1

Mission Unstoppable

Avoiding a Cheap Imitation

Back in the 1980s the Coca Cola Company made one of the worst decisions in the history of its business. Such was the failure of this decision that had the company not reversed its course, it could have went under. What was this decision that now looks so foolish? The creation of 'New Coke.' To their (small) defense, in the 1980s almost anything seen as traditional was thrown out. Everyone seemed to want what was new and hip. The times demanded a new Coke. It needed something that would excite consumers and lead the company through the end of the 20th century. So, old Coke went away.

But the plan failed. There was a backlash. The new Coke was not that good. Though young at the time, I still remember the news stories and ridicule. More than anything, people said it tasted like flat Pepsi—a cheap imitation of Coke's competition. Coke sales plummeted. Panic ensued in Atlanta where Coke's national headquarters is located. It didn't take long before they reversed course. They halted production and pulled the new Coke from the shelves. Soon the "original formula" Coke was hitting the stores again. But the marketing campaign was clever. They didn't just bring back Coke. They brought back *Coca Cola Classic*. Soon, New Coke faded away. Today, though Coke still sells varieties in diet, cherry, low-carb and non-caffeinated, they never stop selling the original.

Sadly, many in the Church have failed to learn the lessons that almost cost Coke its business. They want to monkey with God's design for the Church. They try to improve on it, make it more modern, or post-modern. Some are well-intentioned, attempting to make it look relevant and appealing to a new generation. But in the end, what they end up with is something flat. The Church becomes a cheap imitation of the world. The result is that people are left yearning for the original once again. They may not even know what they want. But once they experience it, God's people begin to flourish and thrive under God's original, simple design for his Church. The best place to find that design and how it is worked out practically is the book of Acts.

The Unstoppable Gospel

Some call this book ‘The Acts of the Apostles.’ Others say it should be called, ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit.’ Regardless of what the book simply known in the New Testament as *Acts* should be called, it is all about one thing: the unstoppable progress of God’s kingdom through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As you read through Acts, you’ll see apparent roadblocks that threaten this progress. Sometimes it is sin or disunity from within the Church and other times it is attacks from the outside. As you think, ‘How are the apostles going to handle this? What’s the Church going to do about that?’ you’ll see every time that the gospel advances. Nothing stops the mission of God to reach the nations. Not even the Roman government, the most powerful nation in existence at the time, can stop God’s work of the Church to preach Christ and see sinners saved.

A Gospel Sequel

Who wrote such a fantastic record of the early Church? Though not mentioned by name in the book of Acts itself, it’s clear that Luke wrote this biblical narrative. How do we know? It actually begins with what we know about Luke from the rest of the New Testament and how we know that he wrote the Gospel attributed to him.

So, what do we know about Luke? He is mentioned three times, beginning with Paul’s letter to the Colossians. There, the apostle says, “Luke, the beloved physician and Demas greet you” (Col 4:14). In the letter to Philemon, we read, “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers” (Phlm 23). And in Paul’s final letter before his death—the book of 2 Timothy—he writes, “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica . . . Luke alone is with me.” (4:10). From these verses a basic picture of this man begins to emerge. We know that he is a physician and a fellow worker with Paul in his apostolic ministry. This means he travelled with Paul and was part of his ministry team, preaching the gospel and starting churches. Given the beatings and abuse and hardships Paul suffered as an apostle, it’s not unreasonable to assume Luke not only served in preaching and teaching, but in caring for Paul as a doctor as well. Finally, it’s clear that at some point the going had gotten rough for the

apostle and everyone with him took off for something easier. But not Luke. He remained with Paul to the very end, even when a close associate like Demas dropped out of the race. It's not hard to understand why he was beloved by Paul.

We know that Luke wrote the Gospel attributed to him because of the witness of the early Church. The earliest list of New Testament books from the second century says that Luke wrote it.¹ Along with that, all of the early church fathers in the second and third centuries—people like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria—said that Luke was the author. Even the famous heretic Marcion, writing against New Testament writers in the middle of the second century, said it was Luke. Given that there is no evidence to suggest otherwise, it's easy to trust the testimony of these early, reliable witnesses to Luke's authorship.² Probably the most important reason Luke was accepted as an author is because of what we already saw in his close association with the apostle Paul. In fact, the ancient church history Eusebius reports that Paul used to begin quotes from the Gospel of Luke by saying, "According to *my* Gospel."³

Once we see that Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke, it becomes clear that he also wrote the book of Acts. In addition to a common writing style, Acts begins the same way as the Gospel: with an introduction to a man named Theophilus and a comment about the author's first book (Acts 1:1). Together, Luke's Gospel and Acts form a two-part work that spans the beginnings of Jesus' life to his death and resurrection, the sending of his disciples, and the spread of the gospel all the way from Jerusalem to Rome. Having written both his Gospel and Acts, Luke becomes the person who wrote most of the New Testament. Yes, Paul wrote more letters, but Luke wrote more words—almost one third of the New Testament. It is no overstatement to conclude that "The debt we owe to Luke is tremendous."⁴

Reading Acts

As we begin this study of the book of Acts, we want to begin with a big picture view of the book as a whole. From this larger view, we want to understand the key themes in the book of Acts. These themes run through the course of the book and help bind together the smaller themes and specific passages of the book. Beginning with an overview of Acts will help you better understand the more in-depth work of the remaining studies.

To get the most benefit from this study, we encourage you to plan time to read through all of Acts in one sitting. However, reading through an entire book of the Bible may not be something you've ever done before. Moreover, the length of Acts may make that seem like a daunting task. Perhaps, then, you'll read it over two days, covering fourteen chapters each day. Still yet, you might read the book over a week: four chapters a day for seven days. However you go about it, spend time with Acts, gaining a clear sense of its content.

After you've read through the book of Acts, go through the questions below, using the references to specific passages to answer them. This study will lead you through the main themes of Acts. It is meant to give you an overview of the whole book which will better prepare you for the deeper look at Acts in the remaining studies.

The Authority of the Risen Christ

Luke doesn't think of his two-volume work as the story of Jesus and the story of the Church. Instead, he writes in such a way that we are to see two stages of Christ's ministry. Though he came into the world as the Savior of the World, in Acts we see Christ actively reigning as Lord. The advance of the Church is in no way disconnected or abstracted from his rule over all things.

1. Consider the following verses and reflect on how they reveal the authority of the risen Christ.

Acts 1:8

Acts 4:5-10

Acts 7:55-60

2. If God has given us Acts to serve as an example as much as history, how does the ongoing authority of Christ affect how you view life?

How should it change how you and your church engages in gospel ministry?

3. What encouragements can you draw out for everyday life from the reality of Christ's reign over all things?

The Fulfillment of the Great Commission

Jesus says to his disciples, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (1:8). This great commission for the church is also a roadmap for the book of Acts. The gospel begins in Jerusalem, moves into Samaria, and from there to the Gentiles at the end of the world. As this unfolds, Luke records the faithfulness of Christ’s disciples and the power of the gospel to change lives. This becomes an example and encouragement for the Church today. The great commission is still our commission and our aim should be to fulfill it.

4. Read some examples of the early church’s mission. What are some different ways the gospel advanced? What common themes do you notice?

Acts 2:1-41

Acts 8:4-8

Acts 11:19-26

Acts 18:24-28

5. Consider some of Luke's summary statements. What is the result of preaching the gospel to all peoples?

Acts 2:41

Acts 2:47

Acts 5:14

Acts 6:7

Acts 9:31

Acts 11:24

6. What does this say about God's plans for the Church and its mission? Are these same priorities and expectations present in your local church?

The Centrality of the Local Church

Sometimes gospel ministry is reduced to evangelism. Sharing the good news of Christ for salvation is essential, but it's not all that we are called to do. As disciples are made, Luke clearly shows the assembling of those disciples into local churches. This emphasis is still crucial for us to grasp today. It is not good for Christians to be alone. Luke not only shows the importance of the local church but what they should look like in life and ministry. The Church is about more than organizational unity. It is *life together*, driven by a common love rooted in the shedding of Christ's precious blood for sinners. The Church loves one another and is committed to one another because they are the people for whom Christ died.

7. Perhaps the most famous statement about the Church is found in 2:42-46. What picture of church life do we see in these verses? What did the Spirit-filled believers commit to do and be?

8. How did the life of the early church compare to Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17:20-23? What can you learn from this relationship?

9. Observe some of the concerns seen in the prayers of the early church.

Acts 4:23-31

Acts 6:1-6

Acts 13:1-3

10. How do these examples differ from your prayers or the corporate prayers of your church? Why might they be different? Why should they be the same?

Pray, Live, and Share

11. How would you summarize what you've seen in this study?

12. From the what you've seen in this study, how can you pray with:

Rejoicing to God

Repentance of sin

Requests for change

13. Who can you prayerfully share these things with, for evangelism or encouragement?

Study 2

Continuing Christ's Mission

We Had Better Wait

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is a well-known pastor from the last century. On at least one occasion he told the story of an old Welsh preacher who was asked to speak at a convention in a small town.⁵ The people were already assembled and ready to begin, but the preacher was running late. He was still in the room he had been given for preparation before the meetings. Wondering why he was late, the leaders of the convention meeting sent a maid back to the house to fetch him.

She came back and reported that he was talking to somebody and she did not want to disturb him. They said, "That is strange because everybody is here. Go back and tell him that it is after time and he must come."

She went again and returned with the same report: "He is talking to somebody."

The leaders asked, "How do you know that?"

She answered, "I heard him say to this other person who is with him, 'I will not go and preach to these people, if you will not come with me.'"

One of the leaders quickly said, "Oh, it is all right, then. We had better wait."

The Welsh preacher did not want to engage in the ministry of the Word without the aid of God who had given the Word. As a young preacher, that story helped my own sense of neediness in the pulpit. Moreover, there is much to be said about remembering this in all parts of life. After all, doesn't Jesus say that apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:5)?

Still yet, this story points to the other side of the same theological coin. Not only can we do nothing apart from Christ, but we are assured that Christ will always be with us. As we make disciples, the risen Jesus promised to be with us to the end of the age, ruling with all authority over our mission (Matt 28:18-20). Luke makes clear at the beginning of Acts that Christ is with us because we are continuing his mission until his return.

Acts 1:1-26

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ¹⁶ “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹ And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field

was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ “For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

“ ‘May his camp become desolate,
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;

and

“ ‘Let another take his office.’

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” ²³ And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Power for Christ’s Mission (1:1-11)

1. Notice how Luke begins the book of Acts. How does he tie it to his previous Gospel work? How is Jesus still the focus of this book just as he was before?
2. Christ promises the disciples will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. What is this power meant to help them accomplish? How does this relate to what Jesus taught in John 15:1-11?

3. Considering your answer to the previous question, how should we think about ministry today? What should we do and why is the power of the Holy Spirit essential? What might the consequences be when we try to do ministry apart from the Spirit of Christ?
4. When John Calvin comments on verse 6, he famously says that "There are as many errors in this question as words."⁶ That may be an exaggeration, but it is true that they're still clinging to some old thinking. How do Christ's words in the following verses help correct their misunderstanding?
5. What assurance does the angel give the disciples? How should this have encouraged them, as well as God's people today, in fulfilling the Church's mission?

Prayer for Christ's Mission (1:12-14)

6. Glance down at verse 15 and notice how many disciples there were at this point. After receiving their instructions from the risen Christ, what do the disciples do?
7. How does Luke describe their prayer? What do you think they were praying for?

8. Consider all the details Luke gives us about this time of prayer among God's people. How is this a model for the church today? What can you do to help encourage this model of prayer in your local church?

Provision for Christ's Mission (1:15-26)

9. Some look at vv. 15-19 as an example of the Bible contradicting itself. At first glance, the description of Judas' demise doesn't seem to match what we see in Matthew 27:3-5. But consider an analogy: if you told someone you sang songs at church and another member said that you heard a sermon, would one of you be wrong? More than likely, the service included both. Likewise, how might we harmonize these two accounts as complimentary, rather than contradictory?
10. When Peter addresses the 120 disciples, what does he say they need to do? Where did he get the idea for this action?
11. What two qualifications are laid out for an apostle to replace Judas? Why do you think these two criteria are significant?
12. Thinking back over the chapter, what practical conclusions can you draw about the relationship between prayer, Scripture, and obedience in the Christian life?

Pray, Live, and Share

13. How would you summarize what you've seen in the passage?

14. From what you've seen in this study, how can you pray with:

Rejoicing in God

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Requests for change

15. Who can you prayerfully share these things with, for evangelism or encouragement?