

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 8: Acts: The Kingdom Expands**

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**Introduction**

As we get started, just a word about the purpose for this core seminar. The objective of this New Testament class is ***to provide an overview of the core message of each book of the New Testament.*** Our goal is that this overview would serve 3 basic purposes in your life: 1) To **strengthen** personal meditation and study as you seek to know God’s Word and live according to what it says; 2) to **broaden** your understanding of the grand story of scripture and how it centers on the person and work of Christ; and 3) to **equip** you for fruitful discipleship and evangelism as you explain God’s Word to others. So, with that objective clear, let’s turn to our subject for today.

Today, Christians have met across the Asian continent, from Japan and China to India and the Arabian Peninsula. Believers in Australia worshipped the risen Christ while we were asleep. Up and down Africa from Cape Town to Cairo, across Europe in cities like Geneva, Oslo, London, and Vienna. Below the equator in South America, hundreds of thousands in Brazil and Chile and Argentina met for the same purpose. Even right now, hundreds of thousands are meeting up and down the East Coast of the United States, and many more will meet later this day across this country from Chicago to Dallas to Denver and up the Pacific Coast from San Diego to Seattle. And then out through the islands of the Pacific. The resurrection day of Jesus will be celebrated until people from every corner of the globe have gathered together to worship the Risen Christ!

Have you ever thought about how we got to this point? Well, in the book we are considering today we are going to explore how the Kingdom of Christ spread from the Roman outpost town of Jerusalem to the very heart of the ancient civilized world…Rome itself. And that will teach us why this Kingdom has continued to expand throughout the nations of the world since Luke wrote Acts almost 2000 years ago!

The book opens picking up where Luke left off in his Gospel account, with Jesus giving parting instructions to His disciples and then ascending up to Heaven. For context, turn with me to Luke 24:46-49: “And he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem, You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.’” Likewise, Luke begins Acts with a similar recounting of this event, like TV sequel: “Previously, on ‘24’…” Skip over John and turn to Acts 1:6-8. Luke writes, “So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. [And then verse 8, which functions as a mini summary for the whole book] 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.’” And with that introduction, Luke accomplishes two things. He connects the Gospel of Luke to Acts, and he provides a preview of what we will see through the rest of Acts: before the final culmination of Christ’s kingdom, the gospel will go to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And as we see God’s sovereign hand through Acts, we will grow to understand how He has likewise continued this expansion to and through us today!

**Background**

Before we consider the message of the book, some brief comments on its background. As we have already considered two weeks ago, Luke, the companion of Paul, wrote both the Gospel of Luke and Acts. It’s likely that they came as a two volume set early on, and not until later were they separated with John placed in between them. The book was likely written not long after Luke’s Gospel in the early 60s AD. While not a precise chronology or a comprehensive recounting of the events of the early church, Acts can be considered a historical work. Luke was a careful researcher as evidenced in his Gospel account and we have no reason to doubt the historical/factual veracity of Acts either.

Why did Luke write? Scholars have suggested a number of purposes for Acts including: reconciliation of Jewish and Gentile Christianity, providing an apologetic for why Rome should consider Christianity a legitimate religion, and defending Paul’s ministry. While all these could have been some of the things the Holy Spirit was looking to accomplish through Acts, we should understand the primary purpose to be the edification of Christians. It was written to build us up in our faith. To quote one theologian, “Luke [edifies us] by describing the historical foundation for Christian faith and by showing, through this historical survey, that the church of his, and Theophilus’s, day is the culmination of biblical history. God’s salvation was revealed in, and made available through, his Son, Jesus Christ. The message of that salvation was entrusted by Christ himself to his apostles, and through the empowering and directing of the Holy Spirit, they have now brought that message, and the salvation it mediates, to ‘the ends of the earth.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

As we consider Acts today, I hope you will be encouraged to see where you fit into God’s redemptive purposes and something of His sovereign care for you by expanding His Kingdom to the likes of us! We’ll take the book in four main pieces. First, we’ll look at the work of the **Holy Spirit** in the book. After all, though it is often titled the “Acts of the Apostles,” a more fitting name would be the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” Next, we’ll examine the **gospel message** that propels the expansion of Jesus’ kingdom in this book. Third, we’ll spend some time tracing out exactly the **progression** of that expansion —from Jerusalem to Rome. And then finally, we’ll examine God’s **sovereign purposes** in all of this. Ready? Let’s dive in.

**First, The Power of Kingdom Expansion—the Holy Spirit**

Just as Christ had promised in Acts 1:8, the Holy Spirit does come. Let’s look at Acts 2:1-4. As Luke recounts, “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” This wouldn’t be the last time we read of this type of experience in Acts. Flip to 8:17, where the Gospel is being preached in Samaria. We are told that Peter and John “Laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.” Then look at 10:44-45. We’re at the house of Cornelius the Roman Centurion, and we read, “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even to the Gentiles.” (Acts 10:44-45). The same thing happens to the new believers in Ephesus in chapter 19. Now, it’s significant that these obvious comings of the Holy Spirit mirror the stages of Jesus’ prophesy about the expansion of his church in 1:8. We see this happening at Pentecost in Jerusalem. And then when we see it when the Gospel comes to Samaria and to the Gentiles there; and finally, toward the ends of the earth in places like Ephesus. The Holy Spirit in this book seems to act in ways that are extraordinarily supernatural in order to validate the message of the gospel when it first comes to new places. As such, these remarkable works of the Spirit should be best understood as an extension of Pentecost, not necessarily the normative experiences of believers receiving Christ throughout the ages.

Yet, that doesn’t mean that the Holy Spirit is not important or active today. We need to listen to Luke – in Acts, he labors to prove to us that Jesus really did deliver on His promise to send His Holy Spirit to the Church – not just the early church, but all of us who believe in him.

And the filling of the Holy Spirit isn’t a one-time event. It’s something that will continue to occur throughout the believer’s life - in fact, in Ephesians, Paul actually *commands* us to “be filled with the Spirit.” As we continue on through the New Testament we will see the way that Christians grow in faith is not by reminiscing about the Holy Spirit’s miracles, but rather by having the Holy Spirit transform their character through the preaching of the Word and through the other Spirit-given gifts of edification (1 Cor. 12:7) in the church.

Therefore, a good question for us to ponder this afternoon might be, are you aware of and thankful for the Holy Spirit? There is a great tendency to either over-emphasize experiences of the Holy Spirit’s work, but it’s also dangerous to ignore Him altogether. We should rejoice that God by his Spirit is opening our minds to his Word, convicting us of sin, conforming us to the image of Christ, assuring us of God’s grace, and guiding us by his presence.

To summarize, in Acts, the Spirit provides the power that Christ promised before his ascension. What does that power do? That leads us to our second point: the Spirit works through men and women to expand the Kingdom – by making known the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

**The Message of Kingdom Expansion—The Gospel of Jesus Christ**

Something fascinating that you see in the book of Acts is that, even though God is miraculously at work, every single conversion is due to a *person* explaining the message of the gospel. So when God wants the Ethiopian eunuch to believe, he sends Philip to tell him “the good news about Jesus.” (8:35). In the very next chapter, even after Jesus appears to Saul as the risen Christ, it is not until Ananias explains it that he receives the Spirit (9:17). And then in chapter 10 God uses a series of visions to both Peter and Cornelius to bring the two of them together so that Peter can share the gospel with Cornelius. For some reason, God has chosen to *always* work his divine power of conversion through human beings proclaiming the message of the gospel. And what is that message? Look at 2:38-39. Peter proclaimed it at Pentecost: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

It’s the same message of hope that we need to hear today. It’s good news that declares to us that even though God is absolutely perfect – the Holy Spirit is *utterly* holy, set apart from us – and even though we have rebelled against this perfect God and broken his law in our sin, so that none of us is fit for his holy presence but instead deserve his judgment – in spite of all that, because of his mercy the Son of God came in the flesh to save us. Jesus of Nazareth, through the willing sacrifice of his own life on the cross, reconciled us to God, so that we could be forgiven of our sins and by grace enjoy the presence of God’s Holy Spirit – if we would only repent of our empty, selfish ways and believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. That’s the Gospel.

And that’s why the point of Acts and what the Apostles teach all throughout this book was not ultimately Jesus’ life, but His death, resurrection and what he accomplished. When they spoke about Jesus, they treated it much differently than a biography. Most biographies give equal attention to every noteworthy detail of a person’s life. But these apostles were fixated on the *end of the story*. The core of their message was the death and resurrection of Jesus. As an example, look at Acts 3:13-15: “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.”

So, the power behind the book of Acts is the Holy Spirit, but his means is the gospel. What that means for us, today, as we see people all around us who do not trust in Jesus, is that we should **pray** and **proclaim.** Pray that the Holy Spirit would miraculously change hearts. But don’t just pray and then sit on your couch; proclaim the good news with boldness and grace, in joyful times and in the midst of persecution, like the believers in Acts.

We’ve seen the power and the message of Kingdom Expansion, and next we’ll look at the progression of the Kingdom in acts. Before we get there, ***any questions*** on what we’ve seen so far?

**The Progression of Kingdom Expansion**

We are going to spend most of our time this morning considering this progress of the Kingdom’s expansion. Those first verses of Acts provide an excellent breakdown for the entire book, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” From Jerusalem, to Rome.

From 2:42-6:7, Luke recounts for us what is going on at the church in Jerusalem.

He moves to geographic expansion in 6:8-9:31, beginning with the speech of Stephen before the Sanhedrin. Stephen boldly lays out a Biblical theology for why the Kingdom was never meant to be confined to a particular ethnic people, the Jews. What’s the response? He’s stoned. Yet after Stephen is killed, we see that the Gospel spreads throughout Judea and to Samaria. Philip explains the Gospel to a court official to the queen of Ethiopia in chapter 8 (8:26-40), and Saul of Tarsus, the future missionary, is converted in chapter 9 (9:1-30).

The first half of Acts, in which Peter is the central character, wraps up (9:32-12:34) with a dramatic account of the Gospel being brought to the Roman Centurion Cornelius in chapter 10. Consider how monumental this was for Peter to be called to bring the Gospel to a Gentile. We read that Peter was shocked at God’s insistence to not consider unclean what God has called clean; the Lord is challenging the very heart of what Peter valued as a Jew. Let’s read 10:27-29. Luke recounts for us that “And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. And he said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.’” We read that immediately after hearing the Gospel and believing, Cornelius and those in his household experienced the same outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was experienced at Pentecost.

What must have Peter been thinking? Could the words of Christ recorded in Luke 13 have been ringing in his ears at this moment? “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard see that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” (Luke 13:18-19). Here is Peter, the one who had persistently confused Christ’s Kingdom with false Jewish Messianic dreams. Now, he is an instrument of exactly the kind of Kingdom Christ had begun to establish. To use the imagery from Jesus’ parable in Luke 14, Peter was now the one to invite new guests to God’s wedding banquet -- ones that would seem most undeserving of the privilege.

It wasn’t just a new experience for Peter; we see that as the Gospel expanded to the Gentiles, it forced the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem to begin grappling with some basic questions about the nature of the Gospel and its expansion to the Gentiles. Luke recounts in chapter 11, “when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, ‘You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them’ (11:2-3). So Peter recounts the entire event, including God’s call to him and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit. After hearing all this, Luke tells us that, “When they heard these thing they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’” (11:18).

How do you respond to this early expansion of the Gospel? Can you identify with Cornelius – a gracious recipient of God’s grace even though he was not a Jew? In the mighty providence of God, He has seen fit to expand His Kingdom to many more “Corneliuses.” Can you identify with Peter, who at first didn’t understand this aspect of God’s plan? There’s a lesson here: we should consider no one beyond God’s ability to reach; there is no people group that is “unclean” or “untouchable.” If you are tempted to see evangelism primarily in terms of sharing the Gospel with people relatively similar to you, read this account of Peter going to Cornelius. Consider that it would have been men similar to Cornelius who oversaw and carried out the execution of Jesus, and now Peter was bringing the Gospel message to one of these men! Peter went and shared, not because it was easy or convenient, but because of God’s mighty command.

Then in the second half of Acts, Luke takes the focus off of Peter and shifts the camera to Saul of Tarsus (Paul), who would be the vehicle God used to dramatically expand the kingdom into the Gentile world.

As the second half of Acts begins in 12:25-16:5, we see Paul and Barnabas heading from Antioch to Cyprus (where Barnabas was from), and then onto Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (all of which are in modern day Southwest Turkey). In each of these towns and cities, Paul and Barnabas established a patter of going first to the synagogue and teaching, encountering general Jewish rejection of the Gospel message, which results in Paul preaching to Gentiles, and finally Jewish persecution forcing them to leave. After retracing their travels back to Antioch in Syria, Paul and Barnabas were summoned back to Jerusalem to defend and discuss their Gentile outreach.

That is what they do in Acts 15, as they meet with the elders and apostles. The central concern was whether Gentile converts must be circumcised or observe other aspects of the Jewish law in order to be Christians. The ever bold Peter rightly defends the work of Barnabas, saying, “But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Acts 15:11). The council agrees, and drafts a letter to Gentile believers asking them merely to encourage their fellow Jewish Christians by living upright lives and avoiding common stumbling blocks.

The rest of Acts, 16:6-28:31, is really about the continued expansion of the Gospel into the gentile world. Paul’s first trip went into modern-day Turkey; his second trip would take him to modern-day Greece. Paul and Silas travel to Macedonia, and after sharing the Gospel with Lydia in Philippi in chapter 16, Paul and Silas are arrested and thrown into prison. They are rescued in similar fashion as Peter had been earlier, but this time by a divinely appointed earthquake. They move on to Thessalonica and then Berea, before arriving in Athens. In Athens, Paul gives his famous address to the Areopagus, in which he quotes the Greeks’ philosophers and poets to gain a hearing and then proclaims to them the one true God. Here was Paul embodying what he would teach later, that he became all things to all men – not by altering the message of Jesus Christ, but by focusing it to the background and context of his audience. We must pray for faithfulness as we do the same thing every time we share the gospel with our children, with our atheist neighbor or new age classmate or Muslim co-worker or simply non-religious aunt and uncle.

In chapter 18, Paul moves on to Corinth, where he spends time working with Priscilla and Aquila, who Luke tells us were also tentmakers. While in Corinth, the Lord speaks to Paul saying, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you or harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” (Acts 18:9-10). What an encouragement that is in the midst of less obvious times of Gospel expansion. Paul, and every other Christian after him, can be encouraged in this ministry to be faithful. God has chosen who will come to him. We don’t bear the responsibility of how much or how quickly the kingdom expands – God does. Our job is to faithfully proclaim the message of the gospel.

Then, in chapter 19, Paul moves onto Ephesus, where a riot ensues because silversmith workers recognize that Paul’s message is bad news for their business. After all, they were idol makers, and Paul preached the exclusivity of Jesus Christ! Yet, in God’s providence the riot doesn’t do any harm to Paul or to the young church there. In fact, when Paul returns to Ephesus some time later he is able to encourage the Ephesian elders in what is perhaps the tenderest scene in the book of Acts. Riots and opposition may come, but these men have the most weighty of responsibilities: Verse 28, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28) As we read of suffering in Acts, let’s pray for our own elders here at CHBC, that they would lead us to rely on Christ in the midst of hardship.

After this second trip into Asia minor, Paul returns to Jerusalem, and trouble awaits him. The ensuing chapters in Jerusalem, chapters 21-26:32, provide some of the most gripping narrative in the New Testament outside of the Passion week accounts. First, Jews stir up the crowds against Paul and he is arrested. He appears first before the Jewish Sanhedrin (22:30-23:10), and then he is transferred to a prison in Caesarea because of threats to his life in Jerusalem. He appears before Festus where he appeals his case to Caesar himself (25:1-12). In Acts 23:11, God had already promised Paul that he would proclaim the Gospel in Rome , and yet Paul didn’t just sit back and wait; in his appeal, he took advantage of his Roman citizenship, which God used to send Paul to Rome. In this case and throughout Acts, we see the Apostles and the early Christians taking bold action for Christ, using every resource the Lord had given for the purpose of expanding the Kingdom, and this is a good pattern for us. It is not wrong to use the gifts, opportunities, advantages, relationships that the Lord has given us for the purpose of expanding his Kingdom. It is a misinterpretation of the New Testament to think that Christians are called to “sit back” and wait for God. Certainly, patience and trust are part of the Christian life, but so is godly ambition!

After a long and dangerous journey, that included a shipwreck, Paul arrives in Rome and that is where Luke ends his story. In a matter of years after Christ’s death and resurrection, the Gospel has made its way from Jerusalem to the very center of power and culture at that time. What encouraging words Paul speaks at the conclusion of Acts, “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; *they* will listen.”

***Any questions*** on what we’ve seen of this Kingdom expansion so far?

**The Providence of Kingdom Expansion—The Sovereign God**

Well then, it’s time for our final point. If we’re tempted to place too much responsibility into the hands of Christ’s disciples for accomplishing his mission, as we were considering earlier, the wise words of a Pharisee named Gamaliel in chapter 5 offer corrective counsel. In the early days of the church, the disciples were arrested and hauled before the Sanhedrin, the ruling group of Jews in Jerusalem. After Peter and the apostles gave their defense, the Sanhedrin was ready to put them to death – until Gamaliel spoke up. Look at Acts 5:35-39. “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”

The book of Acts, in a phrase, is one long validation that this was indeed of God. Angels are sent to release Christ’s disciples from prison. Numerous passages show how the events of the early church were fulfilling Old Testament prophesy. The disciple that betrayed Jesus is replaced as predicted in Psalm 109:8 (1:16-20). God pours out his spirit as Joel (2:28-32) had foretold (2:16-21). And Israel persisted in unbelief, while the Gentiles believed—exactly what Isaiah (49:6) had said would happen. And beyond the fulfillment of prophesy, we see that God does the work in the book of Acts. He grants repentance (11:18). He appoints for eternal life (13:48). He opens the door of faith and the hearts of those who will believe (14:27, 16:14). And it is this choosing of people to be his that God uses even as a motivation for missions, as he tells Paul to go to Corinth because “I have many people in this city” (18:10). Indeed, the book of Acts tells us that even the death of Jesus was part of God’s great plan. As Peter prays in chapter 4, “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.* Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” (4:24-29)

Jesus said that even the “gates of Hades” (Matt 16:18) would not overcome his church because of God’s sovereign power behind it—and that is exactly what we see in the book of Acts. God is at work. Nothing can stop his hand, and his plan is worked out masterfully. And what cause for hope that is for us! To be sure, the church today is hardly a picture of perfect health. Nor has its message yet rung out to every people group; though Christians can be found nearly everywhere on earth, as we thought about at the beginning of the class, there are still millions who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. And yet God is still at work. He continues to call men and women to faith in himself, he continues to expand his church, he continues to use weak vessels like us as his ambassadors, and the certain hope of the book of Acts is that he will accomplish all the work he has planned for us until our Lord returns again.

1. Carson, Moo, and Morris, “An Introduction to the New Testament,” 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)