

TUTORIAL  
2.9

# God's Narrative continued – Acts

The Narrative of God's Word continues in this tutorial, which is an introduction to the book of Acts.

## A new part of the journey

We are about to launch into the next amazing part of God's Narrative - His true Account of who He is and of what He is about.

We have already covered the first part of that Narrative; not every detail, but touching on key events and characters, and tracing the important threads that led up to the coming of Jesus, the Saviour. We also took an overview of the remarkable accounts of Jesus' life and work that culminated in His crucifixion and resurrection. Now, as we've heard, He returned to His Father in Heaven...but the Narrative is by no means over. Everything *before* Jesus was leading up to Him and everything *afterward* can be said to flow out from Him. He is the central point of history, and nothing can be truly understood if it doesn't take Him into account.

We can be very grateful that God made sure we would have a record of what took place in the days, months and years after Jesus left the earth. It was written of course by Luke, one of Jesus' four official biographers, 'official' in the sense that they were appointed by God. Later on, in a reference by a colleague and travelling companion we find out that Luke was a doctor. The account he penned of what took place, as Jesus' followers reached out with the Good News, would become known as *Acts of the Apostles*, or simply *Acts*. A more accurate name might be "The *Acts* of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles". It's possible to see a reflection of Luke's medical training in the methodical way he draws together his own and other eyewitness accounts of events. It is an accurate record of events which would have - and still are having - an enormous historical significance for the world.

## History that is also *our* story...for today

So Acts is historical, but if we *only* see it as history, even 'Church History' - at least if by that we mean dry facts and figures about events long past - then we miss out on the enormously important and relevant lessons that we can glean.

Or maybe it becomes just another 'Bible book' - a compilation of detached texts and devotional readings. It's easy to forget that this is a *true* story about *real* people in *actual* places, who faced challenges very similar to ours and who were given resources that we also have available to us. Or else it gets reduced to a list of references in sermons and lectures and youth group talks. Nothing wrong with proof texts, bulleted points and Power Point slides, just so long as we remember that Acts is the record of some of the most exciting and far-reaching things that have ever happened on this planet.

But these are not just fascinating things that happened a long time ago in a distant place to some other people. This is, in fact, *our* story, *our* history. It's where we can find out what makes us *us*. Not that we want to spend our time 'navel gazing', as the saying goes...introspectively obsessed with ourselves. But aligning our view of ourselves with who God says we are, moves us a long way towards actually being that, being those people, being and doing what He designed us for.

## Part of our identity

There are many elements to the mosaic that forms our individual sense of identity - a lot of layers that add up to the picture we have of ourselves. These are put in place, often without us noticing, by our experiences of our families, our friends, our formative environment, the people we've mixed with in our lives, the larger culture and its media, and so on. But when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, we were *born again*...became, in the most fundamental ways, new people. So what is our identity in light of that? How does this new identity fit in with, or perhaps conflict with, the ways we've always seen ourselves and been seen by others?

Because this issue of identity is so very important, when we followed God's Narrative for *the first time*, we highlighted those parts that helped us understand who God is...then, in light of that, we looked at who we are in our natural state - as His fallen, corrupted race of image bearers. But then, in our *second brief overview*, we focused a lot of our attention on who God says we are *now*, as those who've been restored to a relationship with Him through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

As we move ahead into *the Acts Narrative*, this new identity is clarified further as we observe the beginnings of a new entity that joins together all those who are His people under the New Covenant...His united people, or *Church*. So this is not cold, sterile theology but relevant and exciting realities that relate directly to how we see ourselves, how we view others who also believe, and how we relate to the rest of the human race.

## The Holy Spirit's part

Something directly related to the inception of this new Entity is the arrival and ongoing role of the Holy Spirit. His presence will prove, in the course of the Narrative, to be so integrated into the lives of believers - individually and as a group - that it's not possible to think of them without including Him. They are *who they are* because He is *who He is*.

But it is not just *their story*...as we've already said, this is also *our* story, because He connects us with the rest of God's family - across space and also through time. His presence in the Acts Narrative links it directly and personally with our 21<sup>st</sup> century narratives.

## Two paradigms in conflict

Another important transition was also taking place. But it's one that, on the face of it, we might wrongly assume is not all that relevant to our daily lives...something just of academic interest to theologians. As we know, the Old Covenant was made between God and a particular ethnic group who were the descendants of one man, Abraham. Now another Covenant had replaced it, this one initiated through Jesus' blood, through His death. And this one would not be defined by ethnicity or ancestry at all but by faith, and by the Holy Spirit.

Of course, as the Acts Narrative records, this created tensions between those still clinging on to the Old Covenant paradigm and those who were clearly seeing the implications of the New.

But why should we find these threads in the Narrative interesting and how does all this relate to us in very different places, centuries later?

Well for one thing, even though we might not face pressure to go to the Temple and sacrifice like the early Jewish Christians did, the underlying principles are still relevant. It's important for us to know, as New Covenant people, how we should view God's Law that He gave with the Old Covenant. How free are we under this new Agreement...or should we be trying to follow the Law? From the Acts account of the first believers' journey towards answering these questions we get important insights about how we should approach large chunks of the Old Testament Narrative...and also clues about how God wants *us* to live today.

## The completion of the Narrative

During this inaugural and transitional period the Holy Spirit was also guiding some of Luke's co-workers to write what, along with *Acts* and *the Gospels*, would become God's revelation for the New Covenant...the compilation of books that in English we refer to as the *New Testament*.

A lot of it, as we know, is in the form of extensive, carefully written letters - *Epistles* is the older English term that has stuck - sent to individuals and groups of believers. Luke's history is important to us because it gives us important background details that help us understand the specific contexts, problems and questions the different authors had in mind as they wrote.

Even though we might reach for an electronic device instead of a papyrus scroll to access the truths written down by the Apostles...and even though our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives might look very different from what the first generation of believers faced, the Acts Narrative makes it clear that the challenges are basically the same. And so that's one reason we want to look at this now; it sets the stage for the rest of God's Narrative contained in the New Testament, and shows us that God's revelation is not abstract theory but real encouragement and guidance for His children no matter when or where they are on this earth.

## **The Gospel starts its journey**

Another reason all this is compelling for us is because the changes under the New Covenant launched the Gospel's outward journey from its Jewish, Jerusalem source...out along the roads and shipping routes of the Roman Empire...through the medium of the Greek language that was so widespread...transported out by the Apostles of course, but also by Silk Road merchants, incense traders, sailors, Roman soldiers, slaves, itinerant workers and animal herders.

The Good News unleashed by a potent combination of Jesus' authority, the Spirit's empowerment, and His people's obedience broke down cultural and linguistic barriers wherever it went. It began to draw people who didn't look at all Jewish, who spoke strange languages and whose food was anything but kosher. This outward impetus of the Gospel that Luke records for us...its spread to the non-Jewish peoples - the Gentiles - in the areas dominated by the Roman Empire, would continue on and eventually bring it to us. But as significant as that is for each of us personally, there's a lot more to the picture than how we've benefited. The Task is not completed. What began then is still going on...the Holy Spirit is still challenging and equipping His people to complete the work the Apostles began.

One of the most prominent characters in Luke's story about the Apostles and the early Church was a man called Paul. After his dramatic conversion, this former enemy of anything or anyone promoting the New Covenant would go on to be its greatest advocate. Some of what Luke writes are his first hand accounts - a blog might be today's equivalent - of travelling around the Mediterranean area with Paul and others, looking for opportunities to tell people the Good News. God has provided a way back to Himself through His

own Son who lived recently in Palestine, was crucified by the Romans, but who now lives again as the rightful ruler of the world.

When some from towns like Ephesus or Corinth or an area like Galatia came to faith in Jesus Christ, Paul and friends would gather them together and share the whole of God's Narrative with them. As they were equipped with Truth, these groups of people developed a sense of corporate identity...as distinct groups within the larger community. They grew stronger in the faith and could utilise the skills, abilities and insights given to them as a group by the Holy Spirit. They were also increasingly able to care for their own needs as a 'body' of believers, to worship their Lord, to feed themselves from His Word, and to be His witness in their immediate communities and beyond. And so a pattern was established...a model that would look different in *form* from place to place but would remain unchanged in its *essence* and *function*. So as we trace the Acts account of how Paul and the other Apostles went about fulfilling the Task Jesus had entrusted to them, we can glean invaluable insights into how we should be going about that same Task today. And by seeing their commitment, their passion and their willingness to sacrifice for the sake of their Master, we are inspired to do the same.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*God's Narrative continued - Acts*

1. Do you feel you have an understanding of how the Acts Narrative fits into the whole of God's Narrative? Have you spent time thinking about or been exposed to teaching that clarifies how the overall themes in God's Word flow from the Old Testament, through the Gospels, into Luke's *Acts* account and then on to the rest of the New Testament?



## ACTIVITIES

*God's Narrative continued - Acts*

1. Ask and record the answers three different Christian friends give to these questions (try to ask people from a range of backgrounds) and then also include your personal responses:

- 1) How long is it since you have heard teaching that covers the book of Acts chapter-by-chapter and/or verse-by-verse?
- 2) On a scale of 1-10 how relevant do you feel the book of Acts is to your daily life?
- 3) Do you believe that God was doing anything particularly unique during the period covered in the Acts account, or are things still essentially the same in that respect today?
- 4) Do you believe that God is adding to His special Revelation today, or was that completed with what is in the New Testament?
- 5) In what ways do you feel your church closely follows, or is different from, the pattern in the New Testament?