

The incredible story of the first followers
of Jesus, according to

THE BIBLE

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THE CRUCIFIXION WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

A.D.

THE BIBLE CONTINUES

THE BOOK OF ACTS

WITH NOTES AND INSIGHTS FROM

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

New York Times Bestselling Author



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A.D. The Bible Continues: The Book of Acts: The Incredible Story of the First Followers of Jesus, according to the Bible

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INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

“ALL HIS DISCIPLES deserted him and ran away” (Mark 14:50).

Such was the atmosphere in the garden of Gethsemane on the night Jesus was arrested. All his disciples ran for their lives, afraid of being arrested and put to death themselves. Peter’s shame deepened just a couple of hours later, when three times he denied knowing Jesus.

Fast-forward fifty days, and these same disciples were risking their lives for Jesus. Something had obviously changed their minds—and their lives. In reality, there were two factors involved: the resurrection of Christ from the dead and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Resurrection demonstrated God’s power, and Pentecost delivered God’s power. These two events transformed a fearful bunch of disciples into a forceful band of disciple

makers who are responsible for the fact that you are reading these words today.

As far as we know, no one was writing down these events as they happened. No one was live-blogging, tweeting, or capturing the drama of those days on video. But in due course, a smart Gentile doctor was so impressed with the story of Jesus and the transformation of Jesus' followers that he, too, became a follower of Jesus.

A television commercial from years ago records a CEO saying, "I liked [the product] so much that I bought the company!" That could have been Luke in the first century; he was so impressed with the story of Jesus that he gave his life to it. With his education and abilities, he was an ideal candidate to commit the two-part story to writing: the inauguration of the church through Christ (the book of Luke) and the spread of the church through Christ's followers (the book of Acts). The prologues to both of Luke's books are evidence of the care he put into his research and writing (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3).

As far as we know, Luke was not an eyewitness of the life of Christ—at least not as part of Christ's inner circle. For his book about the life of Christ, Luke "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" (Luke 1:3). For his book about the expansion of the church, however, he was doing real-time research. In Acts, Luke is able to give an up close account. On more than one occasion, he includes himself in the record of Paul's missionary travels and adventures (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16).

In the Greco-Roman world, physicians such as Luke (Paul refers to Luke as “the beloved doctor” in Colossians 4:14) enjoyed high status as healers of the body and the mind. With such status came a commensurate level of wealth and prestige. Yet Luke sacrificed all that to join Paul in extending the Kingdom of God into Asia and Europe.

Luke and Paul would have been a good fit together in ministry. Luke’s standing in the secular world was paralleled by Paul’s reputation in the religious world. Paul enjoyed considerable esteem as a rising star among the Jewish leaders (Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:4-6). Yet Paul gave it all up, “counting it all as garbage” (Philippians 3:8) in order to devote his life to Christ. Perhaps Paul influenced Luke to do the same.

Paul and Luke were kindred spirits in their devotion to Christ and their passion for taking his gospel to the Gentiles. This was Paul’s assignment from Christ (Acts 9:15-16; 22:21; 23:11; 26:15-18), and Luke joined his team as a supporter, scholar, doctor, and recorder. Luke’s book of Acts is a multifaceted chronicle of Jesus Christ and what he did through his disciples, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to advance his Kingdom in the world.

The movement that started in Jerusalem expanded into Judea and Samaria and has continued “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In fact, some say the words of Christ in Acts 1:8 are what Luke used as a general outline for his book.

THE PLAN OF ACTS

Just before his ascension into heaven, Christ told his disciples: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Whether or not this was an intentional technique on Luke’s part, we can outline the book of Acts based on these geographical cues:

- **Jerusalem** (Acts 1:1–8:3): the formation, rapid growth, persecution, and scattering of the believers in Jerusalem following Pentecost
- **Judea and Samaria** (Acts 8:4–12:25): the expansion of the church westward to the Mediterranean shores and north to Antioch of Syria
- **The ends of the earth** (Acts 13:1–28:31): the expansion of the church throughout Asia Minor, into Europe, and possibly as far west as Spain (Romans 15:24, 28)

Such an outline is sparse, to be sure. But it may provide a clue as to why Luke ends Acts where he does—six years before the death of the apostle Paul. At the end of Acts, Paul is under house arrest in Rome—his first Roman imprisonment—around A.D. 59–61. Luke concludes Acts with this description of Paul: “He welcomed all who visited him,

boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him” (Acts 28:30-31).

Paul’s two-year imprisonment in Rome was a productive period. He wrote four letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) and received a stream of visitors and guests who came to hear the testimony of the famous Jewish scholar who had become a follower of Jesus (Acts 28:23-31; Philippians 4:22).

Besides possibly wanting to end his book on a positive note, why would Luke have put the final period where he did? After all, Paul was released from incarceration and then ministered another six years (this was the period when he might have made it as far west as Spain) before being rearrested, jailed, and martyred in Rome (2 Timothy 4:6-22). But Luke chose not to include this final chapter of Paul’s life.

The reason is likely because Luke had made his point. He’d described the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to Rome, the capital of the known Gentile world. That was Christ’s command, and it had been fulfilled. Christ had told his disciples that they would “stand trial before governors and kings . . . [and] tell the rulers and other unbelievers about [him]” (Matthew 10:18). Jesus had also appointed Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul) to take the gospel “to the Gentiles and to kings” (Acts 9:15), and Paul had done that. Luke began his second book on a victorious note in Jerusalem and ended it on a victorious note in

Rome, which was an effective way to summarize what had happened—and what would continue to happen as the church took the gospel throughout the world.

Another way to outline the book of Acts is to center it on the book's key character: the apostle Paul. More than half of the book of Acts (chapters 13–28) chronicles Paul's missionary activity. Chapters 1–12 can be read as a prologue to Paul's work, as these chapters identify him as the leading persecutor of the church, describe his conversion to Christ, and record his pre-missionary activities.

- **Prologue** (Acts 1–12): The church is born; believers are persecuted and scattered; Saul of Tarsus, the Christians' chief persecutor, is converted; Paul is gradually accepted by the church.
- **Paul's first missionary journey and the council at Jerusalem** (Acts 13–15:35): Paul preaches to the Gentiles in Cyprus, Turkey, and Syria, taking Barnabas and John Mark with him; the council at Jerusalem declares that Gentiles who come to Christ do not need to be circumcised.
- **Paul's second missionary journey** (Acts 15:36–18:22): Paul and Silas strengthen churches in Syria; Paul travels throughout Greece, preaching and encouraging new believers (such as Lydia, Priscilla, and Aquila).
- **Paul's third missionary journey** (Acts 18:23–21:16): Paul ministers in Ephesus

(in modern-day Turkey) before returning to Jerusalem, where he is arrested.

- **Paul’s fourth “missionary journey”** (Acts 21:17–28:10): This is not a planned missionary journey; it comes as a result of Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem and his appeal to make his case to Caesar in Rome.
- **Epilogue** (Acts 28:11-31): Paul is incarcerated in Rome.

Outlining the book this way affirms what American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson believed: that all history is biography. In addition to recounting key events in Paul’s life, Acts is filled with descriptions of other people we can learn from.

Another lesson we can glean from this overview of Paul’s conversion and ministry is that God always has a plan. Paul wouldn’t have mapped out his life this way—particularly not being struck with blindness for several days or being imprisoned for several years—but it’s clear in retrospect that God’s plan was sovereign even in these apparent setbacks.

How would you outline your own life? Thematically, geographically, or chronologically? Based on high points and low points? It doesn’t really matter, because all are relevant. God is always at work in our circumstances with “a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure” (Ephesians 1:9).

The path of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and to “other places far beyond” (2 Corinthians 10:16) is not a straight line. There were, and will

continue to be, twists and turns, starts and stops, all along the way. But in the end, God's plan is always fulfilled: "We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

The same is true of our lives. On the front, our lives look like a beautiful tapestry. But on the back, there are all kinds of knots and tie-offs and connections and repairs that make the front of the masterpiece possible. The book of Acts can look a bit "messy" at times, just like our lives do. But all of this is ultimately part of God's plan to build his church (Matthew 16:18) and conform us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), regardless of the difficulties involved (Romans 8:28).

The book of Acts reveals five ways God grew the church in the first century—and how he will continue to grow it until Christ returns. In addition to the plan of Acts, we will look at the people, places, providence, provision, and power in this book as principles for growing God's church.

PEOPLE IN ACTS

The two most prominent people in the New Testament are Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul. But there is something surprising about both of them: we might have passed either of them on the street or been introduced to them in a meeting without being impressed with their outward appearances. There is very little mentioned about their physical looks in Scripture, but what we do know is rather surprising.

The prophet Isaiah foretold this description of the coming Messiah: “There [would be] nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him” (Isaiah 53:2). As for the apostle Paul, his critics said that “in person he is weak, and his speeches are worthless!” (2 Corinthians 10:10). Those characterizations confirm what we find in the book of Acts: God uses ordinary people, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to grow his church. The individuals he chooses may be attractive, eloquent, and learned . . . or not. As God told the prophet Samuel when he was choosing a king for Israel, “The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Think of the variety of people Luke identifies in the book of Acts. There is no predictable pattern at all. There were unnamed women gathered in prayer, perhaps praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit to come (Acts 1:14). There was a repentant disciple named Peter, who had been forgiven and restored to ministry (Acts 2:14; 4:19-20; 5:3-29). Two disciples, Joseph and Matthias, were nominated to replace Judas Iscariot. Matthias was chosen, but we never hear of either again (Acts 1:23-26). These believers are like most of us—behind-the-scenes Christians living faithful lives, serving where needed, contributing to the Kingdom.

Among Jesus’ followers were also scholars such as Paul and Luke. There were generous encouragers such as Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37). The book of Acts also mentions disabled and afflicted people

whose needs were miraculously met and who were unashamed to praise God on the spot (Acts 3:6-10; 5:15). Seven men were given important administrative roles as deacons—all served, but only two receive additional coverage from Luke (Acts 6:5-6).

This book also includes people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. There was an African official who returned to Ethiopia with the gospel (Acts 8:26-40) and a Roman centurion whose family and household gladly believed in Christ (Acts 10). The same was true for a Roman jailer in Philippi (Acts 16:33). Then there was Lydia, a businesswoman in Philippi, who started a church in her home (Acts 16:11-15). A married couple named Aquila and Priscilla encouraged Paul (Acts 18:2, 18), and a powerful Jewish-Christian orator named Apollos refuted the Jewish leaders' arguments (Acts 18:24-29). The list goes on and on.

Do you see yourself in that list? If not, keep reading and you will surely find yourself on the pages of Acts. You will see how God used—and still uses—people just like you to expand his Kingdom on earth.

PLACES IN ACTS

A significant portion of our lives are decided by a simple question: "Where?" While many places in our lives seem mundane and inconsequential—the grocery store, the gym, the doctor's office, the gas station—that's not the right way to view them. *Every* place in life is a location of consequence in God's sight. Acts 17:26 says, "From one man he

made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands” (NIV). That definitely includes where we go and why God has directed our steps to those places.

It would be a mistake to view our lives as commonplace in God’s sight compared to the lives of the believers in Acts. It might be tempting to assume that God sent the apostles to specific, important places while we’re left to wander from place to place in our inconsequential lives. But nothing could be further from the truth!

The book of Acts offers only a bare-bones outline of where the apostles were instructed to go: they were to leave Jerusalem, go to Judea and Samaria, and then make their way to the rest of the world (Acts 1:8). Without taking anything away from the gravity of the command, this was a commonsense set of directions. Jerusalem was in Judea, and Samaria was right next to Judea. After that comes the rest of the world—“the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). When embarking on a daunting new venture, it makes sense to begin with your neighbors and then move on from there.

The apostles’ task is the same one you and I have. We are just as “sent” as they were. The places we go are just as important as the places they went. Why? Because where they went, and where we go, is where Christ goes in this world. We don’t just go to the grocery store to buy food; we go there as “Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5:20) to accomplish whatever needs to be done for him: an

act of kindness extended, a word of encouragement offered, a lesson taught, a testimony or witness shared—all in the name of Christ.

A number of years ago the book *In Search of Excellence* popularized the concept of “management by walking around.” The idea encouraged corporate executives to leave their paneled offices and get onto the factory floors, where problems are solved, opportunities are uncovered, and lives are changed. If you read the book of Acts with an eye for place, you’ll see that Paul and the other believers conducted their mission for Christ in a similar way: “mission by walking around.”

They believed that they were sent, that Christ was with them, and that the Holy Spirit was guiding and empowering them. As a result, they also believed they would bear fruit. They looked for closed doors and open doors (Acts 16:6-10). They believed that there was a purpose for every person they met (Acts 16:11-15). And they took advantage of every opportunity. For example, when they were in jail in Philippi, they decided there must be a reason for it—a calling God had for them in that place. They were convinced that nothing was random. And they were right: God used their imprisonment to bring salvation to the Philippian jailer and his family (Acts 16:25-34).

The entire book of Acts is filled with stories like this one. The apostles believed they’d been placed where they were for a reason, and we should follow their example. Trust that your daily movements, in both significant and insignificant places, can be

divine appointments. Be sensitive to every nuance of the Spirit, trusting him to use you to expand his Kingdom place by place.

PROVIDENCE IN ACTS

Closely tied to the idea of place in Acts is the doctrine of God's providence—his overarching supervision and ordering of the affairs of the world to accomplish his perfect plans and purposes. As New Testament scholar D. A. Carson writes, providence is a mystery: “The mystery of providence defies our attempt to tame it by reason. I do not mean it is illogical; I mean that we do not know enough to be able to unpack it.”¹

And because providence is a mystery, what the great Reformer John Calvin said is also true: “There is nothing of which it is more difficult to convince men than that the providence of God governs this world.” In the moment, it is often difficult to see the hand of God. But when faithful eyes exercise hindsight, it is much easier to see the hand of God in the midst of our affairs.

There are plenty of examples of God's providence in the book of Acts—events that seem unreasonable or illogical from a human perspective but serve as graphic illustrations of Romans 8:28-29—that God causes all things to work together for good in the lives of those he is conforming to the image of Christ. Although there are countless examples of God's providence throughout the book of Acts, here are a few that stand out.

- **Pentecost** (Acts 2:1-13): Christ told the apostles to go into all the world with the gospel. Shortly after Jesus gave this command, devout Jews—thousands of them!—from a multitude of nations gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, all speaking different languages. It would have taken years for the apostles to reach people from so many nations, but here they were providentially gathered right in the apostles' own city. Many of these people heard the gospel, believed it, and were baptized, and then they took the gospel back to their homelands. None of the apostles could have seen this coming. But they stepped into the flow of God's movement, and world missions was born in a day.
- **Persecution** (Acts 4–5): The apostles were beaten, berated, and jailed in the days following Pentecost. But this persecution gave them the opportunity to preach before the Sanhedrin (the ruling body of the Jews) several times (Acts 4:5-13; 5:27-31). The apostles never could have orchestrated such opportunities on their own.
- **Martyrdom** (Acts 7:54–8:2): Stephen was martyred in Jerusalem, and persecution broke out against Christians. As a result, “all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). Did you catch that? They were sent to Judea and Samaria—exactly where Christ had told them to begin

evangelizing (Acts 1:8). The apostles could have formed a committee to vote on the best mission strategy, but instead they went with what God was doing in their midst.

- **Arrest, jail, and shipwreck** (Acts 21–28): Jesus told Paul he would preach to Gentile kings, but he didn't specify how (Acts 9:15). Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, imprisoned in Caesarea for two years, and shipwrecked in the Mediterranean before he finally reached Rome. Would he have planned it that way? Probably not. But he didn't question what God was doing. He let events unfold according to God's timetable.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that God's providence only relates to "big" things—the movements of kings and nations. As the classic theologian A. A. Hodge writes, "special" (individual) providence is equally important: "To admit universal providence and deny special is nonsense. You might as well talk of a chain without any links."²

Are you willing to let God use the events in your life as links in his providential chain to extend his Kingdom on earth? Can you see those events the way he does and step into his flow with submission and thanksgiving?

PROVISION IN ACTS

The root word for *providence* is the same as the root for *provision*. Both words are based on a compound

Latin word: *pro* (“before”) and *videre* (“to see”). In other words, to provide is “to foresee” or “to attend to.”

When Paul was under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16-31), he was totally dependent on God to supply his needs. This was true during his entire ministry, of course, but it was especially the case when he was under arrest and couldn't work at his trade of making tents (Acts 18:3). One of the letters he wrote while he was incarcerated provides a clear example of how God provided for him. The church in Philippi had sent gifts to sustain Paul, and in his letter he thanked them profusely (Philippians 4:10-20). He promised them that, as they had supplied his needs, God would provide for them in return (Philippians 4:19).

The ideas of divine provision and providence are based on God's ability to foresee our needs. He knows the future; he knows what we *have* compared with what we will *need*. And he is prepared to meet those needs as we trust in him. The church in many parts of the world, the United States included, operates out of its abundance, not its poverty, as the first-century church did (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). But if we are going to model our faith and fruit after the first-century church, we will need to learn to trust God the way they did—not just for money, but for everything required to finish the task they started.

POWER IN ACTS

The most important element needed to build the early church was God's power. In the same

instructions—the same verse—where Jesus gave the apostles an assignment, he also gave them the resource they would need to carry out that assignment. They were to go into Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the world, but they weren't left powerless to fulfill this mission: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you" (Acts 1:8).

The implication is clear: we aren't to attempt to be witnesses for Christ apart from the presence and resulting power of the Holy Spirit. The connection immediately became obvious for the apostles. When the Holy Spirit fell upon them and they were given the gift of languages, they began bearing fruit. The formerly fearful and shamed disciple Peter stood up and preached in a manner that must have surprised the Galilean fisherman even more than it surprised everyone else. As a result of his preaching, three thousand souls were added to the church that day (Acts 2:41).

The power of God was working through the apostles in miraculous ways as God verified their roles and their authority in the church throughout the book of Acts (Acts 3:6-7; 4:30; 5:1-11, 12-16; 6:8; 8:6-7, 13; 9:32-35; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11-12; 20:9-12; 28:1-10). Those powers were given to the apostles for a specific purpose: to prove that they were God's ambassadors as the early church was birthed (2 Corinthians 12:12). The church today should not expect the wholesale duplication of that kind of power.

What we can expect is the power of the Holy Spirit in every realm of our lives. The Holy Spirit

gives us the power to develop the character of Christ (Galatians 5:22-23), the power to minister as we have been gifted by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:8-11), the power to overcome obstacles we face (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), and the power to boldly and courageously defend the gospel against the attacks of the evil one (Ephesians 6:10-18).

I invite you to join the “huge crowd of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) who have gone before us by imitating their faith and obedience. God’s plan for his church has already been established, and he is still at work in places around the world, acting through people who are directed by his providence, fueled by his provision, and empowered by his Spirit—until Jesus returns for his church.

God continues to write the book of Acts—but now he is writing through his people.

Dr. David Jeremiah
January 2015

PROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

THE LAST DAYS OF JESUS

LUKE 23:13–24:53

THE LAST DAYS OF JESUS

Then Pilate called together the leading priests and other religious leaders, along with the people, and he announced his verdict. “You brought this man to me, accusing him of leading a revolt. I have examined him thoroughly on this point in your presence and find him innocent. Herod came to the same conclusion and sent him back to us. Nothing this man has done calls for the death penalty. So I will have him flogged, and then I will release him.”

Then a mighty roar rose from the crowd, and with one voice they shouted, “Kill him, and release Barabbas to us!” (Barabbas was in prison for taking part in an insurrection in Jerusalem against the government, and for murder.) Pilate argued with them, because he wanted to release Jesus. But they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

For the third time he demanded, “Why? What crime has he committed? I have found no reason to sentence him to death. So I will have him flogged, and then I will release him.”

But the mob shouted louder and louder, demanding that Jesus be crucified, and their voices prevailed. So Pilate sentenced Jesus to die as they demanded. As they had requested, he released Barabbas, the man in prison for insurrection and murder. But he turned Jesus over to them to do as they wished.

THE CRUCIFIXION

As they led Jesus away, a man named Simon, who was from Cyrene, happened to be coming in from the countryside. The soldiers seized him and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large crowd trailed behind, including many grief-stricken women. But Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, don’t weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are coming when they will say, ‘Fortunate indeed are the women who are childless, the wombs that have not borne a child and the breasts that have never nursed.’ People will beg the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and plead with the hills, ‘Bury us.’ For if these things are done when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. When they came to a place called The Skull, they nailed him to the cross. And

the criminals were also crucified—one on his right and one on his left.

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.

The crowd watched and the leaders scoffed. “He saved others,” they said, “let him save himself if he is really God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine. They called out to him, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” A sign was fastened above him with these words: “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!”

But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

THE DEATH OF JESUS

By this time it was about noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o’clock. The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn down the middle. Then Jesus shouted, “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” And with those words he breathed his last.

When the Roman officer overseeing the execution saw what had happened, he worshiped God and said, “Surely this man was innocent.” And when all the crowd that came to see the crucifixion saw what had happened, they went home in deep sorrow. But Jesus’ friends, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching.

THE BURIAL OF JESUS

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph. He was a member of the Jewish high council, but he had not agreed with the decision and actions of the other religious leaders. He was from the town of Arimathea in Judea, and he was waiting for the Kingdom of God to come. He went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Then he took the body down from the cross and wrapped it in a long sheet of linen cloth and laid it in a new tomb that had been carved out of rock. This was done late on Friday afternoon, the day of preparation, as the Sabbath was about to begin.

As his body was taken away, the women from Galilee followed and saw the tomb where his body was placed. Then they went home and prepared spices and ointments to anoint his body. But by the time they were finished the Sabbath had begun, so they rested as required by the law.

THE RESURRECTION

But very early on Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.



MARY MAGDALENE

Mary of Magdala not only traveled with Jesus but also contributed to the needs of the group. She was present at the Crucifixion and was on her way to anoint Jesus' body

on Sunday morning when she discovered the empty tomb. Mary was the first to see Jesus after his resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is a heartwarming example of thankful living. Her life was miraculously freed by Jesus when he drove seven demons out of her. In every glimpse we have of her, she was acting out her appreciation for the freedom Christ had given her. That freedom allowed her to stand under Christ's cross when all the disciples except John were hiding in fear.

Mary's faith was direct and genuine. She was more eager to believe and obey than to understand everything. Jesus honored her childlike faith by appearing to her first and by entrusting her with the message of his resurrection.

- + **STRENGTHS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** Contributed to the needs of Jesus and his disciples
One of the few faithful followers present at Jesus' death on the cross
First to see the risen Christ
- + **WEAKNESS AND MISTAKE:** Jesus had to drive seven demons out of her
- + **LESSONS FROM HER LIFE:** Those who are obedient grow in understanding
Jesus relates to women as he created them—as equal reflectors of God's image
- + **VITAL STATISTICS:** Where: Magdala and Jerusalem
Occupation: We are not told, but she seems to have been wealthy

They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. So they went in, but they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. As they stood there puzzled, two men suddenly appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes.

The women were terrified and bowed with their faces to the ground. Then the men asked, "Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Remember what he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and that he would rise again on the third day."

Then they remembered that he had said this. So they rushed back from the tomb to tell his eleven disciples—and everyone else—what had happened. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and several other women who told the apostles what had happened. But the story sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn't believe it. However, Peter jumped up and ran to the tomb to look. Stooping, he peered in and saw the empty linen wrappings; then he went home again, wondering what had happened.

THE WALK TO EMMAUS

That same day two of Jesus' followers were walking to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem. As they walked along they were talking about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came

and began walking with them. But God kept them from recognizing him.

He asked them, “What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?”

They stopped short, sadness written across their faces. Then one of them, Cleopas, replied, “You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days.”

“What things?” Jesus asked.

“The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth,” they said. “He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people. But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and they crucified him. We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel. This all happened three days ago.

“Then some women from our group of his followers were at his tomb early this morning, and they came back with an amazing report. They said his body was missing, and they had seen angels who told them Jesus is alive! Some of our men ran out to see, and sure enough, his body was gone, just as the women had said.”

Then Jesus said to them, “You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn’t it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?” Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets,

explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

By this time they were nearing Emmaus and the end of their journey. Jesus acted as if he were going on, but they begged him, “Stay the night with us, since it is getting late.” So he went home with them. As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared!

They said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” And within the hour they were on their way back to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven disciples and the others who had gathered with them, who said, “The Lord has really risen! He appeared to Peter.”

JESUS APPEARS TO THE DISCIPLES

Then the two from Emmaus told their story of how Jesus had appeared to them as they were walking along the road, and how they had recognized him as he was breaking the bread. And just as they were telling about it, Jesus himself was suddenly standing there among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. But the whole group was startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost!

“Why are you frightened?” he asked. “Why are your hearts filled with doubt? Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it’s really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don’t have bodies, as you see that

I do.” As he spoke, he showed them his hands and his feet.

Still they stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder. Then he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he ate it as they watched.

Then he said, “When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And he said, “Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: ‘There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.’ You are witnesses of all these things.

“And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven.”

THE ASCENSION

Then Jesus led them to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. So they worshiped him and then returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy. And they spent all of their time in the Temple, praising God.



JESUS' CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

It's a turn of phrase that crops up occasionally in our vernacular: "Such and such is the crux of the matter." *Crux*, which means "the most important thing," is the Latin word for "cross." That provides a nice play on words when it comes to Christian theology: "The cross of Christ is the crux of Christianity." Without the cross of Christ, Christianity loses its redemptive message.

The story of the cross is not just a history lesson that we read about in a book. It's a reminder to each of us that our sin—our falling short of God's glory—is the very reason that Jesus Christ died on the cross:

- "Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13).
- "He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14).
- "He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

God picked the best that heaven could offer, his perfect and only Son, and sent him to earth to pay the penalty for our sins. The cross is the crux of Christ's work—and our lives—because it is the way God has chosen to bring us back into a loving relationship with him.

The crucifixion of Christ is inseparable from the resurrection of Christ. One without the other is only half of the story of redemption. The apostle Paul said it this way:

"If Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless" (1 Corinthians 15:14).

But Christ *has* been raised, and his resurrection has wonderful implications for all of our lives (1 Corinthians 15:20). When we come to believe the Resurrection, it will change our pasts, our presents, and our futures.

THE RESURRECTION IS ABOUT OUR PAST

The pain of an unforgiven life can be unbearable. Some people go mad trying to deal with the shame and guilt of the past. Others experience an inescapable, low-level throb reminding them of the ways they have wounded others and sinned against God. In his book *The Contemporary Christian*, John Stott writes, "Forgiveness is one of our most basic needs and one of God's best gifts. . . . We all have a skeleton or two in some dark cupboard, memories of things we have thought, said or done, of which in our better moments we are thoroughly ashamed. Our conscience nags, condemns, torments us."¹

The wonderful news of the gospel is that Jesus died and was raised to life to free us from the guilt and condemnation of our past. He was "handed over to die because of our sins, and he was raised to life to make us right with God" (Romans 4:25).

The bill for our debt of sin was paid at the Cross, and the receipt for that bill is the Resurrection! If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, his death would have been in vain, and we would still bear the weight and guilt of our sin (1 Corinthians 15:17). But through his resurrection, we are assured that we can have free and full forgiveness for all our sins.

THE RESURRECTION IS ABOUT OUR PRESENT

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he makes an astounding statement. In his prayer for the Ephesian believers, he asks God that these new Christians might know the greatness of God's power in their lives each day, and then he says that this is the same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him at God's right hand in heaven (Ephesians 1:19-20).

In other words, the power that brought Jesus back to

life on that first Easter is available to us, too, when we put our trust in him. It is through this power that we are raised from spiritual death and given new life. It is this power that takes people who have no interest in the things of God and makes them into students of God's Word and followers of Jesus Christ.

When you become a Christian, it means you begin experiencing the power of the Resurrection today. God's Spirit will transform who you are and how you respond to the challenges of life. And although your circumstances might not change, your heart will. Instead of being filled with fear, anger, or jealousy, your life will begin to be characterized by love, joy, and peace. The Resurrection is not just about your past; it is also about your present!

THE RESURRECTION IS ABOUT OUR FUTURE

Listen to these words concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ and our hope for the future: "All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see" (1 Peter 1:3-5).

No matter how dark our situations in life might be, our hope is anchored in Jesus Christ and his victory over the grave. Because he is alive, our hope is alive too, and we can look forward to a special inheritance that can't be destroyed, defiled, or diminished, since it is reserved for us in heaven. Through the Resurrection, our eternal inheritance is secure. Nothing can keep us from that hope.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the guarantee of our future resurrection. Because Jesus was victorious over the grave, we, too, have confidence that we will be raised up in triumph over death.

Christ's death and resurrection force us to choose what we believe about the biggest issues of life—about sin and salvation, life and death. It truly is a crossroads that

demands a decision. I urge you to place your trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When you do, you can be sure that your past is forgiven—your failures are not fatal. Your present is meaningful—your life is not futile. Your future is secured—your death is not final.

THE BOOK OF ACTS



CHAPTER ONE

THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit. During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.

Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS

So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, “Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?”

He replied, “The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”

MATTHIAS REPLACES JUDAS

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, a distance of half a mile. When they arrived, they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying.

Here are the names of those who were present: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the Zealot), and Judas (son of James). They all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus.

LUKE

Although we know few facts of his life, Luke has left us a strong impression of himself by what he wrote. In his Gospel, he emphasizes Jesus Christ's compassion. He vividly recorded both the power demonstrated by Christ's life and the care with which Christ treated people. Luke's writing in Acts is full of sharp verbal pictures of real people caught up in the greatest events of history.

Luke was also a doctor. He had a traveling medical practice as Paul's companion. Since the gospel was often welcomed with whips and stones, the doctor was undoubtedly never lacking patients.

God made special use of Luke as the historian of the early church. Repeatedly, the details of Luke's descriptions have been proven accurate. The first words in his Gospel indicate his interest in the truth.

And yet Luke accomplished all this while staying out of the spotlight. Perhaps his greatest example to us is the challenge to greatness even when we are not the center of attention.

- + **STRENGTHS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** A humble, faithful, and useful companion of Paul
A well-educated and trained physician
A careful and exact historian
Writer of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts
- + **LESSONS FROM HIS LIFE:** The words we leave behind will be a lasting picture of who we are
Excellence is shown by how we work when no one is noticing
- + **VITAL STATISTICS:** Where: Probably met Paul in Troas
Occupations: Doctor, historian, traveling companion

During this time, when about 120 believers were together in one place, Peter stood up and addressed them. “Brothers,” he said, “the Scriptures had to be fulfilled concerning Judas, who guided those who arrested Jesus. This was predicted long ago by the Holy Spirit, speaking through King David. Judas was one of us and shared in the ministry with us.”

(Judas had bought a field with the money he received for his treachery. Falling headfirst there, his body split open, spilling out all his intestines. The news of his death spread to all the people of Jerusalem, and they gave the place the Aramaic name *Akeldama*, which means “Field of Blood.”)

Peter continued, “This was written in the book of Psalms, where it says, ‘Let his home become desolate, with no one living in it.’ It also says, ‘Let someone else take his position.’

“So now we must choose a replacement for Judas from among the men who were with us the entire time we were traveling with the Lord Jesus—from the time he was baptized by John until the day he was taken from us. Whoever is chosen will join us as a witness of Jesus’ resurrection.”

So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they all prayed, “O Lord, you know every heart. Show us which of these men you have chosen as an apostle to replace Judas in this ministry, for he has deserted us and gone where he belongs.” Then they cast lots, and Matthias was selected to become an apostle with the other eleven.