

Bible-Reading Coach Podcast Transcript

Week 45: Acts 1-24, *The Early Church*

Week 45 of the Bible reading coach podcast. My name is Karl Vaters and I'm here to help you read through the entire Bible in 52 weeks.

Acts is a long book. That's what we'll be reading this week, the book of Acts, it's a long book. It's the longest in the New Testament and it's the only one in the New Testament that's going to take us longer than a week to read, we won't be on it for a full two weeks, but we won't quite finish it this week, we're going to get through the first 24 chapters. It's also the last of the New Testament books of history after this book. All the rest of the book isn't stuck. All the rest of the New Testament books are not stories they are teaching. Or and the final one, of course, Revelation is a book of prophecy. So in fact, aside from Revelation, the rest of the New Testament that follows the book of Acts, takes place during the events that we read in Acts.

Okay, so similar to what we had in the Old Testament, where we read through the books like First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, and then the Psalms, and the Proverbs and several of the prophets all take place during that time in history. Same thing in the New Testament, during the book of Acts, is when we read about the growth of the early church. And the rest of the New Testament, aside from Revelation, happens in the middle of the activities that we're going to read about this week, and a little bit the following week. So it's a really important book to understand because it contextualizes the entire rest of the New Testament for us.

So let's get right into it, shall we? Acts chapter one begins with these two verses acts one, verses one and two. "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after having given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen." So the author of acts starts out by talking about his former book. So what book is that? What book had he written before? Well, if you remember the next word Theophilus, that's a person's name. It occurred one other time, as we've been reading through the Bible. In fact, if you remember, it was back at the beginning of the book of Luke, you might remember it because it's such an interesting name, it only appears twice in the New Testament, and it was not a common name back then.

So he talks about his former book, he tells us a little bit about that former book. So let's take a look back at the beginning of the book of Luke and see if it matches up. Luke chapter one, verses one through four started like this, "If you'll remember, many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too, decided to write an orderly account for you most excellent the office so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." Both books begin by telling us how the books were written, why the books were written, and they are addressed to a man named Theophilus. And Acts refers back to a former book and describes, in essence, the book of Luke.

So we know because of this, and because of many other pieces of evidence, that the Luke who wrote the book of Luke, the gospel of Luke is also the Luke who wrote the book of Acts, it's the same person. And it's really in some ways, like a continuation of the book of Luke. So the start of Acts, describes the Gospel of Luke to a tee and even names the same recipient,

no serious Bible scholar, doubts that the books of Luke and Acts were written by the same person. In fact, when we take a look at it today, through modern computers and so on, we discover that the frequency of language usage, like the small words that he is, this is a way that people scholars today look back at ancient literature, and try to figure out if somebody might have written two books the same.

We used to look at it and think, well they're using these rare words or the using these big words. But that's not the easiest way to compare it. The easiest way to compare it is the small words, like the word "of" or "a" or "that" or "to". How many times do they use it? What kind of little quirks of language that you might not notice? Can a computer show us Oh, this repeats in exactly the same frequency. When you do that, we discovered Luke and Acts, written by the same person.

We know as we saw in the book of Luke, that Luke was a doctor. He was a researcher, he was an interviewer. And while he was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus, he was an eyewitness to a lot of what happens in the book of Acts. So in the book of Luke, He was not an eyewitness to the events. So he interviewed eyewitnesses and corroborated the evidence in the book of Acts a whole lot of what happened he was an eyewitness to and we'll talk about that when we get to it in a few minutes. Okay.

So he starts in the book of Acts Chapter one by retelling about Jesus' ascension, which he also told about at the end of the book of Luke and Luke chapter 24. And then in chapter two of the book of Acts, we come to one of the Bible's huge shifts. Okay? Acts chapter two describes what happens on the day of Pentecost, the first Pentecost after Jesus death and resurrection.

So why is Acts Chapter Two such a big deal? Well, first of all, it takes place on the day of Pentecost, "pente" from the word 50, from the number 50, okay, 50 days after Passover, which is the Passover when Jesus died and rose again. So it's 50 days after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was with them for 40 days. So this is 10 days after he ascended into heaven. And the disciples for the last 10 days have been doing what Jesus told them to do, which is waiting in Jerusalem for him to come back again. Okay. So they're thinking Jesus is going to show up maybe through a wall like he did previously in the upper room. But this time, God is going to show up in a different way than they expect.

So a lot of people have a picture that for 10 days, all they did was sit in the upper room and pray and wait and there's really no evidence to do so. It appears that they spent their evenings in the upper room that was like the hotel room where they slept. But during the day, they did what every good Jew would do in Jerusalem, during a feast like Pentecost, they would go to the temple courts with all of the other faithful Jews. So the disciples were spending their evenings sleeping in the upper room, they were spending their days preaching in the temple courts telling about Jesus to the people in the temple courts. Now Acts chapter two verse one calls it a house, but that's okay. Jesus called the Temple a house, he called it my father's house, it was a very common way to refer to the temple.

All right, so why does this chapter matter so much? Acts chapter two, let me give you a handful of reasons. First of all, Acts chapter two describes what we are called what we would call the birthday of the church. Before Acts chapter two, Jesus had followers. After Acts, chapter two, we have a church, Jesus said He would build His Church and it starts on this day of Pentecost described in Acts chapter two. Secondly, it describes the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

And it's really, really important to, to understand the arrival of the Holy Spirit, because three, now because of Acts, chapter two, everyone who believes in Christ has the Holy Spirit living in us.

In the Old Testament, most of the people who followed God did not have the Holy Spirit living in them. Occasionally, you'd have a priest, or a prophet, or a king, or some of Bezaleel and Aholiab, the people who were assigned to build the tabernacle in the wilderness, were anointed by the Holy Spirit to do so. But the anointing of the Holy Spirit came on people, only specific people for specific periods of time, and not to everybody, since the arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts, chapter two, everyone who comes to faith in Christ has the Holy Spirit come and live inside of us, we now all have direct access to God, the Holy Spirit who lives inside us, that is a huge shift that happens in Acts chapter two. Because of this, point number four that happens, a big shift in Acts, chapter two is, we now have the power that Jesus promised he would give us by the Holy Spirit living in us.

The fifth big change that happens in the day of Pentecost is that everything about the disciples changes from this point on, when you read what the disciples do and say, before the day of Pentecost, you got a bunch of people who are trying to figure this out, who were kind of following faithfully, but really blowing it a whole lot of times after the day of Pentecost, they are dynamos. They're not perfect, nobody but Jesus ever was perfect and sinless. But wow, is this a different group of people why they now have the Holy Spirit living in them, it changes them completely.

Also, the sixth big change that happens in Pentecost is we have the biggest mass conversion. Up until that point, about 3000 people were saved. Acts chapter two tells us this is also one of the reasons why we know that this didn't take place in the upper room. Because if you imagine a little upper room and a little house on a side street in Jerusalem, how do 3000 people see what's going on and become converted, right? That this had to have happened in the temple courts. That's the only place that many people would have gathered to hear it and to become saved.

And then the seventh big shift that happens there are others but these are the seven we're talking about. The seventh big shift that happens in Acts chapter two is the people who see this, this ascending descending of the Holy Spirit upon God's people, and coming into God's people and them speaking in tongues. The people who hear and see this come from every corner of the Roman world Acts chapter one, verses nine through 16. Describe 16 different languages and locations that people are from if you include Jerusalem as one of those locations, and these people will leave within days to take the news of the gospel with them to all of those regions of the Roman Empire.

So Jesus knows what what he's doing, when God sends the Holy Spirit to them, he sends them at a time and in a place where the greatest number of people will be assembled, where they are ready to hear something that God is doing, and where they will leave immediately and spread that gospel as they go, it could not have been at a more opportune time. That's not a coincidence. That's by God's design. So that's just a little bit of why Acts chapter two is such an explosive chapter in the scriptures.

We then go along in Acts chapters three and four, where the early church starts performing miracles with the power of the Holy Spirit, just as they had seen Jesus do in the gospels, immediately, miracles are being performed as signs, which is what Jesus called them,

which means they're not about the miracles themselves, but they are assigned to point to the power of Jesus. And just as Jesus was hated for the miracles he performed by the religious leaders, so the religious leaders hate the followers of Jesus, who are performing these miracles as well, immediately the persecution of Christians begins.

We then go to Acts chapters five, and six. And one of the first things that is tested in the church is their honesty. What was happening was, because the persecution was beginning, people were finding that their jobs and livelihoods were at stake. And so the Christians who had the funds were consolidating those funds and making sure that other Christians got them. A man named Barnabas, for instance, sold his house and took the entire proceeds of his house and just put them in the common fund so that everybody would have what they needed.

Then a married couple named Ananias and Sapphira thought, Oh, that's a good idea, and look at all the credit Barnabas is getting. They sell their house, but they only give part of the proceeds. That's not the problem. They didn't have to sell their house, they didn't have to give any of the proceeds as they're later told. But what they did was they lied and said it was the entire proceeds to the house. The problem wasn't that they didn't give it all they could have given nothing. They had that permission. They're later told that the problem is they lied about what they gave. And integrity is such an important part of what it means to be followers of Christ, that this first place of lying, and the disciples say you didn't just like us, you lied to the Holy Spirit, which is a huge problem. They're both struck dead on the spot for that.

It seems overly severe, but it's one of those establishing principles in Scripture. This is how important integrity is. Again, please understand, it's not that you must give it all, it's kind of like, when we look back at Matthew, Mark, and Luke, where we where Jesus has the conversation with the person we often call the rich young ruler, right? He comes and says, What must I do to be saved? Jesus says, You got to do these things. He says, I've been doing all those things. I've been following the law. And then he says, Yeah, you got to do one more thing. You got to sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and then come follow me. And he walks away, the Bible says because he was very rich, a lot of people look at that and go, well, every Christian needs to sell everything they have. No, that was the only person Jesus gave that instruction to why because his goods had a hold of him. Ananias and Sapphira, same thing. The problem isn't that they didn't give everything they had. The problem was they lied about it.

So nowhere in the New Testament are believers required to sell everything, they have to put it all into a common pot. And anything less than that is not Christian. That's not the New Testament way, but lying about what you do or don't give. That's where the problem is.

And immediately in chapter six, there's a church dispute. So if you've got a church that has conflict, welcome to the church. It happened right from the very beginning, people often look back and go, I wish our church was like the New Testament Church, Oh, you mean filled with arguments and disputes. It's been like that since the beginning, there's a dispute. And then the importance of servanthood comes in, as seven people are assigned to help to monitor this dispute. And you'll read about it when you get to Acts chapter six.

We then go to Acts chapter seven, and the seven people who have been chosen because of this dispute that happened in chapter six, one of them is a man named Steven. And he is sharing his faith and he becomes the first Christian martyr, the first Christian ever to be killed for sharing his faith in Jesus. When you read through Chapter Seven, it's a long and important chapter, note Stephen's courage, note his boldness, note his grasp of the Bible and of

the story arc that the Bible tells. And then also, at the end of, or in the middle of it actually, notice about a young man who heard and saw all of it, named Saul, because we're going to hear a lot more about that guy coming up very soon.

Acts chapter eight then talks about the persecution that is growing in the early church. This is a huge note, in the early church is how quickly it grew, how quickly it went to other places, and how often that happened as a result of persecution. Quite often when bad things happen to Christians we want to push back against it. We want to say no, no, you're not. And of course, we don't welcome persecution, we don't want it, but we have to pay attention to the fact that Jesus said we would be persecuted for our faith and that to me historically, when Christians are persecuted, it actually leads to more conversions. So we have to accept that as one of the interesting paradoxes of living as a Christian.

In Acts, chapter eight, we will also notice that the gospel spreads to Samaria, which we've heard a lot about, and the life of Jesus, of course, and Ethiopia, which is an African nation, of course, which begins to spread to Africa. Then we'll go to Acts chapters 9 through 11. And this is another huge cultural moment. And I know I've been saying a whole lot, this is a big moment, because it just is. The gospels and the book of Acts and then when we get to the book of Romans have these huge, huge culture and world shifting moments that happen over and over and over again.

And another one of those happens in chapter nine, this man Saul, is given permission to persecute Christians, and on his way to persecute Christians. The resurrected Jesus meets him, and he becomes a Christian, and everything changes. Then in chapter 10, we go to Peter's story. Peter receives a vision three times. It comes down to confirming that this is really from God, to convince him that the gospel is now open to everyone, including Gentiles, and including those who used to persecute us, like this saw guy who has been converted, that Peter doesn't even know about yet.

This is also Acts chapter 10 is one of the reasons why Christians don't follow Old Testament food laws anymore. If you've ever met a cynic or a skeptic of the Bible, who says, Well, you say you follow the Bible. Yeah, I do. Well, then Malcolm, eat lobster? How come you're okay with bacon? The Bible says not to eat any of those things. Why are you okay with that? Acts 10 is one of the reasons why we're okay with it. God specifically tells Peter you can eat anything you want. Now, that has changed. Why? Because through Jesus, those ceremonial laws have been fulfilled. So that's one of the places we get that when we follow some Old Testament laws, like do not murder and do not commit adultery, but we don't follow the laws about eating lobster and eating bacon. Acts 10 is one of the reasons why it's not just random. There are very definite reasons for that.

But I also want you to note in chapter 11, that Peter is asked to explain what he's doing. You're going to Gentiles now, you're it's okay, if you eat all these things, what's going on? Why? Because the early church didn't just accept it, because somebody said, I want to do it now. They tested everything, especially these new ideas and these new methods. It's important for us to understand that the church doesn't just randomly accept things because somebody who's got a charismatic personality says so the church is supposed to test these things, especially when they appear to be new to us.

And then you got this really fascinating little verse in chapter 11, verse 26, that says this, The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch, the word Christian appears for the first time

in the entire Bible, in Acts 11:26. And it appears to have been given to us as an insult. Christian means, you know, those people who want to follow Christ, they want to be like Christ. That's what it means. And Christians heard that and went, Yeah, we do want to be like Christ, we'll accept that. And so we accepted this name that was supposed to be given to us as an insult. And we thought, Yeah, we like that. Let's call ourselves Christians from this point on, that happens in Acts chapter 11.

We'll then move to Acts chapter 12. Where Saul starts to go to the Gentiles, this is another huge cultural moment. And then in chapters 13 through 14, in this chapter, the book then is split into chapters one through 12, is about the church in general, chapters 13 through to the end of the book, which is chapter 28. The whole rest of the book narrows into this one person named Saul who later goes by the name of Paul and his travels and his teaching as he spreads the gospel. It just completely shifts. It's from it's got you got Peter, and you've got Phillip, and you've got Saul, and you've got Steven. You got all the church in general all the way through chapter 12. 13 on, it's all about Saul, who later becomes Paul or who goes by his second name Paul.

At a certain point, he goes on his first missionary journey in chapters 13 and 14, it starts as a missionary journey with Barnabas and Saul, and very quickly becomes a journey of Paul and his companions, and they are going down to town, sharing the gospel as they go, we then get to another pivotal moment, I keep telling you these, hey, keep happening, right? Acts chapter 15, is what we call the Jerusalem Council. It happens when Paul comes back from his first missionary journey. He comes in, he reports to his overseers to the people who are overseas who are shepherding him as a Christian and who sent him out to do this. And he reports back and says, Here's how my trip went.

This is really important for us to understand, because there's a whole segment of Christians and there always has been, who think that any kind of organizational structure is somehow anti New Testament, and that's just not the case. They had board meetings and that adjustment, they had to report Their findings back to a group of people who had authority over them. They were commissioned to go on trips, and were required to come back and report on that trip, and to show that they're doing what they said they would do. Accountability is a huge part of the New Testament Church, and it ought to be a part of us today.

So what is this Jerusalem council about three key things to note when you read x 50. And this week, first of all, Paul is reporting back to the leaders who had commissioned him. It's really important that we have people who are in authority over us as part of the body of Christ. In many ways. This is the church's first ever board meeting. And like most board meetings you may have been to, they disagreed, they argued, and they reached a decision that some people actually think is a bit of a compromise. It's really actually a fascinating passage. So there's, that's the first thing that happens in chapter 15.

Secondly, they had to decide, Did God really say it's now okay to preach this gospel to the Gentiles? And they decide, yes, that's true. And then the third question they need to ask an answer is this. Do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to become Christians? Whenever you hear the argument over circumcision, the argument over circumcision is basically this. Do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to become Christian? And the answer from the Jerusalem Council is no, they do not. It's not just that they don't have to be circumcised. It's that Christianity is now not considered only a subset of Judaism. Any Gentile can become a

Christian, without going through the front door of Judaism to get there. That, again, is a huge cultural and theological shift that happens at that time.

We then move to Chapter 16, through 20, where the apostle Paul goes on what are called his second and third missionary journeys. And I want you to take note, in chapter 16, verse 10, there's a shift in language that most of us, including me, would not notice if somebody didn't tell us up until 69. The writer Luke who's writing the book of Acts talks about they did this, Paul did that they did this in chapter 16, verse 10, it changes from they did this to we did this and, and he talks about stops talking about them, and he starts talking about us.

In fact, biblical scholars call these the US passages, I'll give them to you real quick. They are in chapter 16, verses 10 through 17. Chapter 20, verses 5 through 15. Chapter 21, verses 1 through 8. Chapter 27, verses 1 through 28. Chapter 27, 1 through 16. Those segments are all where Luke changes it from they did this too, we did this, it was done by them, too. It was done by us. And during those passages, the details get really significant, very a lot of detail.

What happened then, was that Luke was traveling with Paul at the time, he was actually seeing these things occur and writing about the things he actually saw. So this is really important for us to understand, the writer of Acts was actually an eyewitness to a lot of these events. It's first person I witnessed not just do interviews with others, which is how the entire Book of Luke was, even though it's completely dependable. Okay, now, at the end of Paul's third missionary journey, which is in this chapter, these chapters 16, through 20, he gets a call from God to go to minister in Rome. At that time, he actually sends a letter to Rome, because he knows it's gonna be a long time before he gets there, to get ready for it. And that's the book of Romans, which we'll be reading next week.

But before he goes to Rome, he has to go in the opposite direction and report back to Jerusalem, on his way back to Jerusalem to report to the people who commissioned him for the journey. Several times, he's warned, do not go back to Jerusalem, bad things are going to happen if you go to Jerusalem, but he says I have to go, I have to go for a couple of reasons. One, because I'm required to report back to those who are in authority over me. And two, I've got these offerings everywhere I go. I've been taking up offerings that people have given to help to support the persecuted churches in Jerusalem, and they need what I'm bringing.

And so he heads back to Jerusalem, of course, acts chapters 21 to 24, exactly what was prophesied happens. He has big trouble in Jerusalem, he gets in trouble, he is arrested for sharing his faith. So much detail happens in Acts chapter 21, through 24, and a couple chapters after that, that concerns Roman laws. So let me explain a little bit of it. So you'll understand it when you get there. Roman citizens had rights that non Roman citizens did not have. So when they first arrest Paul, because he's preaching to the Jews, and as a Jew, they just assume he's a Jew. But as they're about to drag him basically into jail without a trial. He goes, Are you allowed to do that to a Roman citizen? And they go, No. And he goes, Well, I'm a Roman citizen. And they're scared because they've just treated a Roman citizen the way they're not allowed to treat a Roman citizen.

Secondly, as the trial goes on, it gets more complicated. He finally goes, I want to appeal to Caesar. What does that mean? Well, Caesar, of course, was Caesar. He was the emperor of Rome. Any Roman citizen could appeal to Caesar and what that meant was Caesar now all other things stop and you have to get him to Caesar. For Caesar to hear his case, here's the complex complexity of it. Caesar was under no obligation to hear the case, just simply because

someone appealed to Caesar. But the soldiers in the magistrates were under an obligation to get the person to Caesar.

So Paul, basically, you know, kind of rolls the dice here and goes, I'm going to appeal to Caesar, which means this trial is over, you have to get me to, guess where, to Rome, which is where God called them anyway. But I could languish in prison in Rome for the rest of my life, technically, Caesar is under no obligation to hear me. So that's what's happening there. And also, part of the reason it gets so complicated and weird, and he goes back and forth between all these people, as the Roman magistrates and judges were appointed in this region especially, not because of their abilities, but because they paid bribes or because they had status or because they were married to somebody. And so they tended not to really be good at their job. And so they just love to pass the buck. And that's what's happening during this whole very complicated and otherwise confusing passage.

So Paul is on trial, he's being shuffled from judge to judge to judge because none of them wants to actually do any work. And that's where we're going to pick it up next week, still in the middle of this back and forth, thing that happens. But now in response to Paul appealing to Caesar. So, so much happens in Acts as we're going to read through this week, the start of the church, the persecution of the church, the spread of the gospel, the early Christians, learning how to follow Jesus and care for each other, sharing their faith with Gentiles for the first time and what all of that means. So much of what we do today as the church comes from the example that we read about in the book of Acts.

So as you read this week, note a handful of things. Note, what we do as the church that has their basis here. Note are the things that we do as a church that don't have their basis in the book of Acts. And if so, maybe we don't need to stop doing them. But maybe they're not the most important things if they're not being done in the book of Acts, the things that we've added on since then, note what the early church focused on what was most important to them, because that's what ought to be most important to us.

And also then note how they responded to genuine persecution, and how God who used God used even their persecution to be a catalyst for the spread of the gospel. It can be an encouragement for us today. Because as we look around, and we're concerned is persecution gonna come to us and quite frankly, if you're listening to this, outside of the US in some places in the world where real persecution is happening, be of good cheer, as the Bible says, because while in this world, you will have tribulation as Jesus told us, he has overcome the world.

So whether you're in persecution, we pray for you as our brothers and sisters in Christ and Christ is with you. Whether you're concerned about persecution potentially coming where you live, be of good cheer as well, Christ is with you and through even persecution. He has his will done. This is a big week, you're going to get a lot out of it. And we'll see you next week.

If you'd like to support this ministry, and help put resources like this into the hands of the people who need them the most, go to KarlVaters.com/support. For an outline of the entire Bible Reading plan, go to KarlVaters.com/bibleoutline. And if you'd like a transcript of this episode, it's available at KarlVaters.com/transcripts. If you're a church leader, and you'd like to get a transcript of each episode a week in advance, subscribe to our free newsletter at KarlVaters.com/subscribe. All these links are in the show notes. This episode was produced by Veronica Beaver. The theme music was written and performed by Jack Wilkins of JackWilkinsmusic.com. And me? I'm Karl Vaters and I'm your Bible Reading Coach.