

Part 7: Jesus in Acts and the Epistles– God in the Church

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We are nearing the end of our eight week series called Jesus at the Center where our goal is to better help us read our Bible's by tracking the overarching story of the entire Bible.

Growing up as a Christian in the 90s, I lived through the era where anything that could be made into an acronym, was made into an acronym. One of those that circulated widely was the definition of the Bible by its acronym: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.

Maybe you've heard that idea before: that the Bible is an instruction manual for life, a map for the road ahead. The problem with these metaphors is that it severs the very heart of the Bible itself. The Bible does instruct, but it's not simply instructions.

Instruction manuals are helpful, until you know enough. Then you discard them. Maps are good, until you know the area, then you don't need them. But if the Bible is a story that makes sense of our lives and our reality by showing the problem of sin and God's loving plan to save all who come to him through Jesus, then this book takes on a different meaning.

As we've tracked God's redemptive plan to restore his people, to his place in his presence, new metaphors might emerge for us. The Bible is picture book of God's faithfulness to his people. The Bible is counsel of past voices speaking into your current situation and time. The Bible is a wedding ring that reminds those who believe whose they are and by what promise they can endure. The Bible is daily bread to face the weight of the day. The Bible is the word of God that comforts us when we feel alone.

The word of God is as Peter says, that which makes us born again, it gives us life, light and everything we need to love and be loved by Jesus every day.

Last week we saw how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament by coming to save the church, and today as we turn our attention to the book of Acts and the epistles, we see Jesus' continued work to create, sustain and grow the church.

We are going to examine these together this morning by doing three things. We are going to **survey the story, study the story**, and lastly we are going to **savor the savior of the story**.

To begin this morning, let's **Survey the Story** together.

In the first five weeks of this study we saw the story of the Old Testament and how the problem of sin, and the recovery of God's people, in God's presence, in God's place was going to be done through the work of God's messiah-king. Last week we saw the accounts of Jesus Christ where he did just that. As fully God and fully man, Jesus fulfilled the promises we could never keep, and dying in our place he took the punishment that we fully deserved. But just as soon as Jesus rose victoriously from the dead and it seemed the story was finally over—Jesus ascended into heaven leaving the church with two promises.

The first is that he will send the Holy Spirit, the second is that he will come again. This time between Jesus first and second coming is often called “the church age” or as the Bible puts it “the last days.” As we look at the book of Acts and the New Testament letters, they are all written during these “last days.”

Notice how Peter puts this in Acts 2 when the promise of the Holy Spirit first fell on the Christian church, quoting the Old Testament prophet Joel he said: **Acts 2:16-17a**. We are living “in the last days,” the days when the Father is laboring on the church that the Son bought through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

This is important for us today because we find ourselves in the same address as these people did. We don’t live in the days of the Old Testament, we don’t live in the days of Jesus’ ministry, but we live here in this church age! Did you know that the Bible anticipates where you are right now? You too are part of God’s story!

When you read your favorite book or watch your favorite movie you understand everything in relationship to the main plot. This portion of scripture teaches us to do that same thing in our own lives with the plot of God’s gospel plan for the world. Which means the geographic and theological progressions we’ve been tracking are not for other people’s parts of the story, but for yours!

So how do we see this progressing in these books and in our own time today?

Geographically the progression here is this: ***The gospel to the nations through the church***. What starts in Jerusalem in Acts 1 is going to the world by Acts 28 through the efforts of God’s church.

Theologically speaking what we see is how and why this happens. That is, we see ***The Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus’ Church***. Jesus being absent from his body is not absent in his rule or presence. Look at what Peter says of Jesus in **Acts 5:31-32**. Jesus is not only the savior of the church, but through the work of the Holy Spirit he is the leader of the church. As the church grows out to the nations, it also grows up by the work of the Holy Spirit.

All of this happens while we await the final return of Jesus. Our key text, which was already read for us this morning comes from a letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. As I read this letter again see if you can find the themes of global expansion, growth in obedience and anticipation of the next stage of the story: **1 Corinthians 1:1-9**.

So here we see our main point this morning as we examine **Jesus in Acts and the Epistles: God in the Church**.

So where do we see this, how do we study it and apply it? Let’s begin to **Study the Story** together.

The books we are going to look at today are the book of Acts, where we see this geographic growth from a 30,000 foot level, and the 21 letters written to individual churches that outline their spiritual growth from the ground level.

To begin we are going to look at the book of Acts (Acts of the Apostles) and we are going to focus on two themes in this book. The two themes are taken right out Jesus promise to the apostles in Acts 1 and those themes are **Power and Witness**.

Right before Jesus ascended, and just while the apostles were wondering where they were in God's story of his people, his place and his presence, Jesus gave them these instructions: **Acts 1:6-11**.

Far from being the end of the story, the work of Jesus enables the work of the church by giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit comes into the church in power, the gospel goes out into the world through the church.

In Acts 2 we see what happens when the Holy Spirit first comes. If you've ever turned on a hose or a faucet, you've maybe experienced at first a powerful flow, with gurgling water and lots of pressure at first. This is a bit like what happened at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit showed up with a display of gushing power.

Read with me this account in **Acts 2:1-21**.

There are two Old Testament themes we need to bear in mind to understand what's happening here.

First, we are seeing the fulfillment of the New Covenant promise in **Ezekiel 36:27**. Also consider how Jeremiah puts this in **Jeremiah 31:34**.

The New Covenant will fall and no one will need to be taught to "know the Lord." What does that mean? It means that the New Covenant, unlike the Old, is not for those who need to be believe, but for those who actively believe. To be in this covenant is to know and believe in God through Jesus Christ.

Here by faith that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God the people of God were filled with the presence of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. The promise Jesus made when he was still with them came true. God's people might not yet be in God's final place, but now they have a unique and real presence by faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is not only for God's anointed prophets or kings, but for all and any who believe.

We see this all over the first part of Acts where the Apostles move from community to community and as they help people understand the full truth of faith and repentance in Jesus as the means of God's promise—people are filled with the Holy Spirit. Far from teaching that we need a second baptism in the Holy Spirit, Acts shows that all who repent and believe in God's promise through Jesus get the Holy Spirit.

This is emphasized in our second Old Testament theme. Do you remember all the way back in Genesis 11? Back when the whole earth gathered together to make a name for themselves at Babel, and because of their hopelessness of their effort God scattered their languages? Well here, as people from many nations gathered to celebrate God's provision for the Jewish feast of weeks, the Holy Spirit fell and the effects of Babel were beginning to be reversed.

The effects of sinful division were overcome in this beachhead event by bringing a unity of language through the work of the Holy Spirit. What are we as readers to gather from this? The gospel is about to go global.

As Peter draws out from Joel's prophecy this new people, this new presence will fall on—sons and daughters, males and females, slave and free. The gospel and the effects of it are open to all who believe. Even Gentiles! As Gentiles believe and receive the same Holy Spirit as the Jews the Jewish

believers fell silent in Acts 11 and glorified God saying, "To the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life!"

This was so incredible that it had to be validated by miracles. God gave the apostles and the early church a smattering of miracles to prove this salvation that was sweeping up people from every tongue tribe and nations was indeed and in fact the work of God and God alone.

This power that fell through the Holy Spirit produces a witness in the lives of the church. Everywhere Holy Spirit filled believers went, the message of the gospel went with them.

When people believed in this gospel, they immediately began to bear witness to it. They started the work of evangelism almost immediately and in a culture that at best was skeptical and at worst was hostile to this message.

But Acts tracks the glorious inversion which we need to see if we want hope in our own efforts of sharing the gospel. In circumstances where it seemed the church lacked power and was exposed, the gospel flourished.

Almost immediately plans are made by authorities to crush the early Christian church. But almost like quick sand, the more the enemy tried to crush the church, the further they got from their goal.

In Acts 7, Stephen becomes the first martyr of the Christian church. But as one early church pastor said regarding church history, "The blood of the martyr is the seed of the church." Stephen's death scattered the church like blowing dandelion seeds in your lawn.

In Acts 9, a Jewish man named Saul is trying to round up all the Christians and imprison them in Jerusalem. But in Acts 8 we see that Saul's persecution of the church had drove Philip to Samaria, south towards Africa where he shares Christ with an Ethiopian who believes and is sent back to the Queen's court with the message of the gospel, then Philip takes a tour all the way up the coast of the Mediterranean preaching the gospel to all the towns. Saul can't contain the church.

But even more than that, Jesus converts even Saul. As Saul went to crush the church, Jesus saved him and commissioned him to give his life for the growth of the church, and specifically the Gentile Christians.

We also see secular rulers like Herod raise themselves up against the church only to be humbled by God. Look at how Luke portrays this in **Acts 12:23-24**.

As human leaders died, the word of God multiplied. Saul, who is given the name Paul, goes on missionary journey after missionary journey along with other apostles and by the end of the book of Acts what started with a group of scared Christians in an upper room in Jerusalem is now a movement of faithful, Spirit-filled believers who have shared the gospel in houses and in courtrooms from Ethiopia to the capital of Rome.

Do you remember the promise God made to Abraham? Look back at **Genesis 12:1-3**. In Abraham the families of the earth will be blessed and here in the expansion of the church, the nations are finding salvation in the God of Abraham. What we are seeing in the New Covenant is that the promise of God is

not set apart by the physical boundaries of the Promised Land but instead by the boundaries of faith in Jesus Christ.

By the end of Acts this gospel expansion consumed the entire Roman world, but the story isn't done there. Acts is the beginning, not the end. We still live in this story. We are progressing this same story line with this same power and bearing witness to the same gospel. There are still 3.2 billion people in our world who have not heard the wonderful new of salvation for Jesus Christ.

When we hear that number most of us fall into philosophical questions about what happens to someone who has never had the opportunity to reject the gospel. But how many of hear that number and instead say: it's my job to go. It's the churches job to go—to preach—to bear witness to the lost whatever the cost. There are people here in our town who have not responded, does this story, does this purpose show up in your life? It's an ominous thing to consider, but talk to someone here and we'd love to help you be faithful in that.

Acts tracks the global progression of the church, but also see glimpses of the spiritual growth of the church here in **Acts 9:31**.

The church walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Spirit and in that, it multiplied.

It's this walking in fear and comfort that we see the growth of the church in the epistles. The word epistles simply means, "letter." These letters were written by at least five authors, to at least 15 specific congregations located across the Middle East, Asia Minor and Europe.

In Acts you saw Paul and others going on missionary journeys to plant churches, but here you see them circling back in writing to encourage those same churches. Here in the epistles we see two primary themes: **Growth and Glory**.

That is we see how the church is not only growing out, but growing up, walking in holiness and fear of the Lord. But we also see how the church is motivated by the glory of God and also comforted by the glory yet to come in heaven. In these letters we see three aspects of the church: the establishment of the church, the energy of the church, and the eternity of the church.

First, let's look at ***The Establishment of the Church***.

As soon as the Holy Spirit fell, the believers in Jesus already began meeting in congregations as a church. Jesus already laid the foundation for this in Matthew 16 where after Peter confessed faith that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus said this: **Matthew 16:17-19**.

The church is established first and foremost not by any physical metric but by faith in Jesus Christ. But God has so designed and planned that people marked off by the gospel gather together as people of the gospel.

Much of what is written in these letters is the Apostles putting in order the kind of church that Jesus desired. That's why Jesus' great commission to the church was not only to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, but to teach them to obey all that I have commanded. The gospel consumes your life, it doesn't simply re-categorize it.

Central to the missionary efforts of the apostles was church planting. This is why Paul left Titus in Crete, to help put the church in order. This is why Peter challenged the elders to be faithful shepherds in an unfaithful world. This is why the author of Hebrews says this: **Hebrews 10:24-25**.

You might find it counterintuitive, but if you want to be passionate about evangelism and the nations, you must be passionate about the local church! Healthy churches produce healthy worship and that's the end of all missions—to invite those on the outside to come and worship the glorious splendor of the God who saved us.

Part of this establishment included the installation of the church offices of elders and deacons, the ordinances of the baptism to mark off the church, and the Lord's Supper to unite the church, as well as the practice of church discipline to protect the church and care for the sinner.

Jesus not only tells us what the church is, but he also tells us what the church is to do. What is the work of the church? Here we see ***The Energy of the Church***.

What is the mission of the church? What do elders, deacons and members covenant together to do? Paul gives us a glimpse in **Colossians 1:28-29**.

What's the role of the church? To proclaim Jesus. To engage with others. To what end? That we may present as many people as possible, by the power of God to save, mature in Christ Jesus.

The goal of the church is not to gather people. The goal of the church is not to transform culture. The goal of the church is not to eliminate poverty or racism. The goal of the church is to unleash the power of God's transformative grace through the message of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit so that people are changed. When God's people, are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the places in which God's people live will inevitably begin to look a little bit more like Eden. But it starts not out there, but in here.

I found an article online that listed 51 “one another” commands from the epistles. Can you imagine how much closer to Eden it would feel if we didn't merely come to church, but if we labored with all the energy the Holy Spirit worked within us to: love one another, live in harmony with one another, instruct one another, wait for each other, have concern for one another, serve one another in love, bear the burdens of one another, sing songs to one another, be compassionate and kind to one another, stir up one another in love and good works, remind one another daily as the day of Jesus draws near!”

When we get to the book of Revelation next week, we will see what it looks like when God begins his re-creative process on the whole world. But in the church God has begun his re-creative process now.

This is what we work for, this is why we evangelize the lost, this is why we go to the nations, this is why we care for helping one another follow Jesus. And that's because this kind of ministry is a whole church ministry! If the Bible's story gives you purpose, the church is given as one of the primary places you put your purpose to work!

Look at **Ephesians 4:11-13**.

This life of the church, this call to present each other mature, is our call. Do you see your life through this story? Do you see that this is what God is doing today, and that all the gifts, all the purposes, all your jobs, relationships and skills are to be used to this end?

How are you using the energy that the Holy Spirit has given you to make progress in the call Jesus has given to the church? Everything God has given you, your skills, your career, your family, your finances, all of it is meant to be poured out to this end because this is the goal of the whole story. This is why we have church membership at Sovereign Hope. Church membership is where we commit to this story in faithfulness to Jesus. Membership is where we covenant together to fulfill God's design for these last days by believing together, belonging together and becoming more Christlike together.

There's no other effort than the glory of God that we can invest our energy because there's no other effort that's guaranteed such effectiveness.

This is where we see ***The Eternity of the Church.***

Look at the optimism Paul puts on the church in **Ephesians 3:7-11** and **Ephesians 5:25-27**. How is God going to go to the nations? How is God going to transform individual believers to look more like Jesus? Through the work of the church. To be part of God's story, to have hope that it's working, is to submit yourself to the work of Jesus in, on and through the church.

What we are called to do as believers together is hard. That's why God gives us each other. But at the end of the day we don't gather, work, believe, belong and become more Christlike together because we need each other. We do it because we need Jesus and Jesus has promised to do that work, comfort to that end and secure that future through his church. We are not called to trust the church, we are called to trust Jesus.

This is where I want to transition into our final point this morning: **Savor the Savior of the Story**. Because to understand the age of the church we actually need to understand the heart of Jesus.

What we just saw in Ephesians 5 is that Christ loved the church. He gave himself for the church. Why? Why all this atonement for the church? Why all this structure and fanfare for this broken body of people? Because this is part of God's story. In fact this is the best of all God's plans for right now. When you are here, when someone in Malaysia attends a church service, they are as close to God's people in God's place in God's presence as we can be in this point of redemptive history.

Look at how Peter puts this in 1 Peter 2 as it relates to the church as God's place filled with God's people: **1 Peter 2:4-10**. Here is the place, here in the church we are and are being built up as God's people in God's place. There is something ordinarily supernatural about who we are and what we are doing here.

Part of this is because it is in the midst of the church that we experience the uniqueness of God's presence as the body of Christ assembles. Look at how Paul puts this in **Ephesians 3:14-20**.

Did you see that? Do you want to see the love of Jesus in all of its dimensions? The come and comprehend it with, together, all the saints. Come and see Jesus in his church. Come and experience the Holy Spirit as it guides the local body. Come and worship the Father as he is glorified in the people he has created.