

## The Bible in One Year Week 23: When the Holy Spirit Comes (Acts Pt. 1)

(Acts 1:1-14)

### • How Did We Get Here?

- Today, we start the next chapter of this adventure of going through the Bible in one year with the book of Acts, for five weeks. Where we left off, Jesus was reinstating Peter to his true purpose on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. So, what comes next? How does Jesus' mission unfold through *these* disciples? How do we get from Peter running off ashamed into the night, to boldly proclaiming Christ to thousands in the same city where Jesus was crucified? How do we get from a motley crew of a couple hundred disciples on the fringes of the Roman Empire to around 6 million believers by 300 A.D. and over 2 billion by 2021 A.D. in what is still the largest faith tradition and most ethnically diverse movement in the history of the world? The odds didn't seem to be in their favor. Yet...here we are. How did we get here? Acts shows us how this story begins to unfold, and it reminds us that it's still unfolding *with us*.
- There's a great summary of how *all* this happened with one simple sentence Jesus says to his disciples near the beginning. And this line frames the way the entire book is going to unfold. Acts 1:8, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" It's all about the Holy Spirit, and today I want to talk about who the Holy Spirit is, what the Holy Spirit does, and how we can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. I talk to many Christians, myself included, who grew up in the Church hearing about God the Father and Jesus the Son, but don't know much about the Holy Spirit. If that's you, Acts is a great book to look at.

### • The Main Character

- The traditional title is "the Acts of the Apostles," but might more accurately be, "Acts of the Holy Spirit." It's actually the sequel in a two-part series by Luke, the first part is his Gospel about the life of Jesus. Acts, second part, is about what happened with the first believers of Jesus after he ascended to heaven and sent his Spirit to them: how the church was formed and the message of Christ spread through their witness.
- There are a *lot* of important characters in Acts who have a part to play in the story: but who's the *main* character? Is it Peter? Paul? Who's the hero of this story? It's the Holy Spirit. The one common denominator, the one consistent character throughout, is the Holy Spirit.
- *All of this*, everything that happens, everything the Apostles and disciples and early Christians do, is *completely dependent* on the Holy Spirit. The mission does not succeed without a total dependence on *the empowerment of the Holy Spirit*. If we forget this today, it's to our detriment.
- Acts 1:8, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" That simple statement is how the entire book progresses, from the epicenter in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), to the surrounding region of the Judean countryside and even their enemies in Samaria (Acts 8-12), and to the ends of the earth (Acts 13-28).

### • Forgotten God

- "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...to be my witnesses..." Everything about our lives as followers of Jesus, the work of the Church and the advancement of Christ's mission *depends on this gift of the Holy Spirit*. None of this happens unless Pentecost happens. And thank God it *did happen*, and thank God it's *still happening* for those who believe!
- We think of Christians as people who have faith in God. We think of Christians as people who follow Jesus. We think of Christians as people who believe in the Bible. But Luke reminds us that we must also think of Christians as people *who are baptized in the Holy Spirit*, people *who are filled with God's Spirit*. This is the "x-factor," this is the power, this is the "secret sauce" of their "success" through all the odds that were set against them. They didn't just carry a message, they carried God's presence in a whole new way of life. The Holy Spirit.
- But how often do we actually hear this message in the church? How often do we talk about the Holy Spirit and teach about what it means to be baptized in the Spirit? How many Christians out

there grew up in church without ever having a direct teaching, much less experience, of the Holy Spirit? Francis Chan wrote a book about this called it *Forgotten God*: he said there is such a gap between how little churches focus on the Holy Spirit and how central the Spirit is in the Scriptures that you can almost call him the “forgotten God.” But we can’t afford to forget about the Spirit if we want truly follow Jesus. We need the Spirit’s power to do this—and that’s good news, because it means it’s not all on us.

- **The Holy Spirit: Who, What, How?**

- So, who is the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit do? How do we live and walk with the Holy Spirit, and what happens when we do? Acts shows us so much about this, and I just want to look at a few different examples throughout the story as we get ready for this journey through Acts.
  - First, who is the Holy Spirit? What are we even talking about when we say that? Here’s the absolute basics: Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is not just a *thing*, not just a mysterious force, not an “it”—the Holy Spirit is a *Person*, the Spirit of God is *personal*. The Holy Spirit is the *personal presence of God* at work in this world, at work in our lives. The technical, orthodox way to say it is, the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity. We believe, based on the whole witness of the Scriptures, that God is *Triune*, Three-in-One. God is three eternal persons in one eternal being. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God.
  - I know, it’s trippy, it’s mind-blowing. What else would you expect with God? Oh, you want something that you can *comprehend*, that makes sense to your human brain? That’s not God, that’s your imagination. The God of the universe is above and beyond our comprehension, and yet we can know him personally: say hello to the Trinity. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is Love—he can’t *be* love unless he’s multiple Persons, but that’s a rabbit trail I’ll save for another time. The point is, we get to *know him* and *join in his eternal life and love*. The Holy Spirit is the Advocate, the Comforter, who leads us into all truth. The Holy Spirit is the gift of God sent to us by Christ to bring us into union with God and fulfill his purposes in the world.
- So, if that just lost you, if your mind is blown, the Bible fortunately gives us lots of cool imagery to understand what it’s like to make contact with, to encounter, to enter into a relationship with the Holy Spirit. A bunch of those images are found in Acts and here are a few that we’ll discover along the way: Baptism, Temples, and hugs. Sounds weird, but here it is:
- First of all, *Baptism*. Ponder for a second how *cool* this is. Listen to what Jesus said to the disciples before he ascended, Acts 1:4 “*Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*” We read those words, but have we really thought about it? John the Baptist prepared people for the work of Christ by baptizing in water. Christians are now initiated into the Church through Baptism. People are plunged into that water as a symbol of repentance, turning away from old life to new life, washing away guilt, totally surrendering our life to God. Jesus says *you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit*. Picture someone plunging into that water, going under that water. *Picture yourself being immersed, just falling back into it as the water closes over your entire body and envelops your entire being*. Jesus says that’s what it’s like when the Holy Spirit comes on you: *you will be immersed, plunged, saturated with the holy, personal presence of God*. I mean, wow! What happens to a person when their lives are *baptized* in the presence of God? That should leave a mark, right?
- Another image is the *New Temple* of God: fast-forward to the day of Pentecost. Jesus has ascended, they’ve been together, just praying and worshiping and *waiting*. And suddenly, there in the Upper Room, the sound of a violent, rushing wind fills the room, and fire—what seemed to be tongues of fire separated and came to rest on each one of them. Wow, it’s getting even more trippy! What does that mean? You have to know the bigger Story of Scripture. Because these people were *steeped* in all the stories of the Old Testament, they knew *exactly what this meant*. Fire, wind, cloud, smoke. Whenever God’s presence “shows up,” you see these images, these manifestations of his presence. The “wind” of God at creation. The burning bush with Moses. But especially, the Tabernacle and Temple. The first time they finished preparing the Tabernacle in Exodus and later, the Temple, the glorious presence of God was accompanied by cloud,

smoke, wind, fire. To put it plainly, the mysterious *thing* that happened when God filled the Temple to be his special dwelling place in the midst of his people—that now happened with the followers of Jesus. Except this time, there was no temple, no structure, there were just *people*. These people had *become*, collectively and individually, the temple of God—their very lives had become the touchpoint between heaven and earth. *That's* what the Church is.

- One last image, my favorite. You hear Luke using this wonderful phrase both in the Gospel and in Acts, “so and so was...” *filled with the Holy Spirit*. And occasionally, you hear other ways of saying it, the Spirit will “come upon you” or will be “in you.” But my very favorite one is when it says *the Spirit fell upon them*. That phrase only happens a few times, but it’s gold, and here’s why. When you hear this expression, “the Holy Spirit fell upon them,” what do you think of? I always thought of it as like rain falling from the sky or something. That’s actually not the idea here. It’s not an impersonal image, it’s actually highly personal.
  - Acts 10:44 Peter is speaking to a Roman household and it says, “While he was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the message.” This word “fell upon” can mean, “gripped,” “pressed around,” and particularly, “embraced.” Do you know the other time Luke employs that particular word in his writings? Luke 15:20, the story of the Prodigal Son: “*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him—or fell upon him—and kissed him.*” Have you ever fallen upon someone like that? Have you ever witnessed something like that? It’s the way people embrace when someone returns from war, when someone who was lost is found, when someone reconciles after a terrible division, when someone *comes home*. When the Holy Spirit enters your life, it’s as if the Father—no, the whole Trinity—falls upon you in a divine embrace that envelops and fills the soul with a Holy Love that marks your life forever.
- That’s what it means to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. That’s what it means to be a Spirit-filled Christian. That’s what it means to be a Temple of the Holy Spirit. That’s *Thriving in Christ* right there. And that’s what takes this all out of the stratosphere of highfalutin theological jargon into the real life: it’s about the deepest longing of every single human being, the thing we’re constantly reaching for, whether it’s through sex, or money, or power, or fame, or smartphones. To be loved, to belong, to be satisfied. When Jesus gives the gift of the Holy Spirit, he’s bringing us into the eternal love relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit. And that’s truly where the power comes from. The power to heal, the power to witness, the power to suffer, the power to change. It’s being filled, enveloped, baptized in the Holy Love of God. That’s how the church went from a couple-hundred, humanly-speaking *powerless* people on the margins, to filling the entire planet and continuing to move across the globe to this day. But you see, when we forget that—we lose our power. We’re powerless without the Holy Spirit.
- And you know what’s so great? It’s for *everyone*. How? Here’s what Peter says, Acts 2:38, “*Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.*” Do you want that gift? Well, if you’ve repented and believed and been baptized, that gift is yours!
  - Some people don’t know that they have it. Some people have gone all their lives believing in God and going to church, but they’ve never really encountered the Holy Spirit, they’ve never known the love of God in a personal way that’s deeper than anything they’ve experienced. You just have to believe and ask and seek until he makes it clear to you. Sometimes it happens like that: there are actually stories in Acts of believers who trusted Jesus, but didn’t know anything about the gift of the Spirit until one of the Apostle’s came and taught them and prayed with them. It can be that way sometimes. If you know, you know. If you don’t, then why not now? Pray—really pray and believe—that the Holy Spirit would fill your life, pray that the love God has for you would be so real and so fill you that you would never be the same. Repent of any sin you haven’t let go, believe in Jesus, and receive the gift. Let’s pray right now.