

The Bible in One Year Week 24: Power to Witness (Acts Pt. 2)

(Acts 2:36-47, 4:13-20, 7:54-60)

- **Made to Move**

- Have you ever toured one of those big, historic ships that's been salvaged from a wreck or decommissioned for a museum? You can drive a couple hours to the Baltimore Inner Harbor and tour the USS Torsk. It's a 300-foot submarine that sailed in World War II. It carried over 80 people, could shoot up to 24 torpedoes, and sank a total of three enemy ships. I toured it as a kid, which was fascinating because my grandfather was a submariner with the Navy in WWII.
 - When you're touring ships like this, it's always a mixture of wonder and disappointment: on the one hand, it's amazing to see this marvel of engineering and imagine what it would have been like; on the other hand, you know that you're not seeing its "full glory," it's no longer doing what it was *made for*. Just compare the photos of the Torsk when it was at sea versus sitting today, docked for tours. It's great history, but it's like seeing an animal in a zoo: it was *made to move*.
- What does this have to do with Acts, you're wondering? Well, Church, I have a simple message for you: *we were made to move*. The Church of Jesus Christ was *made to move*!
 - This not only demonstrated in Scripture, but it's substantiated in history. Christianity is one of the only major religions that's *moved around*. You have this faith that started out among Jewish people, with its center in Jerusalem for the first couple hundred years. Then it became a Roman thing for a while and that was the center. Then it takes over Europe and it becomes a European thing. Then it gets on a boat and moves to North America, and the center of Christianity shifts here for a while. But where is the center today? Where is it growing the fastest in the world? The Church is *declining* in the West; Europe and North America have become *post-Christian* cultures. Meanwhile, the Gospel is spreading like *wildfire* in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Almost every other major faith tradition, although they have multiplied and migrated, are still *most densely* populated around the locations where they originated. Do a google image search of the highest populations of Christianity, and the global map in 2021 looks *totally* different from 500 years ago, totally different from 1,000 years ago, and from 2,000 years ago when it began.
- That's because Church was *made to move* from the beginning! God says to Abraham, "...*all the nations on earth will be blessed through you,*" and it culminates with Jesus saying to his disciples, "...*go and make disciples of all nations...*" and, "...*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.*" We were *made to move*.

- **Witness**

- And the way that *movement* happens is this: "*you will be my witnesses.*" There's that word. *Witness*. How does that make you feel? For a lot of Christians, "witnessing" is the spiritual equivalent of "public speaking," the universal fear, the thing we avoid and out-source to "trained professionals." But what if witnessing was for *all of us*? Would we accept that call? There are different types of people when it comes to witnessing: *apathetic, fearful, guilty, and authentic*.
 - There are those who don't think about it and don't do it because they don't care: they've already written themselves off and left it to others. "The frozen chosen." There are those who don't witness because they're afraid: they misunderstand it and have irrational fears, or they get it but they refuse to push past the natural fears. There are those who feel guilty, like they'll never do enough, so they exhaust themselves and others else because instead of genuinely *loving*, they *use* people to check off their duty and assuage their guilt. And then, there are those who just live authentically from who they are in Christ: at times with deep intention, at times without realizing, genuinely impacting others for Christ. The truth is, most of us are probably a mixture.
- But what it all comes down to is this: whether or not we want to become a church that *witnesses* to Jesus in this world determines whether or not we want to be a church like the USS Torsk in motion, or the Torsk docked as a memorial of days gone by. Which does the church of America look more like today? Which do we want? *I think we know the right answer*. The good news is, we can learn *a lot* about witnessing just by reading Acts. It's going to take a little courage and adventure, but it doesn't have to be as terrible or unattainable as we imagine. Let's dig in.

- **Play-by-Play: Acts 1-7**

- Acts has three sections that follow the pattern of what Jesus laid out in 1:8, “...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” We’re looking at the first section today, chapters 1-7, which shows how it first moves in Jerusalem. I’m just going to give the highlights and then we’ll see what insights we can take away for witnessing.
- So, it all begins with Jesus talking to the disciples in chapter 1, which we looked at last week. He tells them to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will give them the power to fulfill his mission in all the earth. Then he ascends to the right hand of the Father, where he reigns as King.
- They go back to the city amazed, praying together constantly. While they’re waiting one day, the Holy Spirit comes: Pentecost. They’re filled with the Spirit. In a sort of reversal of Babel, they speak of God in different languages, quite a spectacle. Then, Peter stands up and gives the church’s first sermon. He shares the Gospel with *boldness* and they go from several hundred witnesses of Christ to *several thousand* in just one day. There’s this amazing description of their fellowship: “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need... They broke bread together in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily...*”
- Next, Peter and John are walking to the temple. They encounter a man who had been lame for many years begging at the gate. He asks them for money, Peter *looks at him intently* and says, “Look at us! Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give to you.” And he gives the man *Jesus*. He commands him to walk in Jesus’ name and he’s healed right there. And that’s the first of the many miraculous signs we read about in the book of Acts.
- This obviously causes quite a stir, and the same leaders who tried to end to Jesus find out. They thought it all ended at Passover, but now some of his followers are *performing miraculous signs in his name!* They call in Peter and John and ask, “*By what power or what name did you do this?*” and Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, *witnesses* to them. It says that when this group of elite, highly trained and educated religious leaders, “*saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*” The leaders warn them to stop, but Peter and John reply, “*...we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*”
- So, Peter and John return to the community of believers and share what happened, and the church’s immediate response is *prayer*—not for protection or safety, but this: “*Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your servant Jesus.*” And it says, “*After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*”
- So, the work goes on, the community of believers continues to develop, with some little (and big) bumps along the way for them to work through, but the witness of the apostles and the church just keeps growing. At the same time, the tension keeps rising. A second time, the apostles are brought into custody by the religious authorities. “*Didn’t we command you not to teach in this name?*” And they reply, “*The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.*” So, the leaders have them flogged and sent away, warning them again, and there’s this amazing statement: “*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*”
- Then we come to the end of this section, where the twelve apostles have the people raise up seven more leaders to help shepherd this growing community. One of them is named Stephen, and he was living so boldly that the opposition rose to a boiling point. It concludes with him

standing before the Sanhedrin, giving a lengthy message, from Abraham to Jesus. They're so enraged, they drag him out to stone him. As they're killing him, with his final breaths, Stephen sounds just like Jesus: "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit...do not hold this sin against them.*"

- **How to Be a Witness**

- Do you know what they call someone who gives up their life for their faith? A *martyr*. Stephen was *the first Christian martyr*. And do you know what the Greek word for "witness" is? *Martus*. In the New Testament, "witness" is the same word as "martyr." The word that came to describe someone who was killed for following Christ is the same word for anyone who witnesses to the reality that Christ is King. And that's the hardest thing and the most important thing about being a witness. Here are four insights this section of Acts gives us about witnessing:
- **1) Witnessing is about letting go of your life.** The biggest secret and challenge of witnessing is *you have to lay down your life*. I know that seems like a terrible way to encourage people to start witnessing. But I'm not trying to discourage you, or to create a "Messiah complex" or a "martyrdom complex," I'm just saying the same thing Jesus said to anyone who wanted to follow him: "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.*" This is the *starting point* if you want to follow Jesus! It's total surrender: he's Lord and I'm not, he's on the throne of my life. Dying to your old self so he can give you a *new self*. That's the biggest reason we don't witness: we're still focused on *us*, on self-preservation, fear. But the way of Jesus is like Paul said, "*I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*" All witnesses die. It's just that some die to themselves and go on living for Jesus, while a few actually go on to die for Jesus, too. So, if you want to witness, start there: full surrender.
- **2) Witnessing is for everyone and about everything we do.** Too often, we think it's just about the "spokespeople" to the masses—but that's just a small part. Witnessing is something we do *together*. Peter never stood alone in these stories! It's not a solo thing and it's not just a spokesperson thing. It's about how we live together as a community, how we love and serve, how we live in the world. People didn't just come to Jesus because of Peter's loud voice; *they saw how the Christians lived*. If you want to be a witness, but you struggle to know *what to say about Jesus*, just ask God to show you something simple you could *do for someone else* that will witness to the reality that Jesus is King—do that, and eventually the words will come.
- **3) Witnessing is not about forcing the moment, but being ready when the moment comes.** There can be ways of witnessing that are deeply intentional and strategic, and we should applaud and pursue those things. But that's not all, and it's not the way these stories came about in Acts. Do you think Peter and John woke up saying, "Let's go look for someone to perform a miraculous sign so the people get worked up and we get called in for questioning!" Not really. They were just walking in constant communion with Christ, and when the moment came, they were ready.
- **4) Witnessing is not just sharing ideas, but sharing something we've actually experienced.** Peter said, "*What I have I give to you!*" He said, "*We can't help but talk about the things we've seen and heard!*" The Church's witness was powerful because they were living out of what they had really seen and experienced. If you don't really know Jesus, if he hasn't really made any difference in your life, if you have no idea why the Gospel matters for the world, you have nothing to witness to! If that's you, don't start trying to show people stuff about Jesus, start by asking Jesus to show himself to you—and then you'll have something to talk about! It's not just something you do, it's something you are. That's *some* of what Acts teaches about witnessing.
- Come back full-circle: do you want to be a witness? Do you want to be a church *on the move*? Bring it all back to Jesus, give everything to him, and ask him to use your life! Let's pray.