

Introduction for the study of *Gospel and growth* - Acts Part 1.

Introducing the Introduction!

Hello. I'm Marge Hanna and it is really good to be able to join your group today. As you can probably tell I'm from the North of England, but I have been here for over 40 years, so I now call Australia well and truly home. I have a family which includes 8 adult grandchildren and a small great grandson. I have a lovely Christian family at church *and* in a small KYB group here in seaside town of Kingston just south of Hobart in beautiful Tasmania. So much for the tourist plug!

Seriously, it is good to have a time together like this and know that we are part of a very large number of KYB groups who will all be doing exactly what we are doing today. Maybe you're thinking "Acts! I've read it so many times, I wonder what's new about it *this time*" or maybe "Now that's one book I have never really got into, it's just a missionary story isn't it, but maybe there's more to it than that?"

So 'whatever' you feel about 'doing Acts' we need to stop and ask the Holy Spirit – without whom this book would never have been written – to please guide our thinking and studying today and in the coming months. Perhaps you could pause the disc and do that now

Pause disc.....

Getting Started

So, where *do* we start? The best place! The beginning. No, not Acts chapter 1 but verses 1-4 in the first chapter of *Luke's* gospel. Now there *is* a logical reason for this. We'll come to that in a moment

It is clear that both Acts and the gospel were written by the same person, and scholars have almost always been unanimous in accepting that the writer is Dr Luke. Tradition has it that his authorship can be traced in writing to the second century and probably went back *orally* to the first century! In a mainly oral society people actually *remembered* that he had written both the books.

The scholars are also clear that Luke intended these two documents, the gospel of Luke as we know it, and the Acts of the Apostles to be a two-part whole. It probably wouldn't all fit on one scroll.

At the time these scrolls were penned it was quite customary for the introduction to both scrolls to be at the beginning of the first one.

So that's the logical reason for us to have a look at Luke chapter 1 and those first 4 verses. Perhaps you would like to turn to them, as you will when you prepare for the first study.

(Short Pause)

There are 5 things to look out for that apply to both these documents:

First in v1 of **Luke chapter 1 'Those things'** Luke says that have been fulfilled among us... They **were** not unexpected things but Old Testament prophecies they had seen in real situations during Jesus' life on earth and now from heaven with the giving of the Holy Spirit through believers.

Then in v2 He speaks of **The eyewitnesses and servants of the word**, of Jesus. Luke was not one of them in the gospel he wrote, but **he** certainly was for parts of the second half of the Acts in particular.

Thirdly Luke did not accept everything he heard or read uncritically. **He investigated** and he had plenty of material available to research. This is in verse 3

4. Now he feels it is time to get down to the task of **writing**. The many authors mentioned in v1 no doubt eventually included Mark who he may have met in Rome when there with Paul. He was *with* Paul for extended periods of time, so had first-hand information on the Gentile outreach that had occupied Paul for most of his ministry.

5. Theophilus, the first reader, was to have all that he already knew about Jesus confirmed so that he could have certainty, and confidence that, what he already knew, and what Luke was about to tell him, *was* reliable. In those days to be a Christian meant putting your very life on the line, so you really didn't want to put your faith in something that could not be backed up with solid evidence and eyewitness testimonies. Luke provided him with both!

And so *we too* can have certainty and confidence in the reliability of historian Luke's document! John Stott put it this way "the events that have been accomplished, witnessed, transmitted, investigated, and written down, were (and still are) to be the ground of [our] Christian faith and assurance"

Who is this man we have called Dr Luke? Is he the author of these books?

Much detective work has gone into discovering who Luke was. As scholars and theologians have delved into Acts and Paul's letters they have come up with a fairly consistent picture of this writer of about a quarter of the New Testament.

It looks like this..... Luke was a physician, and therefore well educated. The medical schools of the day were thorough in their teaching. It's thought that he originally came from Syrian Antioch up in the North East corner of the Mediterranean. He may have been a convert to Judaism, they called them 'God-fearers'. If so, as he had previously attended the synagogue, he would have acquired a very good knowledge of Jewish history, their festivals, and their customs and their growing anticipation of Messiah. But he was a non-Jew, a Gentile convert to faith in Jesus.

But what are the clues and what's led the scholars to the conclusion that it is *this* man who did this extraordinary piece of research and writing, and who, if it is our Dr Luke, has the distinction of being the only *Gentile* writer in the New testament?

A little bit more detective work and some bits of the story that you won't cover *this* term may help us here. A map would be handy if you have one in the back of your Bible. Perhaps you could have a look at it.

(Short pause)

First in Acts 16, and then from Acts 20, Luke, while not including himself by name in the list of Paul's travelling companions, keeps using the word "we". It is clear he is one of them! Going over to Macedonia from Troas, he is part of the founding team of the church at Philippi.

It's possible that the writer— we *will* call him Luke from here on! — was left in Philippi to nurture the young church there. He may have spent the next 7 or so years there. We don't know. But we *do* know from Acts 20:6 that he joined Paul in Philippi — that use of the word 'we' again is the clue here — and then they sailed across *to* Troas this time where they joined the other 7 team members. They were all taking a gift of money to the needy Judean believers from the Macedonian churches, of which Philippi was of course a part.

In Chapter 21, verse 17 we see Luke arriving in Jerusalem with Paul. He apparently stayed in the area for the next 2 years while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea, on the coast at Government house, where Felix was in residence. This was after being falsely accused of taking a Gentile into the temple. At the end of the two years he appealed to Caesar to avoid being murdered if he was returned, by the new governor Festus, to the Jews in Jerusalem to face a trial there.

Once again Luke travelled with Paul by sea, this time on his journey to Rome, with a shipwreck thrown in, and 3 months on the island of Malta. Luke spent 2 years in Rome while Paul was imprisoned and awaiting trial there. He is named in Paul's letters sent from both this Roman imprisonment, and at the end of Paul's life when he was imprisoned and killed, as was Peter, in the madness of the Emperor Nero's rampage against the Christians in Rome around AD 67/68

So, the consensus of opinion is, Luke wrote both scrolls.

Where did he get his information from?

More detective work needed!

Luke is noted for his very accurate descriptions of people and places in *both* his books and is classed as a very good historian. So, did he spend his time in Judea while Paul awaits a decision on his case, doing that careful research he describes in his introduction to Theophilus? Did he travel to Nazareth and see the hill that Jesus did *not* get thrown off by an angry populace? Did he explore Capernaum, Emmaus, the lake and all the other places mentioned and described *very* accurately in both documents he wrote.

But there were also people we know they met! In the first week or so that they were in Jerusalem before his arrest, Paul and his companions spent time with James the brother of Jesus, now the leader of the church in Jerusalem *and* all the church elders. Peter and John probably among them, as well as some of the women who followed as faithful disciples too.

These folk were those eyewitnesses of Jesus' *physical* life, his death and his resurrection, and also of the incredible events of the day of Pentecost as the *Spirit* of Jesus filled them. They shared their vivid memories of Peter's sermon that day and on other occasions to make clear to the authorities that the miracles they were doing were in the name *Jesus of Nazareth*, the very one they had put to death, now gloriously alive and continuing his work through his apostles and disciples.

Luke would have heard from the Jerusalem church the positive news of thousands coming to believe in Jesus, and all about those heady days in Jerusalem when the believers shared everything they had, and no one went hungry in the fledgling church.

But they would also have told Luke of the hardship and heartbreak of intense persecution following the execution of Stephen. It was thought that up to two thousand Christians died at that time and all except the apostles fled from Jerusalem. But now they saw the results of that scattering of the church. Christians sharing their faith wherever they went and actually doing what Jesus had told them to do.

It is *most* likely that Luke also met Mary, Jesus' mother and heard from *her* the detailed story of the Nativity that only Luke records for us. She would have recalled the visits to Jerusalem and the response that dear old Simeon and Anna had when they saw her tiny baby; and how could she have possibly have forgotten the day they lost twelve year old Jesus on a Passover trip from Nazareth, and the panic that had almost overwhelmed Joseph and her.

But of course, these were not the only sources of the information that ended up in Luke's scrolls. Remember - this was an era of oral learning and memories were very well trained to retain information. So there would have been many written and oral accounts circulating of the sayings and actions of Jesus which, added to the research material of those years, became the gospel and the first part of the *second scroll* - 'the Acts of the Apostles'

When did he put pen to paper, or more accurately, quill to scroll?

Well it's generally thought that when Luke was in Rome where Paul was imprisoned that first time, around AD 60, that this was when he put together, first, his orderly account of Jesus on earth and then his account of the continuing work of Jesus by his Holy Spirit through his apostles and disciples. And it is the first part of that document that you will have the joy of studying. It is probable that Luke also completed the 'Acts' at that time as he does not include details of Paul's acquittal, release, or of Nero's persecution a few short years later, and Paul and Peter's executions. It seems to end abruptly and feels a little unfinished.

One way to look at *that* is that everything that happened after that last verse in the last chapter is the on-going story that we today are still writing with our lives, and our witness in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember the film 'The Never -Ending Story'? We too have the opportunity to jump into the pages as the little boy did and be a part of the action.

Speaking of action there has always been some discussion as to what this second scroll should be called. Some say 'The Acts of the Apostles' is too focussed on the humans involved! They are involved but.... others suggest 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit' but then that minimises the part that God intends us to play. I doubt Luke ever gave it a title. Later generations undertook that task.

One writer suggests the following which he admits is a bit of a mouthful but does give us a clear picture of what Luke was aiming for:

'The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles'
Another suggests; *'Acts of Spirit-filled men'*

Now please use your imagination.....

Luke is free to take his scroll, ink and quill up onto the roof of their rented house in Rome. Paul was not, unless the soldier on duty to whom he was chained was in a really good mood! As Luke sits down in the shade to write the document that you are

going to spend the next nine weeks studying, he recalls all the months he has spent recording the life of Jesus on earth.

As he prays for the right words to tell this *next* part of the story, he realises afresh that the Jesus he had never met... has been *with* the disciples but now was *in* them and *in* all believers including himself.

In fact as one writer says “Jesus had never been so *really with* them as when he left them”!

So, it's not part 1 “Jesus” and now part 2 ‘The Church’, but it's the two *stages* of the ministry of Jesus, first on earth, personally and publicly, and then, Jesus, *from heaven* by his Spirit, through his apostles.

As he consults the notes he has taken so carefully, he re-caps a little for Theophilus to remind him and us, of where he left off in his gospel account. We hear of the resurrected Jesus engaging with his disciples for those 40 days of what must have been the best Bible Study ever!

Perhaps you could pause the disc now and read Luke 24: 44–48 to see what he had already told Theophilus. Check out what Jesus did *for* them and what he promised *to* them. Luke 24:44-48.

Pause disc.....

Some Highlights from the story Luke wrote

Luke now at the beginning of this second scroll recaps and expands a little on what he has said previously at the end of the gospel. Now he continues by telling Theophilus that 10 days after Jesus left them standing on the mountain, he returns to them by his Spirit and fills them with a power they have never known before.

He transforms Peter for example and enables him to stand up and preach instead of hiding away in fear of the authorities. Three thousand people from all over the known world received the salvation that was offered on that day. The 120 in the upper room become thousands and so it begins.

The church in Jerusalem grew and grew, there was deep fellowship, as they ate together, prayed together and were taught by the apostles, and witnessed wonders and signs by them. They shared in the breaking of bread together and Luke's descriptions of these early days have thrilled Christians down the ages!

Opposition was bound to come! It did, in the form of imprisonments and persecution of the leaders, and prayer for their release wonderfully answered! But Stephen was stoned to death after the most stirring sermon and challenge to the religious leaders of the day.

This was a watershed moment as a young man from Tarsus named Saul, looked after the coats of those stoning Stephen, and was a leading part of the intense persecution that then broke out in full force in Jerusalem. All apart from the apostles fled, taking the gospel with them.

You might say ‘and the rest is history’ at this point, as Jesus' command to take the gospel to Judea and Samaria is happening before our eyes in Luke's story, but that is

not the *whole* story that he wants us to hear. That young man Saul becomes Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, many of whom *do* live at the 'ends of the earth' and he is the driving force that finally takes the gospel to them.

Rome was to become important in Luke's story. This was because while Jerusalem was the capital city for the Jews, *Rome* was the capital of the known world of the day. The saying was and is "all roads lead to Rome" and they did! So Luke, in this document, traces the route of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

But you *will* notice that he doesn't tell us about how the gospel was taken to the East or the South by other apostles. He really tells us very little about how the fledgling church was organised, or when or how its leadership passed to James, Jesus' brother. He is very single minded and crafted his source material to give us the emphasis he felt was needed, first in the life of Jesus on earth, and now from heaven.

His songs of praise from Mary and Zechariah and Simeon's words in the gospel, and now the detailed sermons he records in *this* document show us his evangelist's heart as salvation by faith in Jesus Christ is proclaimed loud and clear.

He also tells the story 'as it was'. He had a 'warts and all' approach. Some incidents may shock you, but also remind you that God will not tolerate sin in his church, especially such a young and growing one. Successes and failures are there in the story for our benefit and instruction. Other incidents will sadden you as believers die for their faith and witness. Jesus had told them they too would be persecuted as he was, and so they were!

The young church has yet to understand that the gospel is not only for the Jews but is to be taken to the Gentiles, who Jews have routinely despised, avoided and almost written off, even unconsciously from their agenda. Those who truly converted to Judaism were accepted, but not completely. There is *now* to be *no* difference in the church, but *full* fellowship with those who believe, Gentile or Jew, men or women, slave or free. This was revolutionary to Jewish thinking and actions!

It begins when Peter encounters Cornelius, a Roman, a Gentile, yes, he was a God-fearer but Peter still almost cannot believe it when the Holy Spirit comes to that assembled group of *Gentiles* in Cornelius' home, just as he had come to *them* in Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost. Luke repeats the details of this event a couple of times in his account, probably so that his readers 'get the message'. This was groundbreaking, and Peter learned, but sometimes had to be reminded, of this new relationship. While Peter is known as the apostle to the *Jews* and Paul to the Gentiles, God is leading and overruling so that we see in Luke's story the unity of purpose of all the apostles in obedience to the great commission that Jesus gave to them.

Now Luke tells of the way in which God accomplishes the task of sending Saul of Tarsus to the Gentiles, this zealous Pharisee, currently totally committed to wiping out these 'followers of Jesus of Nazareth'

You may know the story and how that happened. Paul is arrested! Not by the authorities, but by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. But the prisoner was released, filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized by dear Ananias, who no doubt shared with Paul the commission that God had revealed to him was to be *this* servant's future. And it included suffering.

Paul, persecutor turned believer, gets smuggled out of Damascus, and bundled out of Jerusalem and goes back to Tarsus after just a few years of time alone with the Lord and preaching in Judea.

There in Tarsus, his early biblical education and his new understanding of all the Old Testament's fulfilment in Messiah Jesus, is pondered over and refined as God uses this time of probably about 10 years, to prepare his servant for one of the most difficult and dangerous missions any missionary has ever undertaken!

And guess what? His missionary career is kick-started when some of those fleeing believers from Jerusalem years ago had gone to... Syrian Antioch. They have preached the gospel, and news reaches headquarters in Jerusalem that Gentiles are joining the young church there! What are they to do? Easy, send Barnabas that man of encouragement. He sizes up the situation, and decides he needs help to teach these young believers. And who comes to mind? You have guessed, or you've been looking at a map and realised that Tarsus *is* quite close by. Paul is easily persuaded to leave the family business to the family, and join Barnabas to teach, love and encourage this first mainly Gentile church. It is in effect pastored by these two great leaders.

Luke begins to show us his shift in focus from Jerusalem to Syrian Antioch from where the first of Paul's and other's missionary outreaches will begin.

Now we *can* say 'and the rest is history' but not without blood, sweat, and tears from *all* who have followed in the footsteps of Barnabas and Paul. The gospel *did* reach the capital of the world, as Paul travelled, preached, and churches were established and grew and sent out *their* messengers with the gospel.

Roads, and good ones at that, led *from* Rome all over the world and down those roads the gospel travelled in a time of 'Pax Romanus' This Roman peace was keeping local and tribal conflicts at a minimum at this stage of the Empire, making travel and destinations safer. We are here today because it did.

And the job is not yet complete. It will be, when Jesus returns as he promised he would.

To the ends of the earth and the people next door in your street!

Rev Richard Bewes in his book 'The church reaches out' tells this story with which we will finish today.

An Indian man, some years ago in the heart of the City of London, brief-case in hand, was watching his fellow business-men, many wearing the typical bowler hats of the day, as they marched along Bishopsgate and then turned out of the main street, crowding through a courtyard that led to a large building. The Indian man's eyes were alight with curiosity.

It was a Tuesday lunch hour. Where were these people going? Another group came by, swung through the same opening and disappeared. A glance down Bishopsgate.. and yes, there was another bunch arriving.

Very quietly our man slipped into the end of the queue, and followed unobtrusively, his eyes darting right and left as he entered the very large building. Then it dawned on him. He was in a church! This was no place for a Hindu. He turned to retrace his steps and leave.

It was impossible. The doorway behind him was completely blocked by yet further arrivals for the lunch-hour service at St Helen's the oldest church in the City of London, the CBD of London. There was nothing else to do but move further in, Vijay looked around. He would have to sit through it.

Vijay Menon was in his thirties, a businessman from India, living in one of London's suburbs, he had rooms in a home there. Of Christianity he knew nothing. "In fact", he told Richard later "In all the years I lived in India I never even saw a Bible" And now, with several hundred others he was in a lunch-time service, organized by the church's rector, Dick Lucas.

"I had walked into St Helen's as a Hindu" Vijay recollected later on "I walked out half an hour later as a Christian. For the first time in my life I realised that Jesus Christ loved me. Up to that time I had always thought that Jesus had come only for Christians. I was surprised out of my life to find that he was interested in Hindus too"

The early Christians had to learn that the gospel was for all mankind, but how would Vijay have heard it if no one had told him? He would previously have thought that he went in 'by accident' or 'out of curiosity', but he now knows it was by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Dick Lucas was guided by the same Spirit, to present the message that day in a particular way that reached the heart and mind of Vijay.

We are told to go into all the world and preach the gospel, we call it the Great Commission, we could call it completing the 'Acts of Spirit-filled believers in the Lord Jesus Christ until he comes in his glory'. We can all pray, many can give of their means and time, and some are called to physically 'go'. Have you discovered yet your role in the Great Commission? We all have one no matter who or where we are.

There *is* just one more bit of the story!

It was the conviction that no one is beyond the reach of the grace of God in his gift of salvation that led a certain elderly landlady in a London suburb to begin to pray for her lodger from overseas who was of a quite different religion altogether. She asked friends of hers, a Christian couple if they would pray for him too, and they added his name to their prayer list. They prayed regularly. Months turned into years. They never met him. They had no news of him. But still they prayed. The elderly landlady died and they had no idea where her lodger had gone. But still they prayed.

*One day they opened their monthly Christian Newspaper – Challenge Magazine – and saw an Indian face smiling at them from one of its pages. But it was the caption that stunned them with surprise: it read "**Why I am no longer a Hindu**" and yes, it was by Vijay Menon. It had taken 7 years, but their prayers had been answered.*

Thank you for having me to share in your group today. God bless you as you study and fellowship together in the coming weeks

Now let's pray together

Heavenly Father, thank you for our time together. Please may we come to study your Word with open minds, hearts and availability as we accept the challenges to our thinking it will bring, and the practical responses it may require of us. We ask it in the precious name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen

