

LESSON 7 – Acts, pt. 1

Just as knowing the timeline of the monarchy was essential to understanding the prophets in last year's curriculum, so students must have a very thorough grasp of the chronology of Acts in order to understand the NT epistles. For that reason this course devotes four lessons to the study of Acts, and your teaching of this material must be carefully presented. Again, as with the data associated with last year's timeline, the people, places and dates of the Acts narrative must be memorized. Drills will help, but your students should understand at the beginning of these four lessons that disciplined effort is required. Encourage them by pointing out the amount of material they mastered when studying the monarchy, and that this material is no different in that regard. Focused effort for the next four weeks will pay large dividends when we move on to studying the epistles.

As the instructor you also understand that these four lessons in Acts are critical to a proper grasp of the dispensational dynamics of the NT. The change from the Dispensation of Law to the Dispensation of Grace will become obvious to your students as you together work through the events of the book. A study of Acts makes it clear that showing the dispensational shift was one of Luke's objectives as he wrote this treatise for Theophilus. Without ever specifically addressing the issue, Luke's unfolding narrative answers the question, "How did we get from the Jewish nature of the Gospels to the equality of today's church?" Don't tell your students going into this series of lessons that this dimension is a key ingredient in Luke's narrative. Allow it to unfold for them just as it did for Theophilus. Truth learned through self-discovery always sinks deeper.

Luke shows Theophilus the dispensational change in a variety of ways. The most obvious is the shift in focus from Peter's ministry to Paul's. But the geography of the Acts narrative is also a powerful indicator of the change. The events of the first eight chapters happen in and around Jerusalem. After the conversion of Paul, the action moves westward across the Roman Empire, reaching the city of Rome by the end of the book. For this reason it's important that your students also have a good grasp of the geography of Acts. Because this lesson on Acts focuses on the first eight chapters of the book the geography involved is limited. Make sure they can locate Jerusalem and Caesarea. As time allows it might be a good idea to introduce them to the geography of the northern Mediterranean to prepare them for subsequent lessons.

Use the majority of your class time to work through Acts 1-8, pointing out what are clearly Luke's points of emphasis.

- Peter, as primary spokesman for the 12, preaches to the Jews in Jerusalem that the Jesus they crucified was the Messiah promised in the OT.
- If they will repent of their sin of crucifying the Messiah he will return from heaven and set up the promised Kingdom.
- The Jews, led by their leaders, rejected this offer and severely persecuted the believers.
- This group of believers grew, though remained a very small fraction of the Jewish population.

- As they grew the believers struggled among themselves, as illustrated by the incident with Ananias and Sapphira and the dissent over the care of the widows.
- The Jewish rejection of the offer of the Kingdom culminates with the stoning of Stephen. Here the leaders acted as representatives of the nation.

Point out to your students how thoroughly and completely these first eight chapters of Acts revolve around the Jews. Contrary to what many believers think, all those present at Pentecost were Jews (see 2:5). The countries listed in 2:9ff represent the countries from which these Jewish pilgrims had traveled to attend Pentecost in Jerusalem. So, the Arabs of v. 11 were Jews who lived in Arabia.

The events of chapter three take place at the Temple and the Sanhedrin was the Jewish court. The believers' selling their possessions (2:42-47) was an expression of their anticipation that the Messiah would set up a Kingdom where an entirely new order would be put in place.

The Ethiopian eunuch in chapter eight was also a Jew, one who lived in Ethiopia and worked as treasurer for the Ethiopian queen. He had traveled to Jerusalem to worship – not something a Gentile would do – and was reading Isaiah when Philip met him.

Help your students understand the continuity between the content of these chapters and the OT, as well as the Gospels. Acts 1-8 represents an unbroken line of God's dealings with Israel as his special people. We read here a narrative that brings Israel to the pivotal point in their history. Everything prior to this, including Christ's necessary death for their sins, is prelude to this offering of their promised Kingdom.

Explain to your students that they will be expected to know the chapter location for key historical events in the Acts narrative. For this lesson that list includes:

- Chapter 2 Pentecost and the first offering of the Kingdom
- Chapter 3 Healing of the lame man and offering of the Kingdom
- Chapter 7 Stoning of Stephen

(Note the slide with graphics to illustrate these events.)