

# + + Living in the Season of Pentecost + +

## THE SPIRIT LIFE IN ACTS

### Lesson One: An Introduction to Acts and the Spirit Life

#### (1) The Purpose of this Study

As we move into the Season of Pentecost, we enter into our part of God's story. This is no "ordinary time" for us, as another name for this season suggests. It is our time. The saving acts of God throughout history continue to today, which means we've got a job to do; we've got a part to play in the unfolding of this narrative.

Pentecost is the birthday of the church. The combination of a commission and an empowerment gives birth to and launches the church into God's world. The story is told in the book of Acts, which makes it a perfect place to start if we are to reflect seriously on what it means to be the church.

Without question, the event of Pentecost, and the book of Acts in general—not to mention the whole of the New Testament—reveals that the Holy Spirit is essential to what it means to be the church. For the church to be faithful to Jesus, she must pursue and be empowered by the Spirit. But what does this look like?

- What does it mean for the church to give attention to the Spirit?
- How can the church make sure she is continually empowered by the Spirit?
- What might this look like today? What should and shouldn't it look like?
- And most importantly for the purposes of this study, how can the book of Acts help us explore these questions?

The purpose of this study, then, is to use the book of Acts as a lens to explore this vital question for the church today:

*What does it now mean for God's people to live with the Holy Spirit?*

**REVIEW HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:** Read the entire book of Acts with the above question in mind and write down some of your thoughts.

## (2) The Spiritual Life versus the Spirit Life

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** What does the phrase “spiritual life” mean to you? Or when the average person uses this phrase, to what is he or she referring? Where is the phrase “spiritual life” used in Scripture?

The phrase “spiritual life” is often used as a way to speak about an individual’s inner and quiet life of prayer and contemplation. It’s about listening for that still, small voice. It’s about nurturing the inward disciplines of meditation, solitude, and study for the purpose of “finding God’s will for my life.” It’s often private, non-threatening to others, and disconnected from the church community. And since it’s “spiritual,” it has little to do with physical things.

These portrayals of the “spiritual life” are not necessarily misguided, but it should surprise us that they don’t line up very well with the descriptions of the early church’s experience with the Spirit. *Private, non-threatening, quiet, disconnected*—these are not the adjectives one would use to describe the book of Acts.

To the contrary, living with the Holy Spirit in Acts is public, threatening, loud, and connected to all of life. Life with the Spirit as describe in the book of Acts includes tongues of fire, communal transformation, radical inclusivity, powerful signs and wonders, and subversive public and civic demonstrations. This is the “spiritual life” experienced by the early church!

We should note that the Bible never uses the phrase “spiritual life.” And since the book of Acts mentions the Spirit more than any other book of the Bible, and since it’s about the life of the early church, perhaps we should try using the phrase “Spirit Life” as shorthand for the question of our study: what does it now mean for God’s people to live with the Holy Spirit? The phrase “Spirit Life” will also help to highlight three important and often overlooked aspects of the church living with the Spirit. The Spirit Life is about...

- **A PERSON**—We are talking about life with *a person*, God himself, the Holy Spirit, not just a personal inner awareness.
- **A PEOPLE**—The Holy Spirit is fundamental to the definition of the church, which means the Spirit Life is first and foremost about *a people* rather than the individual.
- **POWER**—The Holy Spirit was given for a purpose: to empower the church to fulfill the mission of Jesus Christ, which means the Spirit Life is much about *power*.

### (3) The Book of Acts within the Biblical Story

**The Temple in Scripture.** Before exploring any book of the Bible, it's important to set it in its canonical context, that is, to see how it fits within the biblical story as a whole. While there are a number of themes

that can help to highlight how Acts fits within the Bible's storyline, the theme of Temple is especially illuminating.

- **CREATION.** The creation account in Genesis would have been understood in its day as the construction, not just of a garden, but of a temple, a place for the creator to live and exercise his rule through his image bearers. God's Temple, then, is first portrayed as consisting of all creation. Heaven and earth are happily united. See Isaiah 66:1–2a (1 Kings 8:27; Isaiah 6:3; and see John H. Walton's *The Lord World of Genesis One*).
- **TABERNACLE.** Heaven and earth split apart when humankind rebelled against God, failing in their role as image bearers and causing the world to go out of sorts. But God chose to work from within his creation, calling a people into covenant with himself for the healing of the world, so that once again, his glory would fill the earth. Israel agrees to enter this covenant, and so God dramatically descends to dwell in their midst once the tabernacle is completed. See Exodus 40:34–38.
- **TEMPLE.** Despite the multiple failings of Israel, God secures them in the Promised Land and commissions Solomon to build a permanent resident for him in which to dwell. It's difficult to underestimate the importance the role of the Temple played in the life of Israel. It was the focal point of the Jewish way of life; it was where heaven and earth met. Once again, God dramatically descends to dwell among his people when Solomon completes the Temple. See 1 Kings 8:10–13.
- **DESTRUCTION.** As the covenant predicted (Deut 27–30), increased rebellion on behalf of Israel leads to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple itself. God's presence is removed from his people. See 2 Chronicles 36:15–21 (Jeremiah 52).
- **WAITING IN EXILE.** Despite Israel returning to the land to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, at no point does anyone suggest that God's glory returned in a way similar to Exodus 40 or 1 Kings 8. Instead, Israel clings to promise after promise that God would one day return, rebuild his Temple, and restore Israel to the land. See Isaiah 52:7–10 (Isaiah 40–55; Daniel 9; Ezekiel 36–48; Zechariah 2:6–13).

- **JESUS TABERNACLES.** The four Gospels tell of God finally returning to save his people through Jesus. During his earthly ministry, we are told that God visits his people through Jesus Christ. As John puts it in 1:14: “The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us, and we have seen his glory.” Jesus later rides into Jerusalem as Israel’s king, condemning the existing Temple with its corrupt practices.
- **THE CHURCH.** Throughout the New Testament, God’s promised return through Jesus is now expanded to include the church through the presence of the Spirit. The church community is now described as God’s Temple on earth. See 2 Corinthians 6:14–16 (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19; Eph 2:19–22).
- **CREATION RESTORED.** The Bible ends as it began—only more glorious. God’s creation is once again his Temple. Heaven and earth are once again united. God is present among his people who are ruling his creation in the way he always intended. See Revelation 21:1–4, 22–27.

**The Temple in Acts.** The Temple theme that runs through the biblical narrative lights up in Acts, especially with Pentecost, as the Spirit of God returns to dwell in the newly built Temple of the church. As in the Exodus-narrative, this means that the divine presence will now lead God’s people through the wilderness to their promised inheritance—the entire world itself. The Spirit’s indwelling enables the church to be a dispersed Temple-people, reconstituting God’s Temple over all creation as in the opening chapter of Genesis.

This is shown most clearly at Pentecost as people from various nations hear the disciples speak in their own native language. The curse of Babel (Gen 11), which is the climax of the Fall (Gen 3—11), is coming undone, which means God is restoring his creation (Gen 1–2). The promise to Abraham that his family would bless all nations is finally coming true (Gen 12:1–3). The last days are here as foretold by the prophets (Joel 2:28–32). God’s promised new age has begun!

#### (4) The Story of the Book of Acts

**Theme.** The book of the Bible we are studying is most commonly known as simply Acts. But whose acts are recorded here? There are at least three correct ways of answering this question, each of which shed light on the book's theme.

- **THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**—As this ancient title for the book suggests, Acts traces the ministry of some of the first apostles, in particular Peter, James, John, Philip and Paul. By extension then, as it tells the story of these first apostles, Acts tells the story of the early church.
- **THE ACTS OF JESUS**—The book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke as they are written by the same author and to the same person (Theophilus). Acts picks up exactly where the Gospel of Luke leaves off. In fact, in the very first verse of Acts, Luke tells us that in his former book he wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and teach, suggesting that in his second book he will write about what Jesus continues to do and teach through his church. Consequently, this book is about the Acts of Jesus.
- **THE ACTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**—As mentioned above, the Holy Spirit is foundational to what it means to be the church, which is why we find fifty-seven references in Acts to the work of the Holy Spirit. God is building his kingdom through those who are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, that is, the church. Viewed from this vantage point, this book is about the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Taking these three together then, **the book of Acts is about the early church, empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry on the work that Jesus began to do**, which by implication is the very mission of the church in every generation.

**Structure.** Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome. Jerusalem was the religious capital of the Jewish faith; Rome was the political capital of the ancient world. In between, the plot of Acts moves dramatically through Athens, the philosophical and cultural capital of the ancient world.

Acts recounts how through the Spirit-empowered witness of the church, the gospel of Jesus Christ reaches all kinds of people and places. No power can stop it. By the end of Acts, the entire ancient world is exposed to and talking about Jesus and what it means for him to be the world's rightful Lord.

There are at least three helpful ways to organize the twenty-eight chapters that present this narrative movement.

### 1. By the Two Great Apostles

THE MINISTRY OF PETER (1–12)	THE MINISTRY OF PAUL (13–28)
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### 2. By the Commission Given in Acts 1:8

JERUSALEM (1–7)	JUDEA/SAMARIA (8–12)	THE ENDS OF THE EARTH (13–28)
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### 3. By the Continual Waves of Expansion

(1–2) Commission and Pentecost (3–5) Growth in Jerusalem (6–7) Stephen the Martyr	-----	(8) Philip to Samaria and Judea (9) Conversion of Saul (10) Peter and Cornelius (11–12) Expansion and Opposition	-----	(13–14) Paul's 1st Journey (15) Council of Jerusalem (16–18) Paul's 2nd Journey (19–20) Paul's 3rd Journey (21–26) Paul's Arrest and Trials (26–28) Paul's Journey to Rome
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### For Next Week

Review these notes, and then read the entire book of Acts again, preferably in one sitting. As you do, home in on the following passages and write down the top three pressing questions they raise in your mind about the Holy Spirit: Acts 1:8; 2:1–21, 38; 4:29–31; 8:14–24; 10:44–46; 15:8; 19:1–7. Be prepared to discuss.