

We're starting a new series this evening, and whenever you start a new series or start a new study, it's always helpful to have a big picture before we get into the details. Because having this big picture, this wide overview of everything, will help us to understand what's going on at each individual point. If we don't have that big picture, we might think that the book of Acts is just a series of stories, something that we learn about the past, but nothing else. But with that big picture, we will begin to see the point of this book. The book of Acts is written to show us how the church started from a very small group in Jerusalem and grew and grew by the power of God until it spread throughout the entire world. And it also teaches us through the example of the earliest Christians what it means to live as Christians in the face of opposition. And by having the big picture in view, this is exactly what we will see.

So to get this big picture, then, the first question we should ask ourselves is: who wrote the book of Acts? The book itself doesn't actually tell us who wrote it. But we know from the earliest days of the church that everyone has always said the same thing. It was Luke who wrote this book. Who was Luke? What we know about him? The Bible does tell us a few things about who Luke was. Paul, for example, mentions him at the end of the book of Colossians. He says in Colossians 4, verse 14: "Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas." The Bible tells us that Luke was a doctor, and being a doctor meant that he had at least some education. And having an education in those days meant he was probably a man who was a little bit wealthy, a man of fairly high social standing. He might've even been able to travel independently. And I can imagine that he was a kind of man who helped support the mission of the church also with his money. But he was one who had come to know Jesus and to believe in him by faith.

But the Bible also tells us a little bit more about Luke. It tells us that Luke was Paul's friend. In fact, one of his best friends. Towards the end of 2 Timothy, Paul is in prison, and as he's writing from prison, he asks Timothy to come to him. And he says in 2 Timothy, chapter 4, that "Luke alone is with me." All of his other companions had left him, but not Luke. Luke was willing to stay with him even when the going got rough. And Acts itself gives us little hints about this, that Luke traveled with Paul and stuck with him through many things. Because especially towards the end of the book, we're going to hear in several places passages that say "we did this" or "we went here" or "we saw this." And whenever that happens, we can assume that that's Luke himself talking. Luke was with Paul, and he saw many of these things for himself. So that's what the Bible tells us, then, about who Luke was. Luke the doctor, the faithful companion of Paul, was the man who wrote this book.

Knowing that detail, then, helps us to understand the first thing that he says in this book. Acts chapter 1, verse 1, says: "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach." So when he says "in the first book," then, he's talking about the Gospel of Luke, which he also wrote. We can assume, then, that the book of Acts is actually a continuation of that Gospel. If you want to put in a different way, the book of Acts is the Gospel of Luke, part two. And we can see that these two books are actually very closely connected to each other, because we see many similar things happening in both of them. Many of the same miracles that Jesus performs in the Gospel of Luke, the apostles perform in the book of Acts: raising the dead, healing the sick, casting out demons, all those sorts of things. And a lot of the things that Jesus said was going to happen to the apostles in the Gospel of Luke, we see coming to pass in Acts: saying that they were going to suffer, for example, that they would be hated by all, that they

would be persecuted for the sake of the Gospel. So we can see, then, that the two books go together: the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. And understanding one will also help us to understand the other.

Luke tells us also why he sat down to write this book. He writes it to Theophilus. And Theophilus, whose name means "lover of God," was a man who apparently wanted to know something more about Christianity. And Luke mentions Theophilus also at the beginning of his Gospel. He says in Luke chapter 1: "It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." So Luke claims, then, that he has studied all of these things very carefully. He's made a very careful research into all of it, and he's put it all down in a nice, tight order, so that they are easy to understand. And the point of all of this is to give Theophilus that understanding, that certainty concerning the things that he has heard.

Now, that could mean that Theophilus was a Christian, and maybe he wanted to know more about what happened in order to strengthen his faith. Because Christians in those days, just like in ours, faced a lot of opposition because of their faith. And it would be very easy for him to ask, "Well, how do I know that this is all true? Why should I suffer for this truth if I don't know that much about it? Why should I endure for the sake of Jesus?" And so Luke writes the book, then, first of all to reassure believers, to show that God is in fact with them, that all of these things are worth suffering for. Because without God, he tells us, there would be no church at all. Without God, twelve fishermen would never have been able to change the world like they did. But through the power of God, he used those twelve fishermen to take Christianity out of a forgotten corner of the world and to bring it out to everyone, so that by three hundred years later, Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. The book of Acts is a proof of what Jesus said to his disciples before he went up into heaven: "I will be with you always, even to the very end of the age."

But all of this could also mean that Theophilus was just somebody who was interested in the Gospel. Maybe he didn't quite believe yet, but he wanted to know a little bit more. Why should I take the plunge? Why should I believe in this? Are all the rumors that I hear about Christians true? Because, unfortunately, there were a lot of rumors in those days. Christians were considered to be troublemakers. Christians were considered to be a threat to good order. Those were very common accusations back in the Roman Empire. And Luke wants to defend himself and to defend the church against her critics to show that no, the church is not a threat. In fact, it was the enemies of the church who caused all of the problems. But those who are for Christ have stood firm despite great opposition, because they know the truth of what actually happened. And so there is no reason to hesitate. Here is the truth of God. This is what really happened, and you can accept it for what it is.

Either way you want to take it, Christians, if Theophilus is a believer or if he's just somebody who's interested, Luke reassures everyone who reads this book. Here is the truth so that you may believe, and by believing, be saved in Jesus Christ.

Now Luke also does talk about the problems that were in the early church. In fact, he's quite open about them, talking about the fights that they had, talking about the errors that they faced and the heresies that tried to creep in. The book of Acts does not describe a golden age, Christians, as if there were no problems whatsoever. In fact, the book of Acts in many ways is just like our own time. They faced the same problems. They faced the same opposition. They faced the same troubles. They had to deal with all the things that we do. But Luke also shows us in this book how they resolved those problems, and how God continued to bless them so that they grew and grew. And through it, he shows us how to deal with our own struggles, to deal with our own fights, and to learn to live as they did as Christians towards one another.

But the most important thing that Luke says in the beginning of this book, Christians, is this: "I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach." Now, circle that word "began," because "began" is the most helpful word here in this first verse to help us to understand the entire book. Because Luke does not say here, "In the first book, in the Gospel, I told you about all the stuff that Jesus did, and now in Acts I'm going to tell you what the apostles did," as if there was a division between them, as if Jesus' work had finished and now he was going to talk about something else. No, he says, "all the things that Jesus began to do and to teach." He had begun these things, and Jesus was still at work. Jesus is still now at work. He is still doing. He is still teaching. He is still using the church to carry out his ministry even today. So that when we see the church at work in the world, Christians, we can know that it is really Jesus who is working among us. And that is a great comfort, to know that Jesus is with us, to know that God is strengthening us, that God is building us up. It is a great comfort to know that the church can never fail because she depends on Jesus who is with her always.

Now, there are two more last details here that will help us to fill out this big picture. And the first one is asking the question: when did Luke write the book of Acts? We know that he wrote it sometime just after Paul goes to Rome in prison towards the end of the book, in Acts chapter 28. We also know that that happened roughly the year 62. So the whole book of Acts, then, was written sometime shortly after that date. But that also means that this book covers a period of roughly thirty years from the ascension of Christ to the time that Paul was in Rome. But Paul being in prison in Rome or the church suffering in general was something that was causing some Christians to be troubled, just as it does today. We get troubled whenever we see the church struggling in the world. But Luke wants to show that God was with the church during that whole thirty years. God was still with the church, and God will always be with his church. Because if God could guide the church through those difficult thirty years talked about in this book, then he could certainly still do it now. The church has endured for two thousand years, Christians. It's not going to end tomorrow!

And finally, the last detail that helps us to see the big picture is the structure of this book. The book of Acts can be divided up into three big sections based on where everything is taking place. The first seven chapters of this book take place in and around Jerusalem. Chapters 8 through 12, roughly, talk about the regions close to Jerusalem, the regions of Judea and Samaria. And chapter 13 to the end of the book talk about the Gospel going out into the rest of the Roman world, so that by the time we get to chapter 28, the end of the book, Paul is in Rome, which is the center of the ancient world. The book of Acts, then, is a book which moves outwards. It starts in one place and goes out into the entire world. Because the church has been sent into the entire world to

bring the good news of Jesus Christ. Acts shows us how that happened in the earliest days of the church and shows us how it happened through the power of the Holy Spirit. One author put it really well when he said, "The church does not have a mission. The church is a mission." She is the mission of God sent out into the world to bring the Gospel to all people. And Luke shows us what this means to be a mission to the whole world, so that we are strengthened also here in this place to carry out the work that God has given to us.

So next week, we will begin, then, with the ascension of Jesus. Luke does put everything in a nice little order, after all. But keeping this big picture in view will help us to understand everything that is happening in this book. Acts is a book that is good for us to hear, to learn, and to apply in our own time, so that we would be strengthened to carry out the mission that God has given to us. And may God strengthen us and bless us as we study it in the weeks to come!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who has promised to be with us always to the end of the world and who works through your church even in these dark and latter days, help us to hold on to your Word and to carry out the work that you have sent us to do, so that we may glorify you both now and forever; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.