

Acts Wrap-up—The Lord Stood By His Side
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Today we bring a closure to a project we started way back last August, at the very beginning of the school year. We set out to do what we often do as a congregation—work our way through extended portions of scripture. That's a fundamental aspect of what we are as a church. Our number one core commitment is the centrality of Jesus. And right next to that, the second follow-up core commitment is the authority of scripture. So we are a people that spend a lot of time working our way through scripture together. And we started out working through the book of Acts, and we are wrapping that up today. And we're also kinda wrapping up the school ministry year. So those two things are kinda coming together at one time. And it's kinda neat that the Fishing Crew and them are with us today, because they were going through Acts in Sunday school while we were going through Acts up here. And so we've all kinda come to this place together at the end of the school year. And we're going to take time today to wrap up that study.

And we're going to do it in three steps. One is I'm going to be instructional, and then I'm going to be congregational, and then we're going to address it on a personal level. The first case, I'm going to be like a teacher. I've got to give you some grips to walk away from this text with, that you can kinda remember the book of Acts about, what it's about and how it flowed; and so I'm going to start out being in kind of teacher mode. And then I'm going to go congregational; I'm going to talk like a pastor. And I'm going to talk about the book of Acts and us as a congregation. And then lastly I'm going to get personal and I'm going to take you to what was, for me, probably the most powerful verse in the entire book of Acts. And that's the sequence we're going to go with today. A little different sermon, kind of a wrap-up one, but I think it's a healthy and a healthful process to go through.

When we get instructional we talk like a teacher and wanna summarize the book of Acts, we can start off by sayin' it's...you know, of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament—the New Testament is twenty-seven books put together in one big section called the New Testament—of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, Acts is kind of unique. It stands out. The first four books of the New Testament...the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John...give us the story of Jesus, what He did, what He said, what happened to Him. It gives us the story of His death for us, His resurrection. And that's the foundation...really, that's the centerpiece of the whole Bible, is that story of Jesus. And it's told from four different witnesses—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The book of Acts follows up on that, and it serves a very crucial role because the book of Acts picks it up and describes for us those first thirty years after Jesus was raised from the dead; the first thirty years when those disciples, who had been with Him all the time, who had been able to follow Him when they could actually see Him, touch Him, hear His voice—it describes for us how they carried on after He had left, how they served Him when they could no longer see Him, no longer hear Him, no longer touch Him. And so the book of Acts shows us how that transition was made from when Jesus was right there among them, His physical presence, to when He had been raised from the dead, and how the church carried on after that.

There's other parts to the New Testament. We've got the letters, called the epistles, and that's the bulk of the New Testament are letters that were written during...for the most part, during these thirty years that the book of Acts is playing out. While all these different stories in Acts are going on, while Paul is going here and Peter is going there, they were writing letters to churches. And we have those letters, and that's what we call the epistles of the New Testament. And then we have that very last book, the book of Revelation, that looks off to the future and sees the end, and describes the end of all things. The book of Acts is the one that sits there and says, 'This is what it's like to serve Jesus now, when we can't see Him, touch Him, or hear Him personally, physically, present in our midst.' It sets a pattern for churches. It shows us how we ought to be. And the letters will fill that in, give us examples and follow-up, but that pattern is set in Acts. So it's very crucial.

The neat thing about Acts is the theme and structure; even though it's a long book—twenty-eight chapters long and so many things happen in there. There's tremendous miracles, there's a shipwreck, there's riots...I mean, you name it, it is in the book of Acts. But it's very easy to summarize the whole book in one simple verse, and it's found in Acts 1:8. It reads like this, where Jesus is speaking to His disciples just prior to leaving, just prior to His ascension into heaven, and He's lining out for them what now is going to happen, and what has continued to happen since he left. He says to His disciples,

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses, both in Jerusalem and all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth.”

That’s a summation of the book of Acts. The structure of the book flows according to that last portion of the book, the sentence that we are going to be ‘witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth’...that is the structure of the book of Acts. You’ll find that geographically, the book of Acts unfolds with the gospel, with the witnesses of Jesus going out first starting in Jerusalem and speaking of Jesus there, and then going further out into Judea, and then Samaria, and then beginning to go further and further to Asia Minor, and then ultimately reaching Rome. And as the story goes on Acts takes us to Rome, but there’s a story in church history goes on to the remotest part of the earth, including Alaska. Ok? It’s a geographical spread, and as you go through the book of Acts you can just follow it spreading—first Jerusalem, then Samaria, and then further on out.

As it spreads out it spreads through so many cultures as you go through the book of Acts. It starts in Jerusalem, that was so strong in its Jewish heritage. Then it moves up to Antioch, the crossroads east to west, and people from various cultures from all over the world mixing there...and the gospel went there. Then it went up into the hill country, the isolated area up in Asia Minor where people did not have much contact with outsiders. Then it went to Athens, the intellectual center. It was at Corinth, kinda the cutting-edge party city. And then it ended up in Ephesus, the center of the occult and idol worship and dark powers. And finally it ends up in Rome, the center of power...political and empire. And all the time the gospel just keeps goin’ into these new situations, new circumstances, and new environments.

Probably the biggest thing that happened is it spread from the Jews to the Gentiles. That’s probably the most dramatic thing that takes place in the book of Acts. It spread from a group of people who had been waiting for, looking for, and praying for the Messiah for a thousand years. And when He came they didn’t recognize Him. Very few of ‘em responded. And it spread from that people and began to go among the Gentiles, the non-Jews, who had never looked for the Messiah, didn’t even realize there was such a thing as a Messiah. And it began to spread among those people. And they responded. It was one of the most dramatic things that takes place in the book of Acts, is how that gospel keeps spreading. And you watch it as you read it. And that’s the structure of the book.

There’s something that drives the spread of the gospel, kind of a dynamic that drives it forward, and that I’m gonna highlight here as the promise of the Holy Spirit—that Jesus had said that after His resurrection He would be received up into heaven, and He would pour out His Spirit on His people; and not just a few of ‘em—all of them. And the story of the book of Acts is how that Spirit came upon all of God’s people, anyone and everyone who turns to Jesus Christ, who calls out for forgiveness, receives that forgiveness, and received His Spirit within them. And the transformation begins from the inside out. Jesus called it the new covenant, the new promise. And that is the driving dynamic as we go through the book of Acts, is the Spirit of God is now working in all His people. And they’re saying things, and doing things, and going places as the Spirit moves them, and giving witness to Jesus. It’s an amazing story that the people that lived through it, that early generation of church—when they decided to come up with a symbol of the church in those early generations, what they came up with was a sailboat...‘cause the word ‘spirit’ meant ‘wind’ also. And as they experienced that Spirit, that wind of God moving in them and among them and through them, they said, ‘We’re wind-carried.’ And as we say generations later, one of our themes around here is “We don’t row this boat.” The Spirit is alive in us and among us and working through us. And that’s a driving element that keeps this story going in the book of Acts.

But probably the thing that I wanna highlight here is the definitive call that is there. In this very first verse of Acts Jesus lays out what the church will be. At the very start of things He says, ‘This is what you are about. This is what you will be.’ It’s words we need to hear in our generation so powerfully. We are not an aid agency. We may be benevolent, and we may do helps, but that isn’t our primary calling. We are not a political action committee trying to direct our society. We are not a community center where people can gather and find others that share the same values, have similar interests, and you can find a wife or a husband for your son or daughter. We’re not a theological institution producing scholars and philosophers who can deal with philosophy. We are called—in every generation, every circumstance, every condition. Our calling is simply to give witness to the reality of the glory, the mystery, and the wonder of Jesus. That’s why we exist. And Jesus defined that when He told those early disciples, as He was leaving, ‘My Spirit will come upon you, and you will be My witnesses. That’s what you’re about.’

That’s the book.

Let's talk congregational; let's talk as a pastor. Whenever you go through a book like this it's different than being a seminary teacher, that I'm trying to have you master certain content. My challenge when we go through a book like that is to say ok, how does that interact with us as a church? I mean, when we spend time in scripture it should be formative. It should shape us. And it becomes a way to do a check on us in terms of where are we headed, what are we about, what are we saying, what are we doing, what do we need to adjust. And so when I go through a year like this in the book of Acts, I'm constantly asking, "How should we adjust? How does this fit with us?" And it's a constant application-oriented, practical-oriented reading. It isn't simply 'let's master some concepts here.' In fact, I am not concerned that you walk out of here knowing the outline of the book of Acts. My concern is that we're living the reality Acts points to.

When I look at it pastorally, in the study we've been through, and our congregation, first of all I'm affirmed. There's things in here that affirm us as a congregation; specifically, our direction. As I read through the book of Acts, and I see what the Lord has done in our lives over the past six-seven years, I sit there and say, "Yes; yes, we're on the right track." It's kind of a directional check, and I walk away saying, "yes." Now, we may not have it perfect, but the setting's right.

Think of it this way. A number of years ago, when our church...we've had a theme, and we've had the theme for years. And the theme that we really focused on a number of years ago, that we emphasized, is that, as a church, we wanted to be a church that's enjoying God's grace and extending God's grace. The way we put it was "Enjoying God's grace to the fullest measure, and extending it to the farthest reaches." You see, we, as a church, have been blessed for decades; and we have enjoyed God's grace. And a number of years ago we began to wrestle with, 'You know what? We've been enjoying God's grace; it's been rich, it's been powerful. What are we doing to extend God's grace?' It was that thinking that prompted our move to this property, and all the challenges we went through doing that. We called this building project "Extending God's Grace." Yeah. We wanna do...that's the same direction the book of Acts has. You don't just enjoy God's grace...you extend it.

And as we spoke of it, and we looked at extending God's grace, and we wrestled with that as a church, and we prayed about it, and we talked about it, I'll never forget the first Sunday we came in this building. And we had Communion...we called it "Christ at Center," the first time we ever did that. And then we talked about, 'Now that we're on this building, how are we gonna extend God's grace?' We started a series of sermons that came around one basic theme, and this is a little over three years ago. And this has set our direction ever since. And the direction was this—we're gonna be extending God's grace one conversation at a time; one conversation at a time, every circumstance, every condition, being a people who can speak accurately and clearly of Jesus in the ebb and flow, the twists and turns of our everyday life. We wanna be a people who extend grace one conversation at a time.

The verse we focused on at the time will come back to you, because we memorized it. It was

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Eph. 4:29

That was the drumbeat we moved into this building with. It's been our drumbeat ever since. But we've refined it in line with the book of Acts, as I look at it, because we went beyond saying, "Let's extend grace one conversation at a time," to recognize that we have never fully, ultimately, extended grace until we've given witness to the reality of Jesus. The ultimate extension of grace is speaking Jesus' name and telling His story so that others can come to know His reality.

That's affirming. When I look at where we've been these past number of years, and I read the book of Acts with its call to witness, they went out and they extended God's grace one conversation at a time. Whether it was with the low or the high, they kept talkin' about Jesus. And I say, "You know what? We're headed the right direction. We're headed the right direction, giving witness to the reality of Jesus." But there's a challenge in this section, too, when I read through the book of Acts. Part of what challenges me when I read through the book of Acts is the reality and the reliance upon the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. The Spirit really did come upon those people, and the Spirit really was what carried them forward and enabled them to give witness...every circumstance, every condition. That's why I'm so thankful that over the past year one of the things that we did as an Elder group is we ran...the Elders came...actually they came to the staff as we were getting ready to study the book of Acts, and they said, 'Listen, we want you to teach people how to recognize and respond to the Holy Spirit in their lives.' And we set up our application groups, our theology units and our exploratory studies, and we said, "You know what? That's the centerpiece of our adult education this year." Because this doesn't happen...we don't speak of Jesus with clarity and accuracy without the Spirit. And so we really ran after that.

The challenge as we went through it...and the Elders were the first to teach it; we had staff teachin' it, we've been workin' at it all year long; we've had so many people go through this in these home groups and things. The interesting thing as we went through there is the challenge is not so much people being confused with respect to the Holy Spirit—we can deal with that. The biggest challenge we found in our congregational life is people bein' distracted. We're busy people in a busy culture with a lot of noise. And what we consistently found in our application groups, in our home groups and our studies, is that people...they're not hearing because they're not listening. There's too many other things demanding attention.

Now, that wasn't frustrating. It was challenging, and it was convicting to all of us. I remember one of our elders...'cause he was sitting in one of our Elder meetings and he was talking about it, and he had had a couple groups that went well, and he'd had a couple groups that didn't, and one of the ones...he said, 'You know,' he said, 'these people,' and he wasn't bein' critical, he was just sayin' this is the reality, 'they are just swamped! And to ask them to slow down and read a chapter of scripture was like a huge homework task.' The interesting thing was he wasn't discouraged by that. His response in that Elder meeting was, 'we've gotta keep at this. We've gotta keep at this.' So that is a challenge; it's something we're gonna have to continue after, is bein' a people who, by practice and diligence, are people who recognize and respond to the Spirit in our lives. So that aspect of the study in Acts was challenging. The reality of the Spirit and their reliance upon Him is convicting to us; and we're pressing on to work on that, and press forward to that.

But most of all, the book was encouraging to me. Boy, it was encouraging! The thing that encouraged me was this—Jesus saying, "You will be My witnesses"; and, I think for the first time in my pastoral career, reading that verse not as a command, not as a directive, not as a goal being set, not as a mission being given. It's simply a statement of fact, and a reality we are living; that our God is working in us and through us continually. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. And we are His witnesses.

Every circumstance, every condition, as you go through the book of Acts and then as you look at our own lives...every circumstance, every condition becomes an opportunity for our Lord and our God to manifest His reality in us and through us; and in that process we are His witnesses.

I said we'd be a little reflective over the years, so I will comment on one of those events that happened over the past year. I just remember one week in December sitting down, and it'd been harried, it'd been busy. Things had finally settled down after our fall, and we were headed into December. And I remember setting a day aside just to get out my calendar, look ahead the next two months; and I mean I charted it out, I put everything down there...what I wanted to do when. I mean, I had it down. It took me a full day to say what are all the goals we have here, what are the projects we need to get done, and how am I gonna get it done, and where are we gonna allocate the time. And I just had it all set out. And then a match was lit, and I never saw that calendar again; never saw it again. But we were a witness. Didn't take my plans; didn't take my projects; didn't take my schedule.

Any circumstance, any condition...Jesus says, "You will be My witnesses." He will do it, and He does it. And that's encouraging to me. I do not have to make this happen. He does.

And that leads to the personal. I'm gonna try to do this fairly quick. When I look back over the year, and I read...I see the book of Acts...I understand how it flows...I see how our church...and I'm affirmed by the direction we're headed. I'm challenged by especially our responsiveness and recognition of the Spirit. And yet I'm encouraged by what Jesus does in us and through us. But when I get personal there's one verse that stands out. It's Acts 23:11; Acts 23:11. And I'll introduce it for you a second, and then we'll go on and I'll highlight why it's so important to me. Acts 23:11...just prior to this Paul had been in the city of Ephesus at probably, I think, the high point of his ministry. We're told that in the city of Ephesus he did many extraordinary miracles. He was in a real spiritual conflict there, and he did miracles that you don't find anywhere else in the book of Acts. In fact, they were so dramatic that, we're told, people were taking his sweatband. That when he worked on making tents people were taking his sweatband, and they were taking it to people who were sick, far away, giving them his sweatband, and as soon as they touched that sweatband they were healed!

I mean, these were extraordinary times in Ephesus; and the resistance against the gospel was powerful. But we're told in that chapter that the word, the gospel, prevailed and spread. It couldn't be shut down; it couldn't be stopped. Instead, it just kept right on going out through all of Asia Minor. This was a high point of victory for Paul. In fact, at this point in the city of Ephesus, at that time, he's able to say, 'I'm done here. I've won. The gospel's out there. Now I need to go to Rome. That's where we need to be. That's the next step. Logically, ministry-wise, that's where I need to be.' And so he set his sight and his heart on Rome. Except God said, 'No, go to Jerusalem. Go to Jerusalem.'

And so Paul went to Jerusalem, bound by the Spirit, not knowing where he was going, not understanding what was going to happen, but desiring deep in his heart to be in Rome he went to Jerusalem. And all along the way he was being warned. And then when he got to Jerusalem things turned out very badly. Even though he tried to do everything right, the Jews reacted against him in the temple arena. And they took hold of him; they beat him in a riot mob scene. The Romans have to intervene; they pull him out of there and they put him in chains. And they hold him in custody even though he didn't start the riot. But they figure he must be the problem since he's the one everybody's tryin' to get at, and they keep him in. And then he tries to defend himself and they react, and they finally put him in front of the Jewish council, and he starts to explain himself there, and there's another riot within the Jewish council. And the Roman soldiers have to intervene to save him from the Jewish council that's gone crazy trying to beat him.

From the high point of victory in Ephesus, ready to take on Rome, he is now in a prison cell in Jerusalem believing he's gonna die. It says

But on the night immediately following [the riot scene in the Sanhedrin] the Lord stood by his side and said, "Take courage, for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."

'Paul, don't be afraid. We're goin' to Rome. We're goin' to Rome.'

Now Paul doesn't understand that he's still gonna have death threats, he's still gonna go through a shipwreck, and everything else. But he's heard it. 'Paul, we're goin' to Rome.'

Here's the phrase in all of Acts that grips me. "*The Lord stood by his side...*" That's our Jesus. That is our Jesus. The lowest possible moment...He stands by His servant.

I haven't told this element to the story of the past winter. But on a Thursday night in December I got together with a group of friends and we went up into Hatcher's Pass. It was a full moon and we planned it—we were gonna climb, and then we were gonna ski back down. Full moon skiing is just the best! We put on our skis; we left work just a little bit early. We got up there in the mountains, put on our skis and the skins on the bottom, we climbed up, and it was just this unbelievable full moon up there. We sat on one ridge up there and we watched that full moon come up behind another mountain and just bathe the valley in moonlight. And then we skied down...and guys, I can climb, but I cannot come down. But that day I managed to stay upright! And we came to the bottom...it was one of the most exhilarating ski experiences I have ever had.

And that was followed up. We packed up, threw the gear in, and two of us...one of the others was an Elder, and two of us had to then get down to an Elder meeting...and once a month we have what we call a 'vine time,' and that's where the Elders meet just to share a meal together. We don't talk about administration, we don't talk about projects, we don't talk about things business-wise related to the church. We just talk about our Lord, and we talk about each other's lives, and we care about each other. It's a special time for us around table. And we came down off of that skiing, and we came down...we sat at this vine time, we ate this meal Sally Kirkwood put together for us. I gotta give her credit, 'cause I want her to do more, and it was just fantastic!

And I remember driving home that night just in awe of how much I enjoy Jesus. Up on that mountain had been a moment of worship for me. Around that table it was a moment of worship for me. And I'll never forget coming in that Friday morning and talking to Jim Eller, and I had to tell him about the wonder of Jesus the day before. And then that night, Friday night, I sat out there in that parking lot and I watched this building burn, and chainsaws ripping into the side of it, and the smoke just billowing out, and people wondering what's going on. And you start hearing, "It's arson!" So I cannot think of two more different nights in the whole year.

But I want you to understand this, and I can't say it strong enough—I felt the presence of Jesus just as strongly, just as powerfully, just as satisfying, on the night this building burned as on the night I skied down Hatcher's Pass. I am here to give witness to the reality of Jesus who can, does, and will stand by us...any circumstance, any condition. He stands with us. That's why we are a people who will give witness

Let's stand.

[Congregation sings the prayer song]

Amen. Go in that grace.