

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Acts

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: Ordinary People, Extraordinary God

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.

(Acts 4:13)

In 30 AD, Jesus of Nazareth looked to have been an utter failure. If you don't understand that, then you will miss the message of the book of Acts. It is a record of survival through adversity, triumph against all odds, and victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. It is the story of a group of ordinary people who turned the tide of history through the power of their extraordinary God.

Jesus had failed to spread his message beyond the borders of Palestine. He had failed to convince the Jewish leaders that he was their long-awaited Messiah. He had even failed to keep the support of the rank-and-file people of Israel. He had been abandoned by the crowds, by his disciples, and even by God himself,¹ and had died a shameful criminal's death on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem. For all his early promise, by May 30 AD he had lost all but 120 of his followers,² and Luke goes out of his

¹ In my book *Straight to the Heart of Matthew*, I show that Matthew 27:46 was actually a cry of victory. Nevertheless, those who heard it at the time must have assumed it was a cry of utter defeat and despair.

² He appeared to a crowd of over 500 after his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:6), but only 120 of them obeyed him enough to wait in Jerusalem as he commanded them (Acts 1:4).

way in the opening verses of Acts to tell us what an unimpressive bunch they were.

He stresses in verse 11 that they were "*men of Galilee*" – a group of uneducated barbarians from a far-flung corner of the Roman Empire. The gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and John were among the 120, and their gospels betray their provincial mindset. They refer to the hub of their little world as the *Sea of Galilee*, while Luke, the sophisticated Christian doctor from Antioch, knew enough about the wider world to call it simply a *lake*.³ Jesus' vision for his Church to take the Gospel "*to the ends of the earth*" was not just stretching, but laughably over-sized.

As for their leader, Peter, and his fishing partner John, Luke tells us plainly that they were "*unschooled, ordinary men*".⁴ Their courage had failed them six weeks earlier on the night that Jesus was arrested, and verse 6 shows us that they still didn't fully understand his mission.⁵ With generals like Peter and John presiding over the shattered remnants of his Kingdom army, Jesus' mission looked to have been a colossal failure.

Yet the Christian faith didn't die. Instead it grew, massively. The Gospel message ran from house to house across Jerusalem, then exploded through the cities of Samaria, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. It spread like wildfire across the Roman Empire, until its enemies complained that it had shaken the whole earth.⁶ Incredibly and inexplicably, the Christian Church refused to roll over and die. Instead it conquered the world.

It was this success which brought the believers to the attention of Theophilus, the man to whom Luke dedicates his gospel and the book of Acts. We do not know his exact identity –

³ Contrast Matthew 4:18; 15:29; Mark 1:16; 3:7; 7:31; John 6:1; 21:1, with Luke 5:1 and 8:26. The disciples' terminology is so embarrassingly inflated that some translators even replace the Greek word *sea* with *lake*.

⁴ Acts 4:13.

⁵ They ask Jesus when he will lead the Jews to throw off Roman rule. His real mission was far, far greater.

⁶ Acts 17:6; 24:5.

his name means *Friend-of-God*, so it could even be a poetic name for Christians in general – but there is strong evidence that he was the judge for Paul’s trial at Caesar’s court in Rome.

For a start, Luke ignores the activity of nine of the twelve apostles, and in the second half of Acts he ignores the other three as well. Although his book has become known as “The Acts of the Apostles”, its real focus is on the relative latecomer Paul, with detailed accounts of his missionary journeys, his arrest, his trials, and his journey to Rome. It isn’t a biography, since it tells us neither the outcome of his trial nor how he eventually died, but it builds towards a cliff-hanger ending which leaves Paul awaiting judgment under house arrest in Rome. This only makes sense if Luke was writing to provide background for Paul’s test-case trial of the Christian faith, and Luke confirms this by addressing his reader as “*most excellent Theophilus*”, which was the customary way for any Roman to address a judge in court.⁷

This is much more convincing than the view that Acts is a history of the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to “*the ends of the earth*”, in fulfilment of Jesus’ command in Acts 1:8. Rome wasn’t the ends of the earth, but the centre of it! She ruled the world from the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, which was Latin for the *Middle-of-the-Earth* Sea. The entire world revolved around her, even places at the true ends of the earth, such as Armenia and Britannia. Romans heard the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost itself,⁸ and Paul wrote to a strong church in Rome in AD 57, five years before he arrived there in person. Therefore Luke didn’t write Acts in AD 62 to describe the Gospel’s arrival in Rome, but to guide a judge’s verdict at the palace which

⁷ The lawyer Tertullus and the defendant Paul both address the judge in Acts 24:3 and 26:25 in the same way that Luke addresses Theophilus in Luke 1:3. This is why Luke’s recurrent theme in Acts is that Paul and the other Christians are innocent, and that their accusers are the real wrongdoers.

⁸ Acts 2:10. The day of Pentecost was ten days after Jesus’ ascension, in May AD 30.

dominated the earth. The prisoner Paul was about to stand before Caesar’s court, and Judge Theophilus was about to pass his official imperial verdict over Paul and the Christian faith which had brought him there.

Luke gives Theophilus an outline of the Christian story so far. He tells him about the effect of the Gospel in Jerusalem (chapters 1–7), its spread to nearby Judea and Samaria (chapters 8–9), its acceptance by the Gentiles (chapters 10–12), its success in Asia Minor (chapters 13–15), its advance into Europe (chapters 16–20), and finally – with long speeches and careful attention to detail – the arrival of its leading exponent, Paul, in Rome (chapters 21–28). He does so using the best Greek in the New Testament, structuring his brief like the great Greek historians Herodotus, Xenophon, and Thucydides, on the basis of painstaking interviews with eyewitnesses.⁹ As a result, the book of Acts was extremely successful: Theophilus ruled that Paul was innocent, and released him to continue his church-planting ministry.

Luke wrote this book for Theophilus, but he also filled it with essential, foundational teaching for any Christian who reads it today. We live in a world where the Church’s mission can still feel as overwhelming and unattainable as ever. In the West, the Gospel has been sidelined, church attendance has haemorrhaged, and society at large views Christianity as the outdated and irrelevant creed of a foolish die-hard few. In parts of the world where church attendance is still strong, Christians have largely failed to transform the nations in which they live. Ours is still a world where Jesus’ vision looks completely mismatched to his ragged bunch of followers. Yet Acts gives

⁹ Luke 1:1–4. Luke was simply one of the best historians of the ancient world. When modern historians have criticized his work, archaeologists have repeatedly vindicated Luke at their expense. For example, scholars used to rubbish Luke’s statement in 17:6 that the rulers of Thessalonica were called *politarchs* – until archaeologists dug up five separate inscriptions which proved that Luke was right and they were wrong.

ordinary Christians his blueprint for success – a much-needed manual from their extraordinary God.

If you feel like a very ordinary Christian, this should strike you as very good news indeed. Luke wrote Acts as far more than a legal brief for one of Caesar's judges in Rome. He wrote it as the story of ordinary Christians in the past, to encourage and equip ordinary Christians in the present. He wrote it to inform you, amaze you, excite you, and enthral you, but most of all he wrote it to *enlist* you. The Church's great mission is by no means over, and you have a role which is uniquely yours to play.

So hold on to your seat and get ready for the breathtaking message of the book of Acts. If you are an ordinary person, this book is for you: it is a call to ride to victory on the shoulders of your extraordinary God.

The Gospel to Jerusalem (30–33 AD)

Joseph Barsabbas (1:15–26)

So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias.... Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias.

(Acts 1:23, 26)

You've got to feel sorry for Joseph Barsabbas. He was a follower of Jesus from the beginning, eager to play his role in Jesus' Kingdom Revolution. When Jesus healed the crowds in Galilee, he was there. When Jesus clashed with the Pharisees, he was there too. He was there to take notes on the Sermon on the Mount, there to see Jesus drive out a demon in the synagogue at Capernaum, and there when Jesus went up on a mountainside to pray over which twelve followers he was to choose as his disciples.

When Jesus came down from the mountain, Joseph Barsabbas was in for a nasty surprise. He was part of the shortlist, but he hadn't made it into the Twelve. His friends Peter, John and Matthew had. So had Andrew, James and Simon. Even Judas Iscariot was chosen. I mean, *Judas?! What was Jesus thinking?! After months of following Jesus round and hanging on his every word, Barsabbas was put on the bench and told he hadn't made the first team. It must have been a bitter disappointment.*

But he kept going. For two more years he followed Jesus, not as one of the Twelve but as a close follower nonetheless. He was there when Jesus fed the crowds with loaves and fishes, there when he sent out the Seventy-Two on their Gospel mission, and there when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He was there when the crowds turned against Jesus, there when

JOSEPH BARSABBAS (1:15-26)

25

THE GOSPEL TO JERUSALEM (30-33 AD)

26

he was crucified, and there when he appeared alive again after his resurrection. He was a witness to Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus had chosen twelve disciples, one for every tribe of ancient Israel.¹ There couldn't be thirteen, so the only way to join the group was by filling "dead men's shoes". Judas was dead, which meant a vacancy had opened. Barsabbas' time had finally come.²

Once again he made the shortlist. Only he or Matthias could possibly be the right man for the job, so the Eleven would cast lots between them like the priests of ancient Israel.³ It was a tried and tested way of letting God reveal his sovereign choice – and this time the lot fell to Matthias. *Matthias?! Why him?! This was a man so unimpressive that Scripture tells us nothing about him, before or after he was chosen. Joseph Barsabbas had once again been poised to go down in history as one of the Twelve, and once again God had passed him by. He had not just been sidelined by the Eleven, but by God himself.⁴ Of course I'm speculating about how Barsabbas must have felt in Acts chapter 1, but I'm pretty sure it hurt him. A lot.*

So here's the reason why Joseph Barsabbas is one of my favourite Bible characters: he didn't let it spoil him. He stared

¹ Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30.

² Luke had access to Matthew's earlier gospel, so his account of Judas' death in Acts 1:18–19 must complement rather than contradict Matthew 27:1–10. Evidently Judas' body fell from where it hung and split open on the ground. The priests then took the money he had returned to them and used it to buy the field as a burial ground for foreigners. This dealt positively with the way he had defiled the field with his blood.

³ Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 16:8; Numbers 27:21; Ezra 2:62–63; Nehemiah 10:34. A few writers argue that, since Matthias is not mentioned again, the Eleven were mistaken to cast lots to replace Judas and should have waited three or four years for God to call the apostle Paul. This argument is weak because eight of the Eleven are not mentioned after this point either, and Peter did so out of inspired obedience to Psalm 109:8.

⁴ The God-centred prayer – "*Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen*" – must have made the sting of rejection particularly hard for Joseph Barsabbas.

God's sovereign choosing in the face and made a courageous choice of his own. He would let God be God and accept that the Church was Jesus' body, not his. It was a difficult choice, a mature choice, but it's a choice we all have to make if we want the extraordinary God to work through our ordinary lives. If we manipulate our way to leadership outside of God's choosing, we must lead out of our ordinary strength, but if we submit to God's choice of role, he empowers us to serve him with his own extraordinary strength.

Let me give an example from my own family life. My elderly relations are all British and all played a role in the war against Nazi Germany. One of them served in Montgomery's Eighth Army in North Africa. Another captured Pegasus Bridge in Normandy as part of a daring airborne raid in the early hours of D-Day. Still another flew RAF reconnaissance planes over enemy-occupied Europe. Meanwhile, several others played a more mundane role in the war as farmers, teachers, factory-workers and mothers back in England. My question is this: Which of these relatives were war heroes who defeated Nazi Germany? The answer, I hope, is obvious. They all were. All of them played their own particular role in the massive war effort which defeated Adolf Hitler. Wars are always truly won by a selfless team of willing nobodies, and in God's Kingdom it's the same.

The book of Acts is full of ordinary people who became great apostles, preachers and miracle-working church-planters, but it is also full of ordinary people who served in the background: Dorcas who sewed clothing for the poor; Mary who opened up her home for an all-night prayer meeting; Simon the tanner who offered lodgings to Peter; the businesswoman Lydia whose home became the base for Paul's church-plant in Philippi; the tent-makers Priscilla and Aquila, who disciplined a zealous but ignorant young man named Apollos, little knowing that they were preparing an apostle of the future.⁵ Which of these were the heroes of Acts?

⁵ See the chapter on "Apostles and Elders".

They all were. Anyone who faithfully plays their God-given role can be a hero in God's drama.⁶ The only losers are those who refuse their role, succumb to bitter disappointment and try to play in a position of their own choosing.

You may be like Joseph Barsabbas yourself. Perhaps you once had high hopes that God would choose you to lead, plant churches or perform great exploits in his name. He may yet do so, but first he calls you to serve faithfully in the little things, in the unglamorous and unnoticed sidelines of his Kingdom mission. He calls you to play your God-apportioned role with all the grace and humility of Joseph Barsabbas.

There's an epilogue to this story in 15:22, when the apostles choose a man called Barsabbas to deliver a letter to the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. He is called *Judas* Barsabbas rather than *Joseph*, so it may have been a brother, but since Joseph was nicknamed *Justus* because he was *Just*, it is not unreasonable to assume that he was also nicknamed *Judas* because he was a man of *Praise*.⁷ Luke tells us that Barsabbas was chosen alongside Silas, another Jewish follower of Jesus who had not quite made it into the original Top Twelve, and that together these "*leaders among the brothers*" prophesied, encouraged and strengthened the churches at a time of vital need. Barsabbas had refused to give in to bitterness and disappointment, and continued to serve God faithfully in whatever role he was given.

This should encourage you if ever you feel overlooked or devalued like Joseph Barsabbas. Don't despise the sovereign choice of God and don't let the knock-backs of yesterday spoil you for today. If you guard your heart and play your role, you too can be an ordinary person, empowered by your extraordinary God.

⁶ Luke emphasizes this in the Greek text of 1:15 by telling us literally that there were "*about a hundred and twenty names*" in the upper room. Each of them was known to God by name, and he chose a role for them all.

⁷ The names *Judah* (Hebrew) and *Judas* (Greek) both mean *Praise*. See Genesis 29:35.