

ACTS – THE UNSTOPPABLE FORCE

dr matthew jacoby

thrive

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LIVING LIFE AS GOD INTENDED

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THIS ISSUE

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ACTS

– The Unstoppable Force

In this edition of *Thrive* we will be taking a journey through the book of Acts. The story of the birth and growth of the early church is inspiring and crucial for us to understand what sort of movement we are a part of. The Holy Spirit that was at work in those early years is still at work now. We are a part of the story of Acts. Join me as I trace the steps of the apostles and reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit in this amazing book of the Bible. It will be sure to invigorate your faith and give you a renewed vision for your life.

MJ

NEW

An introductory walk through the Bible

With your guide
Matthew Jacoby



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Images of the Spirit: Dove – Genesis **1:2** & Matthew **3:13-17**

Over the weekends in this issue of **Thrive** we will be reflecting on the momentous and supremely glorious gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift, which we believers in Christ now enjoy, was anticipated all the way through the Old Testament. Our reflections will focus on these images that heralded the outpouring of the Spirit. We begin with that of the dove, a profound and tender symbol of the Holy Spirit. It first appears in Genesis 1:2, where the Spirit of God is described as “hovering over the waters,” a picture of a gentle yet powerful presence poised to conquer the forces of chaos and to implement God’s order. This same motif re-emerges at Jesus’ baptism when the Spirit descends “like a dove” upon him (Luke 3:22), signifying divine affirmation and empowerment for his mission. The image of the dove expresses the idea that God does not work, as though frustrated, through force and domination. Rather, he works peacefully with certitude as he unleashes his unthwartable power. It conveys the Spirit’s way of working with us: quietly, pervasively, and regeneratively. God does not push and coerce. He invites us and draws us with gentleness, and as we yield we are transformed. In biblical imagery, the hovering dove reminds us that the Spirit is always near, poised and brooding over the raw and chaotic places of our lives, ready to bring forth new creation. It is an invitation to openness: to let the Spirit settle upon us and transform the chaos within into beauty and fruitfulness.

Read **Genesis 1:2** and **Matthew 3:13-17**. Invite the Holy Spirit to rest upon you and transform you.

The book of Luke is the story of what Jesus did when he was with his disciples in the flesh. The book of Acts is the second volume to Luke's Gospel written also by Luke who travelled with Paul and also with Peter. It is the story of what Jesus did and continues to do in and around the lives of his disciples by the Holy Spirit. Jesus told his disciples, on the night before his death, it was for their good that he was to go away. For once he had gone back to heaven, he would send the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). Here in Acts 1, just before he ascends into heaven, Jesus reminds his disciples of this promise. It was around this time that he also told them, according to Matthew's account, that he would be with them to the very end of the age (28:20). In the flesh Jesus could only be in one place at one time and with only a limited number of people. But now, by the Holy Spirit (whom Paul refers to as the 'Spirit of Christ'), he is with all of his people everywhere all the time. Not only is he with us but he is *within* us. This means that you never have to live life alone. Jesus wants to be with you today. He wants to be a part of your work, your socialising, your family time. He wants you to talk with him about your concerns and he wants to show you things and teach you things. Too many people say they believe in Jesus but still live alone. It is a sad and empty way to live. Live life with Jesus.

Read Acts 1:1-5

Ask Jesus to draw you closer to him and to make you more aware of his presence with you every day.

RECEIVE & GIVE

Acts 1:1-5, Exodus 19: 1-6,
Joel 2:28-30

In Old Testament times, only certain people experienced the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, namely kings, prophets and priests. The prophets, however, looked forward to a time when *all* God's people would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be like prophets and priests to the nations (Joel 2:28-30). In Acts 1, Jesus announces that the time had almost come for this to happen. He instructed his disciples to "wait for the gift my father promised". This is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was active in the lives of all believers under the Old Testament, but what Jesus is talking about here is something new. The baptism of the Holy Spirit would empower them for a new stage in God's plan. To be a Christian is to enter a priestly calling. This means that we are mediators of God's blessings. Think about the implications of this. To mediate in a situation is not the same as just going out and doing something. To mediate is to receive something and then pass it on. The receiving part is crucial, otherwise we have nothing to mediate. This is why Jesus tells his disciples to *wait* for the outpouring of the Spirit and then, only when they have received the Holy Spirit, to go out and bear witness to him. Only when the power of Christ is operative in us do we have something to be witnesses of. Here is a good pattern for life: regularly wait on God to receive his light and life into your heart and then go out and bless others with what you have received.

Read Acts 1:1-5, Exodus 19:1-6 and Joel 2:28-30

Ask God to shed his life and light into your heart by his Spirit.

WEDNESDAY

5 AUG

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES

Acts **1:6-11**

You would think that by now the disciples would have understood that Jesus was not interested in a political revolution. Yet even now they ask: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus' reply is filled with patience. His answer implies something like: "You'll see how this all works when the Holy Spirit starts to move you along." They could not conceive of a way to change the world other than by the customary forceful means. But they were about to be a part of something completely different; a new sort of movement that would achieve infinitely more than what any army could achieve. They were going to change the world, not by big overt surges of force. No, they were going to change hearts by the Holy Spirit who would empower them. This would be a long slow process, but it would be unstoppable. Nothing can thwart God's purpose. That's what we see in the early history of the church. There would be great opposition to this movement, but the Holy Spirit would nevertheless change millions of lives. Within three hundred years of this moment the known world would be permeated with Christians, and even the Roman Emperor himself would turn to Christ. And all this because ordinary people went out and bore witness to the God that was in their hearts. It happened not by great acts of conquest, but many small acts of love. This same movement of the Holy Spirit continues to transform the world. In fact, it is more prevalent now than ever. God is calling you to be a part of what he is doing today.

Read Acts 1:6-11

Pray for open eyes to recognise the small things that God has for you to do today.

PREPARING THE WINE SKIN

Acts 1:12-26

Jesus had told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (1:4). He didn't want them to rush off and serve God before they had been filled with the Holy Spirit. If they did that they would certainly fail because they would have nothing to impart. It is interesting to note, however, what this 'waiting' consisted of. It certainly didn't mean inactivity. It says in verse 14: "They all joined together constantly in prayer." Then we see them dealing with the practicalities of organising themselves and filling the vacant position left by Judas. The lesson here is important. We should be careful about rushing off into ministry activity without receiving first from God. If we do, we will have nothing to give. We must be constantly going to the place of prayer to unload our burdens and receive God's light and strength. Only then will we have light and strength to impart to others. In addition to this there are practical things that we can put in place to facilitate what God wants to do in our lives. New wine needs a new wineskin. If things are to change spiritually then things will need to change practically. There are practical things you can do now in anticipation for what God wants to pour into your life. Maybe you need to be more organised, create more time and space, streamline your schedule, offload some things, set up some accountability, organise time to pray with others, seek a mentor, etc. These things can be vital preparation for what God wants to do in your life.

Read Acts 1:12-26

Reflect on what needs to change in your life
to make way for what God wants to do.

Throughout the Old Testament there is this sense of distance between the ordinary person and God. There were particular people like Moses and David who experienced God's presence more intimately, but the wider community would have felt a great gulf between them and God. This was confirmed to the Israelites in the imagery of the tabernacle. The great pillar of fire, representing the presence of God (cf. the burning bush in Exodus 3), rested over the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle but only the high priest was allowed to enter that place, and only after lots of preparation once a year for just a few moments. It was otherwise strictly out of bounds. It is important to read Acts 2 against this background because here something momentous happens. The same pillar of fire now appears. But this time it separates and rests on the head of each of those gathered. What did this mean? Six hundred years earlier Ezekiel had seen a vision of the presence of God leaving the temple because it had been defiled by the sins of God's people. Ever since that time the Jews had been waiting for God to forgive them and return to his temple. This is what is happening here. But the temple was not that of wood and stone. The new temple would be the hearts of God's own people. Jesus' death had enabled a cleansing from sin and, here in Acts 2, we see God returning to his temple. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit. Act accordingly.

Read Acts 2:1-3

Ask God to fill you anew with his Holy Spirit
and wait in silence before him for a while.

Images of the Spirit: The Altar of Fire – Exodus **3:1-6**, Leviticus **1** & **9:22-24**

Throughout Scripture, *fire* is the most recurrent symbol of God's presence. It is a symbol of power, light, glory, holiness, purification and judgement. In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, tongues of fire came to rest upon each person present.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and that is true of this manifestation of the divine presence wherever it appears in the Bible. Recall how God appeared to Moses in a bush that burned and yet was not consumed by the flames (Exodus 3:2). This was a sign of a yet impossible promise: sinful people filled with the Holy Spirit and yet not destroyed. The same symbolism is present in the altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle and temple. When Paul exhorts us in Romans 12:1 to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, he has the burnt offering in mind. It was a picture of total surrender to God's ownership. This is why, in the case of the burnt offering, the sacrificial animal was burnt up on the altar, converted to smoke, to become "an aroma pleasing to the Lord". The very first time Aaron put the prescribed sacrifice on the altar "fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering" (Leviticus 9:24). This was a sign of divine favour. God was accepting and fully appropriating the sacrifice. This prefigured what happened at Pentecost. God was accepting the sacrifice of these disciples, appropriating them fully to serve the world and taking everything for himself in a supreme act of divine love and favour.

Read Exodus 3:1-6, Leviticus 1 and 9:22-24. Surrender yourself, your plans, goals and ambitions to God.

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