

Welcome

Good Morning! My name is Vanessa Hewitt and I am the lead children's ministry volunteer here at Catalyst. I LOVE teaching in the LAB. The kids are so much fun! And if I haven't told you lately – you have AMAZING children.

I was blessed as a kid to have some amazing adults who poured into the lives of the kids in our church. One of those was our pastor's wife, Libby. As a pastor's wife, a mother of four kids ranging in age from 2 to 22, a fifth grade teacher, and sometimes choir director, you would think she would have had enough on her plate. Even with all this, Libby took the time to be our Junior Bible quizzing coach.

For those unfamiliar with Bible Quizzing, here is the gist. Each year, a book of the Bible (occasionally multiple books if they are shorter letters in the New Testament) is selected and assigned for study by the quizzers. At competitions questions are asked and the quizzers are expected to answer them. It involves reading the book repeatedly with the goal of memorizing key verses, facts, stories, characters, etc. in the book. There were weekly practice sessions and study sessions. If you are a competitive knowledge geek like me, this is your "sport".

I took up quizzing in third grade and quickly became the local team captain. That year I also became the district team captain and the only person from our district team to make the "honorary" state team – junior quizzers didn't go past regionals. In fourth and fifth grade I was captain for the local team, won district and captained the district team for regional competition, and placed first at regionals for the honorary state team. I was really good at it.

Why does any of this matter? Honestly, it doesn't, except that it was the method of reading the Bible I learned first. I read it for knowledge, the intellectual challenge, and the thrill of competition. And of course I loved making Libby and my parents proud.

Do I regret my quizzing time – not at all. Because of quizzing, I have a great working knowledge of where things are found in the Bible, who the main characters are, why they matter, and the themes of their stories. I have favorite verses memorized, and I am more likely to question those who claim to have authoritative knowledge than many of my peers who did not quiz. Plus, I have an awesome set of Minnie Mouse glasses I won from Libby. (picture of Minnie Mouse glasses).

As I moved beyond my Bible quizzing years, I began to see Bible reading, could and should be done on multiple levels. It is GOOD to know the characters. It is good to understand the cultural and historical context. It is good to follow the story arcs. It is good to take the warnings AND the promises to heart. And it is KEY to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you through and sometimes in spite of all of this so you are transformed in the process.

Today we are going to be looking at one of my favorite books – both as a quizzer and as a Jesus follower. This book is unique. It is a historical narrative, a collection of short articles on key figures, a sequel to my favorite gospel, a history book, and its main character -- the Holy Spirit -- is often overlooked. For my LAB kids, as Shrek would say, it is like an onion – it has layers.

Before we dive into this book and the story of the Holy Spirit, let's stand and worship together as a people called by the Spirit.

Message

This Summer, we're doing a series called *How the Bible Works*. We began by exploring what the Bible is - a library of books written over more than a thousand years, by more than a dozen authors in three languages. The Bible is inspired - a book that is both fully a product of human authors and full of God's spiritual authority. Because the Bible is a divine library, we can trust Scripture fully to lead us into a relationship with Jesus.

We are working to answer the question, "How does the Bible work, exactly?" Well, because the Bible is also a human document, the kinds of books in the Bible matter. Just like when we go to the library, we need to understand what kind of book we are pulling from the shelf of our Bible to receive the most impact from our time with the text. Because the genres in our Bible are ancient and don't exactly match our modern American literary genres, it can be even more difficult to figure out HOW to read a particular book.

How to read each book matters precisely because the goal of reading scripture isn't to become an expert on ancient literature or a Bible Quizzing champion. The goal is to know God. While we can and do gain knowledge when we read the Bible, the GOAL is not information, it is transformation.

We began with one of the more straightforward genres - the Gospels, those ancient biographies of Jesus. Next, we explored the genre of prophecy - a timely message about how we are accountable to use the power God has given us both to remain faithful to God and to care for the most vulnerable among us. Last week, we moved on to the apocalypse books - the crazy, fantastic genre that uses metaphor, analogy, and other wonderful literary devices to paint a picture of God and drive points home not unlike a well-developed political cartoon. This type takes a lot of work, and the transformation potential is worth it.

Today, we're going to look at the Book of Acts. Acts is often labeled as history - the only history book in the New Testament. While that is true, Acts is more than history. It is also a sequel and a biography wrapped in a series of adventures and stories using a diverse cast.

[Scripture Slide 1] Why do I say it is a sequel? The author of Luke also wrote Acts. Book one - Luke - is my favorite gospel -- an ancient biography (purposefully evangelistic), about the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, written to Theophilus who either had an interesting name or is a literary device calling to all of us who "love God". The author's second book, Acts, starts like Luke - addressing Theophilus, then like the best sequels gives us a brief recap and continues where the first book leaves off. For Acts, this involves retelling the last part of Luke -- Jesus giving his followers instructions, a promise of the Holy Spirit empowering them, and Jesus' ascension into Heaven.

Luke tells us the first part of the story - Jesus ministry, death, and resurrection. Acts tells us the second part of the story. But who's story is being told? Luke was obviously written about Jesus. Acts, its sequel, was then written about (pause) Peter? The first eight chapters make that seem possible. However, by chapter 9, we have Saul/Paul taking up more and more of the narrative. And what about Stephen, Barnabas, and the others highlighted?

What if the biographical subject of this sequel to the story of Jesus, this historical narrative chronicling the early church, is not human at all? What if Acts is a biography of the Holy Spirit told within the context of the historical adventures of the early church? How does that change the way we read Acts?

If Acts is also a biography of the Holy Spirit, then it is an account of the transformative, purifying, non-discriminating, peace bringing, miracle empowering, restorative works and power of the Holy Spirit. -- the ACTS of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit shows up, live and in person in Chapter 2 and drives the founding and growth of the church, chronicled through the entire book and then remains the central and main character of the entire book.

Let's quickly look at Acts 1:8 – this is the key verse of Acts. Jesus is talking to his followers just before his ascension. They want to know when he's going to take over the world and make it all right. He tells them it is not for them to know then gives them this very important piece of information that will change EVERYTHING.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” -- Acts 1:8

Just like the author of Luke wants us to know that Jesus is real, fully God and fully man, he lived, died, and rose again, now he wants us to know that this same Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit showed up! We don't have to doubt it. He's putting it down in writing for us.

Spoiler alert: reading and understanding Acts is crucial for understanding the context of the letters that make up most of the rest of the New Testament.

[**Scripture Slide 2**] Let's look at one historical narrative (short story) and test this idea of the Holy Spirit being the main character/central figure of Acts. Because Acts is an historical narrative, context will be helpful. Here's the short version:

After Pentecost, the early church grew rapidly as the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to preach and called an ever increasing number of people, both Jews and non-Jews, to be Jesus followers. The growing church body and the needs of all of its members was more than the apostles could handle on their own, so they commissioned additional leaders to meet the growing needs. One of these was Philip.

We know Philip was filled with the Holy Spirit, so wherever Philip went, the Holy Spirit went. When intense persecution began in Jerusalem and the early Christians were scattered, Philip went to Samaria. He preached there, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and was doing what he was commissioned to do until one day . . . follow along in Acts 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to the chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. “The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

**“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
And as a lamb before the shearer is silent,
So he did not open his mouth.**

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. -- Acts 8:26-40

Our story opens with Philip and the Holy Spirit in Samaria doing the work of calling people to God. Lots of people. Miracles are happening. People are believing. Lives are being transformed. In SAMARIA.

Verse 1:8 tells us that when the Holy Spirit arrives, the disciples would be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem (check), Judea (Stephen hit that one, so check), Samaria – Philip and company hit that one now so, check), and the ends of the earth. Hadn’t made it there yet. But, the Angel shows up and tells Philip to head south. On a desert road. So now he’s heading in the direction of the ends of the earth. Enter our third character in this narrative.

Traveling on the same southern road we have an important man – he is part of the court for the Queen of Ethiopia (Cush) and runs the country’s finances on her behalf. He is important like Alexander Hamilton – Secretary of the Treasury kind of important. In Jewish law, he’s also an outsider like Alexander Hamilton was in Colonial British law. No matter how intelligent or powerful he was, this Ethiopian in charge of the queen’s finances is an outsider. He is not an Israelite. We are told he is a eunuch. Whether by birth, accident, or intent, under the law this disfigurement prevents him from gaining entry to the temple and therefore, the presence of God. (Leviticus -- missing reference and Deuteronomy 23:1). He’s in a chariot – we don’t know how fancy it is, but it’s still fancier than walking. He’s been to Jerusalem to worship -- so he is seeking God or he is a convert to Judaism. His position, his wealth, and his seeking are insufficient to overcome his exclusion under the law.

Even so, he has not been deterred. He’s acquired a scroll of the book of Isaiah – remember there are no printing presses yet so a personal (or even borrowed) copy of the scripture is not easy to come by. This man is seeking God and has invested in a copy of Isaiah. As he is traveling back home, he is reading a passage from the scroll, probably out loud – that was the norm back then – because there was no punctuation or spacing to help with reading silently.

Philip is walking along the road and the Holy Spirit tells him to go up close to the guy in the Chariot. The guy that is more important than you. The guy that has more money than you. The guy that is reading his own copy of Isaiah out loud. The guy who doesn’t look like you and probably has a physical difference, a “disfigurement” that historically, by LAW would have made him unworthy to be in God’s presence (Deuteronomy --- it’s a tough one, we’ll get there another day), yes Philip – that guy. Go up to him.

Philip doesn't blink. He's not afraid of the man. He's not afraid of the Law. Philip is simply an obedient ally to our protagonist, the Holy Spirit. He runs alongside the chariot and listens to the man reading. And no, Philip did not run with the speed of Usain Bolt. The chariot would have jostled A LOT on the dirt road, so it would have to be driven very slowly for the Ethiopian to be reading. Philip jogs up beside the chariot and just listens. The man is reading from the Book of Isaiah. Philip listens for a bit, recognizes the scripture and asks the man a very simple but profound question -- do you understand what you are reading?

Do you understand what you are reading? I don't know about you, but for me there are many times my answer to this question would have to be, "No." Just like the Ethiopian -- how can I understand if there is no one to explain it to me? I love what happens next. The Ethiopian invites Philip to join him in his chariot so Philip can explain it to him. I love this for so many reasons. The Ethiopian was more interested in knowing that he was reading than worried about whether this stranger was a danger to him or was going to belittle him. Philip was more interested in obeying the Holy Spirit than he was following the letter of the law. This man should have been an untouchable.

But wait a minute – the traveler just came from worshiping in Jerusalem. A man, an outsider, an important man, but always an outsider when it came to Jewish law, was seeking God. He went to Jerusalem -- the home of God's temple AND the birthplace of the Church. Undoubtedly the city was still abuzz with everything that was going on. The crazy apostles, the converts, the arrests and persecution must have been primary topics of conversation. This man was actively seeking God in the middle of this - surely someone must have taken the time to share the good news with him . . . or maybe not. Maybe he was too much of an outsider, too untouchable to be worth bringing into the family. Maybe everyone was just too busy or distracted to notice he needed a guide. Whatever the cause, he didn't experience a transformational encounter with God while in Jerusalem. He headed home still seeking, unchanged.

Remember verse 1:8 -- Jesus said when the Holy Spirit came, the disciples would bring the good news of Jesus to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth – Ethiopia was the ends of the earth to the early church. The ends of the earth came to Jerusalem and the disciples missed it.

The Holy Spirit was calling this man from Ethiopia. The Holy Spirit called Philip out of Samaria where he was witnessing to many so that this one seeker, this outsider from another country who was excluded under the law could hear the good news of Jesus and become a Jesus follower. The Holy Spirit empowered Philip to be that witness. The Holy Spirit used Philip to explain the verses that were puzzling the Ethiopian traveler. As the two men traveled together down the dusty road, sharing the word of God, the Holy Spirit was there transforming these men. The Holy Spirit -- through Philip AND the scriptures -- led the traveler to ask the right question – why can't I be baptized right now. Why can't I be transformed, changed, and a part of God's church right now. Right here. At this oasis that might have been a few inches deep or a few feet. That might have been sparkling clean or muddy. A powerful yet previously unwelcomed man from the point of view of Jewish law because of his ethnicity and likely his physical difference, asked the right question – why shouldn't I be baptized? The adversaries in this narrative – tradition, legalism, mistrust, cultural difference – were no match for the Holy Spirit calling to this God seeker.

Our protagonist called the Ethiopian. Our protagonist set up the meeting. The ally (Philip) followed the protagonist's call and went to the man. The ally didn't question. The ally didn't worry about what others would say or think. He didn't say – "wait just a minute, Holy Spirit, I need to check with Peter and John and make sure this is OK". No, he trusted the Holy Spirit and in that moment was part of the

transformation of one man, the fulfillment of Jesus' promise, and a key milestone in the history of the early church – this Ethiopian traveling home was the ends of the earth.

The Acts have layers, like an onion, to be peeled back and savored.

You can do this with the entire book of Acts.

Read a narrative section

- 1) What is the historical context? Hint: because Acts is an historical narrative, the preceding sections are great places to start.
- 2) What insight does this context bring to the work of the Holy Spirit in this narrative?

Read it again

- 3) Ask yourself who the characters are
 - a. Where do you see the Holy Spirit (the protagonist)?
 - b. Who is/are the ally(ies)?
 - c. Who is/are the antagonists/adversaries?
- 4) Who was transformed (or resisted transformation)? Was it immediate or gradual?
- 5) How did this interaction help or hinder the Holy Spirit's work in forming and empowering the church?

Read it again. Ask yourself

- 6) Would I be an ally or an adversary in this story?
- 7) Have I encountered a similar opportunity for transformation or to be an ally in the Holy Spirit's transformation of someone else?
- 8) How would I/did I react in that moment?
- 9) What is the Holy Spirit showing me through this glimpse into history and what can I learn from it/how can I be transformed?

The book of Acts is full of historical narratives showing us the Holy Spirit and his transformative power in the lives of the early church. The story of the Holy Spirit is the history, present, and future of the Church. When we read Acts in all of its layers and facets, we lean into our shared history and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform not only us, but the Church.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Acts matters because it's the story of the Holy Spirit. That story didn't end with the end of the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit is still working among us today, calling us together, making us God's Church. The Holy Spirit is the one who invites us to this table today. The Holy Spirit makes us Jesus' body gathered up and broken for the world. Jesus pours out his blood to save us from ourselves.

Before we come to the table, I'm going to lead you in a Prayer of Examen. I'll ask you some questions, and give you space to reflect, pray and discuss them. Then I'll pray for all of us, and after I've prayed, we will receive communion together.

Here's the first question:

1. When in the last week has the Holy Spirit drawn me into God's work?
2. When in the last week have I resisted the Holy Spirit's call?

3. How might I be tempted to resist the Holy Spirit this week?
4. How can I remain open to the Holy Spirit this week?

Let's pray together:

God, you have gathered us this morning to remind us that we are not living in our own stories. You have reminded us that, like your servants Philip and the Ethiopian official, we are part of your story, the story of your Holy Spirit at work in our world to bring us all together. Whether we are at the center or on the margins, rich or poor, whatever race, ethnicity, language or background, you make us all your children.

And so we come now to the table your son shared with his followers the night before he was killed. We receive these wafers and grape juice (or whatever elements we've been able to find) and we pray they become a spiritual food. Give us ears to hear as the Eunuch did. Give us eyes to see as Philip did. Give us the courage to ask, "What keeps us from you?" And give us the courage to declare, "Nothing!" to all who would ask.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

The night he was betrayed, Jesus ate with his disciples. During the meal, he broke bread and offered it to them, saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat." After the meal was over, he gave them a cup of wine, saying, "This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it all." So too, we eat and drink and announce Jesus' death until he returns.

Assignment + Blessing

Sacred reading of Acts 9:1-31