

The Sequel

Jesus Continued in the Book of Acts
with Dr. Allen R. Hilton

The Course Plan

Welcome to the Book of Acts! I've been looking forward to this time with you for months and months, because this book gives us access to the mysterious, miraculous first baby steps of the Christian church. As it does this, it also provides us with a laboratory for biblical interpretation – a chance to look at how we read Bible and what methods we might glean from others to expand our purposes and practices as we do read. This will be great!

In this document, I introduce you to the course by spelling out the contents of Acts as we will read and study it together, but I give it to you here in reverse order. There is a method to this madness, as you shall see below. I also offer you a quick glance at our normal logistical flow, in and out of class. The companion to this document is a stand-alone prep guide to Session One. Enjoy!

A Brief, Backward-Moving Anticipation of Our Eight Weeks

The Book of Acts is a remarkable narrative. For many of us, it is also somewhat to very familiar. For readers who know scripture and particularly the Book of Acts, one way to re-think the events captured in these stories is to walk the pages backward, as if tracing the Big Bang back to its source. Having begun humbly with a few disciples receiving Jesus' brief instructions, the narrative ends with hundreds of new followers meeting in living rooms across the Mediterranean basin and the apostle Paul holding forth from house arrest in the capital city of the Roman Empire. We will make eight stops on our way through the Book. Here they are in reverse.

- Session 8 (February 29 – Leap Day)
The Book of Acts ends with the apostle Paul sharing the Gospel freely (though physically limited) and free to share his Good News with all comers in the Rome, the capital city of the largest Empire in human history 'til that time. He waits there for trial under agents of the power Emperor Nero himself.
- Session 7 (February 22)
This message and its community reached this place of prominence because its leaders found a way, as Paul did, to speak that Good News in the language of many various peoples. We sampled Paul's appropriate message to the Gentile sophisticates of Athens (ch. 17) and the Jewish audience in the Jerusalem Temple (ch. 22)

- Session 6 (February 15)
To get to those Athenian Gentiles, the Christians had to decide important matters about what parts of the message and Way would be essential and what would be non-essential. To decide this crucial matter of much of Jewish practice would be central to Christian communities, they gathered representative leaders to argue it out in a Jerusalem home. (Acts 15)
- Session 5 (February 8)
Amid all our admiration, we paused to realize that this heroic Christian group, whom Jesus had commissioned to tell his story “in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8) did not leave the city limits of Jerusalem until persecutions scattered them. (Acts 8) Humbling. But God met them in that wide world and they discovered that the Holy Spirit observes no city or national boundaries.
- Session 4 (February 1)
While the Christians may have hesitated before moving outward, they didn’t shrink from a fight in their Jerusalem days. We watched Peter and John wow the most powerful Jewish council with their bold speech, (Acts 4) some of which even sounded downright Socratic. (Acts 5) These Christians waxed courageous in the face of opposition and threat, which we noticed as another part of what gets them to Rome by book’s end.
- Session 3 (January 25)
This bold courage of the early Christians didn’t come from their own wiles. Throughout their flourish in this Book of Acts, the Christians exhibit Jesus-likeness that others notice (the Sanhedrin’s recognition of the resemblance in Acts 4.13), and they credit Jesus as the source of their power (Peter’s healing of a paralytic in Acts 3). A heavenly voice of Jesus even confounds Paul by calling these Christians his body when he says, “I’m Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9)
- Session 2 (January 18)
The church was born international, with “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” in Jerusalem to witness the Pentecost fireworks. (Acts 2.1-13) This wild geographical and ethnic variety, which formed the raw material of the first Christian congregations in Jerusalem, anticipates the speedy expansion of the Way to cities throughout Syria, Africa, Turkey, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy. As the movement expanded, its connecting tissue was made up of simple practices:
- Session 1 (January 11)
The origin and sustaining force for all this international, courageous, virtue-forming, sometimes hesitant, discerning, adaptive, world-changing movement is very clearly Jesus. Luke makes this very clear from the very first words in the Book of Acts. There, the author summarizes the full 24-chapter Gospel of Luke as “all that Jesus BEGAN to do and to teach.” From the book’s beginning, Jesus is clearly its main character – not only as the content of the early church’s message, but more significantly, as a continuing presence and actor in everything that happens in these 28 chapters.

Backward or forward, this story of Christian beginnings will be our focus for these two months of Thursdays.

Our Approach to the Book of Acts

We are a complex group, and we bring many different educational backgrounds, spiritual and theological approaches, cultural and ethnic flavors, and stages in faith development. The trick of a successful Yale Bible Study is finding the sweet spot where all of us can come together.

- We'll ask critical questions of the text. Each session will include some scholarly topics that help us consider who wrote the book, what we can tell about its original audience, what interpretive methods have been most useful to understanding it, etc. I'm sure there will be times when our conversation feels "too academic" to some of you.
- We'll also ask practical basic Christian questions. The book was written to early Christians who were trying to figure out how to follow Jesus, how to pray, what morality came with this new commitment, and how to be a community together as they lived daily lives in their Greco-Roman cities. Consequently, I'm also sure that there will be times when it feels "too churchy" for others of you.

I will do my best to strike a helpful balance between these two good parts of our whole class's aspiration. Some of the work will be yours. Our success as a group will hinge on a practiced combination of individually seeking what each of us wants to learn and communally deferring to what others want to learn. The glory of this self-and-other approach is that, if you pay attention, you will often experience some of your most striking insights during the parts of class that initially feel deferential.

Format

Having begun years before the global pandemic, online learning exploded during it. We have learned to meet together live across geographical distance, and we have also learned to accommodate people who learn after the live meeting, while they are driving or on a rowing machine or just enjoying a more convenient time. We have therefore structured the course in light of this, knowing the complexity of your schedules and array of commitments. (I'm hearing especially from church choir members who often rehearse on Thursdays.)

We love the international reach of the Yale Bible Study. So we are quite aware that our class will include people whose residence doesn't fall within the four continental U.S. time zones. Each week, we will begin at 7:30 Eastern / 6:30 Central / 5:30 Mountain / 4:30 Pacific – or whatever time that becomes in east Asia or Africa or Europe or Tonga or wherever you live.

Each Thursday Evening – Each Zoom session will have four components:

Our times together will fit a whole lot into one hour.

- Lecture: a 40-minute presentation on the part of Acts covered in this session. During this, all Zoom windows should be muted. (7:30—8:10 PM Eastern)

- Q and A: a 10-12 minute time when I'll address questions from the "Chat" window. To prep for this, please ask any questions you have in that chat box. If you have questions about how to do this, please contact Kelly Morrissey. (8:10—8:20 PM Eastern)
- Wrap-Up: an 8-10 minute lecture conclusion, culminating in a final prayer and blessing as we finish. (8:20—8:30 PM Eastern.
- AfterChat: an interactive continuation of our session, open to any who wish to stay on for more. A whole lot of epiphanies seem to happen in this AfterChat.

The Tuesday After – An E-Mail to All Registrants

You will receive an e-mail by Tuesday of each week that includes several things that will help you.

- A video recording of the previous session(s).
- Any follow-up materials.
- An anticipation of our next session, including additional readings and other resources.
- Any logistical details that need to be addressed.

If you have questions about the content of our study, you can always address them to me at allen@houseunitedmovement.org.

If you have questions about the logistics involved in joining the Zoom meeting, receiving e-mails, etc., you can address them to the fantastic Kelly Morrissey at kelly.morrissey@yale.edu.