

About the *Straight to the Heart* Series

On his eightieth birthday, Sir Winston Churchill dismissed the compliment that he was the “lion” who had defeated Nazi Germany in World War Two. He told the Houses of Parliament that *“It was a nation and race dwelling all around the globe that had the lion’s heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.”*

I hope that God speaks to you very powerfully through the “roar” of the books in the *Straight to the Heart* series. I hope they help you to understand the books of the Bible and the message that the Holy Spirit inspired their authors to write. I hope that they help you to hear God’s voice challenging you, and that they provide you with a springboard for further journeys into each book of Scripture for yourself.

But when you hear my “roar”, I want you to know that it comes from the heart of a much bigger “lion” than me. I have been shaped by a whole host of great Christian thinkers and preachers from around the world, and I want to give due credit to at least some of them here:

Terry Virgo, David Stroud, John Hosier, Adrian Holloway, Greg Haslam, Lex Loizides, and all those who lead the Newfrontiers family of churches; friends and encouragers, such as Stef Liston, Joel Virgo, Stuart Gibbs, Scott Taylor, Nick Sharp, Nick Derbridge, Phil Whittall, and Kevin and Sarah Aires; Tony Collins, Jenny Ward and Simon Cox at Monarch books; Malcolm Kayes and all the elders of The Coign Church, Woking; my fellow elders and church members here at Queens Road Church, Wimbledon;

my great friend Andrew Wilson – without your friendship, encouragement and example, this series would never have happened.

I would like to thank my parents, my brother Jonathan, and my in-laws, Clive and Sue Jackson. Dad – your example birthed in my heart the passion that brought this series into being. I didn't listen to all you said when I was a child, but I couldn't ignore the way you got up at five o'clock every morning to pray, read the Bible and worship, because of your radical love for God and for his Word. I'd like to thank my children – Isaac, Noah, and Esther – for keeping me sane when publishing deadlines were looming. But most of all, I'm grateful to my incredible wife, Ruth – my friend, encourager, corrector, and helper.

You all have the lion's heart, and you have all developed the lion's heart in me. I count it an enormous privilege to be the one who was chosen to sound the lion's roar.

So welcome to the *Straight to the Heart* series. My prayer is that you will let this roar grip your own heart too – for the glory of the great Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Lord Jesus Christ!

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.

16 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 enthrall 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)

The Promise (1:8)

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)

When General Marshall became Chief-of-Staff to the US Army on the first day of World War Two, it consisted of only 174,000 poorly equipped soldiers. Five years later, he had turned it into the greatest army the world had ever seen, a mighty force of over 8 million men, which defeated the empires of Germany and Japan. Winston Churchill hailed Marshall as the “*organiser of victory*”, and declared that he had paved the way to triumph through his consummate brilliance as a strategist and trainer of men.

Luke wants to get one thing straight, right at the start of the book of Acts: the success of the Early Church was not down to any first-century equivalent of General Marshall. Their leader, Peter, took twelve years to realize he was even meant to take the Gospel to the Gentiles at all. When he did, he still needed to be rebuked to his face over his methods, “*because he was clearly in the wrong*”.¹ Paul, who rebuked him, was himself so lacking in the skills possessed by General Marshall that his critics in the church at Corinth complained that “*he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing*”.² We are so used to viewing the early apostles as superstars on a pedestal that we can easily

¹ Galatians 2:11–14.

² 2 Corinthians 10:10.

forget that they were pitifully inadequate for the task which they were given. Jesus told them not even to try to fulfil his Great Commission until they had first received “*the promise of the Father*”. Only that promise could turn this little band of zeroes into Christ’s world-conquering heroes.

Not just *a* promise. *The* promise. The Old Testament contains 8,000 promises from God – one promise for every three verses – yet three times Luke tells us that one promise so encapsulates all the others that it can simply be called “*the promise of the Father*”.³ It was the promise which Jesus said would result in believers being “*clothed with power from on high*”. It was the promise which was so indispensable that they must wait in Jerusalem and not try to start without it. It was the promise that God would baptize his People with his Holy Spirit – that he would come and live inside of them and carry them to victory through his own indwelling power.⁴

The 120 disciples knew what it meant to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They knew the story of Samson, who fought an entire Philistine army on his own when “*the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power*”. He was an ordinary man, but when he was filled with the Holy Spirit he was more than a match for a thousand of his enemies.⁵ They also knew the prophecies of Isaiah, that when God’s New Covenant People were filled with the Holy Spirit then “*the least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation*”.⁶ They knew the book of Ezekiel, where the breath of the Holy Spirit turned a valley of old bones

³ Jesus calls it “*the promise*” in Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4, and Peter calls it “*the promise*” in Acts 2:39. Not all English translations stick to Luke’s literal phrase, but he uses it three times on purpose.

⁴ Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5.

⁵ Judges 15:11–15. We tend to view Samson as a muscle-man in his own right, but 16:17–21 tells us otherwise.

⁶ Isaiah 60:22–61:1. Despite the chapter division, these two verses belong to one another.

into a mighty army.⁷ They also knew the prophecy of John the Baptist that “*I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me... [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*”⁸ The hundred and twenty had very little going for them in terms of natural gifting, but at least they had one thing in their favour: they knew the value of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and they waited and prayed until it was given.

The Holy Spirit would enable them to be Christ’s witnesses. Not just *do* his witnessing, but *be* his witnesses. He would transform their lifestyles from the inside out, so that they would bear the fruit of the Spirit. He would fill their hearts with love for one another, so that Paul could tell a church that he loved every single one of them because he was filled “*with the affection of Christ Jesus*”.⁹ The Christians would be so transformed by their baptism in the Spirit that their Gospel message would become irresistibly attractive to the unsaved world.¹⁰

The Holy Spirit would turn them into Christ’s fearless witnesses. This persecuted religious sect, led by a man who had denied Jesus three times in the face of hostile questioning, would bear bold and fiery witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ the Saviour. They would not be head-down, hope-they-don’t-notice Christians who practised their religion in private and kept it to themselves in public. They would be bold and unstoppable, as Michael Green comments in his excellent book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*: “*Neither the strategy nor the tactics of the first Christians were particularly remarkable. What was remarkable was their conviction, their passion, and*

⁷ Ezekiel 37. The Hebrew word *ruach* in v. 6 is the word normally used for the Holy Spirit, and v. 14 shows us that this is intentional. What God promised he would do for ancient Judah, he will also do for his Church.

⁸ Matthew 3:11.

⁹ Galatians 5:22–23; Philippians 1:8. See also Romans 5:5.

¹⁰ Titus 2:10. We will explore this more fully in the chapter “Just the Way You Are”.

their determination to act as Christ's embassy to a rebel world whatever the consequences."¹¹

They would not simply be witnesses, but witnesses *with power*. Like any good witness in court, they would come armed with a wealth of supporting evidence. "Exhibit A" would be their spiritual gifts, such as prophecy, tongues, and words of knowledge. "Exhibit B" would be their ability to heal the sick and drive out demons. "Exhibit C" would be their authority to issue blessings and curses through the power of Jesus' name.¹² By the time these powerful witnesses had finished their testimony, they would be so feared and respected that large crowds of non-Christian onlookers would repent, be saved, and join them in their mission.¹³

Suddenly, this begins to make sense of the phenomenal success of early Christianity in the absence of any first-century General Marshall. They didn't need one because they were baptized with God's Holy Spirit, and their success was simply the result of him coming to dwell inside them. When God filled Samson with his Holy Spirit, he conquered a mighty army; when God filled the Early Church with his Holy Spirit, they conquered the world.

And so the hundred and twenty gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem, and they prayed and waited. They waited because Jesus told them to. They waited because they knew there was no point in starting until the Holy Spirit came. They waited because they had grasped the secret of God's promise of indwelling power.

We, on the other hand, would rather not wait. We would rather look to a Christian celebrity or the latest Christian paperback as a catch-all solution for the problems that we face. Some churches have split over the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Others have accepted that they need it, but crowded it out

¹¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (1970).

¹² For example, in Acts 5:8–10; 8:20–24; 13:8–12.

¹³ Acts 5:13–14.

under mountains of liturgy, activity, busyness, and distraction. The call to be baptized in the Holy Spirit is a call to die to our own strength and *wait*. It's very easy, but also very difficult.

Without the Holy Spirit, we can be busy for God but we cannot be successful. He has given us his plan, and he refuses to fulfil it any other way. The Church has only ever marched to victory through God filling her ordinary foot soldiers with his own extraordinary Holy Spirit. She has always floundered when she neglected this call. Jesus still makes this promise – *the promise* – to us today: *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth.”*