

INTRUSIVE GOD, DISRUPTIVE GOSPEL

Encountering the Divine *in the* Book of Acts



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*Thank you, Beverly Roberts Gaventa,
my teacher and now friend*

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Preface

This book explores the Acts of the Apostles (customarily known by the simple title Acts), which appears immediately after the four Gospels in the New Testament. Acts continues the story the Gospels begin, the story of Jesus Christ. More accurately, Acts continues the story told in one of these Gospels in particular, the Gospel according to Luke. The same author wrote both books, making Acts a sequel. In Acts, the story of Jesus moves forward in the experiences of his followers—not all of them, but a few key figures who appear on the narrative’s stage.

Acts shows very little interest in communicating details about these figures’ lives. The book devotes much more attention to how their experiences—what they say, what they do, and what happens to them—say something about who God is and how God has acted and continues to act through the spread of the good news about Jesus Christ.

This book, the one you are reading now, explores Acts. But, like Acts, its interest also reaches further than retelling a story. As with Acts, this book is interested in directing your attention toward God and the good news (“the gospel”) about what God accomplishes in Jesus Christ. That is, this book explores how Acts depicts God, or how Acts imagines God might be making a difference in the world because of what Jesus did and continues to do. Acts provides a lens through which we might see and consider God.



This book is different from what I usually write. Since I am a biblical scholar, much of my interaction with the Acts of the Apostles involves a good amount of historical analysis, in an effort to uncover what was going on behind and around the story Acts tells and explain how Acts might have spoken to ancient readers in light of their knowledge and circumstances. This book, however, is relatively unconcerned with many aspects of the history behind Acts (why Acts was written, who the author was addressing, what problems Acts was trying to solve or create, and so on). I am more interested in exploring the story Acts tells to us today and how that story prompts us to consider who God is and how God operates.

Those topics interest me because I'm deeply curious about how the Bible shapes communities and how it informs and changes our understanding of who God is, what our faith is about, and what is possible in our lives. Acts tells a story about these things, but it is hardly an uncomplicated story. The story is fascinating, and it is determined to present readers with a gospel—and a God—that offers the possibility of new relationships and newfound hope, transforming lives and communities in the process. According to Acts, these transformations constitute part of the salvation God provides.

Acts looks back on transformations and discoveries rooted in the past, but in so doing it holds out hope for future ones too. Throughout this book I reflect on how our own encounters with God might be transformative in their own ways. These are my interpretations, which come from my efforts to learn from Acts and put my learning in conversation with my own life and the lives and perspectives of others.

I teach about Acts often to pastors, students, and congregations. Sometimes I meet people who resonate deeply with the book, finding it consistent with their experiences of a God who is near and active. More frequently, I encounter people who don't know what to do with Acts. Sermons in their churches seldom focus on the book. Some find Acts irredeemably shallow or even off-putting because of its focus on incredible stuff, such as fantastic miracles and daring, almost impossible heroism. Acts often describes easy solutions to problems and questions that, if our own lives are reliable indicators,

do not lend themselves to neat and clean resolutions. Our lives and our thinking about God have a complexity that can leave us suspicious about simple answers. With this book I dig deeper into who God is in Acts so that you can better understand what Acts is saying about God and consider the portrait of God in Acts in light of how your own life has shaped your outlook on God. My primary hope is that I've written a book that helps you see more in Acts and that, as a result, Acts kindles for you deeper reflections and ongoing conversations with other people about who God is and how we know God.



This book is a result of innumerable conversations. Many people helped me write it, and they deserve my recognition.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa has taught me more about Acts than anyone else, which is why I dedicate the book to her. Her insights roam these pages.

Greg Carey first encouraged me to clarify specific ideas that I thought needed to be expressed in a book—this book. I had just completed a major writing project, and his determination to get me started quickly on my next one provided a creative spark and made me eager to dig in.

I made significant progress on the book and learned much about myself as an author while spending three weeks of summer 2010 as a writing fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey. I am grateful to the Center's director, William Storrar, for inviting me to participate in a writers' workshop led by Marilynne Robinson. The criticism and suggestions I received from her and my eleven writing companions proved to be invaluable; because of their insights, this book is much better than it would have been had I started the writing journey alone. Luther Seminary's academic dean at the time, Roland Martinson, enthusiastically supported my participation in this workshop. Jacqueline Lapsley, Gregory Bezilla, and their family showed me tremendous hospitality, making my time in Princeton more enjoyable and productive.

The Louisville Institute awarded me a generous Project Grant for Researchers in 2012–2013, creating the time I needed to bring my first draft almost to completion. My faculty colleagues and academic

leadership at Luther Seminary were very supportive while I carved out time to write.

Barbara Joyner made it possible for me to take multiple short writing retreats, each one replete with generous hospitality. Never has working on a book been so fulfilling.

Eric Barreto, Greg Carey, Jaime Clark-Soles, Carey Newman, John Semmes, and Jenee Woodard read an early draft of the book; their careful attention and editorial suggestions made for a much-improved final product.

Notice the theme emerging here: the contributions of others. This book relies on many people's encouragement, support, and wisdom. Most of these contributors remain unnamed. I am grateful to my students and audiences in numerous classes, workshops, and congregations who have shared their questions and insights about the book of Acts with me. Countless people, all kinds of people, have shaped how I read Acts and have taught me what to look for in its pages. This is a good thing, since my book is committed to talking about God. We always need one another's insights if we're going to do that well.

Introduction

About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. (Acts 19:23)

“No little disturbance.” The phrase introduces a story Acts tells about a riot in the ancient city of Ephesus. The deliberate understatement attracts our attention: it’s a serious commotion. Indeed, in the scene that follows, the riot’s instigators, joined by a throng of protestors, violently denounce what “the Way”—the expanding Christian movement that had recently come to Ephesus—will mean for the economic, religious, and political life of their city. The message of the Christian gospel and the actions of those who embrace it presage dramatic changes for many in Ephesus, and the rioters mean to nip this pesky movement in the bud in order to preserve their livelihood and their city’s notable cultural reputation.

The hubbub in Ephesus—which we’ll return to later in this book—resonates with a number of other episodes recounted in the book of Acts. Frequently those who announce the gospel of Jesus Christ do things that create or lead to large-scale disturbances. In one instance, a complaint ominously accuses them of “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). What they teach about Jesus Christ asks people to embrace new religious, social, political, and economic values, sometimes putting both the proclaimers and their audiences at odds with the established social order. That social order—“the world” consisting of the various cultural pockets that together make up the

Roman Empire—doesn't appreciate being turned upside down. So it usually strikes back, not out of blind bigotry or petty disagreements over personal religious convictions but out of a keen awareness of just how influential this new religion will be if it is allowed to settle into a community and change how people live, worship, think about themselves, and spend their money. This gospel creates new realities among those who join it, even as it occasionally upsets their preexisting convictions about what's proper. Or what's possible.

The gospel is, in a word, disruptive.

People who live out this gospel say their God is bringing something new into being, something that challenges “the world”—the prevailing sense of “the way things are.” As a result, the same word *disruptive* applies equally to God, as Acts tells the story. God intrudes. God breaks in. God interferes. Whether by sending people out to declare the good news about Jesus, preserving a shipload of desperate travelers during a violent storm, miraculously liberating persecuted missionaries from imprisonment, or creating communities where people gather together to worship, learn, and care for one another, the intrusive God who inhabits the pages of Acts repeatedly engenders “no little disturbance” in the lives of Jesus's followers and the wider population.



Does God still disrupt lives and societies today? Does the portrait of an intrusive God resemble the world we inhabit and the God we seek to know? If so, would that even be considered good news?

For a long time people have spoken about God as intimately engaged with and influencing the ordinary and extraordinary happenings of life. A belief in God's presence and activity plays a conspicuous role in many people's everyday piety. Consider these prayers: “God, give me the strength to get through this difficult day”; “Lord, see our soldiers safely through their tours of duty”; “Prosper for us the work of our hands.”

Those types of beliefs also create problems for many of us. We rightly react warily to claims of divine activity as the cause of earthquakes and game-winning touchdown passes. More seriously, scientific developments in recent centuries have made certain claims

about God's activity—God's role in influencing the events of our lives—more dubious or in need of more nuance than many of us churchgoers feel we can provide. Even when our religious convictions are not naive beliefs in a cosmic puppeteer who arranges every detail of human existence, many of us consider it difficult to speak realistically about God's activity. Add to this the cruel vulnerabilities of our lives reiterated daily in reports of wars, natural disasters, random violence, and climate change, and many of us become more and more uneasy about making statements to suggest God actually *does* much of anything in this calamitous world.

In this kind of environment, we might be excused for finding ourselves occasionally frustrated or even embarrassed by the book of Acts. For one thing, Acts tells a story in which Jesus's followers heal people by touching them or by having their shadows fall on them. Believers in Acts also see visions, find themselves physically swept up then miraculously deposited in distant cities, and even experience no ill effects from poisonous snakebites. The prodigious political and military might of the Roman Empire gets into the game but usually ends up powerless to thwart the preaching of God's word. We ask ourselves whether these things could really have happened, and if so, whether they occurred just as Acts describes. For some, it's acceptable to grant that Jesus could have had such experiences and been a miracle worker (after all, he was *Jesus*); but when Acts says that his followers did the same things, it might imply this kind of stuff lies within the reach of any and all Christians—past, present, and future.

If it's not within our reach, are we still in touch with the same God today? Has God changed since then? Have the standard operating procedures been revised? Are we expecting the wrong things? Some Christians claim Acts describes what we should all expect. But what about those of us who find the action in Acts more alien or incredible? If the book of Acts appears foreign to our lives and experiences, it becomes difficult to figure out what we are supposed to make of what Acts says about the way things are with God and the world.

That's where the book you have in your hands comes in. Its purpose is to explore the theological vision we encounter in Acts. By "theological vision," I mean the perspectives Acts takes on God's ways of disturbing business as usual. These perspectives can shape

our understanding of who God is; they might enliven the expectations we have about God and how God might connect to our lives. By exploring these expectations, we can become more creative, more imaginative, more perceptive, and even sometimes more suspicious in our outlook on where and how we might look for or encounter God. Seeking signs of God, we might follow where Acts points, or we might head in different directions. In either case, Acts will make us consider the question of what we think we're looking for.

Maybe, then, our question shouldn't be, "Has God changed since Acts was written?" but instead, "Have our imaginations and expectations about God become too confined? Too one-dimensional? Too cautious?" Acts might prompt us to ask deeper questions about what is real, and about what God might make possible in our lives and our neighbors' lives.



While in this book I'll pursue how Acts can contribute to our own theological perspectives, I'm very aware of the ways in which Acts provokes all sorts of questions, especially historical questions such as "Did it really happen just like that?" and "Why did the author write such a book?" Questions like these are very important, yet this book will not devote attention to offering answers that respect their complexity. I should say, however, that we miss the point of Acts if we assume that we must classify it as either a precise historical chronicle or an amusing sampling of ancient superstitions. At the same time, we benefit from knowing something about where Acts sits in history. It was written within a decade or two of the year 100, during a period between two major revolts that cost the lives of huge numbers of Jews and magnified negative perceptions of Jews and Judaism across the Roman Empire. Communities of Jesus's followers, at that time still in contentious and often regrettable processes of separating themselves from Judaism, were coming to terms with what it meant to live in protracted waiting for Jesus's return and for the final fulfillment of all God's promises. By then, probably everyone who knew Jesus during his public ministry around the year 30 had died, and so had much of the next generation. How should the current and coming generations of this movement, this religion, regard themselves and understand

what their churches are to do? How will the movement survive, and what should it look like? What should these people expect from God?

The historical issues are important because Acts was originally written to address ancient audiences asking those tough questions about their purpose and identity in light of the particular place they occupied in an unfolding history. (We still ask similar questions for ourselves now. Or we should.) In speaking to these audiences, Acts does not promise to tell the complete, definitive history of the early church. It tries to describe God as the church's creator and preserver. Like most books worth reading, it does this with no small amount of flourish and occasional embellishment. Acts clearly includes some historical reporting, for it speaks of real people and places we can learn more about. Our exploration of the book will pay attention, therefore, to those details. Knowing some information about the culture in ancient Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus, for example, will help us make better sense of the action that transpires in those settings.

Over and over again, Acts will put forth a basic understanding of God as intimately involved in the spread of the gospel message and present among the communities of faith that the gospel creates. Acts asserts God's activity in the growth, movement, changes, and struggles experienced by the early church. It was not a strange thing in the ancient world to believe that invisible forces or divine beings guide or influence history; what makes Acts distinctive in this setting is its insistence that the God made known in the history of ancient Israel and in Jesus Christ is the One who does so. Acts looks back at the earliest years of Christianity—during periods before anyone even called it “Christianity” to label it as a clearly defined development—and sees in them a demonstration of God's active, persistent commitment to bring salvation to the world and to make that salvation known.

How, then, does the story of Acts put forth its “theological vision”? We should keep two things in mind. First, the whole story conveys the theological vision. Not only what people say about God but also the rest of the story—the narrated drama, the repetitions, the unspooling of promises, even the silences—make claims both overt and subtle about God being discernible in the experiences of Jesus's followers. Acts sees God made manifest in these experiences

whether they entail success or failure. Acts sees God manifest in the preaching of “the good news” about Jesus, “the gospel,” and in how people respond to it. “The gospel” and “God” are not identical, of course, but the gospel discloses who God is by expressing what God’s intentions look like; we see these intentions when people experience healing, inclusion, forgiveness, and hope. Acts depicts the gospel as not only a message but also something embodied in Jesus’s followers, as individuals and mostly as the communities they form.

Second, Acts recognizes the mystery that comes with talking about God. The book does not delineate exactly where and how God affects people and events, nor can we read it as a field guide offering an exhaustive, timeless, or unambiguous depiction of God and God’s intentions. Acts is a narrative, a story. As a story, it invites readers to live with and watch this God for a while. Acts tells its story in a confident voice out of a commitment to demonstrate God’s reliability. As we will see in pages to come, however, the people we meet in Acts often find themselves having a challenging time keeping pace with God; they sometimes cannot get their heads around how God is leading or speaking in an event until after it has concluded. The impression left is one of Christians looking backward and trying to discern God’s business even as they look forward and imagine what might happen next. This can, admittedly, be a risky or even self-fulfilling way of making a case about God. We will consider some of the challenges Acts poses for how we think about God, but for now it is enough to note that the people in Acts often lack certainty about where things are headed or what specific purpose might be in view. God’s ways are not easily anticipated. As Acts exhorts us to look for God, it also reminds us of the incomplete and elusive character of our talk about God.

Through its relentless attention to what God makes possible through Jesus Christ and the spread of the Christian gospel, Acts invites us to think about God in the choices we make and the promises we cling to as we live out our own faith. As we set priorities for our futures, counsel children, organize communities and congregations, or merely figure out what we have to look forward to, we should converse with Acts smartly yet creatively, always with a sense of wonder and with an acknowledgment of the limits of what we can know.

As we attend to what Acts shows and tells us about God and God's intentions, we can find fresh ways of imagining God's presence in our own experiences.

Any disturbances that may come from our exploration might not be as raucous as a riot in Ephesus. You might not feel an emotional rush on par with all the narrow escapes described in Acts, as if you've survived a dramatic shipwreck. Nevertheless, reading Acts and allowing it to fuel reflections on God can still be revolutionary and visceral activities if the book leads us into deeper awareness of what it means to live faithfully and responsively to God. When that happens, all sorts of things become possible.

Road Map

As You Read This Book

If I may offer some advice to get you situated before we turn to Acts, I think you will find the book I've written most helpful if you do the following:

1. Remember that it deals only with portions of the Acts of the Apostles. I have chosen twenty-six passages from Acts. If you add these passages together, the number of words they contain constitutes only a little more than half of a much longer narrative. (I occasionally comment on how a passage connects to other parts of Acts. Use the index at the end of the book if you want to see where I mention these other parts.) The passages we will explore in detail represent some of the variety of material in Acts, and they help us keep our focus on the question of how Acts prompts us to imagine God. But Acts is a larger story. To keep this in sight, I strongly recommend that you read all of the book of Acts before or as you read this book. The five additional “road map” chapters I've provided will keep you oriented to where individual passages fit within the wider narrative and thematic structure of Acts to help you relate segments of the story to the whole.

2. Keep a Bible available as you read. While my chapters interact closely with specific passages from Acts, I usually do not summarize all the action. My chapters assume that you have already slightly familiarized yourself with the passage(s) or are consulting Acts as you work through this book. When I quote from Acts in the chapter headings or anywhere else, I use the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV). Even if you have a different translation of the Bible, you should still have no trouble keeping track of what I say here and how it connects to the passages we're investigating.
3. Do not expect an answer to every question about "what really happened." Some people find reason to believe Acts narrates events as they really occurred, more or less, nearly two thousand years ago. Others are convinced that Acts contains mainly legendary stories meant to illustrate convictions about God and the church more than to relate a precise, factual account. It is a mistake to assume that Acts must entirely be either one of these or the other. It is also a mistake, when it comes to how ancient writers understood history and history telling, to assign "fact" and "fiction" labels as totally separate or distinguishable categories. Other books about Acts can help with sorting through those questions; some of them appear in the "For Further Reading" section at the end. I have tried to write this book in a way that will make it useful to a broad variety of readers—those who see no legendary elements in Acts, those who do, and those who do not worry about such matters. My focus is to approach Acts from a different angle, to ask about the God we might encounter in the story.

Acts 1:1–11

Waiting to Go

He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there
for the promise of the Father. (Acts 1:4)

The Acts of the Apostles begins where the Gospel according to Luke left off: with an emerging recognition that God is creating new possibilities, that God is bringing long-promised things to fruition. Truly, it's a whole new world.

Backing up a step, before getting to these new realities, there is the matter of the connection between the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. As the first two verses of Acts indicate, the book presents itself as a sequel to Luke, written by the same author to the same reader, an otherwise unknown “Theophilus” (compare Luke 1:1–4). The stories told in the two books connect right as the risen Jesus Christ leaves his followers and commissions them to work on his behalf. Luke ends with an ascension; Acts begins with one.

At the juncture between the books, as Jesus ascends, the fullness of what God has done through Jesus's life and death remains undefined and unrealized. The same is true concerning what God will do through the lives of Jesus's followers. But expectations are high. The final chapters of Luke got our attention: someone recently executed as an enemy of the state was raised from the dead and appeared to his friends. Death, life's great certainty, was upended. In its

stories about the resurrected Jesus, the final chapter of Luke's Gospel offered morsels of insight into what Jesus's cross and resurrection might mean, and it divulged just a few hints about what will come next in post-Easter times.

As Acts begins, we find ourselves waiting to hear more about what exactly God has accomplished through Jesus and what might come next. Several of Jesus's promises ring in our ears. For example, just prior to his arrest, he said to the twelve apostles,

You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. [Then, turning to Simon Peter, Jesus continued,] Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (Luke 22:28–32)

After his resurrection, Jesus told the wider company of his disciples (his remaining apostles as well as other followers),

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:46–49)

Death overpowered. Promises of a kingdom. Promises of power. Promises of forgiveness extended to all. Promises of work to be done. We expect God to do something, therefore, to equip Jesus's friends and to call them into action. We expect Peter (maybe a surprising choice, given his inconsistent track record as a disciple in the Gospel according to Luke) to provide leadership to strengthen Jesus's followers. We expect big things from the apostles at the beginning of Acts, because Jesus said so.

In another sense, however, Acts does not pick up exactly where Luke left off. Jesus ascended to heaven at the end of Luke's Gospel

after making a few brief appearances to his followers during the course of a single day. When we read about the ascension in Acts, the clock has been turned back. Acts first describes Jesus still physically present with his followers, interacting with them in Jerusalem over a protracted, forty-day period. (Neither the Gospel of Luke nor Acts ever explains the discrepancy in how much time elapses between Jesus's resurrection and ascension.) During the forty-day period, Jesus makes a few additional promises before disappearing into the sky. These promises inform his followers about what will soon involve them. He tells them to wait in Jerusalem until they are "baptized with the Holy Spirit," reaffirming that they "will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come."

The power he promises will come from God, as did Jesus's power to effect change during the course of his ministry (see Acts 10:38). This power will have a purpose: to make these ordinary people into Jesus's witnesses across the Roman world. As witnesses, they will tell what they know and what they have seen; they will also make Jesus and his intentions manifest in how they conduct themselves. Their witnessing will begin in Jerusalem and move throughout the broader region, the Roman province of Judea. It will go northward into Samaria (a territory not exactly on good terms with the kind of people who constitute Jesus's current followers, Judean and Galilean Jews) and ultimately to points unknown, "the ends of the earth."

They must be eager. They must be terrified.



New things stand at the threshold, then, at the beginning of Acts. According to Jesus's promises to his followers, his departure does not conclude but initiates the next chapter in a grand narrative about the salvation God makes possible. While Jesus's words include an instruction to remain in Jerusalem for the time being, his dominant thrust is descriptive: he simply informs his friends of what God will do and what they will do as a result. His statements and promises outnumber the one request. Power, Holy Spirit, testimony about Jesus and forgiveness of sins, participation in God's kingdom, expansion across cultural and geopolitical lines, opposition (implied by the courtroom flavor of the word *witnesses* and stated clearly by

Jesus back in Luke 12:11–12 and 21:12–17)—again, big things lie ahead for these people.

The promises' magnitude creates a contrast to his followers' inability to grasp how it all might unfold, as illustrated by their entirely reasonable but not-quite-appropriate question about what is going to happen and when: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus promised a kingdom back in Luke 22:28–32, but he never guaranteed he could give answers about *when* that might happen. He equips his followers with promises, not schedules.

They will have some catching up to do as the story progresses if they are to keep pace with what God has in store. For now, however, clearly Jesus's ascension will not mean the immediate arrival of the fullness of God's kingdom, the realization of all God's intentions for humanity's well-being. But neither will the ascension mean the cessation of Jesus's ministry or the suspension of God's activity to set the world free from all kinds of oppression. Two men in white robes, heavenly messengers, reassure Jesus's followers that he will return in a manner as unmistakable as that of his departure. Still another big thing to come. And again, no one knows when. Yet the time for looking into the sky in wonder has ended.



The beginning of any book can set the tone for what follows. Acts starts with strong theological statements about God's intentions. The boldness of some, such as "You will receive power," makes us take notice, especially when the most recent display of divine power was a resurrection. The open-endedness of other things Jesus says, such as what exactly it will entail for Jesus's followers to be his "witnesses," invites readers to settle in, to watch and learn along with the people who inhabit the pages of Acts. In the boldness and mystery about them, the statements hold God responsible to make God's intentions known and effective. Acts begins by fixing everyone's attention and expectations upon God, even as it makes clear that people will play a part in God's objectives.

What about the execution of these plans, the next step? The next step into what promises to be a great and glorious future brought

about by the culmination of “the kingdom of God”—will this happen right away? No. First, everyone waits.

Fulfillment will come, but after a waiting period. When the two messengers in robes call Jesus’s followers back to their senses after he disappears, they do not tell them to get to work. Although there is urgency in the messengers’ admonishment to stop staring slack-jawed into the sky and pondering everything, the moment’s urgency is not a call to action. It is a call to wait. The first great act in the Acts of the Apostles is to walk back to Jerusalem and let time pass. Eventually, the apostles and the rest of Jesus’s followers will be moving outward and bearing witness to Jesus in the world-altering power of the Holy Spirit, but not now. Even as Jesus’s and the angels’ words generate momentum for action to come, his people stay put as instructed.

We may find the waiting at the beginning of Acts easy to skip over, as a brief narrative hesitation to build suspense for the eventual coming of the Holy Spirit during the Jewish festival of Pentecost at the beginning of Acts 2. Yet the interval conveys an important lesson about how God will interact with these people. Presumably the Holy Spirit could have come immediately after Jesus’s ascension, but God waits a little more than one week’s time.



Why the delay? For one thing, waiting often proves wise when people try to make sense of where and how God is accompanying them. Waiting reminds us of our dependence on God and the limitations of our ability to see and know God. By waiting, Jesus’s followers begin to learn that they need to be a responsive community, a community that waits upon God to initiate. Whether they return to Jerusalem from the ascension with eager energy or paralyzing fear, we do not know. It’s probably both. All we know is that their job, for now, is to hang on.

This waiting has an active quality to it, going beyond merely sitting around and contemplating the past and the future. Further into the chapter, we will learn that they wait secluded in a “room upstairs” where they are “constantly devoting themselves to prayer” along with others who followed Jesus, both men and women (1:12–14). Also, Peter begins his work of strengthening the community (recall Luke

22:32) by leading the process whereby the whole group (consisting of about 120 people) selects two candidates for filling the spot among the twelve apostles vacated by Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15–26). The group remains sequestered yet expectant. In their waiting they obey Jesus's commands, but they also express a readiness for what will come.

They wait in a context of enormous and not fully explained expectations. They must feel like anything is possible now as they breathlessly anticipate the new realities that the risen and ascended Jesus has declared. To live like this—waiting—requires just as much courage as if Jesus had told them to go out immediately and change the world on their own. The waiting period trains them to be available and attentive so they might respond as followers when the time comes.

Much of Acts depicts Christians as responsive people, people who watch for God's lead. They are not puppets but agents, prompted by God to tell what they have seen, to report and give evidence of the new realities God has brought about through Jesus. The courage these people exhibit in doing so throughout all sorts of situations in Acts leads some readers to understand the book as a depiction of human heroism to spread the gospel. But this view misses the point. As the opening verses of Acts prepare us for the story to come, as dust has hardly begun to settle on the rumpled burial cloths left behind in Jesus's empty tomb, promises of what *God* will do in and through Jesus's followers fill the air.

For many people I know, waiting to make a decision or to put a plan into action proves a frustrating thing to do, because it feels like indecision, weakness, or wasted time. Once you start waiting, how do you know when it's time to stop? The beginning of Acts seems to suggest that you'll know, as long as you remain attentive and anticipant as you wait. Waiting isn't always the best course of action, but in the beginning of Acts, there's nothing else these people can do. For them, it's part of learning to be a disciple.

Jesus's followers wait not because they see it as their only option, not because they need to figure out everything before they take a first step, but because they expect God to open up opportunities and new realities. When God does, they, along with many others, will be privileged to play vital parts.