

# ACTS IN AUGUST

**6** So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” **7** He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” - Acts 1:6-8 (NIV)

In the first chapter of Acts we see the writer laying out the agenda for the rest of the chapters that will follow. In these few verses Jesus' disciples ask him when He will restore the kingdom of Israel. Their view is small, since God's agenda is not only towards one nation, culture or ethnicity but for all people. Jesus' answer to their misguided question is 2 fold:

**1) God has all authority.** It is through God and from God that all authority in the world must flow. We don't have ultimate authority; no human no matter what task or role ever does. It all comes from God.

**2) We will receive power.** What we are promised is power. The word used here is "dynamis" from which we get dynamite. Just like Jesus' first followers we too need this power if we are going to be his witnesses in our world. But what are we witnessing to? Just like ancient heralds would run to all corners of the kingdom to announce the inauguration of a new king, so we run to all corners of our suburbs, cities and nations to herald in the rightful King and Lord.

The agenda is set in chapter 1 of Acts by Jesus: To Judea (the surrounding countryside), to Samaria (the

hated semi foreigners living next door), to the ends of the earth. Acts is a journey of witnesses taking the message that "Jesus is Lord" to the ends of the earth. N.T Wright says: *"Jesus is already appointed and enthroned as the world's true king. One day the kingdom will come, fully and finally. In the meantime, we have a job to do."*

Over the next 30 days we will go on this exciting journey chapter by chapter as a Hillsong Africa church family.

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**42** And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **43** And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. **44** And all who believed were together and had all things in common. **45** And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. **46** And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, **47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved - Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

Acts has gotten off to a flying start, with the conversation between Jesus and his apostles, then the spectacular events of Pentecost and Peter's first public statement about the good news. Acts 2:42-47 serves then as a pause to stop and smell the flowers

These verses have often been called the 4 landmarks of the church. They are:

**1) The apostles' teaching.** Without attention given to constant, life-long Christian teaching we will find ourselves reverting to the worldview, culture, mindset and social pressures of the times. Jesus then becomes some pale influence or memory.

**2) The fellowship.** Without the common life of the Christian family (fellowship) we become isolated and find it difficult to sustain a living faith.

**3) The breaking of bread.** Without sharing regularly in "the breaking of bread"(a simple meal in remembrance of Jesus) we fail to raise the flag which says that Jesus'

death and resurrection is at the center of everything.

**4) The prayers.** Without prayer we neglect the fact that we are HEAVEN and EARTH people. Prayer makes no sense unless heaven and earth are designed to be joined together, and we can share in that now.

As a family of faith in Africa, lets commit to these 4 landmarks in our everyday lives.

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**3** Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. **2** And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. **3** Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. **4** And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." **5** And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. **6** But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" **7** And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. **8** And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. **9** And all the people saw him walking and praising God, **10** and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

– Acts 3:3-10 (NIV)

Chapter 3 of Acts begins with this amazing miracle story. The writer (Luke) draws our attention to a few details:

1. Peter and John looks hard at the man. They stared intently at him. There is something important about that deep, face to face contact. Peter and John did what maybe no one else has ever done to the beggar; they didn't just stare, they noticed and looked intently. What is about to happen in this beggar's life involves a deep human contact as well as a deep work of God

2. Peter says "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." The idea of names having power is a prominent idea in the ancient world (less so in our western world). The point that the writer is making is that Jesus' name now carries power. Mention his name and new things will happen. In this story it turns a disabled man who sat on the outside of the temple into a worshipper who went all the way in.

This story challenges us on 2 levels. Firstly, are we intently looking, seeing and noticing those who are "begging" in our lives? Secondly, are we pointing them to the one who can heal them?

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**13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. – Acts 4:13 (NIV)**

This verse is taken out of an exchange between the temple authorities and Peter and John. The temple authorities would have been used to rounding up trouble makers who would undoubtedly fold on the spot under questioning and scrutiny of this kind.

Because of the small Jewish society they would know that Peter and John had no classical rabbinical training. They would know that they were not the up and coming bright young students. They were "uneducated, common men." But Peter and John had something that no amount of book-learning could get you- they had been with Jesus. They had seen and heard him pray, they knew how he read the scriptures, they had caught on to his mission and thinking. And this gave them a clarity, a sharpness, a boldness.

As believers today we too, no matter how untrained and common we are, can face any situation with the boldness of Peter and John because of who we have been with.

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**12** Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. **13** None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. – Acts 5:12-13 (NIV)

This passage is Acts chapter 5 tells us that apostles continued to meet together in Solomon's portico. This is significant since Solomon's Portico was one of the great temple porches. The ancient Temple in Jerusalem was not technically a single building. It was an entire area of a city, covering dozens of acres, walled off with several gates and porches. It seems like the apostles had taken up one of the great porches where there would be plenty of room to gather.

This would have been very "in your face" to observers and authorities and would certainly have caused uncomfortable commotion. From Acts Chapter 5 we see that the early church acted with decisive power in the face of pressure and opposition, and the result was that more and more people began to take the message of Jesus seriously.

As a church, let's endeavor to continue to occupy the porches of society just as the early church did. As we endeavor to make a real difference in our cities, we will undoubtedly see God do "many signs and wonders" in our midst.

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**11** Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” **12** So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. **13** They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. **14** For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” - Acts 6:11-14 (NIV)

At a time when the world of ancient paganism was all around, all loyal Jews knew they had to stick by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and not to have anything do with compromise, with fancy new ideas which could and would only lead to following idols, blaspheming nonsenses. So, whenever Stephen spoke, out came the accusations: you're undermining the law of Moses! You're speaking against the Temple! And, behind it all, 'You're blaspheming God!'

Up to now, it seems the followers of Jesus were simply taking their stand day by day in the Temple porches and teaching people as and when they could. Their main area, and hence their main opposition, was within the Temple itself. But Stephen was going around Greek-speaking synagogues within the Jerusalem area, and the people he was speaking to weren't trying to defend a position of power, since they didn't have any. They were defending a worldview, a way of looking at things which colored their whole life. And they saw the proclamation of Jesus as a threat to that whole way of thinking and living.

They accused Stephen of undermining the Law of Moses, speaking against the temple and, worst of all, blaspheming God. But Stephen's claim was that Jesus didn't come to destroy history and heritage, but rather to fulfil it. The early church claimed that the God of our ancestors, in fulfilment of the purposes for which he gave the law and the Temple in the first place, is now doing a new thing.

As a multi-cultural church with people from many backgrounds, we too are challenged to be a part of the “new thing” that God is doing.

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**57** At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, **58** dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59** While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” **60** Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.- Acts 7:57-60 (NIV)

These verses tell the story of the very day that the persecution started against the church in Jerusalem. Stephen was stoned and the followers of Jesus were scattered all across Judaea and Samaria.

If we knew nothing about Christianity except the fact that its martyrs called down blessing and forgiveness, rather than cursing and judgment, on their torturers and executioners, we would have a central, though no doubt puzzling, insight into the faith.

There is of course only one explanation. They really had learned something from Jesus, who made loving one’s enemies a central, non-negotiable part of his teaching. On the cross Jesus himself prayed that those nailing him up might be forgiven (Luke 23.34).

Throughout church history Stephens’s death has been commemorated on the day after Christmas Day, reminding us that Christmas is not simply about a nice little baby surrounded by friendly animals, but the sudden arrival of the new life of heaven within an inhospitable and downright dangerous world.

The story of Stephen reminds us that as followers of Jesus in our world our conduct should be radically different. We should be marked by grace, forgiveness and love even in the face of severe pressure, opposition and ,in Stephens case, even in the face of death.