

Understanding Jesus' Resurrection through the Lens of the Book of Acts (#1)

By Bob Young

The Jesus Story Is a Life and Death Story

Hear the story. What you hear. How you hear.

I am rethinking Acts, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This study summarizes what I see when I read chapters 1-5. This is the story of the early church: Pentecost, the church established, the infant church, conflict with the Jewish leaders, suffering, Ananias-Sapphira, following Jesus is costly. We are called to respond to and live out the Jesus story. How is it possible?

The first step is hearing the story correctly. Getting the story right, hearing the story, the Easter story, the Jesus story, is a life and death concern. I purposely said "life and death" rather than "life or death." Hearing the story correctly requires hearing it again and again. Hearing it afresh. Reading, studying, thinking. We have oversimplified the gospel, the contemporary version that exists among "us" is not the whole truth. Because it is not the whole truth, it is lacking in power. It is simplistic, it is not the result of intense Bible study. Jesus came preaching the gospel (Mk. 1), the gospel was announced in advance to Abraham (Gal. 3), those who fell in the wilderness had the gospel preached to them (Heb. 4). The gospel that Jesus is the Messiah is rich, fulfilling, challenging (Ac. 18).

The world does not understand the story. It may be that many in the church do not understand the story. The story must be told again and again. (Let each take heed: perhaps we do not understand the story.) The world focuses at Easter on resurrection life. The Jesus story says that life comes only through death. The "old man" is gone so the "new man" can exist. But that is getting ahead of the story. In Acts, Luke uses a code word for the process of moving from death to life; that word is "saved." We use the word in the same way today: he was saved from the swirling flood waters, the firefighters saved her, the doctors were able to save the boy. These are descriptions of life and death situations.

Listen to Luke—

- Acts 2:21, And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.
- Acts 2:38, Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins. [remission of sins is equal to saved]
- Acts 2:40, With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."
- Acts 2:47, And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.
- Acts 4:12, Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.
- Acts 11:14, He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.

Look at some other life and death references from Acts. Acts makes clear that this life and death content. First, the Jesus story is a life and death story as it tells the history of Jesus. Second, it is a life and death story for every human being, because Jesus is the only source of life.

- Acts 2:32, God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.
- Acts 3:15, You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.
- Acts 5:20, "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."
- Acts 11: 18, When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

The content of the story of Jesus (the Easter story, the Passion) makes it a life and death story

Acts 2:23, 24, This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

The preaching of the early church was the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Near the beginning of this century, the movie "The Passion" made clear that the story is a life and death story.

Because it is a life and death story, it seems to have less appeal in today's world. People want the life story without the death story. People want the blessing without the sacrifice.

The story of Jesus as reflected in the lives of his followers has always been a life and death story

Acts 5:33, When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. The early followers of Jesus understood well that this was a life and death story, because their lives were threatened.

Acts 7 tells of Stephen's death. Acts 12 records the death of James the apostle. Church history and church tradition tell the story of martyr after martyr.

The story of Jesus is a life and death story today

Even today, some are martyred for their faith.

Too many Christians have forgotten that the Jesus story, the gospel, is a life and death question, a life and death decision. We choose death to self to live to him, we choose death to sin to live to him. The old gives way to the new. Rom. 6; 2 Cor. 5.

It is easy for us to forget. Christianity is for many of us today easy, comfortable, undemanding. We easily fall into habits that keep Christian commitment on the fringe of life. Life is not intentionally Christian, purposefully Christian, focused, discipleship-demonstrating.

We may never be called to give our physical lives for Jesus, but the Jesus story, the Easter story, the gospel story, is still a life and death story. It is a story of dying to self to live to Christ. Gal. 2.

Baptism illustrates that following Jesus is a life and death proposition.

Christian living, biblical discipleship, demonstrates that following Jesus is a life and death proposition.

The story of Jesus is a life and death story for me, for you, for this church, for every person.

Deciding to follow Jesus is costly, demanding, sacrificial, life-changing.