

The Book of Acts: The Kingdom on Mission

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Sermon 1, The Kingdom's Certainty, Acts 1:1-6, 28:23-31

Proposition: The book of Acts is written so we can know the certainty of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we begin this morning to look at the second volume of a two-volume work. We are going to be spending the next many months in the book of Acts in our time together each Sunday morning. Why this book? Why not Luke first and then Acts? The short answer is that, like my mentor and childhood pastor, I do not yet feel equipped to preach one of the Gospels. They are the summit of God's revelation to us in many ways, and I do not want to tackle one as an amateur. At this point, I have preached about 430 sermons. I am not quite a beginner. But I would love to see that number closer to 1000 before I feel that I will do justice to the gospels. Anyway, the other reason that we are looking at Acts has nothing to do with my own subjective judgments about whether I am capable of doing justice to a major portion of Scripture, and everything to do with the time in which we live. The gospels deal with a very special three years in redemptive history. We know that the time of Jesus' earthly sojourn was tremendously special and unrepeatable. We understand that the way things were done in the days of Caesar Augustus and Tiberius Caesar is not necessarily programmatic for the church today. Acts, on the other hand, tells us about the era of redemptive history in

which we live today. This book details the further progress of the kingdom of God in the (physical) absence of the King. And that, of course, is where we live. God reigns. That is only too clear from the text of Scripture, and only too dubious when we look at the world around us. If Jesus is King, why is the world run like this? The answer, of course, is that Jesus is King but He is reconquering the territory in which we live. All this realm was lost to Him when Adam took that first bite. Jesus was anointed by His Father for the purpose of bringing the cosmos back under control. Luke tells us about how He completed the first step of that process through His death and resurrection, thereby inaugurating the Kingdom and introducing the Age to Come into this present Age. Acts tells us about the Kingdom of God once the King returned to Heaven. Jesus still reigns from Heaven. He's still doing, still teaching — and we still can't see Him in the flesh. And if we can't see Him, we tend to start to wonder whether He's really there. Acts is written for people wondering whether Jesus really reigns. Acts is a book of reassurance. It tells us about the certainty of what we've been taught. I don't think anyone here struggles much with historical faith in whether Jesus of Nazareth actually lived and did what the gospels say He did. But I know all of us have times when we doubt whether He's still active, still subduing this world under His perfect reign. There is just too much misrule all around us to think that Jesus is completely in charge, right? Except that Luke so clearly tackles that misrule head-on (the last third of the book is all about wicked earthly rulers making trouble for God's kingdom) and gives us even more certainty that everything we've been taught is true and that Jesus' Kingdom really is coming through the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the church. So let's look this morning at the major large-scale features of the book of Acts, and from them draw certainty regarding the things we have been taught.

I. Volume 1: The Temple as the Frame of Luke's Gospel, Luke 1:9, 24:53

Luke and Acts are tied together by similar prologues that address Theophilus. That's how we know that they are two volumes of the same work. But in addition to being two volumes of the same work, they both are written within the literary feature called a "frame" or *inclusio*. I have talked about these before with you at some length as we looked at Proverbs together.

If a piece of literature mentions something at the beginning and again at the end, you know that that something is important not only at the beginning and end, but to everything in between. Thus, as we noted with Proverbs, Solomon mentions the Fear of the LORD at the beginning, middle, and end of that book — making it clear that Proverbs is about the fear of the LORD. In the same way, Luke frames both of his volumes, the first one with the Temple and the second one with the Kingdom of God. Let's talk about both of those.

The gospel of Luke begins with Zechariah called to the Temple to offer incense in his division of priests. While he is offering incense, an angel appears to him and says "You will have a son and name him John." And the story gets moving from there. Thus, after the prologue, the first scene of the gospel of Luke is set in the Temple in Jerusalem. And then, the final verse of Luke's gospel has the disciples in the Temple once again, blessing God. Indeed, Luke actually informs us that the disciples were not just in the Temple once in a while; they were there *continually*. What's the point of this frame? Well, the Temple is the place where God lives. Luke

is telling us something important about the Temple. The Temple is the theme of the gospel, and if you read the gospel you'll see that it's all about Jesus. Your point, Luke? *Jesus is the new Temple!* The place where God dwells among His people was a particular building from the time of Moses onward. But when Jesus came to earth, the place of God's residence with His people moved out of that building and into Jesus of Nazareth.

A. Jesus' Journey to Jerusalem, Luke 9:51

And so a huge portion of Luke is taken up with Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. "And it came about, when the days were approaching for His ascension, that He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luk 9:51). Luke announces this purpose in ch. 9, and he follows it up basically through the rest of the book. Why is it important for Jesus to go to Jerusalem? Because it is there that the showdown will take place between the new way of God's presence with His people and the old way of God's presence with His people. In other words, it is in Jerusalem that Jesus will administer the final blow to the Temple and its whole Levitical system. To get ready to ascend to His Father, He first goes to Jerusalem — because that is where He will die, but also in a certain sense because that is where the Father is.

Luke is about the Temple, and about Jesus as the New Temple.

B. Jesus' Church Starts in Jerusalem, Luke 24:53, Acts 1:4

When we get to the beginning of Acts, we see this emphasis on the Temple rapidly dissipating. Thus, Luke ends with the disciples in the Temple, but Acts begins with them in the Upper Room, an undisclosed location within Jerusalem city limits. To be with God, one no longer needs the Temple. Oh, various apostles will still visit the Temple in Acts, but it is no longer central. It doesn't appear at the beginning and end. We have moved on. The church is indeed started from Jerusalem, just as the prophets said — "Out of Zion will go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."

C. Jesus' Witnesses Journey from Jerusalem, Acts 1:8

But the church isn't going to stay in Jerusalem. Indeed, Jesus' disciples become witnesses who leave Jerusalem and go to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. You likely already know that Acts 1:8 is programmatic for the rest of the book, that the story begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome (aka the end of the earth). And yes, that is incredibly important. Luke is circular: We start in the Temple, where Zechariah is worshipping God. We end in the Temple, where the disciples are worshipping God. The whole book centers on being in and getting to Jerusalem, and what goes on in Jerusalem. Not so in Acts! We trace our heritage to Jerusalem and the Jewish church that met there. But we do not feel the need to go back to Jerusalem any more. The church has moved on.

II. Volume 2: The Kingdom as the Frame of Luke's Further Account, Acts 1:3, 6; 28:23, 31

In fact, the Kingdom has moved on. Jesus calls Jerusalem "the city of the great king," quoting Psalm 48. But that quote appears only in Matthew; Luke does not mention it. Instead, he frames his second volume with quadruple references to the Kingdom of God. Jerusalem is the King's city. It is His capital, and He belongs there. We went over all that in Luke, right down to how the

ruling elites of the city rejected him. That continues to be a major theme in Acts — rejection by the Jewish people. It is the note on which the book closes. But I want you to see that one major point of Acts is that the Kingdom is not limited to the King's own city. In fact, that city threw the king out and killed Him, and He was not even born there. But though Jerusalem is sidelined in Acts, the Kingdom is foregrounded. I want to highlight the four aspects of the Kingdom that Luke makes prominent in his frame around this volume.

A. What Jesus Continued to Do and Teach, 1:1

The first emphasis, of course, lies in the past tense (or aorist tense) of “began.” Jesus began to do and teach many things in the course of the gospel of Luke. In the book of Acts, He continues to do and teach many more things! Though He is in Heaven, He is very active on earth through His word, His Spirit, and His people. Luke is going to major on the word, the Spirit, and the church throughout the book of Acts. Behind the action of them all lies the action of Jesus. The Kingdom, in other words, did not vanish when the King was “taken up” (Acts 1:2). Far from it. The King continues to work and teach. But now He does it by His word, His Spirit, and His church.

B. The Kingdom in Jesus' Post-Resurrection Teaching, 1:3

But Luke goes on to mention (what no other New Testament writer covers) what it was that Jesus did during the period between Easter and Ascension Day. During those days, He taught His disciples about the Kingdom. That was the focus of His post-resurrection ministry. He did not prioritize teaching about Jerusalem. He did not cover sacraments in detail. He did not necessarily discuss the theology of resurrection with them. He spoke about the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God. And of course, as this is Luke's first mention of the Kingdom, so the last mention of it will not be until the final verse of Acts. Clearly, Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom is highly relevant to those who are going to live in the era between His Ascension and His Second Coming. That's us. We need to know the certainty of the Kingdom. We need to know that Jesus reigns even when the world doesn't look like it.

C. The Kingdom in Salvation History

Well, the largest question relating to the Kingdom at this moment in salvation history is not sidelined or left out. Oh no. Luke confronts it head-on. The Old Testament witness is abundantly clear: The Kingdom of God existed in physical form in the earthly monarchy of Judah. Chronicles literally speaks of the Kingdom of Yahweh in the hand of Solomon.

1. Israel as the Kingdom, 1:6

In other words, if you wanted to know where God reigned on earth, you needed to look to Jerusalem, the city of the great king and the place where Luke directed his focus throughout volume 1. That's where the Kingdom of God is to be found. And over it you could find reigning Yahweh's Anointed, the Messiah and the Son of David to whom the promises were made. Never mind that some of those sons of David were completely wretched, and that many others had no political power to speak of (e.g., Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father!). The OT is as clear as our prairie air here on the high plains: The Christ, if you want to use that Greek title, sat on a throne in Jerusalem and ruled a thousand square miles and a few hundred thousand people. And that had

all been taken away by Babylon some 600 years before the opening of Luke's gospel. After the career of Jesus, then, burning question and the one that the disciples, being good biblical theologians, naturally asked, was "Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" Because the Kingdom rightfully belonged to Israel. The Kingdom was basically coterminous with the borders of Judea. And wasn't Jesus going to bring that situation back, and reign as a new Solomon who would give Tiberius Caesar a worthy foe on the geo-political stage? The time was obviously "now." An unkillable Messiah would give Rome something to think about, for sure.

But what on earth is Jesus' answer? It is a deeply unsatisfying one. Obviously, it is some form of "No." But rather than just say "No," He says "You don't need to know. The Father handles the calendar."

What? Of course, we are going to talk about this more in a couple of weeks. But I want you to feel what the disciples felt. The Kingdom of God that He had just been teaching about all those 40 days wasn't going to get off the ground after all. Rome and Pilate and Herod's various descendants would continue to rule in Jerusalem.

But then Jesus goes on. And His answer to the question seemingly morphs from "No" to "Yes" — or at least, to "If you'll allow me to reframe the question in accurate terms, then yes, the Kingdom is just starting to take off. And you are going to be the ones who spearhead that effort."

What? Israel isn't going to get the Kingdom. You are. "You, the eleven apostles, are going to witness to me here, there, and everywhere." What? How? Well, of course, the rest of Acts is going to answer that question. The Kingdom of God is not going to look like the reign of Solomon any more. What is going to look like? That is an answer that the apostles have to forge with the help of the Holy Spirit. That's literally what Jesus tells them, and then leaves.

What? Again, if you've ever felt that sense of helplessness, that sense of "What on earth do we do now? How is the church supposed to handle *this*?" then join the club! That is how the church was left at the beginning. No longer are we in the days of the Levitical system, where they were told who the personnel were, where everyone was supposed to live, how to set up camp, and how many inches wide the church door was supposed to be. That's all past. The church is suddenly supposed to grow up.

2. The Kingdom Going to the (Gentile) Dogs, 28:23

And it's also growing out — going, quite literally, to the dogs. At least, the Jewish people of that day often called Gentiles "dogs." The end of Acts is about the Kingdom going to the dogs. Paul talks to a huge number of the leading Jews of Rome. He solemnly testifies to them concerning the Kingdom of God. That is the burden of his teaching, and they listen to him on the subject for a whole day. Again, the point is clear: The Apostle to the Gentiles, in common with the whole church, feels a particular burden for the Jewish people. There is no one closer to the Kingdom. There is no one we have a greater responsibility to reach! And yet there is also no one who is simultaneously more familiar with Christian theology and more resistant to it. They heard the message about Jesus from its most powerful interpreter. I mean, honestly, if you can't send Jesus Himself, then you would send in Paul as Christianity's #2. You aren't going to find a more

compelling theologian or a more cogently expressed argument. And the thing he wanted to talk to them about was the reign of Christ. The Kingdom of God is no longer a geopolitical entity in Jerusalem. It is a socio-spiritual entity expressed in the gathering of the people of God — Christians, the church, followers of the Way, whatever you want to call them. That change from geopolitical to socio-spiritual is a tough one to wrap our minds around. Didn't we give up too much when we gave up the Levitical model? Well, anyhow, Paul spoke about the Kingdom for a whole day. And there was a hard core in there who utterly rejected the teaching, provoking Paul to an outburst of bitter prophetic denunciation. "This salvation has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen!" Of course, as I stand here and speak to a Gentile congregation, we all know how true those words were. Surrounded by followers of Jesus, the Jews have held on to their own ways, language, and identity for 21 centuries. The Gentiles listened. The Kingdom has gone to the dogs. We Gentiles hold it now. The Jews will return to it, as Paul so confidently taught in Romans 11 on the basis of prophecy. We will not be the leaders forever. The apostles were all Jewish. Hint, hint. At the end, the church will once again be Jewish-led, I firmly believe. (Our King is Jewish!) But Acts talks about the church and the Kingdom in the in-between time, when Jesus is in Heaven and the Jews are more likely to regard the church as a threat than as a friend (often with good reason, unfortunately!). The Kingdom belongs to the dogs; the saints possess it.

D. The Kingdom in Apostolic Preaching, 28:31

And what do they do with it? They talk about it! If you had to sum up the content of Paul's teaching for those two years under house arrest in Rome, what would you say? Certainly he talked about Christ. There's no doubt. But more than that, he talked about the Kingdom. That is how Acts ends — with apostolic preaching of Christ (the King) and His Kingdom. That is the good news that we are announcing to the world in the in-between time. Luke about the Temple and Jesus the New Temple. Acts is about the Kingdom while the King is in Heaven. He's not precisely absent or away, but He is not precisely present either. We are familiar with this reality, because we live in it every day. Jesus reigns! Amen, we say. But then we look around and say "How can that be true?" Acts shows us that the reign of Jesus takes place these days through His work in His people, His Spirit, and His word.

III. The Purpose of Both Volumes: That You May Know the Certainty of What You Have Been Taught, Luke 1:4

Well, let's conclude this introduction to Acts by looking at Luke's purpose statement. He tells Theophilus in Luke 1 that the purpose of his work is "that you may know the certainty of what you have been taught." That is what Luke-Acts is for: giving us certainty about what we've already heard about Christ.

A. How Little We Would Know Without Acts!

With that in mind, brothers and sisters, just think with me for a moment about how little we would know without Acts. When did we first get called "Christians"? How did the church get its start? To go from the end of Mark or John to the first fragments of church history that we have from around the year 120 is a major jump. It's 90 incredibly important years! And without Luke's work, we would know nothing of Peter's ministry, little of Paul's, nothing of Pentecost,

or how the question of Jewish inclusion in a majority-Gentile church was decided. We would simply be ignorant, with no way of bridging that gap. So just thank God with me here this morning for the information contained in this book. It is of fundamental importance for understanding what is going on with the Kingdom of God during our time here on this earth.

B. Acts: The Teaching of the Kingdom

So in Acts, I want you to look with me for teaching about the Kingdom. The word doesn't occur frequently — only 8 times in the whole book, and half of those are at the beginning and end and another one is in the middle. But precisely because the theme of the Kingdom is found at the beginning, middle, and end of the book, we know that we ought to look for teaching about the Kingdom within these pages. What did Jesus teach about the Kingdom? What did Paul teach about the Kingdom? Luke doesn't mention that they taught just so he can leave us high and dry. Far from it. No, Luke mentions that they taught so he can tell us what they taught. He tells us what they taught by telling us the content of the book of Acts.

Do you want to know what Jesus and Paul taught about the Kingdom? Then stay tuned, for it is what Luke teaches in Acts.

C. Acts: The Certainty of the Kingdom

And that, my friends, is what we will learn — the certainty of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God that our Lord taught and that the apostle Paul taught. These things really happened. This is true history. Luke was there for a lot of it, and he interviewed others and carefully set in order all the information that he gathered.

We are going to see the certainty of the Kingdom. We really can trust Jesus. His reign is real, His reign is now, and we are privileged to be His subjects in the Kingdom of Grace. Let's live like it. Amen.