

Acts

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 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

The Ascension (Part 1)

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Acts 1:1-5

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to the Book of Acts.

As you turn there, I want to invite you to consider something with me. I want to draw your attention to how strange this gathering is. I'm not talking about the things we do here – though we certainly do some strange things. I'm talking about how strange the very nature of this gathering is – the fact that we are here in 2022, in Orillia Ontario, worshipping Jesus.

Think about this: Jesus ministered in a tiny fragment of the Mediterranean world for three short years. Then he became one of the thousands of men who were crucified that year. He was placed in a tomb and a stone was rolled over the entrance. His followers retreated to the lives that they had left behind, and the world continued on as if nothing had changed.

But then, three days later, rumours began to spread that he had risen from the grave! Eyewitnesses swore that they had seen him! Even Thomas, the disciple who had always been plagued with doubt, testified that he had been with the risen Christ and that he had even touched Jesus' wounds! Men who had been cowering in fear days earlier suddenly launched out into the world with the message that a new kingdom had been ushered into the world. They held to their testimony even as they were tortured and killed.

There was no internet. There were no newspapers. And there was fierce opposition to the spread of this message.

And yet, 2000 years later, here we are on the other side of the world continuing to proclaim the message of the risen King, Jesus Christ!

How did that happen?

That is a good question to ask as we begin our time in the Book of Acts. Acts was written by an eye-witness – a physician named Luke – who travelled as a missionary with the Apostle Paul. This is the same Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke. In fact, Acts is actually “Part Two” of Luke’s Gospel. Which is why, in the opening verse, Luke writes:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach (Acts 1:1 ESV)

Everything that follows in Acts needs to be understood then as an extension of the Gospel of Luke. And because Luke and Acts were written as a unit, the real introduction to Acts is actually found back in Luke chapter 1. Look there with me now. In that introduction, Luke writes:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4 ESV)

Here we find a clear explanation of why this Book is in our Bibles. The compilation of Luke-Acts was written so that we might have certainty of the things that we have been taught.

I just asked the question: “How did this happen? How did the 3-year ministry of a man in Galilee change the world?” This Book was written to a believer named Theophilus – a believer just like you and me – to answer that question! Eyewitness Luke is saying, “Lean in close, and I’ll tell you EXACTLY how it happened!”

To that end, let’s look now to the Book of Acts. We’re going to be reading chapter 1, verses 1-5. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (Acts 1:1-5 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This first chapter in Acts serves as a transitional chapter. In these opening verses, Luke is building a bridge from the conclusion of Jesus’ earthly ministry to the beginning of the ministry of the Holy Spirit empowered church. Acts 2 is where we read about Pentecost and where the church as we know it today is born.

But, while we’re obviously eager to get to Pentecost, Luke wants us to see some things before we rush ahead. In particular, in verses 1-11, he zooms in on the ascension of Jesus. Now, this is interesting because Luke just finished describing the ascension at the end of his Gospel. Remember, these books were originally a unit, so Luke is describing this same scene twice in a row. Why would he do that? Clearly, he means for us to see something here.

So, let’s ask the question:

What Are We Meant To See?

I’ve decided to consider these opening 11 verses over the course of two Sundays because there is so much here for us to see. This morning, we’re going to zoom in on verses 1-5. We’ll make three observations of the text, and we’ll pull out some practical implications along the way.

First, Luke means for us to see:

1. A reminder of Jesus’ continued presence

Look closely at verses 1-2:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (Acts 1:1-2 ESV)

If you read through this verse carefully, it almost looks like Luke has made a mistake. Did he really mean to write that the Gospel of Luke was an account of all that Jesus “began to do and teach”? Is this a typo? The

Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus ascending into heaven. It ends with Jesus LEAVING! Yet, here, Luke tells us that that was simply the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

This is not a minor detail: Luke understands, and he wants US to understand, that while Jesus is no longer physically present with us, nevertheless he is still at work in the world!

But how? How does Jesus work in the world today?

The resurrected and ascended Jesus is actively working in the world through his church. In Ephesians 1, we learn that Jesus is the head of the church:

which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:23 ESV)

WE are the body of Christ! WE are the fullness of him! WE are the manifestation of Jesus to the world! That's a sobering thought, isn't it? The church doesn't always look like Jesus. Sometimes we look like the world. Sometimes we look like a fight club. Sometimes we look like the devil himself. And what a tragedy that is! Do we not understand that we are the fullness of him who fills all in all? For many people in this city, the only glimpse they'll ever have of Jesus is what they see in us. If we understood that, I think we'd cut out a lot of the nonsense that we've grown to tolerate.

Luke wants us to see this before we jump ahead. Commentator I. Howard Marshall notes:

By writing in this way Luke has emphasized the unity between the story of the ministry of Jesus and the story of the beginning of the church. The Gospel tells what Jesus began to do and teach; Acts relates what he continued to do and teach through the agency of his witnesses.¹

I want you to think through the implications of this. Jesus is just as present with us today as he was with his disciples when they ministered in Galilee. Do you believe that? It's the truth! Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18b-20 ESV)

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 55.

He said this as he was physically leaving. He wanted to ensure that we understood beyond the shadow of a doubt that He was, and is, and TO THE END OF THE AGE will be WITH US! When you understand that Jesus is with you – when you understand that the King of kings and the Lord of lords is ministering through you – then you approach your impossible assignments with a different kind of confidence.

We don't always see him, but he's with us. We don't always feel his presence, but he's with us. G. Campbell Morgan gives us this helpful reminder:

When we gather in worship today, we do not do so in memory of a dead leader; but in the real presence of a living Lord.²

Therefore, the Book of Acts is not the story of how the church picked up where Jesus left off. It is the story of how Jesus PICKED UP HIS CHURCH and used them to continue his ministry in the world! THAT is what this book is about. That's the first thing that Luke would have us see, and it is not a small reminder.

Second, we are meant to see:

2. Forty days that changed the world

I love this! Look with me again at verse 3:

³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3 ESV)

This verse summarizes the forty-day period between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension.

Jesus didn't ascend to heaven immediately after the resurrection. Did you know that? I suspect that some of you have never thought about this before. There were forty days between those two events. So, what happened in those forty days?

Well, here in the opening verses of Acts, we are reminded that those forty days were HUGELY significant! In fact, those forty days changed the world! I can say that without exaggerating, because the disciples that we

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 10.

met before that forty-day span were entirely different from the men we find in Acts! As one commentator observes, after their encounter with the risen Jesus:

A new light will shine through the same eyes. A new tone will come into the same voices. A new atmosphere will be generated by the same presences. Peter will be the same man, and yet absolutely changed.³

When you read through the Gospels, you often walk away wondering why Jesus didn't just go ahead and fire his disciples. Truly! They fall asleep when Jesus asks them to join him for a prayer meeting. They jockey for positions of power. They are slow to understand. In fact, they frequently misunderstand Jesus' lessons entirely.

As one example, I think back to the time when Jesus first told Peter about the crucifixion. Do you remember that story? After Jesus explained to Peter that he was going to suffer, die, and rise again, Peter REBUKED him! Can you imagine that? He rebuked Jesus to his face. He declared:

“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”(Matthew 16:22b ESV)

To which Jesus said, “Get behind me Satan!”

The disciples didn't get it. They didn't understand what Jesus was doing. They were reading the Old Testament all wrong. They were so entrenched in their way of thinking and their expectations of what the Messiah should be that they failed to see what Jesus was accomplishing right in front of their eyes!

And that would be a minor inconvenience if these were just average Joes. But it becomes an enormous problem when you realize that these men are the future teachers of the church! Jesus is about to leave, and these guys are going to become the stewards of his message. But THEY DON'T YET UNDERSTAND THE MESSAGE!

Jesus' ascension would have been the END of the church were it not for those forty days that changed the world.

³ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 15.

Following the resurrection, Jesus spent forty days appearing at various times to his disciples. He let them touch his wounds. He ate with them. He proved his resurrection to them. And he used those forty days to illuminate the Scriptures for them. We catch a glimpse of one such encounter in Luke 24. Two disciples were walking on the road to Emmaus when Jesus appeared to them. As they walked, Jesus taught them. The text says:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:27 ESV)

This was a crash-course in biblical theology! Beginning in Genesis, Jesus taught his disciples how to read their Bibles.

When we think about the Book of Acts, we think about miracles, signs, and wonders, and rightfully so. There are plenty of those in this Book. But, when we think of Acts, do we think of long, biblical sermons? We should! Did you know that sermons make up nearly one third of the Book of Acts? As I. Howard Marshall notes:

Acts is the story of the triumphant progress of the Word of God.⁴

Here's an implication for us: If we want to be used by the Lord to change the world, then we can't be skipping Bible study! Time and time again in this story of the early church, the word goes forth and hearts are changed. But in order for the word to go forth, the word must be known! These men needed to be taught before they could be of any use.

The same is true for us today. If we are going to be of any use, then we need an encounter with Jesus. We need him to teach us the truth. We need to learn how to see our Saviour on every page. I wonder how many of us would receive the same rebuke that Paul gave to the church in Corinth. He said to them:

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. (1 Corinthians 3:1-2a ESV)

I suspect that there are some here today who have been living off of spiritual milk for too long. Hear this in love: You're not an infant anymore. It's time to ditch the diaper. If you want to be used by the Lord to lead men and women into the truth, then you need to know His word!

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 29.

Get a reading plan, find an accountability partner, buy some highlighters, pick some verses to memorize, set the alarm back thirty minutes. Leave the milk for the infants and get God's word into you so that God can spread His word through you!

As we hear Peter's sermon at Pentecost, and Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin, and Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, let's thank God for the crash course in biblical theology that was given to the disciples. Let's thank God for these forty days that changed the world! The word went forth.

And it went forth in POWER! That's the final thing we're meant to see:

3. A promise of Holy Spirit power

I can imagine that some of you who have more of a charismatic background are thinking to yourself, "Leave it to the Baptist preacher to spend his first sermon in the book of Acts talking about Bible studies!" Well, I make no apology for my love of Bible studies. But let me be clear: There is no power in our study of the Word apart from the Holy Spirit. It has been said:

One might as well try to catch sunbeams with a fishhook as to lay hold of God's revelation unassisted by God's Holy Spirit.⁵

This is a spiritual book, and it is spiritually discerned. We cannot see what we are meant to see apart from the Holy Spirit. We cannot live how we have been called to live apart from the Holy Spirit. In and of ourselves, we do not have the power to believe, or the power to obey, or the power to understand, or the power to change, or the power for mission. But in these verses, we are reminded that God has promised a SOLUTION to our powerlessness! Look with me at verses 4-5:

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:4-5 ESV)

A few verses later in verse 8, Jesus says:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you (Acts 1:8a ESV)

⁵ Vance Havner as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 7109.

The outpouring of this power – the fulfillment of this promise – takes place in chapter 2. That’s where we will read about Pentecost – the day when God once and for all empowered His church with His Spirit.

I’m tempted to jump ahead but I’m going to fight that urge. For our time this morning, I want to zoom in on the language that Jesus uses here of “promise.” Here, before his ascension, Jesus is preparing us to recognize that this outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of a plan that has long been in the works.

John the Baptist understood this. As he ministered in the wilderness, he was preparing his listeners for the arrival of One who would usher in a new age. He declared:

I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Luke 3:16 ESV)

John didn’t simply conjure up this idea himself. He was a student of the word, and he was looking forward in anticipation to the fulfillment of God’s promises – promises like the one we find in Joel 2 which reads:

And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days. (Joel 2:28-29 ESV)

Pentecost – the anointing of God’s people with the Holy Spirit – was always part of God’s plan.

Jesus words before his ascension, then, were preparing his disciples – and us – to understand the scene that was about to take place. Pentecost was crazy! Let me just say that as we make our way towards chapter 2. Pentecost was unlike anything the world had ever seen! It was remarkable! It was shocking! And it was exactly what we needed because it was exactly what God had promised.

The Holy Spirit is God’s gift to His church. We were powerless before Pentecost. But all that has changed now. If you are here today and you are a Christian, then you have received this promised power. Through the Holy Spirit, the God of the universe powerfully lives in you. In John 7:37-39, Jesus said:

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37b-39 ESV)

Jesus teaches us here that this promise of the Spirit is for “whoever believes in me.” Every child of God is indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Every child of God possesses a heart that has rivers of living water flowing through it!

But not every child of God lives like they believe this is true. And not every child of God understands the tremendous gift that they have received. Too many times, we try to do spiritual work with human strength. Too many times, we minister as if Pentecost never happened.

One of the primary lessons that we are going to learn as we work through the Book of Acts is that apart from the Spirit of God, we can do NOTHING.

NOTHING.

Which is why God promised us this gift! Jesus, in his final moments before ascending to heaven directed his disciples’ attention to THIS. As the church was being born, God was teaching us this lesson: There is no church without the Holy Spirit. The great preacher John Stott once said:

Before Christ sent the church into the world, he sent the Spirit into the church. The same order must be observed today.⁶

Do we believe this?

There is no Redeemer City Church without the power of the Holy Spirit.

Apart from the help of the Spirit, our prayers bounce off the ceiling.

Apart from the help of the Spirit, my sermons are just bad TED talks.

Apart from the help of the Spirit, your family devotions are just time wasters.

Apart from the help of the Spirit, evangelism, discipleship, growth in holiness – they’re all impossibilities!

⁶ John R. W. Stott as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 7144.

But HALLELUJAH we are not without help!

you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you (Acts 1:8a ESV)

Our God is a PROMISE KEEPER, and in ages past, he promised that He would provide us with the power that we need. Brothers and sisters, we have that power today! The Holy Spirit is working in our midst today!

Let us not hinder Him.

Let us not grieve Him.

Let us not forget Him.

Let us, be ever being filled by the Spirit.

To that end, let's pray together.