



## Acts 1

### The Mission Goes Forward

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This week is the beginning of an 18-week series walking through the entire book of Acts. The book of Acts, written by Luke, is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke telling the story of the *acts* of the early church after Jesus' ascension into Heaven.

In this session, we will discuss Acts 1:1-11 where Jesus says farewell to the disciples, and they receive the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. One of the greatest tragedies of modern Christianity is the failure of believers to understand where they fit in this story.

We know the mission of Christ is the redemption of the whole world. We know that His death on the Cross and His resurrection assure us of the success of this mission. We know the Gospel has run so rampant it has made its way from a hill in Jerusalem to Greenville, SC.

Yet the mission is not done, and each of us as Christians have a place in it. If you are a follower of Christ, you are called to be a part of the mission of God, not to be a bench warmer. Through the Holy Spirit's power, you can do great things in God's name!

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## BELONG

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- How is everyone's week going? Any life updates?
  - What is something the group can be praying about?
  - What is something the group can praise this week?
  
  - What do you know about Acts? What would you say is its place in the Bible?
  - What do you think is the role of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life?
  - How do you currently view yourself in God's story? Do you feel like you are a part of it?
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## BELIEVE

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

Acts 1:1-11 (NIV)

**1** In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach **2** until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **3** After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. **4** On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. **5** For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

**6** Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” **7** He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” **9** After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. **10** They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. **11** “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Jesus having conquered death now sits on the throne, at the right hand of the Father. The mission has been going forward since the day Jesus first commissioned the disciples, and we are called to be a part of it.

Let's walk through these 11 verses and take note of how Luke records the advancement of the early church and how we are supposed to join in.

### 1. The Tomb is Empty

The book of Acts opens by linking itself back to the Gospel of Luke (the 'former book'). In Luke's Gospel, he began by addressing the recipient of the document, a man called Theophilus. Acts is addressed to the same individual. Some believe Theophilus to be a literary device representing all Christians in general, but it is much more likely he was a real historical person. It's possible he was a recent convert in need of instruction or someone seeking after God in need of the basics of the faith.

Luke ended with the crucified but risen Christ. We would do well to remember what had just occurred. Jesus was arrested by the Jewish authorities on illegitimate charges, mercilessly beaten, crucified between two thieves on a Roman cross, sealed in a tomb, and three days later walked right back out. Jesus was so alive in fact that we find Him walking seven miles between Jerusalem and Emmaus. Despite the paradigm-shifting nature of these events, Luke views this as the mere beginning of the story ('I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do...').

The implication here is clear: Jesus might be ascended into Heaven, but He is not done working. The tomb is empty, and Jesus is picking up right where He left off. Nothing as silly as a crucifixion could hinder Jesus' work. Death is nothing to Him and He has conquered it with ease. No other religion in the world makes such a claim as this. Muhammed is dead. Buddha is dead. Confucius is dead. For as important as he was to both Jews and now Christians, Abraham is dead. But Christ is alive. And His work has yet to cease.

Luke mentions evidence of Jesus' resurrection as the basis of the disciples' belief ('...He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs...'). The text mentions how Jesus appeared to His disciples for forty days before His ascension. Paul in 1 Corinthians notes that Jesus in fact appeared to 500 different individuals before He left the earth. Our faith in a risen Christ is not based on myth, but rather historical facts that are verifiable and accurate.

## 2. Jesus Ascends to the Throne

The ascension of Jesus Christ is one of the most important realities in Christianity, but it is often overlooked. Often we focus so much on the crucifixion and resurrection that we ignore the ascension. The ascension is vitally important because it demonstrates Christ is not only alive, but He is reigning. He is not only savior, but king of the world.

Fittingly then, Luke says Jesus taught the disciples about His kingdom before ascending ('...and speaking about the kingdom of God.'). In the kingdom of God, Christ is its king, and this kingdom is expansive.

The disciples first question regards that kingdom. Specifically, the disciples were concerned with their home, the kingdom of Israel, and how it would fit into Jesus' plans ("Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?"). Perhaps they saw the kingdom of God starting and ending with the nation of Israel. Up until this point in history, Israel was the bright hot center of God's work in the world. The prophet Isaiah writes:

Isaiah 42:6

<sup>6</sup> "I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness, And will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the Gentiles,

From the beginning of its establishment by God, Israel has been the conduit by which He made His presence known to the world. However, since the time of the Assyrians, Israel has been dominated and occupied by foreign empires for hundreds of years. First-century Jews longed for their country to be restored to its former glory, and to be the great and holy nation God promised to make them.

However, Christ intends to expand His territory ("...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."). The kingdom of God was begun with Israel, but it wouldn't stay there. As Isaiah prophesied, Israel would be a light to the Gentiles. The disciples were commanded by Jesus to take their light first to the Jewish people and then to the rest of the world.

Jesus did not answer the disciples' question ("It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed..."). The restoration of Israel was indeed an event on God's prophetic calendar, but it was not yet time. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, we are blessed to be witnesses to the beginning of the fulfillment of this promise. The Jews in 1948 formed a new state of Israel and by the day are returning to their land. They will be fully restored when their hearts are turned back towards the God their fathers, and Jesus comes again to reign physically from Jerusalem.

This is an incredible promise, and we must be watchful of what is happening in the world as it relates to the coming of Jesus, but the mission of God comes first. Many times, Christians want to know everything, but want to go nowhere. We hyper-focus on the details but are hesitant to bring our knowledge to the world. Jesus helps the disciples to focus on what matters here and now ("But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come...").

This is our calling: to spread the Gospel to the nations through the power of the Spirit. Christ's kingdom is for all and has no boundaries. Christ is king and there is none higher. We live under His authority, are His citizens, and are on mission for Him until He returns.

### **3. The Spirit Empowers**

As Christ ascends, He does not press pause on the mission. Instead, He is now going to be running the Gospel campaign from His throne next to the Father, and He is going to send an agent to empower His people ("But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...").

The first hint of this comes back in Luke's opening to the book of Acts ('...after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit...'). Something has changed. Jesus isn't just speaking to His people. He is giving them power through the Spirit of God. Further, Jesus tells the disciples to go forward once the Spirit has come ("...but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."). This comes from the Gospel of Luke rather than Acts. The beginning of Acts and the ending of Luke provide parallel accounts of this event with some minor differences.

It is imperative to see that Christ is not relying on the power, impressiveness, skill, or ability of the disciples to advance the mission. Rather, God is the one who will ensure that the mission will go forward successfully through the coming of the Spirit. As Christians, we are but vessels for the Holy Spirit to act through us to spread the Gospel. We need not fear our own inadequacy or fear messing it up. The entire project depends solely on God Himself. We simply have to make the conscious choice to follow His lead and He will do the rest.

This is how the mission is advanced today. God empowers normal people like us to accomplish great things by the power of the Holy Spirit. This means we have no excuse for lack of participation. We have to learn to trust God to do the heavy lifting of reaching people's hearts through our words.

### **4. The Church is Sent**

As Christ leaves, He deploys the Church ("...and you shall be witnesses to Me..."). The Church has one job and one job only: to bear witness. This is not a complex job as many might think. We must simply tell people about Jesus: who he is, what he has done, and why it matters. And the Spirit will do the rest.

After Jesus' ascension, we see this concept play out throughout the book of Acts. The believers go about their lives, and as they go, they talk about Jesus. And what happens? Jesus begins to take over the world with the Gospel.

The Church is who God has chosen to be His messengers. If not us, then who will spread the Gospel? Our great calling in life as Christians is to tell others about Jesus. Everything else in our lives is secondary.

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## BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- Do you realize that you are called to be a witness of Christ? What would witnessing to others about Jesus look like practically in your life?
- How does your situation compare to that of the disciples? Is your job to witness easier or harder than there's was at their time? Considering your answer, how does that affect how you witness to others?
- What excuses do we often make not to witness to others? How might we combat these excuses to fulfill our calling?
- Why do you think Christians sometimes get so focused on knowing the details rather than fulfilling the mission?
- Do you feel the power of the Holy Spirit inside you? Can you recall an experience where you have felt the presence of God empower you to get through?