

ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT
A SERIES ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
(1) INTRODUCTION

Acts 1:1-11

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February 2, 2020

PREFACE

In recent years we have completed four series on the Gospels including Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Today we begin a series on Acts, the fifth book of the New Testament. Luke is the third Gospel but was the fourth book in our series. This is because I intended to cover the Acts of the Apostles this year and wanted them to be back to back. The Book of Acts is the second volume of Luke's two volume work. Luke and Acts go together.

In ancient times it was common for the author of a two volume set to begin the second volume with a brief summary of the first. And we see that is the case here. Like the first volume, the Gospel of Luke, the second volume is addressed to Theophilus. We do not know who this person was – though it is likely that he was some sort of official who had received some training in the Christian faith.

The term “forty days” in this introduction refers to the time Jesus spent with his followers after the resurrection and before his departure from them.

SCRIPTURE

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” ⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by

them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:1-11 NRSV).

MESSAGE

The title of this book, “The Acts of the Apostles,” was not added until the second century. So far as we know, Luke never gave it a title. Because of the prominence of the Holy Spirit in this book some would like to rename it, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” But as we dig deeper we see that this book is about the followers of Jesus continuing his ministry in the world in reliance upon the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we should call it, “The Acts of the Church Alive in the Spirit.” In any case, the purpose of this series is to answer the question, “How do we become a church alive in the Spirit today?”

The scene in Acts 1 features Jesus with his disciples in one last gathering before his departure or what we call the ascension. The disciples have one more question before he leaves. They ask, “Lord, is this the TIME when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). This may seem like a strange question to us but it would have made sense to the disciples. Jesus had been talking about a kingdom and about the Holy Spirit. References to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament were almost always in the context of the restoration of the nation of Israel.

Nevertheless this is the wrong question. They were speculating about the “end times” and Jesus told them repeatedly not to do that. So he replies, “It is not for you to know the times (1:7). It is not for us to know the times. Jesus even says that he does not know the time of the end (Matthew 24:36). If he doesn’t know why do we think we should know?”

Even so, there are many people who are fascinated by what other people say about the “end times.” These are the people who make millionaires out of authors like former NASA engineer Edgar C. Whisenant who sold 4.5 million copies of his book: *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Many also bought his sequel in 1989 (think about it!).

We are not to be focused on time. We are not to be slaves to time. The Apostle Peter writes:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day (2 Peter 3:8 NRSV).

The older I get the more surprised I am by the passing of time. I have heard many others make similar comments. C. S. Lewis tells us that we are surprised by time because time is not our natural environment.

For we are so little reconciled to time that we are even astonished at it. “How he’s grown!” we exclaim, “How time flies!” as though the universal form of our experience were again and again a novelty. It is as strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised at the wetness of water. And that would be strange indeed; unless of course the fish were destined to become, one day, a land animal.¹

As my grandchildren get older, I wonder if I will be around to see them reach adulthood. Will I be around to see them make decisions about college, marriage, and careers? Will I ever hold a great-grandchild in my arms? Time seems to fly by and if I am not careful I can easily become quite fretful about this. But then I realize that the *fact* that I want to worry about this is proof that I do not *have* to worry about this. My discomfort reminds me there is a whole lot more to the story.

The second problem with the disciples’ question has to do with who they think should do all the work. They ask, “Lord, is this the time when YOU will restore the kingdom?” They think Jesus should do all the work and they can sit back and relax.

It must have been a rude awakening when Jesus tells them, in effect, “No, I’m turning that over to you. You get to continue the work I started.” It does not sink in right away. When Jesus ascends they just stand there looking up at the sky. Two angels have to come by and tell them that star gazing isn’t part of the job description. It is their task to be the hands and feet of Jesus and be witnesses to the Good News of Jesus until Jesus returns.

Now when Jesus insists his followers continue his work in the world, he has no intention of leaving them bereft of resources. They were going to receive the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit would give them the strength to do the work. We will take a closer look at what this means next week. But for now let me stress that Scripture affirms that no one can truly believe that Jesus is Lord apart from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. If you can say that Jesus is your Lord and you really mean it then you have the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes Christ real to us and empowers us to serve in Christ’s name.

The third problem with the disciples’ question has to do with whom they thought should benefit from the work. They ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to ISRAEL?” They think only their own kind should benefit. Sadly, we often have the same attitude today. Too many congregations belong to the PLU denomination. Are you familiar with the PLU denomination? PLU stands for: “People Like Us.” We welcome people like us. The mentality is, “We don’t have to change to draw people here.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1958), 115.

They need to change and become like us.” And so we become a PLU church.

There are Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of Israel. But these were misinterpreted to mean a political restoration. People wanted someone to destroy the Romans, vanquish the Gentiles, and thrust Israel into preeminence. They were not looking for a Messiah who would die on the cross while forgiving those who put him there.

But the prophecies of the restoration of Israel point to a restoration of purpose. The Lord, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, tells them, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth (Isaiah 49:6). Nations not nation.

Jesus acts to fulfill this prophecy. He says, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). As it turns out, this is an outline of the entire Book of Acts. It is the story of how the Good News of God’s love in Christ is to be shared with the whole world. There is not supposed to be a PLU church – People Like Us. Or even a PL church – People we Like. This is for all people. All walks of life. No one excluded. Our job is to build bridges and share God’s love and grace with all people.

Acts is classified as history. Most people find history boring – unless there is a personal connection. Most of you know my wife, Sandy. Do you think she would be interested in the history of an old wooden sailing vessel that was built over 200 years ago? Probably not. But if we are talking about the USS Constitution, “Old Ironsides,” the world’s oldest commissioned naval vessel still afloat, a vessel that Sandy’s great great great grandfather, Josiah Fox, helped to design and build – then it’s a different story. She is interested because now we are talking about a personal connection, a family connection.

This is also true of the Book of Acts. It is a family history. And like all family histories, it is filled with imperfect and often conflicted characters just trying to do the best they can.

The Book of Acts does not end. Yes, chapter 28 is the last chapter you will find in your Bibles. But the story does not end. The story does not end. Read chapter 28. The last written words tell us about Paul “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness” (28:31 NRSV). And then it leaves us hanging, eager to find out what happens next. And I think that, in a sense, this is intentional.

Do you want to know what happens next? I’ll tell you what happens next. We happen next. We become part of the story and it becomes our story. We have a family connection with the narrative. We learn we are not slaves to time, we anticipate eternity. We don’t shirk our responsibilities, we continue the work. We don’t put up barriers, we bring people together. We live in the Spirit until Christ returns.