

Explore the Bible Adult Leader Commentary

Session 1

Entrusted

Acts 1:1-11

Context: Acts 1:1-26

Memory Verse: Acts 1:8

Main Idea: Jesus assigned His followers the task of telling everyone about Him and His message.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Have you ever imagined what it would be like to work as a 911 emergency dispatcher? You would constantly handle desperate calls from people in need. Some callers might be crying out for help concerning an imminent threat or a crime that had been committed. Others might be pleading for assistance with a life-threatening medical emergency, a fire, or a horrible traffic accident. In many of these cases, your rapid yet calm response as a dispatcher could make the difference between life and death for someone at the scene. You must quickly understand the crisis, collect necessary information, and alert the appropriate emergency responders.

(In PSG, p. 13) When have you recently been a part of communicating important information to others?

Emergency dispatchers receive and communicate vital information that saves lives. Similarly, the Risen Christ commissioned His followers to communicate the message of salvation to a lost and dying world. The Holy Spirit would empower them to fulfill their mission.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Acts 1:1-26

Everyone loves a sequel to an exciting and unfinished story. The Gospel of Luke describes the virgin birth of Jesus, the calling of His disciples, His public ministry, and His arrest, crucifixion, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances. Luke concluded his Gospel with Jesus' command for His disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait until they were "empowered from on high" (Luke 24:49). The final verses of Luke provide a description of Jesus' ascension into heaven and the return of the disciples to Jerusalem (29:50-53). In Acts, Luke provided the first recipient of his Gospel, Theophilus, with an exciting sequel describing how these disciples and other believers were empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The Book of Acts begins where the Gospel of Luke ends, but with a more detailed description of the conversation Jesus had with His disciples immediately preceding His ascension. Jesus was crucified on the Friday of Passover (Luke 23:54), and the women discovered His empty tomb the following Sunday (24:1-3). Jesus appeared to His disciples over a period of 40 days (Acts 1:3) and then ascended into heaven. Acts 2 describes events that occurred on the Day of Pentecost; therefore, the events of Acts 1 probably occurred during the 10 days leading up to Pentecost.

Acts 1:1-11 reveals a conversation between Jesus and His disciples about their need to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. These verses provide a transition from Jesus' earthly ministry to His work through Spirit-controlled believers on earth. Acts 1:12-26 describes an intense time of prayer by the eleven faithful disciples and others who joined them to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Luke revealed how they sought God's will and chose a disciple named Matthias to replace the deceased Judas Iscariot.

The Book of Acts provides a unique and important sequel to all four Gospel accounts. Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, described the origin of the church and the expansion of Christianity from Jerusalem to the territories of the Roman Empire. He was not only a writer of history but also a participant in it, as attested by his use of "we" when he accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16).

The powerful events recorded in the Book of Acts provide today's church with important lessons about dependence upon God for divine power and instructive examples of how we should relate to one another in love as brothers and sisters in Christ. Most importantly, the focus on missions and evangelism in Acts must remind us that the mission of the church in the first century A.D. is the mission of the church today.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE REMEMBERED PROMISE (Acts 1:1-5)

¹ *I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach* ² *until the day He was taken up, after He had given orders through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen.* ³ *After He had suffered, He also presented Himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.* ⁴ *While He was together with them, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. "This," He said, "is what you heard from Me;* ⁵ *for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."*

VERSES 1-3

Luke began Acts as he began his Gospel account—with an introduction or prologue. Luke is the only New Testament writer to use this literary device that was also used by other first century A.D. authors. The prologue of the Gospel of Luke introduced the purpose and initial recipient of the account. The prologue to Acts refers back to events in the Gospel of Luke and then transitions to the continued story.

Luke referred to his Gospel account as his *first narrative*. The initial recipient of Luke and Acts was a man named *Theophilus* (the name means “friend of God” or “lover of God”). We know little about this individual but assume he was a Gentile like Luke, based on his name. Theophilus was possibly a prominent believer with social standing (“most honorable”; see Luke 1:3). Luke wrote his Gospel to supplement the information Theophilus had and to strengthen his faith (Luke 1:4). Luke summarized the events of his Gospel by describing them as *all that Jesus began to do and teach*.

The phrase *until the day He was taken up* referred to a critical event in the story of Jesus. The ascension of Jesus into heaven concluded the earthly ministry of Jesus and made possible the sending of the Holy Spirit in a new capacity promised under the New Covenant. Before the Holy Spirit could come, Jesus had to “go away” (John 16:7). Luke reminded Theophilus of the conclusion of his Gospel where Jesus *had given orders through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen* (see Luke 24:49). Jesus personally gave the command that we will examine in verse 4, so how did He give it through the Holy Spirit? Probably the best explanation is that the Holy Spirit ministered to the disciples through Jesus during His earthly ministry and would minister personally to them from within following Jesus’ ascension.

The phrase *after He had suffered* referred to the atoning work of Jesus on the cross. Luke described Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances as presenting *Himself alive accompanied by many convincing proofs*. Only Luke recorded that Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances occurred *during 40 days*. This 40-day period is one of many significant biblical events occurring over a period of 40 days (see Gen. 7:17; Ex. 24:18; Matt. 4:2). The time indication also prepares the reader for the events of Pentecost—a celebration occurring 50 days after Passover.

Significantly, Luke characterized Jesus’ teaching during His post-resurrection appearances as *speaking about the kingdom of God*. Jesus’ public ministry was characterized by the proclamation of the kingdom of God (see Luke 4:43; 6:20; 8:1). The preaching of the kingdom of God focused on the need for salvation through faith in Jesus. The kingdom of God has present and future implications. Presently, the kingdom of God expands as the gospel is preached and believers are added to the church. This is the story of Acts. The present expansion of the kingdom of God continues today wherever the gospel is preached and disciples are made. The future implication of the kingdom of God will be explained in verses 6-7.

VERSES 4-5

In verse 4 Luke referred back to one of Jesus’ post-resurrection meetings with His disciples. On that occasion Jesus ate with His disciples and instructed them *to wait for the Father's promise* of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem (Luke 24:43-49). He promised they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit *not many days from now*. Jesus’ baptism of believers with the Holy Spirit is contrasted with John who *baptized with water*. In the Gospels, John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; Mark 1:8; Matt. 3:11; John 1:33). John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance symbolized by immersion in water. He predicted Jesus’ baptism would impart the power of the Holy Spirit to the individual believer. Luke prepared his readers to understand and correctly interpret the events of Acts when the Holy Spirit would descend on the praying disciples (Acts 2).

The doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit has been controversial in the history of the church. Some have interpreted the experience as a heightened state of spirituality subsequent to salvation. The baptism of the Holy Spirit in their understanding requires absolute surrender to God and only applies to those who spiritually seek it. Additionally, some teach that the proof of receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the ability to speak in tongues. If the baptism of the Holy Spirit were an important experience to seek after salvation, we would anticipate commands in the New Testament to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Paul does command that we be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 1:18), but no writer commands that believers seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the

Holy Spirit describes the new ministry of the Holy Spirit for all believers under the New Covenant. The Holy Spirit baptizes all believers into the body of Christ at salvation (1 Cor. 12:13). The baptism of the Holy Spirit was first evidenced at Pentecost.

(In PSG, p. 16) What makes it difficult to wait for the Lord to prepare us to fulfill His purposes? What are the rewards of waiting on His timing?

THE RESURRECTION PROCLAIMED (Acts 1:6-8)

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked Him, “Lord, are You restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

VERSES 6-7

The disciples knew that something very important was about to happen, but they did not yet have a clear understanding of what it would be. Jesus had been speaking to them about the kingdom of God. As indicated in the commentary on verse 3, the concept of the kingdom of God had present and future implications. Old Testament prophecies, particularly after the Babylonian exile, predicted a renewed kingdom for Israel in fulfillment of promises made to the patriarchs. In Old Testament prophecies, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and prophecies of a renewed kingdom for Israel are frequently linked (see Isa. 32:15-20; Ezek. 39:28-29; Joel 2:28-3:1; Zech. 12:8-10). The question asked by the disciples (*Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?*) was based on these prophecies and promises made by Jesus related to His second coming (Luke 21:34-36).

Jesus did not deny that there was a future restoration of Israel but told the disciples it was not for them to know. Jesus referred to times or epochs which the Father has fixed *by His own authority*. God sovereignly has determined the precise times to conclude His plan of salvation and summation of human history on earth. Jesus told His disciples that the Father has chosen not to reveal the specific time of His second coming.

VERSE 8

Jesus pivoted the conversation from future to present events. He promised that they would soon *receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you*. The Greek noun translated *power* is the same word used to describe Jesus' miraculous powers of healing in the Gospels (see Luke 5:17). The promised power for the disciples would enable them to be Jesus' *witnesses*. Typically the word *witness* refers to someone giving personal testimony about what they have seen, heard, or experienced. The word is used here to refer to testimony given in proclamation of important truth. The witness they would be called upon to give was knowledge of Jesus and more specifically the gospel. John, in his Gospel, said of John the Baptist, “He came as a witness to testify about the light, so that all might believe through Him” (John 1:7). Jesus' use of this word establishes it as an important term in evangelism and missions. The Greek word (*martus*) is the source of our word *martyr* because of the price paid by faithful witnesses in the history of the persecuted church.

Believers today also need the power of the Holy Spirit to witness. The power is not simply to give believers courage to declare the truth of the gospel in a hostile world. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to be effective. Salvation does not occur through argumentation and human persuasion. Salvation is a spiritual transformation that can only occur through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The reference to *Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* serves as a map for the geographical expansion of the church described in Acts. The gospel would first be preached in Jerusalem because of all of its associations with God's dealings with Israel but would then rapidly expand to Gentiles. The mention of Samaria demonstrated Jesus' rejection of first-century prejudices between Jews and Samaritans. No region, country, or peoples were to be excluded from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus intended for His disciples to have global ambitions. The gospel needed to be preached everywhere because there is salvation in no one other than Jesus (Acts 4:12).

Christians today rightly place emphasis on the need for the church to assemble. The New Testament gives support to the regular assembling of God's people (see Heb. 10:25). In assembling, we worship, teach, fellowship, and use our spiritual gifts. We must not forget, however, that Jesus commands us to go to the ends of the earth with the gospel. Clearly it is easier to come together with people of like mind and faith than to go into a sometimes hostile world with the gospel. Jesus knew we would need courage and power to go and sent the Holy Spirit to provide that power. The divine power is not only to embolden us but also provides supernatural power to the words we share. Only the Holy Spirit can convict lost people of sin and regenerate them through faith in Christ.

How has the Holy Spirit empowered you as a witness for Jesus Christ?

THE RETURN PORTRAYED (Acts 1:9-11)

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⁹ After He had said this, He was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While He was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen Him going into heaven.”

VERSE 9

The Gospel of Luke (24:51) and the Book of Acts (1:2,9) provide the only descriptions of the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene about His coming ascension in His resurrection appearance to her (John 20:17), but there is no description of the event in John or any other Gospel account. Other ascensions in the Bible include Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11). The ascension of Jesus was a critical event marking the end of His earthly ministry and His assumption of rule at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Paul declared the ascension of Jesus to be the time when the Father exalted Him for His obedience and humility in suffering for our sins (Phil. 2:9-11). The ascension became an essential component of early summaries of Jesus’ life (see 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 3:21-22).

VERSES 10-11

The disciples were amazed as they watched Jesus disappear into the clouds above them. Immediately *two men in white clothes stood by them*. The sudden appearance and description of their clothes indicated they were angelic messengers sent to interpret the miracle the disciples witnessed. This event is reminiscent of the two angels who appeared at the empty tomb to explain the resurrection to the women who came to anoint Jesus’ body (Luke 24:4-9).

The disciples are addressed as *Men of Galilee*, demonstrating the angels’ knowledge of who they were. The final statement of the angels provides specific information about Jesus’ future return. They declared that Jesus *will come in the same way that you have seen Him going into heaven*. The second coming of Jesus is as certain as His ascension. When He returns, it will be a visible descent from heaven to earth. This verse rules out any return of Christ that is not bodily and visible to all. While waiting for that event, there was much for the disciples to do, and there is much for the church to do today.

The second coming or return of Jesus Christ is an important doctrine for the church. The prospect of Christ’s return brings a sense of urgency to the task of evangelism and missions. The doctrine of Christ’s return also gives hope and encouragement to those who are suffering or persecuted. The faithful servant will be rewarded for diligent service during the Master’s absence. These themes become an underlying motivation for the disciples of the early church and continue to motivate faithful Christians today.

How does the prospect of Christ’s return motivate you in your service to Christ?

KEY DOCTRINE

Evangelism and Missions

The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

BIBLE SKILL

Compare passages with related concepts.

Read Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; and John 20:21. Compare those passages to what Luke recorded in Acts 1:5-8. Take note of similar themes, teachings, and directives. How do the passages complement one another?

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Who Was Luke?” in the Spring 2016 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator.