

Tonight we will begin a close examination of the book of Acts. Acts is the sole historical sequel to the gospels, recorded in the New Testament. We know that Luke is the author, and that he was with Paul, and wrote as an eyewitness in chapters 16-20. The gospel of Luke combined with Acts is a two-volume set of the same work.

Acts is sometimes called the Acts of the Apostles, but it might be better thought of as the Acts of the Holy Spirit, or the Acts of God in the lives of key people to advance His kingdom. The eleven disciples are mentioned in chapter one, along with Matthias, who was chosen to replace Judas, but among the Apostles, only Peter and Paul are emphasized. John is mentioned as being with Peter, but none of his words are recorded. John's brother, James, is mentioned in death, but, in only one verse.

Peter's primary role seems to be to take the gospel message to the Jews, while Paul's primary role is to take the gospel to the gentiles. Peter, and the men with him, are the primary focus of chapters 1-7, with a shift in focus to Paul in chapter 8, which continues through the end of the book.

We can be pretty certain of the timeframe for the writing of this book. Luke would have surely spoken of the destruction of the temple if that had already occurred, so he had to write this before 70 AD. The book ends with Paul in house arrest with the freedom to continue to spread the gospel. The time of Paul's death is traditionally held as being between 66-68 AD. The Nero persecution and the burning of Rome occurred in 64 AD, so a best guess would be that Paul wrote this book between 60-62 AD.

Acts gives us an apologetic and defense of the gospel message. It informs the context of Paul's ministry and shows that Jesus died for all people. It contains much theology and informs our understanding of eschatology wherever we see a reference to the kingdom of God. The overarching emphasis is on the sovereignty of God and how the gospel continues to advance against all odds.

In our passage this evening, Luke gives us the general background for his book, and presents the theme for all that follows. Let's discover these things together as we read Acts 1:1-8.

The first phrase, in verse one, ties the book of Acts to the gospel of Luke. In his gospel, Luke says that he made a careful investigation by interviewing the eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and ministry, and recorded them in an orderly fashion for a man named Theophilus. Acts then is the result of the second half of Luke's investigation. There has been much speculation over the man Theophilus. Some say he was a made up figure, or Jew with a gentile name, others say he was a gentile. The bible doesn't tell us who he was, but he may have been a patron who hired Luke and financed his research.

Verses one and two show that Acts is a continuation of Luke's account of the ministry of Christ. The event that naturally divides the two books is the ascension of Christ to the throne of God, and Acts proceeds with how the gospel message spread through Holy Spirit filled people. Luke ends his gospel with an account of the ascension, and he expands on it in the second half of chapter one in Acts. The instructions that Jesus gave the Apostles that are mentioned in verse two are given in verse 8. They were to wait in Jerusalem until God gave them the Holy Spirit, and that they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

For born again believers, and as an aid in our witness, verse three stands out, and should give great confidence to everyone who believes that the bible is the inspired word of God. After

Jesus sacrificed Himself, He showed Himself to those who had trusted Him, and He gave many convincing proofs that He was alive.

I often say that a person cannot be saved without faith, but ours is not a blind faith. Christianity is an informed faith. We have the testimony of God's inspired word, which tells us that Jesus really did rise from the grave. We have recorded in the pages of the New Testament the eyewitness testimonies of people who knew Him personally during His earthly ministry. They saw Jesus crucified and buried three days and three nights in a tomb, and after His resurrection they testified, Jesus is alive; we have seen Him with our own eyes.

Some placed their hands in the marks in His flesh, which He suffered in the crucifixion. In Luke's gospel he records appearances of the resurrected Christ to the women at the tomb, and that on the road to Emmaus, Jesus appeared to two other disciples. He appeared to the disciples in the upper room on at least two occasions. Paul records that Jesus appeared many times and to at least 500 people on one occasion. Here Luke says that Jesus appeared over a period of 40 days, and he gave many convincing proofs that He was alive.

Jesus spoke to the people. He sat down and ate with them. He revealed Himself in such a way that those who had trusted Him were certain that it really was Jesus, and although He had been dead, He was now alive, and with them. Here Luke gives us a brief summary of all these eyewitness accounts, and I am so glad that he did.

Without the resurrection of Christ, we would have no gospel. The good news is that Jesus defeated sin and death once for all, and if we follow Him in life, He gives us that victory and eternal life with Him in paradise. The bible is brutally truthful in its presentation of the facts throughout the history it records. The word of God contains no rebuttal, not even a hint, which could be used to deny the truth of the resurrection. The Jews could not deny the resurrection, because the eyewitnesses were continuing to claim that they had seen Jesus with their own eyes.

We receive the gospel message in faith, but passages such as these give us great confidence in our faith. Jesus really did rise from the grave, just as the prophets, and Jesus Himself said that He would. For 40 days He showed Himself to hundreds of people, and He taught them about the kingdom of God.

There is a sense in which the kingdom of God is all around you. It is in your heart. The kingdom of God is advancing, and you and I have a role in God's plan to further advance it. But, the phrase, the kingdom of God, used here has an eschatological meaning. The kingdom of God is promised in the future, and has not yet reached its full development.

Since we know that Jesus was teaching the disciples on the subject, it is natural for the disciples to ask in verse 6 if Jesus was going to restore the kingdom of Israel at this time. This passage gives us insight into the end times. The culmination of the events leading up to the end is that the kingdom will be restored to Israel.

This is in fulfillment with God's covenant with the Patriarchs and His commitment to His chosen people, Israel. It is also a reminder that if we are going to attempt to interpret end times prophecy, we must view events through Jewish eyes. We cannot be self-centered and believe that unfulfilled prophecy is all about us. Everything centers on Israel, God's chosen people. We see the godlessness in our own culture, which points to the condition of the world in the end times, but our eyes are focused on Israel, and the events that threatened her security in the world.

If we back up to verse four, Jesus was eating with His disciples, once again giving convincing proof that He was alive, and told them to wait in Jerusalem for the gift that the Father had promised. This is of course a reference to the Pentecost event where the Holy Spirit came upon all believers and the church was born. Notice that the Holy Spirit is a gift from God. No

one can whip up the Holy Spirit through a surrender to their emotions. No one can manufacture the Holy Spirit in his or her life. The Holy Spirit is a gift from God. It is God's personal presence in the heart and soul of any person who surrenders their life in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ that empowers the believer for God's purposes.

In verse 5, the Greek verb used for baptized, means to be immersed. The people originally identified with John the Baptist, through immersion in water. The faithful in Christ, on the other hand, would identify with Jesus through immersion in the Holy Spirit. We still baptize people who profess their faith in Jesus Christ, because that is what Jesus instructed His disciples to do. But the baptism by water is just a symbol, and a testimony, of a believer that they have been baptized by, or immersed in, the Holy Spirit. Through faith in Christ, God sets His seal of ownership on a person. This is why we place such an emphasis that people be baptized as born again believers. For without the experience of new life through faith in Jesus Christ, baptism would mean nothing.

Notice that Jesus warned His disciples not to get ahead of God, and not to go out into the world in their own strength. They needed the gift before they would be equipped to do the work required. There is a good lesson for us in this as well. All that we can offer God is our obedience, and trust that He will work His power in our lives so that we can be a part of what He is doing in the world. If we get out there in our own strength, we are destined to fail, but if we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us, guide us, and empower us, God can do great things in us and through us.

Based upon the truths Jesus taught His disciples, it was natural for them to ask if it was time for God to restore the kingdom to Israel. Jesus said instead of worrying about the time and dates, here is what is important. Here is what is going to happen right away. This is what you are to focus on until God says its time.

Jesus says that you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. Since God has not restored the kingdom to Israel yet, Jesus instructions to the disciples stand for His disciples today. As believers in Christ, we are to be empowered by His Holy Spirit. We are empowered against the devil's schemes, so that he won't trip us up, we are empowered for life so that we live in faith, and we are empowered for God's purposes.

In the second half of verse 8, the words you will be, are in the imperative future tense. Imperative means that it must be this way. There are no other options. Jesus says you have to be empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to carry out my will. And what was Jesus will? Jesus' will is that His disciples be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus' words in verse 8 gives us the theme of the whole book of Acts. Luke writes a historical account that reveals how God fulfilled His purpose in the disciples' lives, and by extension, how He continues to fulfill His purposes in the lives of believers today. At the end of Chapter one we see about a hundred and twenty believers gathered with the Apostles waiting for the promised Holy Spirit. In Chapter two, the Holy Spirit comes, just as Jesus said He would. Full of the Holy Spirit, Peter gets up and preaches the first Christian sermon, and three thousand people get saved, the church is born, and God begins to work in the lives of the believers to carry out His purposes.

In chapter 8, we are introduced to a man named Saul, who later takes the Greek name Paul. God uses Paul as His primary instrument for opening the gospel up to the entire world. Over the coming months we will take a close look at how God worked to grow the church, and offer salvation in Jesus name to all people, including you and me.

The book of acts informs our faith. It is a great encouragement to all who study its' content. But, it is only precious to those who believe and accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Jesus was God in the flesh. He sacrificed Himself for our sins. Because He was sinless in life, death had no hold on Him, and after three days in the grave He arose. He is alive today and calling to repentance and faith everyone who is still lost in their sin.

If there are any here tonight in need of the Savior, this can be your time of salvation and a new life through faith in Jesus Christ. Just ask anyone around you, "How can I be saved." If they have trouble answering your questions, then I, or one of the other leaders in the church, will be happy to help.