

## Lesson 1: Acts 1:1-11 The Commission of Jesus Christ

### Introduction

Welcome to lesson 1 of, *Interpreting the Book of Acts*. If you enjoy history, I imagine you already enjoy the book of Acts, the inspired biblical account of the early spread of Christianity. If you do not typically enjoy history, Acts has a lot for you to consider. I am not even sure if it is correct to call Acts a history, certainly not the kind of typical history we are used to with lots of names and dates and battles and political parties. Acts is not that. Acts is historical. And Acts is written as a narrative. But as with all biblical narrative, the goal of the author goes well-beyond a record of events. The book of Acts is theological history.

Acts gives us an authoritative, inspired interpretation of a critical moment in human history. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ divides human existence into two major eras. There is the before Christ era and the after Christ era. Together with the Gospels, the book of Acts serves as a bridge from before Christ era to after Christ era.

Acts is a book of transitions. We are transitioning from the leadership of Jesus to the leadership of the Apostles, from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from a primarily Jewish people of God to a multi-ethnic people of God. This historical context of transition provides a backdrop for Luke to help believers define the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we see that Gospel worked out through transition.

In the fifth chapter of his Gospel, Luke describes a confrontation between Jesus and a group of Pharisees. Put off by Jesus' reception of tax collectors and other sinful people, the Pharisees question the behavior of Jesus' disciples. Jesus responds,

<sup>37</sup> No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. <sup>38</sup> But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. <sup>39</sup> And no one, after drinking old *wine* wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'

The Pharisees were committed to the Old Covenant and to their own understanding of Old Covenant institutions and rituals. They had a structure, a skin, a container in which the wine of relationship with God, the wine of their spirituality could go. The old wine is good. They have no desire for new wine or a new wineskin. They are open to the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah as long as it looks, and it tastes, and it feels just like what they already have.

Jesus says, "That's not going to work." The New Covenant is something new. It is not going to taste and smell the same as the Old. And if you try to shove it into the same form, it is going to burst that form. This is not simply an upgrade of all the same rituals and institutions you are used to. Now, we know that Jesus also affirms and values the Old Covenant. He came to fulfill all of the Law, not a bit of the Law is being rejected. But the Old Covenant Law has fulfilled its purpose and now we're moving into something new. And there is going to be both continuity and discontinuity in that move. Now, I reject replacement theology. The New Covenant is not simply a replacement of Old Covenant, where we don't need it anymore and it has no value to Christians, where we doubt that it was a good thing. Christians do not, or at least ought not, dismiss the Old Covenant simply because the New has come. The New flows from and fulfills the Old. We need to resist a rejection or any kind of devaluation of the Old while also embracing the radical change of the New. But we do not want change just for change's sake. We want the new wineskin that Jesus' offers.

And this new wineskin is not going to be intuitive to those who grew up under the old. Jewish believers are going to face significant challenges letting go of what they ought to let go of. And new Gentile believers are going to face another significant challenge of being tempted to bring pagan

values with them into the New Covenant. So, the book of Acts helps us understand and embrace the new wineskin that is the New Covenant, what really is the Gospel.

Right away, the first eleven verses of Acts emphasize for us the transitory nature of this period. Jesus has risen from the dead, but he has not yet returned to Heaven. Jesus has given leadership to a small movement of Jewish believers dedicated to proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Now he commissions his apostles to take over leadership and he ascends into Heaven. The transition has begun. What now?

That's the big question hanging over the first chapters of Acts. Jesus began something. He has left. What happens now to this little group of mainly Galilean followers?

### **Background of the Book of Acts**

Let's start with just the first verse of Acts and address some background information about the book.

Acts 1:1 begins with these words, "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach..." Consistent with other ancient writings, the author does not identify himself. He's not going to identify himself anywhere else in the book. Ancient Greek letters, epistles, like those of Paul and Peter were an exception, being written with a "to" and a "from" in the greeting. We tend to know who wrote those. Acts is not a letter, so no author is specified.

Early Christian tradition attributes Acts to Luke, the traveling companion of Paul who, also according to tradition, wrote the Gospel of Luke. We do find a couple of clues in Acts. The narration is mostly in third person, telling us that Peter did this, or Paul did that. But then in chapter 16 verse 10 the narration changes to first person, "And when [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia." Did you hear the "we"? "We sought to go into Macedonia." The author is not just telling us about the travels of Paul from a third person point of view. The author is with Paul. "We went into Macedonia." And that "we" shows up again in chapters 20, and 21, 27 and 28. So the author is there.

In his own letters, Paul mentions Luke three times, once each in Colossians, 2 Timothy and Philemon. In Colossians 4:14 Paul calls Luke "the beloved physician." To the best of our knowledge, Luke was a Gentile traveling companion of Paul trained as a physician.

In this series, I am going to trust the accuracy of Church tradition that this Luke, this traveling companion of Paul, wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Here is our first verse again, "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach..." This is not Luke's first work. He references another work calling it "the first account." And it was about "all that Jesus began to do and teach," which sounds an awful lot like a Gospel.

Acts 1:1 references a person named Theophilus. The only other reference to the name Theophilus in the Bible appears at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. Taking the two references of Theophilus together, we have what appears to be a two-book series, covering the life of Jesus and the spread of the early church.

The first verses of Luke's Gospel tell us a little more about Theophilus and a little more about Luke. This is Luke 1:1-4,

<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, <sup>3</sup> it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

The name “Theophilus” combines the two words “theos” and “phileo”, meaning “loved by God” or “lover of God.” It’s a great name for a Christian. It reminds me of John’s term for himself in his Gospel, “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

And because the name has such a great meaning for a Christian, it has been suggested that Theophilus is a literary character made up by the author. We are all to be Theophilus, loved by God and loving God, earnestly seeking to know the truth about Jesus Christ, which is here recorded in Luke and in the book of Acts. And by all means, be a Theophilus. Be a lover of God. Seek to know the exact truth of what you have been taught. But just because the name works so well as an exhortation to readers of Luke and Acts, that is no reason to think Theophilus is not also a historical figure. The name was a common one. And Luke’s address treats him as a real person.

Luke says he is writing, so that Theophilus might “know the exact truth about the things [he had] been taught.” So, possibly Theophilus is already a believer. He is at least an interested person who has already been taught about Jesus. Luke honors him with the words, “most excellent Theophilus,” making us wonder whether Theophilus was Luke’s patron. Could he have been a wealthy Christian who supported Luke in his ministry of the Word? We don’t know. That’s certainly a possibility. Could he have been an influential Roman who could urge for Paul’s release? That’s where Paul is. He is under house arrest at the end of book of Acts. Could Luke be writing to this Roman who cares about Christ, who cares about Paul, giving him all this information so that he could argue for the release of Paul? It is a possibility. We really do not know that much about Theophilus at all. So in a sense, we’re just guessing.

Even without knowing much about Theophilus, Luke’s reference to him helps contextualize his writings. It gives us a sense of the real. Luke and Acts were written in such a way that a real person, somebody like Theophilus, living in the first century, a real Gentile, a non-Jew, might understand accurately the events and teaching of Jesus Christ and the spread of the early Christian movement. And you can imagine him, you can imagine this man wanting to know more. You can even put yourself in his place, “I want to know more about the life of Christ. I want to know more about the spread of Gospel, and what is the Gospel and how it went out from Israel into different nations.”

Luke’s introduction to his Gospel also gives us a little insight into his process. You know, what does Luke believe he was doing. He acknowledges that others had recorded events and teaching of Jesus, and things received from eyewitnesses. Luke is not himself an eyewitness. He is not even Jewish.

But Luke believed that he has something to contribute to the record. In writing his Gospel he may have been motivated to provide a version of the life of Christ more accessible to a Gentiles, like himself. He certainly seems to have been motivated to write about the birth of Christ. If we don’t get the Gospel of Luke, we don’t have most of what we know about the birth story. Luke also seems motivated as a travel companion of Paul to give us Paul’s story, covered in the second half of the book of Acts, leading some to suggest that Acts is primarily intended as a defense of Paul. And I think there is something to that, though I think it more accurate to say that Luke was motivated by a defense of the Gospel of which Paul was an apostle, and in defending Paul he is really defending the Gospel preached by Paul. So Acts is about the Gospel. What is this Gospel? Let’s define it. Let’s defend it.

Luke indicates that he has consulted eyewitnesses. He has investigated. He has written things down in a consecutive order. And that’s his language. These are the values of a historian who desires to communicate events truthfully. You know, he was a physician, he was a man of science who understood order, who understood the importance of being exact and getting facts right. We might wonder when did Luke do this, when did he carry out his investigation into the life of Christ. Since he indicates in the book of Acts that he was present in Israel at the end of the book, it is plausible to

think Luke took time during Paul's two-year imprisonment in Caesarea to do on-location research, and perhaps he visited Nazareth, and the Sea of Galilee, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem, and he met with people, and he gathered information.

Luke may have conducted research during Paul's imprisonment. But when did he actually produce the finished manuscripts of Luke and Acts? When were they available? Well, the book of Acts takes us up to Paul's house arrest in Rome. Tradition suggests that Paul was released and able to continue his ministry but was imprisoned a second time and executed during the persecution of Rome. An early dating of Acts assumes that Luke has ended his story when he has brought events up to his present time; that he actually is ending his story while Paul is under his first imprisonment in Rome. If that is the case, Acts may have been written just after 60 AD. Certainly before the mid-sixties, when Paul was executed.

Proponents for a later dating of Acts point out that Luke's Gospel emphasizes prophecies about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. And it is inferred from that that Luke did this after the temple's destruction in 70 AD to remind readers that Jesus had made these prophecies, so when the temple falls people need to remember that Jesus knew this was going to happen and he prophesied it. And so, Luke gives that emphasis in his Gospel. And since Acts was written after Luke, this view argues that the date of both books comes in the early 70s, after the destruction of the temple. It seems unlikely that Acts would have been written much later, since Luke makes no reference to Paul's letters, suggesting that those letters were being collected and circulated more after the writing of Acts, though not much later, since 2 Peter already refers to Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:16). Taking either point of view, whether we're looking at the early 60's or early 70's, the book of Acts was written very close to the events recorded by a person - Luke - who was actually an eyewitness to some of those events. He was traveling with Paul.

So, to sum up, the book of Acts serves along with the Gospel of Luke as a two-part work that bridges us from the era before Jesus to the era after Jesus. Acts is written very close to the time of the events by a traveling companion of Paul who wants us to understand the truth about the early spread of Christianity and uses the true story of those events to define and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so that we might rightly understand the new wineskin of the New Covenant and not try to understand our walk with Jesus according to the old wineskin of the Old Covenant or the old wineskin of pagan belief. We are asking with the apostles, "What now? What does life with God look like now that Jesus has ascended into Heaven?"

### **Witness and the Spirit (Acts 1:1-11)**

Let's continue on in this lesson with our first passage, the introduction to the book found in Acts 1:1-11.

<sup>1</sup> The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when He was taken up *to heaven*, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. <sup>3</sup> To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over *a period of* forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," *He said*, "you heard of from Me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." <sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; <sup>8</sup> but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." <sup>9</sup> And

after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.<sup>10</sup> And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them.<sup>11</sup> They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”

*Transition from Gospel to Acts (1:1-5)*

Luke begins Acts with an overlap to the end of Luke. The Gospel ends with Jesus appearing to the disciples, commissioning them as his witnesses, affirming the promise of the Holy Spirit, and ascending into Heaven. Acts begins with Jesus appearing to his disciples, commissioning them as witnesses, affirming the promise of the Holy Spirit, and ascending into Heaven. As the Gospel ends, so Acts begins. This overlapping is a feature of the Luke’s literary style that we’re going to see at every major section of Acts. In this case, the overlapping is between two books, and it’s creating a connection between Luke and Acts. So rather than two blocks placed side by side where one clearly ends and the other one clearly begins, Luke and Acts are like two puzzle pieces that click into place. They’re linked together.

Verses 1:1-5 of Acts point us back to Luke. We can read here that Jesus, “presented himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of things concerning the kingdom of God,” and then if we want to know more about that, we go back to the last chapter of Luke and what we find is Jesus appearing to the disciples and teaching them about himself.

Luke 24 records Jesus walking with them, and talking with them, and eating with them. Jesus also says to them,

“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have (Luke 24:38-39).”

That’s what Luke is saying here next. Jesus gave the disciples proof of his bodily resurrection. This is the Christian hope. Jesus truly did rise from the dead, and he did so with a physical body. His resurrection is not an idea, it is not a metaphor, it is not a vision, it is not a dream. Jesus rose from the dead as a human being in the flesh and he gave proofs of his resurrection to his disciples. And just as Jesus has risen from the dead, this is our hope also, that we will rise from the dead with new bodies. And the disciples are an eyewitness to this truth. The historical resurrection of Jesus is critical to the witness.

We also get in the Gospel an idea of what Jesus talked about with his disciples during these appearances. Luke 24:27, “Beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, [Jesus] explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.” And again in 24:44, “All things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” The apostolic message about Jesus is grounded both in the teaching that Jesus gave the apostles directly about himself but also in the understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus communicated to them.

It’s on the day of Pentecost, that is coming very shortly, when Peter preaches about Jesus with reference to the prophet Joel and to the Psalms of David, how do we think Peter developed his understanding of these passages? Well, he could have put two and two together himself, but we read here that he got it from Jesus. Jesus was his Old Testament professor. Jesus taught the disciples how the Old Testament scriptures point to him; how Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. Peter learned these things from Jesus.

Jesus prepared his disciples to be his witnesses by helping them understand who he is according to Scripture. That's a necessary requirement for witness, that the witness understands and communicates not his own truth, but the truth of Scripture. In the New Covenant, Word and Spirit act hand in hand. So, it's not going to be enough to witness simply by the Word, but the expectation is by the Word and Spirit. Disciples are going to perform a ministry of the Word, they are also going to baptize in the Holy Spirit. They're going to witness to the Word. They must witness in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And for this reason, Jesus is not ready for the witness to begin. Even though we see it at the end of the Gospel of Luke that he taught them all these things, and we know that they had been there - they're eyewitnesses - so they have a lot they can say. Nevertheless, they must wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon them. And the Holy Spirit will not be sent until Jesus first returns to the Father.

#### *The Commission of Jesus Christ (1:6-8)*

Let's move on and look at the commissioning. This is in Acts 1:6-8. And Jesus makes very clear here, just as he did at the end of the Gospel of Luke, he's making clear here this connection between the Spirit and the witness. 6-8 again,

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; <sup>8</sup> but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

First, here we have the disciples asking a question. And we might wonder why they are still going on about Jesus reigning as king over Israel. The word is, "Is it at this time that you are restoring the kingdom of Israel?" Wasn't that one of the main misconceptions Jews had about Jesus during his whole ministry?

Yes, it was a major misconception. People believed that Jesus came to make Israel great again and to re-establishing the throne of David and to throw off Roman rule. That's what they wanted from Jesus. But we do not have to assume that the disciples are so dull or disconnected from the plan of Jesus that they're thinking that, that they're thinking that was the whole reason that Jesus came. The early misconception also denied the validity of a crucified Messiah. But these disciples, they've accepted and believed that Jesus had to first come to die to provide forgiveness of all humankind. And they had believed that Jesus is more than a man. He is more than a son of David. He is also God. So, some of their misunderstandings have been rectified.

With that accomplished, now that they've believed that Jesus is God, they believe that he had to die and they believe he is risen again, so with all that accomplished, what happens next? The disciples are processing all that Jesus is saying and they're trying to understand the plan from the cross and from the empty tomb onwards. Jesus never denied that he would set up an eternal earthly kingdom promised to the son of David. He simply argued that there was more. Not only is he the son of David. He is also the son of God. And not only will he reign. He must also die.

The disciples accept Jesus as God and king. They accept him as lion and lamb. They saw the lamb slain, now they are wondering when will the lion reign. And they are hoping the answer is "Now."

Jesus, however, in a way that must seem very familiar to the disciples from what we've seen in all the Gospels, their time with him, Jesus declines to give them an answer to their question. He tells them it is not for them to know times or epochs fixed by God. And the use of the "epoch" there might be a

hint to them how long this might be before the earthly throne of David is established. They're not to know about the epochs of God.

Also, in a way familiar to the disciples, Jesus takes their question, and he may not answer it, but he communicates to them something that they really need to know. It gets more to the heart of the matter. They don't need to know the plan for the second coming of Jesus. They do need to know the answer to the question, "What's next?"

Jesus has already told them, more than once, that their job now is to serve as witnesses to him in the world. The most famous wording of the Great Commission is from Matthew 28:18-20, which begins, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..." That Commission Jesus gave on a mountain in Galilee.

Luke records for us here the last version of the Commission spoken by Jesus just outside of Jerusalem, right before he ascended into Heaven, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses." This is what is next. You will wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit has come on you and then you witness. The restoration of Israel is a hope for the future. Do not worry about that. It will come when it comes. For now, do this. Be my witnesses in the power of the Holy Spirit.

If you have your Bible out with you, you really should highlight or circle or underline Acts 1:8. This is as close as we come to a purpose statement for the book of Acts. You should memorize it. The power of the Holy Spirit and witness to Jesus Christ. Both of those themes are going to run through the book. And both themes take on a unique aspect in the New Covenant.

Though the Holy Spirit does empower certain Old Covenant believers for special acts of service, the work of the Holy Spirit indwelling New Covenant believers enables a new kind of spiritual experience that was not available until after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. You know, Moses prophesied about this in Deuteronomy 30:6, that after exile God would do a new work in the hearts of believers to enable them to love God. They are missing something under Old Covenant, something they need and Moses, looking ahead, promised, "You're going to get it but it's going to come after the exile." In Jeremiah 31:33, Jeremiah connects that something new with the New Covenant. There's a new work that's going to be done. He calls it, putting the Law of God into the hearts of believers.

Jesus connects this new work in his own teaching with the promised helper of John 14-16. And there, Jesus gives us the metaphor of the true vine in chapter 15, "I am the true vine...abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in me." Jesus is the branch. Spiritual vitality flows through him. We cannot bring about the spiritual fruit of the New Covenant unless we abide in Christ through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit.

We know that Jesus intends for us to understand the metaphor of the vine, the spiritual relationship with the Holy Spirit, because both chapters that flank John 15 include a promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "After I go, I'm sending him to you." And in John 14 the emphasis is on the Holy Spirit empowering the believer to live a life of loving obedience to the Father. It's very Deuteronomy language. And in John 16 the emphasis is on the Holy Spirit empowering the believer as a witness in the world. In both chapters, the disciples are taught that the Holy Spirit is not coming until after Jesus ascends. This is a new reality that's made available in the New Covenant.

And so here, the apostles are supposed to wait for it. They are to sit. They're not waiting for the second coming of Jesus, which we don't know how long that's going to take. They are waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, which is very imminent. It's coming. And then they are to be witnesses.

The act of witnessing is also not completely new to the New Covenant. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests. That means that they were to witness to the nations of God. Priests mediate relationship with God. They are supposed to try to help bring other people into relationship with Yahweh. There is, however, a new content to New Covenant witnessing. And identifying that new content of the New Covenant is going to be one of our tasks as we go through the book of Acts, so we do not want to assume too much about that message, the witness from the start. We want to pay close attention and see how did these early believers witness, what is the content, what were they driven to tell people. But it is safe to say that the witness is going to be about Jesus Christ. And this knowledge of Jesus Christ is something that the prophets of the Old Covenant long to know about - more specifically, to understand, but they never saw how exactly this was going to work out. It has now worked out. And that gives content to New Covenant witness. Eternal life now comes through faith in the name of Jesus. So, the witness is going to be connected to Jesus. The witness is not about the Holy Spirit. We don't want to confuse that. Holy Spirit and witness go together. But they go together because the Holy Spirit empowers witness about Jesus Christ just as Jesus taught in John 16:14, "He shall glorify me; for he shall take of mine and disclose it to you."

We are going to follow these two themes closely as we observe Acts, the empowering of the Holy Spirit, you know, what really is that? And the Gospel witness to Jesus Christ. So, what is the message they were sharing? And when I use that word "Gospel" through our series, I'm not going to be referring to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I'm going to be referring to the basic Christian message that is being proclaimed by the witnesses recorded in Acts. We will be paying attention to the definition of the Gospel provided by Luke as he records this movement from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and towards the remotest parts of the earth.

That expansion out is the second half of our key verse Acts 1:8. So we get these two themes of Spirit and witness but we're getting more than that, "You will be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." The progression of the Gospel is going to be described as a geographic expansion from the city they are in at this moment, they're in Jerusalem, and it's going to go into the surrounding countryside, the nearby area of Judea and Samaria, and then it's going to go out to remote parts of the earth. Some versions say, "to the ends of the earth." The disciples are being commissioned to witness to the Gospel everywhere.

At the same time, this geographic expansion is also an ethnic expansion, moving from Jews in Jerusalem and Judea out to Samaria. The Samaritans are a cultural mix between Jew and Gentile, and then out to all the peoples of the earth. And we're going to follow both the geographic and ethnic expansion of the Gospel through the book.

#### *The Ascension of Jesus Christ (1:9-11)*

Jesus has commissioned his disciples. Now it is time for Jesus to go. Acts 1:9-11,

<sup>9</sup> And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."

The angels answer the question of timing for the disciples. When will the kingdom of Israel be restored? When Jesus comes back on the clouds of heaven just as he has gone up. Do not stand around waiting for Jesus to come back. You will know when it is time for him to come back when you actually see him coming.

Believers of every generation talk about the second coming of Jesus. We know there are going to be wars and there are going to be plagues. These are some of the signs. The Covid-19 pandemic seems to be strengthening the conviction of many that the end is near. And the end could be near. I don't know. I am reminded of Jesus' teaching to the disciples that the signs of the end will be like a woman in labor. Tribulations are going to occur in successive waves. And if it is like labor, the present pain, whatever pain you're in right now, whatever tribulations are going on, it's always going to seem like it must be the. Can it get worse? Until the next pain comes. And then you know it can get worse. It's not over.

So, when I hear people talking about unrest in the Middle East, I think to myself, when has there not been unrest in the Middle East? And why would we think it's not going to keep happening? And when people talk about this leader or that coalition of governments setting up a new order, I think, didn't every generation have their possible explanations of the anti-Christ? And when someone refers to Covid-19, I think wasn't there a Spanish flu before that, and people thought it was the end? And the black plague before that? People certainly thought it was the end. I mean, could Jesus come back during this generation? Certainly! Could his coming still be hundreds of years away? I do not know why not. I am sure that the crusaders who captured Jerusalem in the 11<sup>th</sup> century would have scoffed at the idea that Christ's return was still at least 1000 years in the future. But that's the metaphor of the woman in labor, that the pains are going to keep coming and you don't know if the baby is coming right now, or do we still have hours to wait.

So, we are to eagerly look forward to the return of Christ. But we're not supposed to just stand around, looking into the sky. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?" Do you want to know when Jesus is coming back? You'll see it, I promise you won't miss it. He is coming and everybody is going to know it's him. Right now, the Holy Spirit is coming to empower you. Ready yourself for that, so that when the Spirit comes you might engage in the work of the Gospel to be my witnesses. This is your mission, Church. In the power of the Holy Spirit witness to me in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the remotest parts of the earth, so that people of all nations and every might hear the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## Life Change Through Bible Study

With this lesson, we begin the new observetheword.com series *Interpreting the Acts of the Apostles*.

These lessons are intended to supplement your own study of the text as you seek to interpret the meaning of God's word and apply his truth to your life.

Good Bible interpretation comes first and foremost from good observation. This is the lost art of Bible study. It is quite natural to come to a Bible text full of assumptions about things you have heard or to seek to give the text some special, spiritual or religious meaning or to latch on to points of comparison to your own life. When you do this, you are bringing meaning with you and placing it on top of the text, rather than letting the text speak for itself, which, in the end, is a simpler process.

The drive to come up with spiritual meanings and applications of the text skips over the most important task of basic reading. Simply put, observation asks, "What does the text say?" Forget that you have read it before. And read it again, slowly, thoughtfully, just taking note of what you see.

Interpretation comes next and goes a step further asking, "What does the text mean?" Having paid close attention to what the text says, some of the interpretation has already become clear. But questions are also raised. You will not be able to answer all the questions. After observe, observe, observe, the second key to good interpretation is context. As my Bible Study Methods teacher used to drill into us, "Context is king!" A biblical phrase means what it means in its literary context of sentence, paragraph, section, and book. Pay close attention to the immediate paragraphs and also to the author's flow of thought through the whole work. Context also applies to the historical situation. A biblical phrase means what it means in the historical context of the original author and original audience. What was Luke communicating to his first readers?

Application follows observation and interpretation, asking, "What does this mean for me?" That is the individual way to phrase application. You could also ask in the corporate sense of your family or your church, "What does it mean for us?"

Starting with observation of the biblical text, we are not looking for great spiritual insights in religious language. We are simply reading. We are assuming that the author has something to communicate, and we are paying close attention to what the author says and the way he says what he says.

To observe well, we need to slow our brains down with some method for observation. One way to do that is to write the text out in a notebook. Writing the text forces you to slow down and pay attention to the words. Or we can ask the journalist questions of who, what, when, why, where, how. Who is mentioned in the text? What are they doing? Why are they doing that? Or why does God do that? Or why did the author include this? (You can ask endless why questions.) Where is this taking place? How is the text telling me to act? If the answer to the question is apparent, right it down. Questions also make great observations to pursue for interpretation. Write down your questions.

Good observation really does require pen and paper (or computer and keyboard). Get a journal. Grab some colored pens if you like. Set aside some time in a quiet place. Start with prayer. Then just read God's word and take note of what you see.

At the end of each lesson, I have included some questions that might be helpful. The first question is always the same. It is the most important question and should take most time. If you discuss these questions in a group, begin with 15 minutes of silence in which everyone reads the text on their own and writes down at least three observations of simple things they notice in the text. Start your discussion by going around and having everyone share a short observation (not an interpretation) of something they noticed.

## Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 1:1-11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Read the beginning of the Gospel of Luke 1:1-4. What stands out to you in this passage? What is similar to the beginning of Acts? What information is included that is not repeated in Acts?
3. Read the end of the Gospel of Luke 24:36-53. How much of this is repeated in the beginning of Acts? Do these events provide a good ending to the book of Luke? Why? Do these events provide a good beginning to the book of Acts? Why?
4. What question might the disciples be asking in Acts 1:5? Consider the context set up by the end of Luke and beginning of Acts? What is going on at this moment when they ask? What do they want to know?
5. Observe Acts 1:8 again closely. What stands out to you in this one verse? Write down at least two more observations.
6. From what you already know about the book of Acts, how does Acts 1:8 relate to the message and structure of the book?
7. What stands out to you in Acts 1:9-11?
8. From these initial words in the book of Acts, what do you understand about the purpose of Acts? What is Luke intending to communicate through Acts and how is this different from his Gospel?