

## #30 - Ascension/Great Commission - Acts 1:1-14

### Engage:

Even though we have left the four gospel accounts, we still have one more recorded event concerning the life of Jesus. In his gospel, Luke presented the earthly ministry of Jesus as He lived in His physical body. The book of Acts written by Luke tells of the ministry of Jesus as He lived in His spiritual body, the church. Yes, everyone needs to know about the life of Jesus on earth, but we also need to move on to living out the life of Christ as members of His body, the church.

“The book of Acts—written by the beloved physician Luke—begins where his gospel ends. The initial fulfillment of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) is seen in the early growth of the New Testament church. Christ’s last words before His ascension (Acts 1:8) concisely outline the book’s contents: ‘Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem [chapters 1-7], and in all Judea, and in Samaria [8-12], and unto the uttermost part of the earth’ [13-28].” *DW*, November, 2003

“You won’t have to read far in the book of Acts before you make a significant discovery. The 1<sup>st</sup> century church was not wired together by organization, raised together by habit, or frozen together by tradition, rather, it was melted together by prayer.” *DW*, November, 1982

### Thoughts about the story:

Luke presented only a glimpse of the ascension as he closed his gospel (Luke 24:51-53). Here he continued the narrative with more details about the ascension of Jesus. This experience and the last words of Jesus on this earth continued to be a reminder of their calling throughout the rest of their lives.

Acts 1:1-4 – The “last minute” teaching of Jesus before His ascension to heaven

The “former book” about what Jesus did and taught is the gospel of Luke (See Luke 1:1-4). Luke’s gospel and the book of Acts were written to the same person: “Theophilus.” This name means “friend of God” or “one who loves God.” It has been suggested that Luke was just referring to people who love God, rather than a real person. There are other suggestions about who this person could have been, but we really can’t know for sure who he was.

The educational preparation the disciples had received over the past 3 plus years included the teaching of Jesus, watching Him in action and seeing His passion for people. This did not end until He was taken back up to heaven.

During the time before His ascension the disciples never knew when Jesus was going to appear to them after He was resurrected. Point: Our situation is similar to theirs in that we don’t know when and how Jesus is going to present Himself to us in our life or when it will be that He will return – whether it will be before we die or afterwards.

Jesus took every opportunity over those last 40 days to teach His disciples so they might be convinced that He had been raised from the dead. If Jesus had not been raised, there would have been no message for His followers to share. The text also credits the Holy Spirit as being the source that empowered Jesus to accomplish His purpose with His followers before His ascension. The instruction they received about the “kingdom of God” included what they

needed to know about the church and how it was to effectively function. Note: The “kingdom of God” and the church are terms used to express the same thing (see Matthew 16:18-19).

Note: “By reading the Bible, we can sit with the resurrected Christ in His school of discipleship. By believing in Him, we can receive His power through the Holy Spirit to be new people. By joining with other Christians in Christ’s church, we can take part in doing His work on earth.”  
Life Application Bible

You will recall that the official position of the Jewish leaders was that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus (Matthew 28:11-15). His followers had to be convinced that He truly was alive.

Note: We do not know how many people Jesus appeared to, but we know the number was over 500 (1 Corinthians 15:4-10). Here is a list of the known appearances:

- Mary Magdalene - John 20:14-18; Mark 16:9
- Other women - Matthew 28:1, 8-10; Mark 16:1, 8
- Simon Peter - Luke 24:34
- Two men on the road to Emmaus - Luke 24:13-35
- The apostles, except Thomas - Luke 24:36-49
- The apostles, with Thomas - John 20:26-29
- Seven by the sea of Tiberias - John 21:1-23
- More than 500 - 1 Corinthians 15:6
- James - 1 Corinthians 15:7
- The eleven - Matthew 28:16-20
- At the ascension - Acts 1:3-11
- Paul - Acts 9:3-6; 1 Corinthians 15:8
- Stephen - Acts 7:55-56
- Paul in the temple - Acts 22:17-21
- Paul in prison - Acts 23:11
- John on the isle of Patmos - Revelation 1:9-19

\* Although these are the only recorded appearances, there may have been more.

\* How did Jesus reveal Himself in His resurrected body? He spoke. He was physically recognized (He was not a disembodied spirit). He was touched and held. He ate and came through closed doors/walls into a room to be with His disciples.

\* Our belief is based on historical evidence which has never been successfully refuted, only doubted, and then by those who do not want to recognize Jesus as Lord.

### Acts 1:5-8 – The coming Holy Spirit

On one occasion before the ascension Jesus told His disciples to wait for the time when they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. This occurred on the day of Pentecost. What did He mean by this?

1) John the Baptist had announced a future baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 11:16).

2) Jesus announced that the Holy Spirit would come (John 14:16-18, 26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). Jesus said they would receive “power from on high” (Luke 24:49) so that they would be prepared to accomplish the ministry they were called to do for Jesus.

3) Nothing was said at this time about a baptism of fire which John the Baptist spoke of (Matthew 3:10-12). This term refers to a judgment in the future.

4) On the day of Pentecost we see that the apostles were given special power to speak in tongues or languages (Acts 2:1-4). This power was used to confirm the message and the messenger to those who were present.

“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” (Acts 1:8). This is the key verse in this story.

The power and presence of the Holy Spirit was and will continue to be a key part of how the God’s work is carried out until Jesus returns. It is not an option, but a must. Through the power of the Holy Spirit ordinary people have been empowered to do extraordinary things.

“Witness” (Greek *martyria*) - This is an important word in this verse, and throughout the book of Acts. It is used 29 times in the following ways as a verb or a noun: witness, testify, testimony, to declare, who are known, who is respected, who confirmed, showed, spoke well, highly respected, martyr, (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 6:3, 13; 7:44, 58; 10:22, 39, 41,43; 13:22, 31; 14:3; 15:8; 16:2; 20:26; 22:5, 12, 15, 18, 20; 23:11; 26:5, 16, 22). This word conveys the concept of giving testimony about what you believe and know to be true. It is to be followed by living a life which demonstrates what you know and believe. The English word “martyr” is translated from the Greek word translated “witness.” Many followers of Jesus since the birth of the church have paid the ultimate price by laying down their own lives as a testimony of what they believe. This will continue to occur until Jesus returns. Every follower of Jesus is called to be such a witness.

They had asked Jesus when He was going to “restore the kingdom to Israel.” Jesus responded that it was not for them to know the “times or dates the Father has set . . .” Their responsibility was to be His witnesses. This was to begin in Jerusalem, spread to the region of Judea (which included Jerusalem), to Samaria – and then to “the ends of the earth.” This would agree with what is commonly known was the great commission: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20; also see the commissions found in Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:45-49).

Note: No matter where we live, as Christians, we should begin our witness at home (in your “Jerusalem”) and then extend it to the “ends of the earth.” Never forget: **“The light that shines the farthest will shine the brightest at home.”** Oswald Chambers

“Jesus did not rebuke them (the disciples) when they ‘kept asking about the future Jewish kingdom (Acts 1:7). After all, He had opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44), so they knew what they were asking. But God has not revealed His timetable to us and it is future for us to speculate. The important thing is not to be curious about the future but to be busy in the present, sharing the message of God’s spiritual kingdom. This is another emphasis in the Book of Acts (see Acts 8:12; 14:22; 20:25; 28:23, 31).” Wiersbe

Acts 1:9-11 (Luke 24:50-51) – The ascension is described and His return is anticipated

Jesus had said earlier that He must go back to His Father so that the Holy Spirit could come (John 16:5-15). We also know that Jesus is now interceding for us as our great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16). As someone has said, He is our man in heaven. He is also our advocate, speaking to the Father on our behalf (1 John 2:2).

There were two men dressed in white (angels) who assured those present that Jesus Christ would return just as He had ascended to heaven. See Matthew 24:30; 26:64; Revelation 1:7. At that time there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:15).

Acts 1:12-14 (Luke 24:52-53) – Waiting for the Holy Spirit

“A Sabbath day’s walk” - between half and three-quarters of a mile. Luke said that they “returned to Jerusalem with great joy” and they also spent time in the temple “praising God” (Luke 24:52-53).

Notice who was present. This was quite a mixture of people:

- 1) The apostles: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas, son of James.
- 2) The women and Mary the mother of Jesus
- 3) The brothers of Jesus. It is interesting that His brothers did not believe in Him during His ministry (John 7:5), but did after the resurrection (Acts 1:14). James was a brother of Jesus (See Acts 12:17; 15:13; Galatians 2:9).

While waiting they spent time in prayer! After all something big was about to happen! The birth of the church on the day of Pentecost. (This is the next story.)

Note: There is no reference to criticism of Peter for having denied Jesus. No one seems to be concerned about being first as they had earlier. John could have said that he had been chosen by Jesus to care for Mary, the mother of Jesus, but he didn't. The attitude of prayer has a way of dispelling any feelings of arrogance and jealousy.

“With one accord” (Acts 1:14; also 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25, also note 2:44) – The unity present in the first church is the type of unity that will always be needed for the church to present a powerful witness to the world. Note: It is not enough for Christians to have faith in the Lord; they must also have faith in one another.

### **Extra:**

Luke's two books can be summarized as follows:

Volume 1: The history of the founder of the church - Jesus Christ.

Volume 2: The history of the first followers of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Discussion starters:**

- What convincing proofs (see Acts 1:3) do you have of Jesus' resurrection that would make sense to non-believing people?
- The first century church had her “Jerusalem.” Where is your “Jerusalem” to where you are called to be a witness? Or is it to the “ends of the earth”?
- The first century church learned to lean on the power of prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit. What has caused you to realize the same need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- The final promise of Jesus is: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” The final command of Jesus is: “you will be my witnesses.” How does this promise and command apply to you?