

Acts 1:1-9 [NIV]

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with[b] the Holy Spirit."

"Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

"He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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."

"After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

We're in chapter 1 of the book of Acts, if you'd want to turn there with me. Acts 1.

We know that this fellow, Luke, is the author, and he's addressing here the same person to which he wrote his previous work—the gospel that bears his name, this "Theophilus."

Who was Theophilus?

The traditional view is that he was a person—a Greek or Roman—who was a spiritually interested friend of Luke's, or maybe the financier of Luke's study into the happenings of Jesus.

It has also been suggested that, since the word *theophilus* literally means "lover of God" or "loved by God," maybe Luke is writing not to an individual, but instead to all followers of Jesus.

It's hard to know that for sure though, since Theophilus was a real name that was widely used in Luke's day.

This is Luke's second work, his second book, or more literally his second *scroll* on this subject of Jesus. This book of Acts is the continuation of what he had begun to write in his gospel, which was necessary because a scroll could only hold so long of a piece of parchment. You had to break the writing somewhere, just for physical reasons. And this was, apparently to Luke, a good place to do that.

There in verse 1, Luke says that his previous work—the gospel that bears his name—contains, "*that which Jesus began to do and teach.*"

Notice the word, "began" that he includes there. You see, Luke includes that to let us know that he, in no way, thinks that the work of Jesus ended with Jesus' death and resurrection and then ascension into Heaven. Luke presumes that his previous book was really just describing the *beginning* of Jesus' ministry—Jesus' activity.

Luke understood that Jesus' work carries on, even without Jesus being physically present on earth, and Acts is that description of some of the things that Jesus goes on to do *through His Church*—through His *followers*.

That's how to read Acts: all of this that Luke describes in Acts—all of this that happened: none of it is about Paul or Barnabas or Silas or Peter or John or anyone else but Jesus. It's all about Jesus. It's all about what Jesus was doing—what He *continues* to do—in our world through His followers.

The Apostle Paul references that sort of perspective in his first letter to the Corinthian church. They were all segmented and separated into followers of Paul and Peter and Apollos and probably others. Paul says, "No, you have it all wrong. Nothing that's going on is really about any of those people. It's all about Jesus—Jesus is doing it all, so Jesus should get all the glory."

That's clearly how Luke thinks about what He's writing.

Now, Luke overlaps the two books just a bit. He recaps here the end of his first work, where we find the disciples once more in Jerusalem.

Now, it's interesting, isn't it, that over the course of the days Jesus appeared to His disciples after the resurrection, He sent them from Jerusalem to Galilee, the region well to the north and their home region. He sent them there for the sake of their restoration to Him and to each other. We talked about that a few weeks ago.

But once that was accomplished, He then sent them *from Galilee back again to Jerusalem*, to the city, for their commissioning and for the beginning of their ministry. He sent them back to where all the people were who were involved in His death—the people who knew the disciples had been His followers.

Why did He do that?

To make them face their fears?

To test them?

To refine them?

To make them depend on Him?

To put them in the center of the population—in the capital—where all the people were?

Probably all for all those reasons, and others.

You see, it's easy to follow Jesus in the wilderness—in those places where you feel safe and where you can depend on yourself and your family and your known connections.

What is much harder is to follow Jesus in the crowd, and in a sophisticated crowd, and in a hostile crowd.

It's easy to follow Jesus in a Christian home, or in church, or in a Christian school, or even a Christian company.

It's much harder to follow Jesus when you're surrounded by non-Christian people—and even harder when you're surrounded by anti-Christian people.

That's why Christians from most places in the Middle East or northern India or most of Europe or China or even our own northeast or west coast, when they come to middle American and experience our Bible-belt culture, they say, "Man, you have it made here. It's easy to follow Jesus here, compared to where I'm from."

And it's true, and we who live here forget that, and sometimes we think we have it so hard, but we don't, comparatively speaking.

And I think it's just healthy to remember that, especially when we start to feel sorry for ourselves and we get whiney and think we have it so terrible. There are people right here in this fellowship who can remind us just how good we have it, compared to where they're from.

Jesus took the disciples back to the place of conflict to begin the ministry because, as someone said at our Annual Conference last week, usually that place in our lives where we're feeling the most tension is the place where the Lord is wanting—is trying—to work.

Luke tells us at the end of his gospel that Jesus' Ascension—His leaving of the earth—happened in Bethany, which is just east of Jerusalem.

And that's where He told His followers several things.

First, in verse 4 there, Jesus said, "*Don't leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*"

Then down in verse 6, Jesus returns to that idea—He says, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.*"

Now, this is far from the first time that an empowering presence of God was promised. John the Baptist promised this back in Luke, Chapter 3.¹

But you know long before John, the prophets promised this.²

God says through Isaiah, "*I will pour out my spirit on your offspring.*"

Ezekiel says, "*I will no longer hide my face, but I will pour out my Spirit upon them.*"

Joel wrote, "*I will pour out my spirit on all people.*"

For ages, God had been preparing a gift for those who would receive it—for those who would follow Him—for the benefit of the world, you see?

God does not give His Spirit to His people for their own glory nor for the ease of the Church or of any individual Christ-follower. God has one specific purpose in His giving of His Spirit, which Jesus defines there in verse 6: so that God's people might fulfill His mission to make disciples—to make more people of God.

The Spirit is not here to fulfill our purposes, to do our bidding.

The Spirit is not magic that *we control*.

On the contrary, the Holy Spirit of God was sent to Christ-followers to *control us*—according to *God's purposes*.

You know, you hear Christian people, from time to time, praying and pleading with God to send a new outpouring of His Spirit, and that is all fine to do.

I would imagine, though, that as God hears those prayers, He very likely wants to know from us, "What, precisely, do you intend to do with it? What is your motive for asking?"

[*Hold up chainsaw.*]

Chainsaws are very powerful tools—there's not much that can stop a chainsaw. They can do a lot of good work—and they're loud, which is why most men love them.

This one is mine, and I have no problem loaning it to someone to cut down a tree or shrub or whatever in their yard, so long as they respect its power and they use it according to its purpose.

Chainsaws can also do a lot of damage, and so I would not offer this to someone who didn't know how to use it, or who wanted to use it for things it wasn't designed to do, because much harm could be done with this, and that's not the purpose of the tool, or in loaning it.

As long as you use a gift according to its purposes, then all is well. But if we try to deviate from that, that's when we get into trouble—which is probably why the Church doesn't experience more of the Spirit's power today.

I think sometimes we want the Spirit so we can do what *we* think is best—because we think we know best.

But the Giver of the gift knows best, and He offers still today the gift of His Spirit, but He offers the gift to people with submissive spirits and humble attitudes and teachable hearts to use to fulfill the mission of making disciples of Jesus.

That's the deal—the great offer of Jesus to His Church. That's the gift Jesus gives.

At the same time, however, we ought to notice that there is something in this passage that Jesus does *not* give to His followers.

You see, one thing the Jews of this day were so stuck on was the idea that the messiah to come would be strictly an *earthly* messiah—sent from God to the Jews in order to, if you will, "Make Israel Great Again."

That's what even Jesus' disciples were utterly convinced of: that the messiah was all about their nation of Israel.

I mean, even after Jesus' death *and resurrection*, those on the Emmaus Road were still confused as to why Jesus didn't go ahead and overturn the Roman government.

Luke tells us how they were disappointed, and they were saying how they had hoped Jesus was the one who was going to redeem Israel.³

That could not get this idea of national messiah out of their heads.

¹ Luke 3:16

² Isaiah 44:2-5, Ezekiel 39:28-29, Joel 2:28-29

³ Luke 24:17-21

And even here as His own disciples listened to Jesus tell them, again, all about this Holy Spirit, notice the question they ask, there in verse 6: "*Lord, so is this the time you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*"

"Is this when you're going to kick those filthy gentiles out of power?"

That's what they were asking—even here on the cusp of Jesus' ascension.

You see how Israel-centric they were? It was all about them and their nation. It ran deep, deep, deep.

They still had no clue about the scope of Jesus' intentions.

Notice how Jesus responds.

He never says that He's not about a Kingdom, because He is.

How He answers them is, "*It is not for you to know.*"

There are some things we want Jesus to give us, but He won't, because it's not necessary for us to have them.

Jesus mentions that here, and also in Matthew and in Mark. We want answers—specifically about the end times, about Jesus' Kingdom coming, about what that will look like and when and all that.

But Jesus won't give us answers to those questions.

That the day is coming, yes, we can know that.

That it's coming sooner rather than later—yes, Jesus tells us that plainly.

That's it's urgent that we recognize those realities? Yes, Jesus says that too.

Why, though, is it urgent that we recognize those realities?

It's not so we can be in the know, or be proven right, or stand up and declare days and times and all that. It's urgent that we recognize that reality, so that we can make more disciples, because all that God gives—and all that He doesn't give—is for the sake of His purpose for His followers. And that is: *to make disciples*.

You see, I think what Jesus is really saying here is that if you really trust God, you don't need to know all of His plans in order to do as He asks.

All we need—in order to do as He asks—is to receive what He's willing to give, and to use that for the purpose He intends.

The fact is, it's only in receiving the gift of God's Spirit that it's possible to begin to think the way God thinks and to prioritize what God prioritizes and to want what God wants.

It's only after the Spirit was received that the disciples could finally divorce themselves from that false notion that had gripped them for generations: that a messiah was only about the greatness of Israel.

It took the coming of the Holy Spirit—it took their receiving of the gift of the Spirit—to allow them to think rightly, think spiritually, think accurately.

Apart from the Spirit, our thinking is limited, our perspectives are small, our values become obscured and confused.

Apart from the Spirit, we—and our perspectives with us—are stuck to just what is immediately around us, to only that which we can perceive with our senses.

That's where our world is today: stuck in immediacy. Our world is filled with fear, with the deep desire to avoid death, to fulfill only animal desires, to escape reality, or to create reality according to what it thinks and sees and feels.

The only way to understand rightly the ways of our world and all that is really going on here is by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

That's why Jesus made such a big deal out of this gift—and it's why He diminished in importance just about everything else the disciples asked for.

The secret of living the Christian life successfully, victoriously, peacefully, joyfully, and confidently is in receiving what Jesus gives, and in the letting go of what He doesn't give.

Will you do that today?

Imagine it's not I, but instead it's Jesus standing here. I know that's quite a stretch, but imagine you're standing with Jesus, and you have all these questions about the here and the now and the what's to come and when and why and all of that.

And Jesus simply says, "*Those things you've been asking for? They're not for you to have or to know, at least for now. But I do have something for you—a gift. Receive the Holy Spirit, and if you'll listen to Him, you'll accomplish my purposes for you.*"

Receive the Holy Spirit, and you will know all you need to know.

Receive the Holy Spirit, and your influence upon others for the sake of my Kingdom—your disciple-making—will be felt nearby and far away and even to the ends of the earth.

Don't demand of me what I don't have to give you.

Receive what I do have to give—and know that it will be far more than you can ask or imagine.

Will you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit—to empower you to do God's will—to live a life that pleases God—to influence others for Christ—to make disciples?

Closing Song: *With Thy Spirit Fill Me*

Benediction:

The full title to Acts in most Bibles is, "The Acts of the Apostles."

What the title really ought to be is something more like, "The Acts of Jesus Christ, Done by the Power of His Spirit—God's Great Gift, Given to His People, in Order to Make Disciples."

That's too long of a title for one scroll, so it continues on in the scrolls of our lives. You see, where this book leaves off, our lives begin—and we'll write more chapters—if we'll receive what Jesus has to give us.