



'YOU SHALL BE MY WITNESSES'

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

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Acts 1:1-11

First Message

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The Spreading Flame is the sub-title of this new series in the book of Acts. In its record of the birth, infancy and adolescence of the church, Acts tells the story of the spreading flame of the Holy Spirit.

A lot of non-Christians think that the church is made up of a collection of self righteous bores who gather on Sundays to listen to someone who is even more boring. They regard the church as both odd and bland at the same time. One of the nicer things they say about Christians is that we are irrelevant. They view us as shallow and naïve people who do not think deeply about life. Though we have strong moral opinions, they say we don't care enough about people to bother getting our hands dirty.

While we have to admit there is some justification for the opinions of our non-Christian friends, this is not an accurate picture of the church. In reality, the church is the most important body of people on earth. It is, as Paul puts in his letter to Timothy, "the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). The church is the source and support of all realistic knowledge on earth. How then can an organism that is so exciting and powerful become so dull and irrelevant? I pray that in these studies in Acts we will rediscover the distinctives of the early church and the principles that made her great.

Luke, the good friend, travelling companion and family physician of the apostle Paul, is the author of Acts. The book is actually volume 2 of a history of Christian origins, written by Luke. Volume 1 is his gospel, which covers a period of about thirty years, from the birth of Jesus to his ascension, concerning what our Lord taught and did. Volume 2, the book of Acts, also covers a period of about thirty years, from AD 32-33 to AD 62. It records the events from the ascension of Christ to Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

Not a great deal is known about Luke. We do know that he was a doctor (Col 4:14). Luke attended Paul when the apostle needed medical help, and probably came to Christ through the apostle's ministry. There is an indirect reference to Luke in chapter 16 of his book, when the narrative switches from "they" to "we," and Luke joins Paul on his journey.

The theme of the book of Acts is given in 1:8. Speaking to the apostles, the Lord says,

"but you shall 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." (Acts 1:8, NASB)

This verse also provides a cursory outline for the book. The opening seven chapters describe the growth of the church in Jerusalem. The disciples are scattered at the beginning of chapter 8, and chapters 8-12 go on to describe the expansion of the church throughout Judea, the province around Jerusalem, and into Samaria, the Roman province to the north. Lastly, chapters 13-28 describe the expansion of the church into Europe, the "remotest part of the earth."

Let's begin by reading the opening two verses of chapter 1:

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 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. (Acts 1:1-2)

The book is written to a man named Theophilus ("dear to God"), who was also the recipient of the gospel of Luke. In his gospel, Luke attaches the term "his Excellency" to this man's name, implying that he was a high official in the Roman Empire. Some say that Theophilus was the attorney who represented Paul when he appeared before Caesar. It is possible that these two volumes, the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, were a legal brief that Luke prepared for Paul's defense. Reading both Luke and Paul, one gets the sense that their writings are an apologetic on the origins of Christianity. If that is so, they were written to inform Theophilus about the historical background of the church.

We learn two things from these opening verses. First, Luke writes that the "first account," his gospel, was about all what Jesus *began* to do and teach. This implies that this second book is about what Jesus *continued* to do and teach. We often think of Luke's gospel as the story of Jesus Christ and Acts as the story of the church. The contrast here is not between Christ and the church, but between two periods of ministry of the same person. So if Luke's first account was about all that Jesus *began* to do and teach while he was here on earth, Acts records what Jesus *continued* to do and teach after his ascension. As John Stott puts it, "Jesus' ministry on earth, which he exercised publicly and personally, was followed by his ministry from heaven, exercised through his Holy Spirit, by the apostles."¹

The ascension, which is often overlooked by evangelicals, marks a critical point in salvation history, namely, the termination of Jesus' earthly ministry and the inauguration of his heavenly ministry. In a very real sense, Acts is not the acts of Christians, or even the acts of the apostles, but the continuing acts of Jesus. In the gospels, Jesus did these things through his physical body; in the book of Acts he does them through the bodies of men and women who were indwelt by his resurrection life. That is the strategy of this book: men and women possessed by Jesus Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, manifesting his life in their everyday existence. The power of the church in the book of Acts, and the power of the church today, rests in the work of the Spirit, to whom there are 59 references alone in this book.

Having said that, we might ask what should we call this book? The popular title here in the United States is simply, the book of Acts. The traditional title, "The Acts of the Apostles," may be a little man-centered. A better title might be "The Acts of the Holy Spirit," or to be more accurate, as John Stott puts it, "The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through the Apostles."²

The second thing we notice here is the foundational ministry of the apostles, as there is a transfer of responsibility from the Lord to them. The gospel of Luke records the Lord's calling, teaching and training of the twelve. Then Jesus passes on to them the commission, and the work of the church continues through them from this point on. They occupy a unique role, and they were uniquely prepared.

Luke elaborates on their preparation and the transfer of responsibility, in verses 3-5.

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. 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (1:3-5)

There are a few things to notice about the role of the apostles. First, they were uniquely chosen. Luke uses the same verb here in verse 2 as he does in the gospels, where he describes Jesus' calling and choosing the twelve. He will use the same verb again later in the chapter when two men are nominated to fill the vacancy left by Judas. The same verb is used yet again later in the book in connection with Paul, whom the risen Lord describes to Ananias as "My chosen instrument." Here and throughout Scripture it is clear that the apostles were neither self appointed nor chosen by committee. They were personally chosen and appointed by Jesus Christ himself.

The second thing to notice in terms of their preparation is that the Lord convinced each of them that he was alive. Luke puts it this way: *he presented himself alive*. John Stott says, "The foundation witnesses had to be eyewitnesses."³ There was no question in the mind of the apostles that Jesus was alive. He wasn't a ghost. He had risen from the dead. Luke says that Jesus gave them "many convincing proofs." The gospels describe how Jesus accomplished this. He appeared to them over that period of forty days between his resurrection and ascension. He appeared first to Mary at the grave; then to Peter; then the two disciples on the road to Emmaus; then to the ten disciples; then to Thomas, and later to 500 people in Galilee. So there is irrefutable evidence that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. He let people touch him, allowing them to examine the wounds in his hands and side. He talked with them and ate with them. They saw for themselves that he was real. They weren't hallucinating.

That is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions. No other religion claims that its founder rose from the dead. Jesus defeated death. This is the historical basis on which the preaching of the apostles is built. That objective experience of the risen Lord was an indispensable qualification of an apostle. That is why there have been no other apostles since, and there can be none today. The marvelous fact of the resurrection of Jesus is the bedrock upon which the Christian faith rests. Whenever you are troubled with doubts or under attack for your faith, come back to this fundamental truth: the resurrection is a fact that proves the deity of Jesus. Because of resurrection we can trust what Jesus says, and we can trust the Bible, because he taught that it was the word of God.

Luke also says that during this forty-day period our Lord "instructed" the apostles. From these verses it appears that the two main topics of the conversation between them concerned the kingdom of God and the Spirit of God.

We will see in a moment from the apostles' question in verse 6, that they were confused about the nature of the kingdom. When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God he was referring to the right of God to rule in our hearts. That is the essence of the gospel, the essence of life. Augustine said, "O God, you have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." There is no meaning to life apart from God's rule in our hearts. That is what Jesus taught the disciples.

The second dominant topic of conversation is the Holy Spirit. So important was the apostles' receiving of the Holy Spirit that Jesus tells them to remain in Jerusalem and wait. This might seem a little odd to us. It would be natural for them to get on with the task. Salvation had been accomplished. Jesus had risen from the dead. They should get on with the proclamation. But Jesus tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit, because every attempt to advance the church that does not spring

from this source of power is destructive. We were made to live in dependence on Another. The church would never grow through the plans and ingenuity of mere humans. The basis on which the church would be established was reliance on the Spirit of God.

The apostles were aware of the prophecy of Joel that the new, messianic era would be initiated by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, when God would pour out his spirit on all flesh, upon men and women, slave and free. Also, Jesus had already taught the apostles a great deal about the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room on the night before he was crucified. He told them, in John 14:

“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” (John 14:16-18)

When Jesus told the disciples that the Spirit “abides with them,” he was talking about himself. When he told them, “I will come to you,” he was not talking about his second coming, but about his coming on the Day of Pentecost, when he came in the person of the Holy Spirit. That was when the Holy Spirit came to reside in the church and give it direction. The head of the church today is the invisible Lord. He is not off somewhere in outer space. He is right here in this room with us, just as real as he was in the days of his incarnation, but present in the person of the Holy Spirit.

There is much confusion today about the Holy Spirit. I offer a few statements that I hope will be helpful. Though these verses in John’s gospel were directed to the apostles, they apply to us as well.

The first thing I want to say is, *If you are a Christian, you possess the Holy Spirit.* Jesus said, “the Father will give you another Helper.” You don’t have to ask for the Spirit. You don’t have to have a special experience to receive him. If you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, if you have submitted to his lordship in your life, you possess the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, *The Holy Spirit will be with us forever.* That is what Jesus promised. We cannot lose him. Sin cannot drive him out of our lives.

We used to have an old, leaky basketball at our house. After we had played with it for a while, we’d have to pump more air into it before we could shoot baskets again. In the same way, many Christians think that, as far as the Holy Spirit is concerned, they have a slow leak. They need to go to meetings all the time to get pumped up in order to get more of the Spirit. But Jesus says that if we are Christians, we possess the Spirit and he is with us forever. Jesus was with the disciples in the flesh for three and a half years, but this Spirit will be with us forever. He will not leave us. He will not leak out. We don’t need to be pumped up. When we

came to Christ, we received all of the Holy Spirit we will ever receive, nothing more or nothing less.

Thirdly, *The Holy Spirit resides within us, somewhere in our human spirit.* Jesus said, “you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you.” We do not need to go to a special place to get more of the Spirit. There is no more of the Spirit here in this building than there is in your home, your work, or in a restaurant. The Spirit resides in people, not in buildings. Some people go Israel because they think that is where they really feel the Spirit and they can get closer to the Lord. Although Israel is a wonderful place to learn, we are no closer to the Spirit there than we are here. He goes wherever we go. The New Testament says that we are the temple, because the Holy Spirit makes our body a sanctuary.

Finally, and most importantly, *The Holy Spirit is nothing more than the Lord Jesus come to dwell inside us.* This coming refers to the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles. For us, that happens at conversion. In fact, that is the purpose of the Holy Spirit: to make the life of Jesus continuing and real. Paul described this as the “treasure within an earthen vessel.” Do you know that the same Lord Jesus who walked here on the earth and who did these mighty works, now lives in you? That is the genius of the Christian life. We grow by laying hold of his power within us.

This matter of the Holy Spirit raised another question in the minds of the apostles.

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 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.” (1:6-8)

They had the same mindset as most of their fellow Jews of the time. Joel had predicted that when the Holy Spirit was poured out, that would be the beginning of the new age. The Messiah would come and drive away the enemy, and Israel would again be restored to its central place on earth. The wording of the apostles’ question reveals that they were looking for a political and national kingdom that would be established immediately. They were imagining a place that could be located on a map. But the kingdom of God isn’t like that. It can’t be found on a map, because it is spiritual in nature.

The Lord corrects the apostles, and his answer is very instructive to both them and us. In response to their confusion about the kingdom, Jesus reminds them of the coming of the Spirit, which would give them real power. But the power in God’s kingdom is different from the power of earthly kingdoms. It is the rule established in people’s lives through the Holy Spirit. And, as

John Stott says, it is spread by witnesses, not by soldiers. Its message isn't a declaration of war, but the good news of peace.⁴ God is not angry. He has made peace. God's kingdom is accomplished by the work of the Spirit, not violence or political power.

Jesus warns the apostles not to become preoccupied with the future. It is easy to get obsessed with prophecy and prediction so that we miss the main thing, which Jesus says is to give witness now about the kingdom of God, that God is available to man. That is what we are here for. That is exactly what these men and women did. Within ten years this little group of ordinary people, laymen and women, not professionals, starting in Jerusalem, effectively evangelized the center of Judaism, Jerusalem and Judea. Everywhere they went they talked about Jesus. In AD 47 there was not a single Gentile church. There were no churches in Asia Minor or Europe. In AD 57, 10 years later, Paul had established churches in four of the major Roman provinces: Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia. In 57, Paul said he had finished his work there and he left. By the end of the Book of Acts, one generation, thirty years after Jesus ascended, the Roman Empire for all practical purposes had been evangelized. That doesn't mean that everyone was a Christian. It means that the gospel was available. Churches had been planted and Jesus was being preached in all the major centers of the day. The gospel message had turned the world upside down.

In verse 9-11 Luke describes for us the ascension of Jesus:

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. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. 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." (1:9-11)

When you read those words maybe you picture the Lord ascending from the Mount of Olives like a rocket lifting off a launch pad going higher and higher, becoming smaller and smaller until it disappears from sight. But that isn't the picture that is described here. Luke says that Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud covered him and he disappeared. Jesus isn't off somewhere in outer space. Heaven is right here. We just can't see it. Jesus is here right now in an invisible realm. He is here, just as real as he was in that forty-day period. He could make himself visible right now if he chose to. He is still leading his church, and he is far more accessible to us than if he were still here in the flesh.

That is why Jesus told his disciples, "it is better for

you that I go away." That is because *in* is better than *with*. Imagine what a mess it would be if Jesus lived in Palestine today. Imagine the traffic problems. You couldn't get a call into him for years! The lines outside his house would be blocks long. But he is here, in the realm on the Spirit, the invisible realm around us, just as much as he was then. In our materialistic world we think that the only real things are those that we can detect with our five senses. But there is another realm of reality that is more actual, more factual, more substantial than anything we can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell in this world.

One of my favorite Old Testament stories is told in 2 Kings 6. The prophet Elisha and his servant are in the city of Dothan. The king of Syria, Ben Hadad II, is upset with Elisha, because he kept tipping off the Israeli king (Joram) to Syrian troop movements. Of course, God was providing the inside information for Elisha. So Ben Hadad decides to put an end to the prophet. He storms in with his army to besiege the city of Dothan, where Elisha and his servant are staying. During the night, the Syrians surround the city and wait for dawn. Next morning, Elisha's servant wakes looks out over the walls. Seeing the army, he panics. He wakes Elisha and tells him the bad news. "It's all over. What are we going to do?" Elisha says to him "Don't worry. There are more of us than there are of them. " We can sense the servant's look of bewilderment. Elisha sees that he is afraid: "Elisha prayed and said, 'O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.' And the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kgs 6:17).

The Lord is here with us today. That is where our confidence and trust need to lie. What you see with your eyes is real, but it isn't the only reality. Remember that this week when you feel you are outnumbered; when you feel intimidated and insecure in a crowded, hostile classroom; when you feel that your marriage is hopeless and you are ready to call it quits. That is when you should say to yourself, "The LORD and his legions are here. There are more of us than there are of them." There is no situation too difficult for God. There is no fear that he can't dispel. We have a risen Lord whose life is made available through the coming of the Spirit. May God grant that we will discover this powerful resource in our daily lives.

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 32.
2. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 34.
3. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 35.
4. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 32.

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