



PREPARATIONS FOR LIFE

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 1:1–8

1st Message

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Today's theme is about transition. Transitions are seldom easy, especially when we are uprooted from all that is familiar and thrust into foreign environments with new and challenging roles we have no experience with. It's difficult to leave the comfort and predictability of our routines and natural rhythms. Unfortunately if you're a follower of Jesus, you've probably discovered that he is not shy about thrusting us into uncharted waters.

Thirty years ago this month I preached my first sermon at PBC Cupertino. At the time I was serving as college pastor at Stanford and one of our elders assured me that my new preaching role shouldn't have any impact on the college ministry. But when I finished preaching my series in June, it became painfully obvious to me that I could not continue my ministry at Stanford and have an authentic ministry in Cupertino. The transition for me was not easy. I was not ready to leave campus ministry. I had a long history at Stanford; first, as a student for four years, then as campus intern for two, and finally as a college pastor for seven. I knew the campus inside and out and had established lasting friendships with many students, staff and a number of the faculty. The campus environment was energizing, the students challenging, and the academic environment stimulating, not to mention Emily and I always had an ample supply of free babysitters for our three daughters. The thought of leaving a vibrant student ministry on the largest campus in the world to do ministry in a neighborhood church, whose facilities were rundown and sorely inadequate was anything but appealing. But from God's point of view it was time for me to leave my comfort zone. And so I came.

For my opening series I decided to teach the book of Acts, whose story spans approximately thirty years. Only now looking back thirty years later I realize that in the first chapter of Acts Luke documents a transition the disciples must make in a mere 50 days, one that from a human standpoint seems impossible. Think of the emotional upheavals the disciples have gone through. They have already been through one transition, leaving everything to follow Jesus. As they witnessed Jesus' powerful deeds and authoritative words in the many months that followed, a feeling of elation began to stir within them. In their final pilgrimage to Jerusalem they had high hopes that Israel's new David would conquer the city and set up his kingdom. But on Good Friday all the powers of hell are unleashed upon Jesus. By the end of the day he is dead and buried in a tomb. Evil has triumphed. Once again it seems that "might makes right" as bribery, deceit, political expedience, and corruption snuff out all that is good. The disciples flee in despair. Three days later Jesus is raised from the dead and "declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness" (Rom 1:4 ESV). Jesus has disarmed the powers and authorities of darkness, having triumphed over them by the cross (Col 2:15). In forty days time Jesus will be enthroned in heaven and ten days later he will make a royal transfer of power to his disciples on earth. The magnitude of upheaval and shift in cosmic power that occurs during this transition is difficult to comprehend. If it had been an earthquake, it would have registered over a 9 on the Richter

scale. The only language Peter can use to describe it is apocalyptic imagery, "the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon into blood" (Acts 2:20; Joel 2:32). We have arrived at the hinge of history, the birth of the Messianic age on the earth. Once you cross the great divide, there is no going back.

So that we don't miss the point, Luke places the events of this transition right at the center of his two-volume work. It concludes the first volume (Luke 24:36–53) and is retold in fresh ways in the introduction of his second volume (Acts 1:1–14).

I. The Unity of Luke's Two Volumes (Acts 1:1–2)

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (Acts 1:1–2)

In the prologue to his friend Theophilus, Luke gives a brief summary of the contents of his first book. The reason why Luke divided his work into separate books was not because of different subject matter, but rather due to their length. Joel Green explains that "The maximum length of a papyrus roll extended to some thirty-five feet, and Luke's two volumes, the longest books in the New Testament would have each required a full papyrus roll."¹ Luke's two-volume work comprises almost 30 percent of the material in the New Testament. Luke's description of his first volume as "all that Jesus *began* to do and teach," gives us a clue as what we should expect in his second volume. John Stott suggests that an appropriate title would be "All that Jesus *continued* to do and teach *by his Spirit through the Apostles*."

Though the work of the atonement was complete at the end of Jesus' life, it was just the beginning of a new era. After his resurrection and ascension to the Father, the gift of his Spirit was poured out on the apostles, who continued to perform his works and spread the good news of his universal reign. The two volumes "narrate one continuous story and the phrase from Luke's preface that describes the content of his work, 'the events that have been fulfilled among us,' refer both to the story of Jesus and to the activity of the early church."²

Stott remarks that it is no exaggeration to say that this is what "set Christianity apart from all other religions. These regard their founder as having completed his ministry during his lifetime; Luke says Jesus only began his."³ Jesus' life and ministry brought Israel's history to a climax and now, with the pouring out of his Spirit on all flesh, he has ushered in nothing less than a New Creation.

II. Wait for the Promise (1:3–5)

He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying (lit. "eating with them")

with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (vv. 3–5)

In these opening verses of Acts we immediately begin to see the parallels Luke draws between Jesus’ ministry and that of the apostles. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus underwent forty days of testing to solidify his commitment to God’s “way” of the kingdom. After he was victorious over the devil he returned to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:1–14). The apostles, who are uniquely chosen by Jesus, become eyewitnesses of his resurrection through many convincing and decisive proofs, which made them uniquely qualified to bear witness to him. Before they begin their ministry, they are instructed for forty days on the ways of the kingdom and the necessity to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit—a promise the heavenly Father had put his seal upon which would mark the dawn of the new age (Joel 2:28–32; Isa 32:15–18; Ezek 36:27–30).

III. Their Commission: The Mandate to Witness (1:6–8)

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (vv. 6–8)

The fact that Jesus appointed twelve apostles to follow him made it clear to the disciples that he was God’s Servant called “to raise up the tribes of Jacob” (Isa 49:6). But that hope was crushed when he was crucified. But now that he has been raised, his discourse on the kingdom coupled with the announcement that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was within days of fulfillment reignite the embers of their hope. So the disciples ask, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” On the verge of elation they wonder, “Will our hopes and dreams finally be fulfilled?”

Unfortunately, “as Calvin commented, ‘there are as many errors in this question as there are words.’ The verb, the noun and the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom.”⁴ The phrase “at this time” suggests that they expect the kingdom to be established immediately. The verb “restore” is used in the gospels of healing, of putting something back into its original state or condition and suggests that the disciples envision a political and territorial kingdom, one in which they would have positions of authority (Luke 22:24–27; Mark 9:33–34; 10:35–41). The final phrase “to Israel” further confirms their nationalistic aspirations with Israel being “the top nation ruling over the rest of the world.”⁵

Just like the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, the disciples need a new lens to understand how the kingdom has been radically transformed through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Instead of a “restoration” to what the kingdom once was, Jesus redefines the nature of the kingdom and the crucial role they will play within it. There will indeed be a consummation of the kingdom, but their role is not one that is privy to “times and seasons,” for those are divine matters which only the Father knows. Jesus shifts their attention from speculation to responsibility, from curiosity about the future to embracing their mission in the present.

The kingdom will not be a restoration of what it once was, but an advance, going beyond the borders of Israel in new dimensions that

will culminate in nothing less than a new creation. It will not be a territorial or political kingdom (though it will have radical political and social implications) established by force as the Maccabees had done in the second century. Rather it will be a spiritual kingdom that rules the hearts of men, transcending national and cultural boundaries. It’s good news for the whole world.

And in one sense Israel’s restoration has already happened. For in his death and resurrection Jesus had been exalted as Israel’s representative. And when Jesus is enthroned, the Spirit promised by the Father and anticipated by John’s baptism will “come upon” his disciples with power, enabling them to be his witnesses in ever expanding circles of influence from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The disciples were hoping for *authority* to rule, instead they are given *power* to witness, a power that overcomes all the forces of darkness. As Luke Timothy Johnson observes,

Luke punctuates the triumph of the mission in each new territory with a symbolic conquering of evil powers. In Jerusalem, Peter strikes dead Ananias and Sapphira who had taken Satan into their hearts (5:1–11). In Samaria, Peter rejects the overtures of the magician Simon, rebukes him, and wins his recognition (8:9–24). In Cyprus, Paul overcomes magical power of the “false Jewish prophet” Bar-Jesus (13:4–12) and in Philippi, the forces of divination and soothsaying (16:16–18). In Asia Minor, the “seven sons of the Jewish high priest named Scaeva” who tried to work exorcism in the name of Jesus are routed (19:11–20). In Malta, Paul is thought to be a criminal because he is bitten by a deadly viper, but when he survives he is regarded as a god (28:1–6).⁶

Their power to witness is also evidenced in supernatural gifts of healing, tongues and prophesying, but more importantly by the Holy Spirit’s internal transformation of the character of the apostles, as they embrace suffering and love their enemies for the sake of Christ. In Philippi when Paul and Silas are unjustly attacked, severely beaten with rods and thrown in prison, they respond by singing hymns of praise. At midnight God answers their prayers with a violent earthquake shaking the foundations of the prison. The prison doors open, and everyone’s chains come loose. Thinking that everyone had escaped, the poor jailer, who is responsible for the safe keeping of the prisoners, panics and takes a sword to kill himself. Rather than taking the opportunity to escape, Paul and Silas assure the jailer that no one has left his charge. Simultaneously shocked and humbled, the jailer asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved.” Paul and Silas respond, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” In appreciation the jailer takes them home and then, in one of the most moving moments in the book, Luke writes,

And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. (Acts 16:33–34)

Instead of speculating about the future the apostles are living it. Like Jesus they immersed themselves in their world and transformed it with healing, justice, love and grace. On Pentecost life is unleashed upon the people of God. It is a subversive invasion of God’s glorious future into our painful present. That’s what eternal life is—the life of the age to come, invading our present age through the Holy Spirit.

In thirty years time the disciples accomplish what Jesus had prophesied—bearing witness to the life, death and resurrection of

Jesus in Jerusalem (Acts 5:28), Samaria (Acts 8:5) and ultimately to the end of the earth, i.e. Rome. (Acts 28:30–31).⁷

Again we are reminded that Luke's original purpose was to give "full confidence" to Theophilus and his readers concerning "the things that have been *fulfilled* among us." Luke-Acts confirms that God's saving activity in the world unfolded before their very eyes exactly as God had promised. And it was accomplished not by paid professionals, but an army of witnesses. The invitation is now yours to be part of the ongoing drama.

IV. Witnessing for Introverts

A. A proper definition

How is this witnessing to be carried out? If you are like me, you may have an aversion to "witnessing," because of a common caricature presented by many naïve or misguided Christians. If you were to ask the man or woman on the street to give a definition of witnessing from his or her experience, they might say:

Witnessing is venturing forth from your natural setting to new and unfamiliar territory. Then, with great boldness and an utter lack of tact or sensitivity, you impose your religious view upon people you've never met, answering questions they haven't asked, in religious terms they don't understand. The goal of witnessing is to make the victim feel uncomfortable because of their lifestyle, which is offensive to you. But this can be solved with a short prayer and a promise to abstain from sexually immoral behaviors, attending your church and voting like you do.

Being a witness it's not a specialized activity we do, it is who we are in relation to the world. God is calling a people for his name among the nations and it is our supreme privilege to be his ambassadors of light and love. We bear testimony to Christ with everything we say and all that we do. For the apostles, their witness embodied the writing of the entire New Testament and their sacrificial service that ended in their martyrdom.

B. Making connections

So how do we make connections? I imagine many of you have had the uncomfortable experience of being accosted at the most inconvenient time by someone who wanted to impose his religious views on you. Even if he is a fellow Christian, I feel like running away. It's important to note that Jesus and the early Christians never shared the gospel in the ways that were offensive. Their message may have been offensive, but their methods were not. Jesus preached in the synagogues by invitation as a rabbi commenting on the prophetic reading in the liturgy. Paul did the same, as well as receiving a hearing with the philosophers on Mars Hill, reasoning in the market places and renting a lecture hall in Ephesus. If we aren't able to relationally connect with those with whom we are speaking, our message will fall on deaf ears and will harden hearts.

Living in a multi-cultural society as we do, you may feel like it is difficult to connect with others from foreign cultures. How do you speak into someone's life whose background is Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Zoroastrian? The good news is that you don't have to be an expert in world religions to have a meaningful conversation with someone. The art of connecting is not about having "answers," but asking questions. Make it your practice to take someone out to lunch, or better yet, invite him or her home for a meal, which is a rare treat to someone who is traveling far away from home. Getting them out of the workplace and off stage from co-workers gives them

a stage where they are able to let down and be vulnerable. Once the stage is set simply ask them to tell their story, and as they tell it, be attentive and enter into their world. Probe them with questions to get beneath the surface—"What expectations did that place upon you?" or "How did that experience impact you?" or "What longings or fears did that create?" or "How did your family process pain?" It is such a gift when someone takes the time to know you—simply to know you with no agenda.

When your new friend has finished, don't be surprised if he or she asks about your life and invites you to share your story. This is so much more exciting and less daunting than engaging in ideological or doctrinal debates that, more often than not, create walls instead of opening doors to human hearts. And the joy of it all is that you don't have to have answers to mysteries you don't understand. You merely share out of your own personal experience the things that Jesus has done for you. I have never found people put off by how God intervened in our lives with the miraculous gift of children after our first two children died shortly after birth due to a rare enzyme deficiency. And I've always found people receptive and fascinated when I share about my encounter with the Romanian poet Traian Dorz in 1988, and how his "illegal" poems were creating a spiritual revival in Communist Romania.

C. Following the highways made by others

Jesus' commission to the apostles to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" was not just a command to the apostles, it was also a prophetic word of the divine mission that was about to take place. When we read Acts we discover how the sovereign Lord orchestrated life in such a way to make it reality, breaking down prejudice by way of visions, forcing Christians out of their comfort zones through persecution, using unjust edicts by ungodly rulers to maneuver his servants to where he wanted to use them for service (including prison!), and speaking through the Holy Spirit to set missionaries apart for the mission to the Gentiles.

Being a missional Christian isn't just something we do out of dogged obedience. When we come to faith and are baptized by the Holy Spirit that divine mission is stamped into every believer's heart. The more we expose ourselves to the light of God's truth and open our eyes to what God is doing around the world, we can't help but be drawn into the joy of the kingdom. God is sending out the invitations and who would want to miss the party?

Because Emily and I are introverts, when I began my ministry I prayed that God would lead us to others more adventurous than ourselves, who would take us places we never thought we would go. After forty years I can attest that every opportunity to minister outside my "Jerusalem" has been the result of walking on highways others have built. When I came to PBC Cupertino, I had no idea that I would travel behind the Iron Curtain and connect with believers in Romania, or minister to pastors in Albania, or teach at a seminary in Croatia. Who would have thought that so many of you would find your hearts' home in a small village in Liberia? I never dreamed I would be involved in the battle against sex trafficking or find myself on Capitol Hill as an advocate of the anti-slavery initiative being introduced into the Senate. It was Grace Kvamme who took the initiative to begin a ministry of justice at PBCC and introduce us to the ministry of International Justice Mission and their miraculous work fighting injustice around the world.

So, if you are introvert like I am, all you have to do is pray and open your eyes to what God puts in front of you. Let the adventure begin!

IV. Questions to ponder

1. Do you see your faith as a missionary faith? What motivates you in this area (2 Cor 5:10-15)?
2. What cultural barriers make it difficult to share your faith? How did Paul overcome those barriers (Acts 17:16-31; 2 Cor 4:1-12)?
3. How does Jesus' exaltation to God's right hand undergird our mandate to witness (Ps 2; Acts 8:3-4; 10:1-34)?
4. Have you ever sensed that God was inviting you to pray for an individual or group outside your comfort zone and then experienced a surprising encounter that opened the door to witness (Acts 8:26-40; Isa 56:3-8)?
5. Reflect on the places God has "sent" you over the past year (i.e. business trips, vacations, neighbors, social engagements, cultural events, hospital visits, relatives, etc.). Were you aware of open doors to witness in any of those settings (Col 4:2-6)?
6. Looking to the months ahead, pray for God to open a door for you to witness where he is "sending" you.

1. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*; NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 8.

2. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 9-10.

3. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts, The Spirit, the Church & the World*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 34.

4. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World*, 41.

5. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone; Part One, Chapters 1-12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 7.

6. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 11.

7. Johnson notes that "The precise meaning of 'end of the earth' relies on the context," whether it is a specific geographical context or a universal extent. "In the *Psalms of Solomon* 8:15 the Roman enemy is called 'someone from the end of the earth.'" Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 26-27.

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