

The Book of Acts

Lesson 1: The Promise and the Ascension -- Acts 1:1-11

Imagine standing on a hillside outside Jerusalem on an ordinary morning. The air is still. A small band of men and women, maybe a hundred or so, are clustered around a single figure they cannot stop watching. Forty days earlier they had buried their hopes in a borrowed tomb. Now the One they buried is standing in front of them, eating with them, teaching them, alive in a way that death can never touch again. They are not looking at a memory. They are looking at a man who walked out of His own grave.

Luke, who wrote the Gospel that bears his name, picks up his pen a second time and addresses a friend named Theophilus. His first book told all that Jesus began to do and to teach. The word began is worth pausing over. Luke is about to show us that the story of Jesus did not end at the ascension. It kept going, through His Spirit, through His church, through ordinary people sent out with an extraordinary message. The book we call Acts is really the acts of the risen Christ working through His people.

Before He leaves them, Jesus does two things. He tells them to wait, and He tells them they will be witnesses. Wait for the promise of the Father, He says. Do not rush ahead of God. And then, when the Spirit comes, go everywhere, to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and the very ends of the earth. Their lives are about to be cracked wide open. The small room they have been hiding in cannot hold what God is about to do.

And then He is gone, lifted up until a cloud takes Him out of their sight. Two men in white stand beside the stunned disciples and gently turn their faces forward: this same Jesus will come back. So this opening passage hands us the two truths that will carry us through the whole book and through our own lives. Jesus is alive and reigning, and Jesus is coming again. Everything in between is the time we have been given to be His witnesses.

Group Discussion: Jesus tells the apostles to wait for the promise of the Father before they do anything else (v. 4). Why do you think He insisted on waiting rather than sending them out immediately, and what does that say about how God works through us?

Personal Reflection: The disciples had to live in the gap between a promise made and a promise kept. Where in your own life are you being asked to trust God in the waiting, before you can see how the story turns out?

Read Acts 1:1-11

Study Questions

1. Luke says that after His suffering Jesus presented Himself alive to the apostles by many proofs, appearing over forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (vv. 3). Why does Luke stress the physical, evidenced reality of the resurrection, and how does the resurrection function as the foundation of everything that follows in Acts?
2. Jesus told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father rather than scattering to do the work in their own strength (vv. 4). Think about your own tendency to run ahead of God. Where in your life are you tempted to act on your own power instead of waiting on Him, and what would it look like to wait well?
3. Jesus promised, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses (v. 8). What did Jesus promise the apostles here, and what was the purpose of the power they would receive?
4. Jesus mapped the mission from Jerusalem outward to the ends of the earth (v. 8), starting right where the disciples already were. Where is your Jerusalem, the people closest to you who most need Christ, and what holds you back from being a witness to them?
5. When the apostles asked whether Jesus would now restore the kingdom to Israel, He answered that it is not for them to know times or seasons fixed by the Father (vv. 6-7). What does Jesus' answer correct about their expectations, and what does it teach us about speculation regarding God's timing and an earthly kingdom?
6. Jesus turned the disciples' eyes away from speculation about the future and toward the work in front of them (vv. 7-8). Are there ways you spend energy worrying about or trying to control the future that distract you from being faithful today? What would change if you trusted God with the timeline?
7. As the disciples watched, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took Him out of their sight (v. 9). What is the significance of the ascension, and where is the risen Christ now according to the rest of the New Testament?
8. If Jesus is truly reigning right now at the right hand of God, that lordship has a claim on every part of life. Where in your daily life are you living as though Jesus is reigning, and where are you still holding back an area from His rule?
9. The two men in white said, this Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven (v. 11). What does this promise teach about the return of Christ, and how does the New Testament hope of His coming differ from the idea of a future earthly political kingdom?
10. Look back across this whole passage. Jesus rose, commissioned His followers, ascended to reign, and promised to return. Of everything you have seen in Acts 1:1-11, name one specific way the risen and reigning Christ is calling you to follow Him more closely, and what is one step you will take this week in response.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Daniel 2:44, God setting up an unshakable kingdom in the days of the Roman empire; Mark 9:1, Jesus promising the kingdom would come with power in that generation; Acts 2:32-36, Christ raised, exalted, and reigning as Lord and Christ; Ephesians 1:20-23, Christ seated far above all rule and authority for the church; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the comfort of Christ's personal return and the gathering of His people