

This evening we begin a new series of sermons on the book of Acts. In this sermon we will consider the relationship between the Gospel according to Luke and the book of Acts as well as the main points that Luke makes in Acts 1:1-8. Both Luke and Acts were written by Luke and so Acts is a continuation of the story that Luke begins in his gospel. The gospel tells the story from the announcements of Jesus' birth to Jesus' ascension into heaven and the book of Acts begins with Jesus' ascension and tells the story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the early growth of the NT church.

The book of Acts is inspiring and instructive for us because it shows how Jesus, through his Spirit, and through Spirit-filled people began the work of building his church. It was an exciting time in the life of the church. It was a beginning of a new phase in redemptive history. Jesus had completed his earthly mission. At the very beginning of the book of Acts, we read about his ascension into heaven. It is once that he is in heaven that he pours out his Spirit and the next phase of redemptive history takes off with the Spirit-driven expansion of the church of Jesus Christ.

But let's put this into context by considering some of the relationship between the Gospel according to Luke and the Book of Acts. Luke begins his gospel with the following words: Luke 1:1-4 ¹"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

Luke is writing for a man named Theophilus, who seems to have been a person of some prominence. Luke addresses him as "most excellent Theophilus." He says that he is writing an orderly account on the basis of eyewitness reports. His purpose is that Theophilus may have "certainty concerning the things you have been taught." Luke is claiming to have written a well-researched orderly account of the story of Jesus. What is not obvious from the English translation is that Luke is telling the story of Jesus as the outworking of God's plan. He speaks about "the things that have been accomplished among us." By that language he is speaking about what God had accomplished through Jesus. The word for "accomplished" can also be translated as "fulfilled." The Gospel according to Luke is a well-researched account of how God had fulfilled the OT promises in and through Jesus.

Luke picks up on this idea at the end of his gospel, Luke 24:44-49, where he quotes Jesus as saying, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

There are three things that Jesus emphasizes as having been or still needing to be fulfilled from the OT Scriptures. “That the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.” “That repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations through the witness of the disciples.” And that Jesus was going to send the promise of his Father upon them. They were going to be clothed with power from on high.

In the book of Acts, Luke mentions these same three points in the opening verses. Verse 3 says of Jesus, “He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs....” Verse 4-5 speak about waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit. “And while staying 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.’” And then in verse 8 he speaks about their calling to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. “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.”

These three points of the fulfillment of the Scriptures mentioned both at the end of the gospel of Luke and the beginning of the Book of Acts form a bridge between Luke and Acts according to David Cook in his book called *Teaching Acts*. And it is clear from this what the book of Acts then is all about. It is about the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures concerning Jesus and God’s plan of salvation. It is about what had to happen next in God’s plan on the basis of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The death and resurrection of Jesus were the great saving actions of God in Christ. But that was not the end of the outworking of God’s plan as foretold in the OT. God’s plan involved the whole world. It involved the Gentiles as well as the Jews. It involved the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God. And it involved the people of God being witnesses to Jesus “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Now it is clear from this that God’s plan for saving the world included a much more significant role for Jesus’ disciples than had been the case when Jesus was with them. When Jesus was on earth, the disciples mostly just followed Jesus around. Their role in Jesus’ mission at that point was mainly to be eye-witnesses – to observe Jesus’ actions, to remember Jesus’ teaching and particularly to be eyewitness of Jesus raised from the dead. But the book of Acts describes a transition. Jesus ascends into heaven. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon them. And they become the people through whom Jesus through the Spirit are going to bring the gospel to the world. Clearly the followers of Jesus have a very significant role to play in the accomplishment of this phase of God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

This is not to say that Jesus ascends into heaven and hands off the mission to his disciples. The book of Acts has something very different to say. We see this in the way that Luke introduces the book of Acts. In verse 1 he says, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach....” The implication of these words is that this second book is a continuation of what Jesus would do and teach. Back in

Matthew's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "I will build my church...." (Matthew 16:18) The book of Acts is the story of Jesus beginning to do that.

The book of Acts is traditionally called the Acts of the Apostles, but a more accurate title would be the Acts of Jesus through the Holy Spirit through the Apostles. As we work our way through the book we will see that Jesus, through the Holy Spirit is establishing the NT Church. The apostles are very much involved but all that they do is by the direction of the Holy Spirit and all the successes are by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is important for us to remember this perspective because it is still very much a reality in the church and in our own lives as believers. We are active in our own spiritual lives. We are active in various ways pursuing the mission of the church. But at the same time Jesus through the Holy Spirit is working in us and through us. We grow towards Christ-likeness because Christ is at work in us. And any growth that happens in the church, whether in numbers or in holiness is the result of the on-going work of Christ who is constantly at work building his church through the prayers and activities of his people.

So those are the big themes that summarize what the book of Acts is about. Let us now look at some of the details of Acts 1:1-8. These verses highlight the significance of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Listen to how Luke mentions the ascension of Jesus as a great transition in the ministry of Jesus. Verse 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.... Luke is making a distinction here between what Jesus began to do and teach before he was taken up and what he would continue to do after he was taken up. The ascension of Jesus' marks a great turning point in Jesus' ministry. Before his ascension he was pursuing his mission on earth and after his ascension he continues to pursue the same mission, but now from heaven.

Other passages in the NT give us further insights into the significance of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Hebrews 1:3 says, "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...." Jesus ascended to reign as Lord of all from his position at the right hand of his Father. In Matthew 28:18 Jesus had told his disciples "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus ascension into heaven is about Jesus taking his place on the throne at the right hand of his Father. In Ephesians 1:20-22 Paul describes Jesus in his exalted state in these powerful words: God has "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And he has put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church...."

So Jesus ascended into heaven to reign over all things "to the church." The phrase "to the church" is awkward, but the point is that Jesus reigns over the church and for the church.

So, the ascension is a great turning point in redemptive history. Jesus transitions from his earthly ministry to his heavenly ministry and what he is doing from his exalted position at the right hand of God is building his church and his kingdom.

That is a great encouragement for us as we live here on earth in weakness, facing temptation and opposition. Jesus is reigning from heaven. He is building his church. He is bringing his kingdom. The one who died for us and rose from the dead is seated at the right hand of God and he is directing all things for the glory of God and our salvation.

Verses 2-3 describe the time that Jesus spent with his disciples between his resurrection and his ascension. The ascension happened, “after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 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.”

What a time that must have been for the apostles! We know very little about that time. It is not described for us in any detail. Jesus gave them commands. And he spoke to them about the kingdom of God. It is very interesting that in spite of all that the apostles still ask Jesus the question recorded in verse 6, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Whatever Jesus told them about the kingdom of God during those forty days mentioned in verse 1, they still did not clearly understand what Jesus’ kingdom would look like. They were still expecting some kind of earthly kingdom like the OT kingdom of Israel had been. They still seemed to be thinking along the lines of the common hope of the time that the Messiah would defeat the Romans and restore Israel to her former earthly glory.

How it was possible for the apostles to still think about God’s kingdom in this way after having spent 40 days with Jesus discussing the kingdom will have to remain a mystery. The most significant thing that we can say about this is that they understood very little of what Jesus was teaching them until after the Holy Spirit had been poured out. And that is certainly something that the gospels and the book of Acts highlight. Before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the disciples understood very little of Jesus’ mission. But after the Holy Spirit was poured out they were transformed and were suddenly able to understand Jesus and his significance in a way that had been impossible for them before. These opening verses and chapters of the book of Acts highlight the great significance of the giving of the Holy Spirit. And that is a great reminder for us today of how dependent we are upon the Holy Spirit and what a great blessing it is that he is active in us and in the church in general.

The way that Luke speaks about Jesus’ resurrection in these opening verses is also important. Verse 3 says that “He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days.” This reflects Jesus’ concern to make it perfectly clear to his apostles that he had truly and physically risen from the dead. The language here reflects the importance that the NT places on the fact that there is historical evidence for Jesus’ resurrection. The time Jesus spent with his apostles after his resurrection was intended to

convince them that he had truly risen from the dead and that he was not appearing to them in some kind of vision. Jesus “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs....”

Christianity stands or falls on the literal historical reality of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Paul makes this point explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15:14, “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” Apart from Christ’s literal bodily resurrection from the dead, we are still in our sins, death has not been defeated and there is no hope of eternal life.

The main evidence that we have are eye-witness accounts, preserved in the NT, of those who actually saw the risen Lord. Paul stresses the importance of eye-witness accounts of Jesus’ alive after his resurrection when he writes in 1 Corinthians 15:4-6 that Jesus “was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scripture, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive....” The way the writers of the NT emphasize the fact that many people saw Jesus after he had risen from the dead makes the point that the claim that Jesus rose from the dead is a claim that is supported by copious historical evidence. There are all kinds of things that are accepted as true in ancient history on the basis of far less historical evidence. Indeed, most of what we know about ancient history is based on far less historical evidence than we have for the resurrection of Jesus. Many, many people saw him alive after he died on the cross and witnessed to what they had seen.

This is not to say that our faith in the resurrection is based on the historical evidence. We believe everything that the Bible teaches because we believe it to be the word of God and that faith is given to us by the Holy Spirit. But the historical evidence is helpful. The NT strongly makes the case that a large number of people saw Jesus after he had died and risen from the dead and have testified to what they saw. And that is a strong confirmation for our belief in the resurrection of Jesus. It is a useful argument in speaking to unbelievers. There have been those who have come to faith by means of examining the evidence for the resurrection. Luke is reflecting this NT emphasis when he says in the opening words of the book of Acts that Jesus “presented himself alive to [his apostles] after his suffering by many proofs....”

Verses 4-5 describe Jesus’ command to his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promised out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. “And while staying 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.’”

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is related to the ascension of Jesus into heaven, and together, these mark one of the great turning points in God’s history of salvation. The OT has a number of very significant promises concerning the gift of the Holy Spirit in connection with the future salvation that God was promising to his people. We will consider that in more detail when we get to Acts 2. In this passage Jesus tells his apostles to wait until the Spirit would be given. He refers to this as the promise of the Father and he refers to John the Baptist’s teaching that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. It is significant that the apostles were to wait

until the Spirit was given. They were going to be given a mission to be Jesus' witnesses and to bring the gospel to the end of the earth, but that mission would not begin until they had been equipped for it by the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit.

We see that connection in verse 8 where Jesus says, "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." As the book of Acts makes clear, it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that the apostles began to preach and the church began to grow. Without the Holy Spirit nothing would happen and so the apostles were told to wait in Jerusalem for Jesus to baptize them with the Holy Spirit from heaven. And once the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them, they would be empowered for the mission of being Jesus' witnesses to the end of the earth.

Finally, we will consider the hope of the apostles concerning the kingdom and the kingdom that Jesus was actually going to bring. The fact that the disciples were concerned about the kingdom was a good thing. The problem was that their vision of what it would be like was mistaken in a number of ways. They were expecting the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. The kingdom of God that Jesus had established and would bring was going to look very different. The main characteristics of it at the beginning of the book of Acts were the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the command to witness to Jesus to the end of the earth. Witnessing to Jesus would mean witness to everything about Jesus and his significance. It would involve witnessing to the OT promises concerning Jesus and his fulfillment of them on earth. It would involve witnessing to his life, death and resurrection, but also his ascension into heaven and the significance of that, namely that Jesus was now sitting at the right hand of God – Jesus was now the king who was reigning from heaven. That was and is a vital part of the message that is to go to the end of the earth.

The vision of the disciples concerning the kingdom was of a visible earthly kingdom. The reality that Jesus was bringing was and is only visible in the Spirit-empowered lives of the followers of Jesus. It is not a visible earthly kingdom in the way that OT Israel was. It is a spiritual kingdom and its earthly manifestation is the Spirit-empowered witness of the people of God. Much of the kingdom of God is invisible, but it is much more glorious than the earthly kingdom of Israel ever was because the ascended exalted Christ is the King of that kingdom to whom all authority and power in heaven and on earth has been given.

In 1 Corinthians 15:25 Paul writes, "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." Verse 26, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." The kingdom of God in the present means that Jesus is on the throne and what he is doing from there is saving his people from the curse and bondage of sin and destroying the greatest enemies of the human race – sin and death and Satan.

The book of Acts shows how Christ involves his followers in his mission – in his kingly reign. Empowered by the Spirit, the apostles and in them the church witnesses to Jesus – declares to the world who Jesus is and calls men and women and children to submit to his rule and receive his gift of forgiveness and life.

The ideas that we have reviewed in this sermon are a great encouragement for us as we consider the way in which God's kingdom comes. We are definitely involved as the church of Jesus Christ, but our involvement is a part of what Jesus is doing through his Spirit. Jesus is on the throne. He has sent his Spirit to empower his people. And we are given the mission to be Jesus' witnesses both close to home and throughout the world. We have a significant role to play, but Jesus is the one who is bringing the kingdom through the Holy Spirit.

These verses impress upon us that without the Holy Spirit we can do nothing. Before the Spirit was poured out all the apostles could do was wait. But after they received the Holy Spirit they were equipped and their ministry was blessed and the church began to grow. We are not in the pre-Pentecost situation. Jesus is at the right hand of God. He has poured out the Holy Spirit on the church and he continues to work through his weak people in such a way as to show that he is the one who saves people, builds his church, and brings his kingdom.

So the book of Acts is about giving us confidence in God's plan for salvation and judgment which is being implemented by Jesus through the Holy Spirit using weak and sinful people. By the end of the book of Acts the gospel has been proclaimed in Jerusalem and Samaria and had made its way to Rome, the heart of the Roman world. Over the centuries that followed it continue to spread throughout the world as Jesus through the Spirit equipped his people for their mission. Throughout it all the people of God have shown both faithfulness and ongoing sinfulness demonstrating again and again that Jesus is the one who builds his church and brings his kingdom.

And it is in that light that we do our part. We engage the mission together as the church of Jesus Christ – as the body of Christ. May what we have considered this even motivate us to consider how we are contributing to the mission and encourage us go forward in faith knowing that the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon us and Jesus is building his church.