

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson One – Acts 1

Times. Dates. We want to know when Jesus will return. So did the apostles. In Acts 1 they were asking, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 6).

Jesus told the disciples that they were not to know times or dates, but what they should know was that they would receive power so that, between the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost and the Son’s coming again, they could be his witnesses in ever-widening circles. In fact, the whole interim period between Pentecost and Jesus’ return is to be filled with the worldwide mission of the church in the power of the Spirit. Christ’s followers were both to announce what he had achieved at his first coming and to summon people to be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (1:8).

Christ’s vision and commission would give clear direction to the disciple’s prayers during their ten days of waiting for Pentecost. But before the Spirit could come, the Son must go. The themes of Acts 1 will encourage and instruct all who wait for Jesus.

OPEN

- What helps you to feel equipped to carry out Jesus’ ministry on earth?

STUDY

- *Read Acts 1:1-5.* Luke’s first two verses are extremely significant. It is no exaggeration to say that they set Christianity apart from other religions that regard their founder as having completed his ministry during his lifetime. Luke says Jesus only began his. This is the kind of Jesus Christ we believe in: both the historical Jesus who lived and the contemporary Jesus who lives.

1. In what ways did Jesus prepare and equip his apostles to continue his ministry and life on earth?

Gave them commands (v. 2), proved his resurrection to them (v. 3), speaking about the kingdom of God (v. 3), promised them the Holy Spirit (v. 4-5)

2. What was the significance of the fact that Jesus showed himself to the apostles and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive?

It proved that he had actually risen from the grave. He wasn’t just a “vision” or something. He was in the flesh, alive, even though he had died. It also gave them the certainty that they would need to carry out their mission, which was to proclaim the Gospel to all nations.

3. How would the apostles' ministry be affected by the fact that Jesus chose, commissioned and instructed them?

It would be a ministry based on the authority that comes from Jesus Christ. They didn't choose this ministry for themselves. They did not speak on their own authority, but on a borrowed authority.

Summary: In a sense all the disciples of Jesus can claim that he has chosen us, revealed himself to us, commissioned us as his witnesses, and both promised and given us his Spirit. Nevertheless, it is not to these general privileges that Luke is referring here, but to the special qualifications of an apostle—a personal appointment as an apostle by Jesus, an eyewitness experience of the historical Jesus, an authorizing and commissioning by Jesus to speak in his name, and the empowering Spirit of Jesus to inspire their teaching. It was primarily these uniquely qualified men through whom Jesus continued “to do and to teach,” and to whom Luke intends to introduce us in the Acts.

4. Read Acts 1:6-11. What evidence is there that the disciples did not understand the kingdom that Jesus set up?

They were focused on the timing rather than the kingdom itself (v. 6). They were concerned with the establishment of a kingdom, but Jesus actually sent them out to do work (v. 8). They continued to look into heaven after Jesus ascended (v. 10-11).

5. The primary way that Jesus equipped the apostles was the promise of the Holy Spirit. What was going to be the result of the Holy Spirit coming on them?

They would receive “power” and would be “witnesses” in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (v. 8).

The major event of the early chapters of the Acts took place on the day of Pentecost, when the now-exalted Lord Jesus performed the last work of his saving career (until his coming again) and “poured” out the Holy Spirit on his waiting people. His life, death, resurrection and ascension all culminated in the great gift, which the prophets had foretold and which would be recognized as the chief evidence that God's kingdom had been inaugurated. For this conclusion of Christ's work on earth was also a fresh beginning. Just as the Spirit came upon Jesus to equip him for public ministry, so now the Spirit was to come upon his people to equip them for theirs.

6. What difference would the ascension of Jesus and the promise of his return make in the ministry of the apostles?

The ascension of Jesus meant that the Apostles were left on their to carry out the mission. They could not wait around and watch Jesus work. It was on them now. The promise of his return served a two-fold purpose: encouragement that he would return for his people, and motivation to spread the Gospel because when Jesus returned he would judge the world.

7. *Read Acts 1:12-26.* Why do you think prayer seemed to be the major activity that they engaged in after they returned?

They were communing with the Father while they awaited the promised Holy Spirit. They needed wisdom and direction from Him. For the first time, they were without Jesus (other than the 3 days). They realized that more than ever, they needed divine empowerment and guidance.

Luke tells us that their prayers had two characteristics, which, Calvin comments, are “two essentials for true prayer, namely that they persevered, and were of one mind” (Acts of the Apostles, vol. I [1552, Oliver and Boyd, 1965], p. 38). There can be little doubt that the grounds of this unity and perseverance in prayer were the command and promise of Jesus. He had promised to send them the Spirit soon (1:4-5, 8). He had commanded them to wait for him to come and then to begin their witness. We learn, therefore, that God’s promises do not remove the need for prayer. On the contrary, it is only his promises which give us the warrant to pray and the confidence that he will hear and answer.

8. What was Peter’s conclusion about Judas (vv. 15-20)?

Peter believed that Judas’ actions were a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (which is what Jesus thought, John 17:12), namely Ps. 69:25; 109:8. Peter saw in Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 the dark treachery of one who repaid the friendship extended by God’s king with hatred and harm (see Ps. 109:4-5). The desolation was fulfilled in Judas’ gory death in a field purchased with the proceeds of his betrayal. His blood defiled the land, making it unfit for the living to dwell there and so it became a cemetery for aliens (Matt. 27:7-8).

9. What were the qualifications of the person who would replace Judas (vv. 21-26)?

He had to be with the disciples from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry all the way until the ascension.

10. Why were these qualifications important?

Because he would serve as “a witness to his resurrection” (v. 22).

Summary: The stage is now set for the day of Pentecost. The apostles have received Christ's commission and seen his ascension. The apostolic team is complete again, ready to be his chosen witnesses. Only one thing is missing: the Spirit has not yet come. So we leave Luke's first chapter of Acts with the 120 waiting in Jerusalem, persevering in prayer with one heart and mind, poised ready to fulfill Christ's command just as soon as he has fulfilled his promise.

APPLY

- The records of these acts of the Holy Ghost have never reached completeness. This is the one book which has no proper close, because it waits for new chapters to be added so fast and so far as the people of God shall reinstate the blessed Spirit in his holy seat of control.

How are you involved in being and praying for the witness of Jesus throughout the world, beginning with your own "Jerusalem"?

How have you seen the power of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of others?

In your own life?

How would you like to experience more of his power?

PRAY

- Praise God for the provision that he has made for you to be his witness. Ask him to empower you for that task.
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All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.