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GAZING INTO HEAVEN

Acts 1:1–11

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. (Acts 1:8)

he Acts of the Apostles *ends* very differently from the way it begins. It ends in the city of Rome—the Eternal City and center of the world of Luke’s day. It begins in Jerusalem—the Holy City and center of the purposes of God thus far. The very last sentence of the Greek text of Acts contains the word rendered “boldness” (Gk. *parrēσίας*) in our English translations. Paul, for a period of two years, was under house arrest in Rome. He was waiting for his case to be heard, which, if things went badly, would result in his execution. And what was Paul doing? “Proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all *boldness* and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). On the other side of Acts, we find the New Testament church in its infancy: a band of eleven men, some women, and a few others. They had witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, but seemed not to have expected either, despite the fact that both had been foretold. Initially, after the events of Good Friday, they fled in fear of their lives. What began in fear emerged in boldness.

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Since then, they had witnessed evidence of Jesus' physical resurrection on more than one occasion. A few had personal encounters with Jesus that had shaken them to the core. They had spoken with him, eaten with him, and listened to his words. He had "commissioned" them in words that seemed to imply great expectations for the gospel, saying "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). He had urged them to "wait" in Jerusalem for "the promise of my Father" (24:49)—words now repeated here as Luke summarizes the past forty days from Resurrection Sunday to Pentecost (Acts 1:4). Jesus was reminding them (and Luke is reminding us) of words spoken by John the Baptist: "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16).

In the forty days from resurrection to the ascension (Luke has summarized it already at the close of his Gospel), the disciples remained confused and uncertain of what Jesus' "promise" meant. They were still asking questions, which, from our vantage point, sound hopelessly naive. They still seemed earthbound and parochial in their expectations. That the church, which spreads through the eastern Mediterranean world as Luke describes in Acts, should grow from so unpromising a seed to a continentwide faith was evidence that a greater power was at work—a divine and supernatural power. The book of Acts poses a question: How did the church grow and become so bold from such small and fearful beginnings in Jerusalem to "the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8)?

WORLD VISION AND LOCAL EVANGELISM

The answer to this question is twofold. From a human point of view, the answer lies in what these disciples did in terms of evangelism and missions. In particular, there is the content of what they proclaimed and how that message came home to the hearts of men and women who embraced it as "good news." As such, we find that 30 percent of the text is taken up with preaching that explains the meaning of the gospel. Over and over we find the New Testament church preaching the gospel in which the character of God and the nature of salvation are set forth. Though there is clearly a great amount of action in this book, a third of the book is taken up with teaching:

explaining what the gospel is, why we need it, and how we don't deserve it. Fascinatingly, we observe how carefully the early church did this in the differing contexts of their Greco-Roman world. Jerusalem was a very different place from Athens, and the early Christians were as contextually sensitive to the varying cultures of their day as we need to be in our own time. The church's passion and zeal for evangelism and mission forms part of the explanation for the massive growth of the church in the thirty years that constitute the historical setting of the Acts of the Apostles.

But this can never be the complete answer, or even the most significant. The principal reason for the church's growth must lie elsewhere—in the supernatural activity and sovereign power of God. The Acts of the Apostles is a book that could be given the title *THE ACTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT*, or more accurately, *THE CONTINUING MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST*.¹ Luke quite deliberately informs us that this is volume 2 of a two-part work, the first being the Gospel of Luke. Acts continues what Jesus “began to do and teach” in volume 1. The role and ministry of the Holy Spirit is intimately related to the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ. Pentecost—the pouring out of the Holy Spirit that followed the resurrection-ascension of Jesus—as we will see, is a Christological event. It enables us to see how the promise of Psalm 2—“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession”—will be answered (2:8). Behind the earthly lies a heavenly reality. When Jesus announced at Caesarea Philippi that he intended to build his church within enemy-occupied territory, he insisted that nothing—not even the forces of darkness—could prevail in their sustained opposition against it (Matt. 16:18). The Acts of the Apostles provides the contours of how Jesus accomplishes this task. The New Testament church is God's promise to his Son in eternity and is brought about by the work of Jesus' personal representative agent, the Holy Spirit. A Trinitarian purpose is at work, accompanied by all the attendant paraphernalia of deity!

Like any other part of Holy Scripture, Acts is designed to be “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16)—not just on an individual basis, but also corporately as the body of Christ. The church of today must learn, from this important period of church history, the principles and strategies of effective church growth in

1. See F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 21.

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our own time. A journal exists in the United States called *Acts 29* (there are, of course, only 28 chapters in Acts), and in a sense, that is precisely what a study of this book should bring to the surface. What are the lessons that the church in the twenty-first century needs to learn? Until we come to that point, we have not reached the goal Luke has in mind for us.

And learn it the early church did! In A.D. 204, Tertullian wrote his famous treatise, *A True Christian*, giving something of a defense against the Roman nobility:

We are but of yesterday, yet have we filled all places among you, Cities, Islands, Citadels, Boroughs, Assemblies, your very Camp, your Tribes of the common people, Decuries² of the Judges, the Palace, the Senate, the Judicatories, we only leave to you your Temples. For what War are not we fit and ready, though we were fewer in number, who so willingly are put to death?³

In this relatively brief span, the gospel had already spread like wildfire to the end of the earth. *Good news travels fast!*

MOST EXCELLENT THEOPHILUS

Acts opens with a dedication. It is similar to the dedication given to the author's "first book" (Gk. *prōton logon* [Acts 1:1])—the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:1–4). Both volumes were dedicated to Theophilus (Acts 1:1; Luke 1:3), whom Luke described earlier as "most excellent." The title suggests someone of high rank and authority within Roman society. Later, he addressed Governors Felix and Festus by this title (Acts 23:26; 26:25). Various speculative opinions have been voiced as to his identity, including that he may have been Luke's literary patron (funding the hand-copied Gospel and Acts); or that he may have been an official at the Roman court and could therefore act as an advocate for Paul at his forthcoming trial. However, neither viewpoint has gained much traction. More certain was that Luke directly described Theophilus as a man "taught" (Luke 1:4), or "catechized." These two volumes were carefully written and researched so as to provide him with greater certainty

2. That is, a squad of ten men.

3. "A TRUE CHRISTIAN Subject under a Heathen Prince; or TERTULLIAN'S plea for Allegiance, argued in time of the sixth Persecution under the Emperor SEVERVS," *Ann. Dom.* 204, chap. 37.

and assurance concerning the things that he has come to believe. Like Luke himself, Theophilus was probably a “God-fearing” Gentile attendee of the synagogue for whom an account of the purposes of God in redemption, of both Jews and Gentiles, was being given.

The book of Acts is largely history. In our postmodern world, the church will do well to heed the importance of history, of establishing solid empirical roots to faith and doctrine. Luke was a careful historian, eager to establish solid foundations for the New Testament church’s origins. But more especially, Acts is about Jesus Christ. It continues the story of Jesus. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

The starting point, the fundamental thing, is that Christianity is about Jesus. “I’ve written to you already about Him,” said Luke in effect, “and I’m going to tell you more about Him.” Christianity is not a teaching—it is a person. It is not merely a moral outlook that is to be applied in the realm of politics. You start with a historical person. Luke was a pure historian. He was giving an account of events and of facts.

The Lord Jesus Christ was the theme of the preaching of the early church. He is the theme of the Gospel of Luke. He is the theme of the Acts of the Apostles.⁴

Following hard on the heels of this dedication, Luke begins a description of the infant church. The picture is one of weakness and puzzlement. There are no attempts to gloss over the frailty of the apostles. There is no Nietzschean *Übermensch*, no superman that points to glorious beginnings of the church! Instead we see a band of disciples unskilled in their understanding, unsteady in their identity, and unsure of where Jesus had gone.

FORTY DAYS OF PREPARATION

Luke describes several aspects of Jesus’ ministry to the disciples in the period before his ascension. First, Jesus gave them proof that he was alive (Acts 1:3). One of the reasons why Jesus came and disappeared again during the interval between his resurrection and ascension was to prepare the disciples for days when he would no longer be physically with them. Jesus

4. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Book of Acts*, vol. 1, *Authentic Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 10.

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had foretold his departure on many occasions, not least in the upper room on the eve of his death. “I go away,” he had said (John 14:28; 16:7). But his departure was not sudden and instantaneous. He remained from Passover to Pentecost, appearing to his disciples individually and corporately in different locations. These appearances would surely have helped them come to terms with the fact that one day soon, he would go away and not return again (at least in their lifetimes).

The resurrection appearances were “proofs”: “To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). But proofs of what, exactly? They demonstrated his victory over death (1 Cor. 15:54–57). They corroborated Jesus’ claim that he was divine (Rom. 1:4). They validated his every word—particularly the gospel truth that declared deliverance from sin through faith in Christ alone (Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:17). They attested to the fact that his atoning work was complete and perfect, and that his offering up of himself as a lamb in the place of sinners was accepted. The resurrection tells us that the Father in heaven declares, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Each appearance spells the end of sin, for apart from this proof, we are still in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17). Each declared that Calvary has met every obligation of the law. But they also spoke by way of prophecy. The resurrection of Jesus is a foretaste of the resurrection of those who are in union with him by faith. He is the “firstfruits” of a greater harvest (1 Cor. 15:20).

A second aspect of Jesus’ preascension ministry was to give further teaching about “the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Jesus had already taught them much of this material, but they had not grasped it. He was bringing in a kingdom, built on the foundation of his death on the cross and consequent resurrection. The kingdom had now been established. The rule and reign of Jesus Christ, now and forever, had been inaugurated.

The third aspect of Jesus’ preascension ministry to his disciples was 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.” (Acts 1:4–5)

Jesus, the one true “apostle” (Heb. 3:1), as he was sent by the Father, now gave to his disciples “through [by the power of] the Holy Spirit” the “promise of the Father”—the Holy Spirit of God (Acts 1:2–4). The same Spirit who had energized him Jesus now gave to his disciples to continue his ministry to the end of the earth. What had been promised now came to pass (Luke 3:16). Jesus employed the word *parakleton*, or “Paraclete” (meaning one who gives support), repeatedly in his Upper Room Discourse to refer to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. *Parakleton* has been a notoriously difficult word to render accurately into English, though the term “Encourager” would seem deeply significant, given the fear that now well-nigh crippled them.⁵ Much has also been made of Jesus’ promise of *another* Paraclete (John 14:16, 26; 16:7), suggesting another *of the same kind* rather than of a *different* kind. Such *paracletic* ministry is meant to floodlight Jesus Christ, suggesting that Jesus’ ministry continues after his physical departure from them. Their strength and motivation will be drawn from their communion with Jesus, no less so after his physical departure than before. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to empower (“you will receive power” [Acts 1:8]) and enable for the tasks of the kingdom of God. These impoverished disciples manifested no sign of being church planters and martyrs. Yet the Spirit will change all of that. He always does.

In one of his appearances to the disciples, Jesus had told them what he wanted them to do: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). He sent—the Greek is the verb form of the word “apostle,” rendered *missio* in the Latin translation. So disciples were to be apostolic missionaries: those sent by Christ as his personal representatives. Further, they were to be “witnesses” (Latin *martus*).⁶ This initially implied that they were to bear witness to what they had seen and heard, then to witness to what they believed to be true, and eventually to be willing to suffer to the death for this witness to the truth (thus, *martyr*).

5. Translations have included “Counselor,” “Advocate,” “Comforter,” “Helper,” “Strengthened,” and “Encourager.”

6. They were to be witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The significance of the widening circle from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and the “end of the earth” will become evident later in these studies, but commentators have long since noticed that Luke records definitive and epochal moments when the gospel seems to spread to these regions within the records of Acts itself. The Acts of the Apostles is in fact the story of how this was accomplished.

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Where these things are present—namely, a conviction about the death and consequent resurrection of Jesus Christ, the active establishing of Jesus’ heavenly kingdom, and the confessed need for the power of the Holy Spirit—world mission and evangelism will follow. But where these things are absent, the church will inevitably fail to do what Jesus has commissioned us to do.

KINGDOM PUZZLES

It may seem almost incredible to us that the disciples could get things so utterly wrong at this point, but they did. They asked Jesus: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Several things emerge all at once, primarily because, as Calvin so famously observed, “There are as many errors in this question as there are words.”⁷ The victory, constitution, and power of the kingdom were greater than the disciples had imagined.

First, and very clearly, the disciples did not understand the nature of the purposes of Jesus Christ for them and for the world. Despite all the teaching that they had received directly from the Master Teacher himself, they were astonishingly slow to learn. Perhaps this should be a warning to us who are called to preach and teach in the church. We should not be surprised that despite our very best efforts, some Christians do not pick things up quickly. We may need to exercise patience, remembering that our Lord also ministered in such circumstances. We need to exercise what Paul so evidently felt was the case, that to “write [or preach] the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you” (Phil. 3:1).

Second, they still retained a view that Jesus had come to do something great for ethnic-geographical Israel. It is possible to construe Jesus’ reply to suggest that he does not deny a future purpose for Israel and the disciples are simply not privy to its timing. However, the text quite certainly indicates that in saying that he intends them to go “to the end of the earth,” Jesus clearly intends the focus of the kingdom to be away from Jerusalem. Paul will later declare to the Ephesian church that the middle wall of partition between

7. John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 1:29. David G. Peterson argues against the view that this question of the disciples was misguided. “[Jesus] endorsed it, but interpreted it in terms of the gift of the Spirit and the fulfillment of prophecies about the restoration of Israel as a servant community, called to be God’s ‘witnesses’ to the nations (Isa. 43:10, 12 and 44:8).” David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 109.

Jew and Gentile has been broken down (Eph. 2:14). Like most first-century Hebrews, the disciples were nationalists at heart—longing for a return of the days of David and Solomon. But the purposes of God are far greater than their minds could possibly grasp. Israel is only a tiny country, and the gospel is to conquer *the world*.

I still smile when I think of my grandfather telling me with a solemn earnestness when I went off to the university that I was “going very far away” and that he hoped I’d come back and see him. The University of Aberystwyth in Wales was barely forty miles away! Yet it was the farthest my grandfather had ever traveled away from home in his life (and he was approaching ninety when he told me this). The world for my grandfather was whatever lay across the horizon of his small farm in West Wales, and that world was a great mystery to him, one that he was not very eager to learn about. The disciples, similarly, were having their horizons enlarged. Jesus was saying to them in effect, “Some of you have traveled only as far as Galilee [just over a hundred miles], but I intend to send you to places that you have only heard about from merchant travelers, Diaspora Jews as they returned to Jerusalem for festival seasons, and Roman soldiers stationed in Palestine.”

Third, they made a fundamental error in thinking that it was possible to predict the future precisely by events that were occurring in the present. Eschatological predictions of the coming of Jesus have not been confined to these disciples, and even within our own traditions, there have been speculations aplenty as to possible dates for the return of Christ. It is fascinating, for example, to observe that many of the Westminster divines of the seventeenth century were given to speculations of the timing of the end. Typical was Henry Wilkinson (1610–75)—canon of Christ Church, Oxford, a member of the Westminster Assembly, and, later, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity (1652–62)—who preached before the House of Commons in October 1643, in what was to prove to be an astonishingly eschatological sermon. Having reminded the House that their “business lies professedly against the Apocalyptic beast and all his accomplices,” he went on to say that “the prophetic calendar in which the time of the ruin of Babylon, and the building of Zion is foretold, seems to intimate that the time is near approaching both for the one and the other.”⁸ Nearer our time, Harold Camping expressed his

8. Henry Wilkinson, sermon preached before the House of Lords, May 28, 1645.

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belief that the Christ would return in September 1994.⁹ Jesus' warning to refrain from such speculation seems to have gone unheeded.

But why would Jesus make such a prohibition? Partly, no doubt, in order for his disciples (and us) to keep an eye on the present task. We are meant to catch the vision of a great work that needs to be done before Jesus returns. A kingdom needs to be established and a gospel preached to every nation. Christians who have understood this have caught the great vision for missions and evangelism. It was what drove William Carey to India. As a thirty-year-old cobbler he could exhort a group of ministers: "Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God." God gave this cobbler a vision that took him to the end of the earth.

ANGELIC PROMISE

It is unfortunate that the ascension of Jesus has received so very little attention in the thinking and writing of theologians over the ages, for this is a central fact of our salvation. Luke's description of it is vivid:

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9–11)

As Jesus spoke, he began to rise into the sky and a cloud eventually hid him from view (Acts 1:9). It was his Father's act of withdrawing his Son from the disciples' gaze by having him "go up" (which naturally would have suggested exaltation or promotion) into a cloud (often a symbol of God's presence).

Moses witnessed the cloud on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:9, 16). The cloud that descended upon the tabernacle (Ex. 13:21–22; 1 Kings 8:10–11) in the wilderness and the temple in the days of Solomon was the effulgence of God's glory. Three disciples witnessed the same cloud at the time of the transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34–35). Now this same symbol of God's glory-presence appeared again, and Jesus was caught up into it and

9. Harold Camping, *1994* (New York: Vantage Press, 1992).

disappeared. Peter and James and John may have turned to the others and said, “We’ve seen this before! He’ll come back in a moment!” But two angels in white robes came and said (in effect): “Stop gazing up into heaven! One day it will be appropriate to look up there, but not now. Remember what it was you learned when you were on top of the Mount of Transfiguration: that at the foot of the mountain there is a dying and lost world that needs to hear the message of the good news of the kingdom of God.”¹⁰

The ascension was meant to indicate at least three things. First, it provided a *visible demonstration* of Jesus’ final return to heaven. That way, the disciples would not be expecting him to appear again as he had over the past forty days. There was something permanent about this manner of departure. If he had vanished secretly, the disciples might have been in doubt about what had happened.

Second, it portrayed the *manner* of the return of Jesus from heaven at the end of the ages. He “will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). It is interesting that in the space of two verses (9–10), Luke employs four different ways of expressing the visibility of the ascension—especially since theologians in our time have regarded the event as a myth! The ascension signaled that the dust of the earth (his human body of flesh and blood) now occupies some *place* in the universe that we call “at the right hand of God.” From this position Jesus engages in a heavenly ministry on our behalf. It is the high priestly activity of intercession as Jesus pleads for us on the basis of his finished work (Heb. 7:25). “Our Lord’s life in heaven is his prayer.”¹¹ From the vantage point of the throne of the universe, he lavishes upon us the benefits of his finished work on our behalf. We have a perfect intercessor, as the words of Charitie L. Bancroft so beautifully capture:

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea.
A great High Priest whose name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart.¹²

10. See Acts 1:10–11.

11. H. B. Swete, *The Ascended Christ* (London, 1912), 95.

12. Charitie L. Bancroft, “Before the Throne of God Above” (1863).

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Third, the ascension was a visible demonstration of Jesus' *promotion*. It was the beginning of his exaltation, in which his humanity was taken to the right hand of God. The King of Glory was entering into his new mode of existence. Though he had always been divine, his human body had never before occupied the place of honor and distinction.

This was a transition anticipated in the book of Psalms:

Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle!
Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory. (Ps. 24:7-10)

Have you caught the vision? Have you sufficiently reflected upon the meaning of the ascension of Jesus for us? Do you draw from it the strength and motivation to endure in the face of difficulty, hardship, and opposition? This is what Luke, or rather the Holy Spirit, would have us do.