

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BECAUSE JESUS ACTS AND TEACHES THROUGH HIS CHURCH Acts 1:1-11

INTRODUCTION

Our church is part of the biggest miracle that the universe has ever seen. The fact that there are groups of people from so many different languages and cultures gathering together week after week to worship Jesus Christ is a miracle of outstanding proportion. The fact that there are communities of people all over this world who trust Jesus and daily die to their desires to find life in this world in order to find their life in Christ is as great a miracle as the creation of the universe out of nothing. The book of Acts was written to explain how it is that this miracle has taken place and how it will continue to take place until the end of this world and the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth.

As you can see from the first verse of this book it is the second volume of a two volume work written to an individual by the name of Theophilus. The first volume is the gospel of Luke. We know this because of what the opening paragraph of Luke's gospel says. He writes, "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." As Acts 1:1 says the gospel of Luke is the description of what Jesus began to do and to teach and so the book of Acts is the continuing saga of what Jesus does and teaches. Luke has written an orderly account, not only of the birth, life, suffering and death of Jesus but also of the birth and life of the church which is the instrument through which Jesus acts and teaches.

Verse two tells us that the subject of Jesus' conversation with his apostles after his resurrection was the kingdom of God. Jesus says in Luke 4:43, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." In Luke 11:20 he says to the Jewish religious leaders, "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you." It was through his words and his works that Jesus Christ manifested the kingdom of God while living on this earth. In this opening passage in Acts we see that Jesus is continuing to do the same thing through his church. As we will see in this passage this has been God's program from the beginning of the universe. God has always been working to bring the universe under his gracious rule.

If the gospel of Luke is the beginning of the story of how Jesus by his actions and his words began the process of establishing God's kingdom on this earth, then the book of Acts is the ongoing story of how Jesus is establishing God's kingdom on this earth by acting and speaking through his church. But it is more than simply the story of how Jesus is bringing God's kingdom to this earth but it is indeed the story of the Triune God. In this opening introduction to the book we can see the Trinity at work. It is Jesus the Son of God who gave instructions to the apostles and who continues to act and teach through the church. It is the Father who promised to give the HS and who has determined when the kingdom will be established. The HS enables Jesus to teach and he is the one in whom the apostles are to be baptized and who enables the apostles to bear witness to the resurrected Christ. We will see this same thing throughout the entire book. The Triune God is the main actor in the book of Acts. Even though we will be talking about many different human beings and observing much human action, yet throughout the book we will be repeatedly reminded that God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is doing it all. Our church, indeed every church in the world, has been directly created by and is sustained by God himself. As we begin our journey through this book by looking at this introductory passage we will discover the means by which the Triune God is establishing his rule over his universe through his church.

MAIN POINT

The eternal purpose of the Triune God is to establish his kingdom on the earth by...

I. Convincing his people of the glory of the crucified and resurrected Christ (vv. 1-4a)

Luke's gospel ended by recording several appearances of the resurrected Christ to different individuals and groups of individuals. In each case, those to whom he appeared were skeptical and incredulous. Several women are the first to witness the empty tomb. They are shocked and even dismayed that it is empty. Two angels show up and rebuke them, saying, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words." Jesus, during the last year of his earthly life, told his disciples on numerous occasions that he was going to be crucified and then rise from the dead. Each time Jesus told the disciples that he was going to suffer, die and rise again, they gave him blank stares. They didn't get it. So we see them in that last chapter of Luke as they are faced with the resurrected Christ still not getting it. He has to show his disciples the scars of his wounds and eat with them before they will accept the fact that he is not a ghost.

So we are told here in Acts that it was over a period of 40 days that Jesus appears to the disciples on numerous occasions in order to convince them that not only is he the one who died but he is also the one who has been raised from the dead. This is the central point of the Christian faith and that which sets it apart from every other religion and worldview. Every other religion is based upon the teachings of the founder of the religion. Our faith does not simply rest upon the sayings and teachings of Jesus and the apostles and prophets but upon this historical event: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Throughout the book of Acts this will be the constant refrain from the apostles as to why people should believe the gospel; Christ has been raised from the dead. The gospel is not merely a message, but a person, the divine Son of God who became a man at a point in history and lived for some 30 years in obedience to God's law and then for three years teaching about God's kingdom and doing miracles and then he was betrayed into the hands of his enemies and was tortured and finally killed on a Roman cross. But then, three days later he rose from the dead. The certainty and truthfulness of the word of God and the promises of God are sealed by this life, death and resurrection.

Becoming a Christian and living as a Christian is always first and foremost being taken up with the greatness and the glory of this person who suffered and rose from the dead. There has never been anyone like him and there will never be anyone else like him. He is the most impressive of beings. He is the only human being who has escaped the power of our greatest enemy, death itself. Who else has willingly submitted himself to the pain and humiliation of suffering for the good of others? Who else has willingly died for his enemies? Who else has risen from the dead? The foundation of our faith and of our existence as a church is the crucified and resurrected Christ. The story of the church's growth and expansion that is recorded in the book of Acts is rooted in these historical events. If Jesus Christ did not die and did not rise from the dead there is no reason for our existence. There is no reason to be a Christian. We should all go do something else with our lives because if Christ did not rise then your praying, reading the Bible, coming to church, restraining your passions, giving money to the cause of Christ, forgiving those who harm you, traveling to Mongolia to share the gospel is a complete waste of time.

But Jesus has been raised from the dead. He gave many convincing proofs to these eleven men that he was indeed the crucified one who had come back to life with a physical, glorified body. It is because of this glorious person that we trust the words of the Bible. Every human being is going to base his or her life on the judgment of someone. We all are going to make decisions about how to live and what to love based on someone's interpretation of reality. Why would you listen to and stake your life upon the words of anyone else? How can you trust your own judgment about the nature of reality and ignore the words of this resurrected Christ? This is the insanity of our sinfulness. We trust our own judgment or we trust the judgment of mere men while ignoring the words of this most glorious of all persons, the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. So I ask you, is this crucified and resurrected Christ the center of your life? Or is he simply an add on to what really matters to you?

The eternal purpose of the Triune God is to establish his kingdom on the earth by...

- *Convincing his people of the glory of the crucified and resurrected Christ*
- *And by...*

II. Giving the promised HS who makes his people public, passionate lovers of Christ (vv. 4-8)

At the end of v. 3 Luke tells us that the general topic of conversation with his disciples was the kingdom of God. Then in vv. 4-5 we are given an occasion of that discussion about the kingdom of God. In recording this brief statement we see our first example of one of the means by which Luke tells the story of Jesus' ongoing work of establishing his church. Throughout the book of Acts we will hear the sermons and teachings of the apostles, which, according to v. 1 are the teachings of Jesus. However, in no case does Luke record the entire sermon or teaching. When we read these comparatively brief summaries of much larger speeches we need to pay attention and seek to discern the larger issues behind them. In this case, Luke means for us to understand something about Jesus' teaching regarding the kingdom of God through this summary statement.

There are several things we discover about the kingdom of God from this brief summary. First, the coming of the kingdom of God is based on a promise God the Father made prior to Jesus' coming to earth, which Jesus had also spoken about during his earthly ministry. Second, this promise of the Father is to be fulfilled to the apostles while they are waiting in Jerusalem. Third, the promise has some sort of connection to John the Baptist. Finally, the promise that God made in the OT regarding his kingdom and about which Jesus spoke prior to his crucifixion, which they are to receive while waiting in Jerusalem is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. What we are hearing in this summary is that God's kingdom has been coming for a very long time. The story line of the entire Bible is the story of how God is establishing his kingdom through his Messiah by means of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist is one of the hinges on which that story turns. He is the last of the OT prophets who have all been preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. His water baptism was meant to symbolize the much greater Spirit baptism that the Messiah, the Son of David, Israel's king and Savior, Jesus Christ would perform. The immersion in water of those repentant men and women by John symbolizes the immersion of God's repentant people in the Holy Spirit by Jesus the Messiah. When Jesus talks with the disciples about God's kingdom he is enabling them to see the entire OT as a description of his coming as the king who pours out God's Holy Spirit on his people, beginning in Jerusalem.

In vv. 6-8, at the final meeting of Jesus with his disciples prior to his ascension, they ask the question that this discussion of God's kingdom and the coming of the Holy Spirit has raised for them. This question is not a new question for them. This is the same question they were asking Jesus prior to his crucifixion and resurrection. They had expected that Jesus was going to set up God's kingdom on earth, prior to his death. In fact, in Luke 22, eighteen hours before Jesus was going to be killed and 43 days prior to this conversation, while they were eating the last supper together, the disciples were arguing about who was going to get the job of Vice-President in Jesus' kingdom. That last supper to them was a victory celebration, they were certain Jesus was going to take over in the next day or two and they, as his closest friends would get to be in charge. They expected this because they knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah and they expected that when the Messiah showed up he would take over the world, make Jerusalem the capital of the world, put Israel in charge of all the nations of the world and appoint them to be his chief officers in that kingdom. The death of Jesus was a crushing blow to these men. So now that Jesus is resurrected and using this OT language about the HS, their expectations are aroused again and they want to know, "Is it now you are going to take over the world and put us in charge of things?"

Listen to me. What the disciples were asking for is no different than what millions of people in the world daily ask of Jesus. Millions of people daily ask Jesus, "Is it now Lord that my wife is finally going to love me the way a Christian wife is supposed to love her husband? Is it now Lord that my children are finally going to respect and obey me the way Christian children are supposed to? Is it now Lord that I will finally get that promotion I deserve as a faithful Christian worker? Is it now Lord that I'll finally be healthy, like you promised? Is it now Lord that I'll be totally free from my troubling addiction?" The disciples want a world that

works the way they want it to work and a world in which they are in charge, under God of course. They want God to make things right, right now. They are not asking God to do his will but seeking to get God to do their will.

Notice how Jesus responds. First of all, he acknowledges that God is going to establish his kingdom on the earth. One day the universe will work the way it is supposed to work and we will judge angels. However, God will do it in his time, according to his own sovereign purpose and will. He basically tells them it is none of their business to know when it is going to happen. We do not and cannot know the times and seasons surrounding the establishing of God's kingdom because he has sovereignly and secretly laid out a plan that is known only to him. It has always been a puzzle to me how it is that people who say they believe the Bible spend so much time inquiring into and talking about when Jesus is going to return when this verse and others like it so clearly say it is none of our business. We are to long and even pray for God's kingdom to come but we are not to spend our time investigating the "signs" to see if we can get a heads up on when it will come.

Verse 8 is one of the most famous verses in that part of Christianity to which we belong. Evangelical Christians emphasize the fact that God intends to save people from all over the world and that he intends to do it through us. This verse says that very plainly. I have taught this verse dozens of times as I have tried to encourage Christians to take serious our responsibility to tell others about Christ. However, several years ago I noticed three things about this verse that are not usually emphasized in its treatment. First, it begins with the word, "but". This means that verse 8 is in contrast to verse 7. Jesus tells the disciples, "The kind of power you are looking for you are not going to get. You want power to make the world fit your ideas of how things ought to go. You want power to throw off the cruel Roman oppressors, to get rid of all the "sinners". That's not your job, that's not your business. But you will get power, not the kind you lust for but the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, it's not a command, it's a promise. Jesus is not saying, "I command you to be my witnesses". He is simply saying, "You will be my witnesses because you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit." Every true Christian and every Christian church bears testimony to the saving power of the resurrected Christ by their life and by their words. That is a fact. Jesus is absolutely confident that the gospel is going to the entire world, not because he is confident of the faithfulness of Christians but because he is confident in his own power to accomplish all his will. Just think about it for a moment. If you were Jesus and your intention was that the good news of your saving work was to be preached in the whole world and your entire program depended upon these 11 men, how confident would you be? Jesus is not confident of the success of the church because of the people in it but because of the Holy Spirit's being present in the church. The history of the past 2000 years bears out the reality of this promise that Jesus made. The U.S. Center for World Missions has documented the growth of the Christian church. In 100 A.D., about 70 years after this conversation, there were 180 million people in the world and of those an estimated 500,000 were Christians. That is a ratio of 360 non-believers to every Christian. By the year 2000, in a world populated by over 6 billion people the ratio of non-Christian to Christian is less than 5 to 1. Acts 1:8 is the reason for this miraculous growth.

Third, notice that it says that when the disciples receive the power of the Holy Spirit it says "and you will be my witnesses", not "so that". Christians will bear testimony to the saving power of Christ, but it is an effect of the Holy Spirit's power, not his ultimate purpose. God does not save us first and foremost for the purpose of making us into evangelists. Luke is building on a long history of teaching about the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the OT the Holy Spirit has been promised to God's people as the agent who would give new hearts, new minds, new affections to God's people. It is the first and chief work of the Holy Spirit to cause you and I to love God and all of God's ways. It is his first business to give us hearts that are full of love for and delight in Christ as our Savior. In Jesus' most extensive discussion on the work of the Holy Spirit in John 14-16 this is what he says as summed up in 16:15, "The Spirit will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you." The Holy Spirit's chief work and aim is turn us as God's people into passionate fans of Jesus. Among the numerous beneficial effects of having new hearts that now love God is that we will gladly declare the glory of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

We all know how this works. As most of us know, Michael Phelps, the American swimmer, won 8 gold medals in the just finished Olympic Games. In my home as I'm sure in many homes here we watched as he won race after race. Each time we cheered him on and when he won we applauded and cheered. The next day we talked with others about his successes. If we met someone who did not know what he had done, we gladly told them about him. We willingly and gladly worshipped him and evangelized on his behalf because we were so impressed with and delighted with his accomplishments. C.S. Lewis describes this necessary connection between what we are impressed with and our verbal praise of it when he says this, "... just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it. "Isn't she lovely?" "Wasn't it glorious?" "Don't you think that magnificent?"

This is what v. 8 is describing. The Holy Spirit by his sovereign power enables us to rejoice in Christ and one of the things that we then do by our lives and by our words is to glorify him to others. We bear witness to his greatness out of our joy in him. While training in evangelism is helpful and while strategies for sharing the gospel with others is necessary, the most necessary thing for us is the sovereign and gracious work of the HS giving us hearts that delight in Christ. This explains why Paul's prayers for the church are not full of pleading for God to empower people to share their faith but rather are full of requests that God would enable his people by his Spirit to know and marvel at his great love in Jesus. The fact is that when the Holy Spirit imparts life to his people then we cannot help but worship Christ and talk with others about him.

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III. Promising to unexpectedly send Jesus back to finally and fully institute God's kingdom (vv. 7 & 9-11)

Luke's introduction to his story of Jesus' building his church ends with the story of Jesus' ascension. The mention of the cloud which hides Jesus from their view is a visible sign from God that Jesus has gone to dwell in the very presence of God. This cloud is symbolic of that cloud that led Israel through the desert, the cloud that settled on top of Mt. Sinai, the cloud that filled the tabernacle when Moses set it up and the temple when Solomon dedicated it. It is the cloud that accompanied Jesus at his transfiguration when Moses and Elijah showed up and was witnessed by John, James and Peter. In a visible way God lets the apostles know that Jesus has been exalted to God's right hand where he now waits until the day he will return to finally and fully establish God's kingdom on this earth. The appearance of the two angels confirms that this is indeed what is transpiring. God's kingdom has come with the coming of the Messiah, Jesus, is coming through the power of the Holy Spirit but will not fully come until Jesus returns on the clouds of glory as the prophets, Jesus himself and now these two angels have foretold. This coming, as Jesus said in v. 7 will be unexpected, according to God's predetermined plan.

The angels, aside from confirming Jesus' ascension to the place of highest authority and his certain return also mildly rebuke the eleven disciples for continuing to fix their attention on heaven, when they ask them, "Men of Galilee why do you stand gazing into heaven?" What is it that the angels are rebuking in the apostles; why are they gazing into heaven? In part their riveted attention is an expression of their love for Jesus and their sorrow over his final departure. However, it also is another example of their slowness to believe the promises and to embrace the will of God. They still do not fully comprehend the glory of God's saving work through Christ. They still cannot imagine the powerful presence of Jesus by means of the Holy Spirit to all of God's people everywhere at the same time. As we will see in the unfolding story of the church's expansion, they still do not get that God's intention is not and never has been limited to national, ethnic Israel. Their focus is still too narrow and too small. This will change when the Holy Spirit comes. So for now the angels must come and tell them to stop their longing for what they want and to return to Jerusalem to wait for God to do what he wants.

Again, we can see ourselves in these men. We often sit, gazing into heaven, longing for an experience with Jesus that is too private, too narrow, too focused upon ourselves. We want heaven on earth now rather than wait for Jesus to come and take us to heaven. God would say to us to stop gazing into heaven and to enter into what he is doing in the world. His Spirit has come to us and so now we are to be taken up with Christ and his glorious salvation. We are to trust in and hope in and long for his return while we do his will here and now and so bear witness to his glory among the nations. We live by the Spirit now, in this fallen, imperfect world, knowing that one day we will see our Savior face to face and then we will enter fully into the joy of our Master. The fullness of this joy will not be known until then, so now we live in a confident expectation of the return of Jesus who will finally and fully establish God's reign as he makes a new heavens and a new earth.

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