

Acts 1:1-11

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[0 : 00] And if you've got a Bible, turn in to Acts chapter 1. If you've not got a Bible, I'd really encourage you to go and grab one from by the table just outside. And we're going to dash around the Bible a little bit this morning.

Acts chapter 1. It's a real joy, isn't it, to people who are part of the church family and are now serving the Lord in different places. It's really great to have Will and Marianne and Jonathan and Michael serving the Lord in the far north in Dundee.

And Jordan Saturov, who's with us, who's serving the Lord with London City Mission in East London. So we're really, we're so glad to see you and we're going to pray for you now.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you that the gospel that we love and believe, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, is being proclaimed all around the world.

And we thank you for the saints in every place that are calling on your name. And we thank you, Heavenly Father, for Will and Marianne and Jonathan and Michael serving you in St. Peter's Dundee.

[1 : 06] And we pray for encouragement for that church family. And we pray that your word would continue to go forth faithfully there. And we thank you, Lord, for Jordan and Colina. And we pray for blessing in their work with London City Mission as they seek to train and equip others in the work of evangelism.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that Jesus Christ, your son, is unstoppable. And his kingdom has come and is coming and will come. And he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

And we pray that this series in Acts would fill us with that confidence. That we would recognize that Jesus Christ, by his spirit, is still at work today.

He is still speaking today. And he is building his church. And we pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I've never preached on my way through the Book of Acts.

And this summer I've spent a bit of time while I was on sabbatical kind of reading around it and trying to think how best to approach it. I'm convinced that I've got the main message. And I'm pretty sure how we're going to get into it.

[2 : 13] I'm not really sure how we're going to get out of the Book of Acts. Because it's a long old book. And as you well know, I'm not brilliant at preaching big chunks. So we might be in this series for the next five years.

The Book of Acts is far more than the birth of the church. It's far more than the spread of Christianity across the Roman Empire.

The Book of Acts reveals to us God's purpose for this world. But specifically the place of the church in the purposes of God.

And the Book of Acts is tailor-made for a church which is half asleep. And finds serving Jesus a great inconvenience. And doesn't have much heart for mission.

And is in danger of forgetting who she is. And the Book of Acts is written for a church that has turned inward on itself. Where the worship is predictable and routine.

[3 : 14] And where the ministry is relegated to paid professionals. Where compassion fits around the busyness of my daily life. The Book of Acts is written for a church that is under risk and in uncharted waters.

None of which, of course, is relevant to us today. That was a joke. It's a terrible thing when you have to say that. I find myself having to say that more often.

I thought it was because people didn't get the joke. But actually, it's more to do with me, isn't it? That is a joke. Let's go back to the Bible.

There's no other book in the Bible like the Book of Acts. It functions as a bridge. It forms a bridge between the first half of the New Testament. And the Gospels.

And the second half of the letters. It forms a bridge between the Jesus Christ of the New Testament. And the Jesus Christ of the Church today. It forms a bridge between Jew and Gentile.

[4 : 22] And so the Gospel goes out from Jerusalem to Samaria to the ends of the earth. To the heart of the Gentile world. And in the first two verses, the writer introduces himself.

The writer is Luke. And he reminds us of this bridging purpose. He introduces the book to us in this way. He says, O Theophilus, I've dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.

Until the day when he was taken up. And after he'd given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. The first book that he's speaking about, of course, is the Gospel of Luke.

That's volume one. And Luke was an educated man, a physician. He writes some of the finest Greek in the New Testament. He's widely travelled. And we discover in later chapters that he travels with the Apostle Paul.

And he goes back into Palestine, into Israel. He interviews the eyewitnesses to write the Gospel. My theory is that Luke spent quite a lot of time with Mary, Jesus' mother.

[5 : 30] And because at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, you've got the tenderest details, haven't you? Of the annunciation of the coming of Jesus, his birth and his early life.

But the point is more important, and Luke in verse one wants us to know that the subject of volume one was Jesus. And the subject of volume two is Jesus.

The key to this, he says, I dealt in the first book of Theophilus. I've dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach. In other words, volume one was what Jesus began to do and teach.

Volume two is about what Jesus continues to do and teach. Some people think that the Gospels are about Jesus and the Book of Acts is about the Church. But the contrast is not between Jesus and the Church.

The contrast is between two different phases of Jesus' ministry. The first phase, which is in the Gospel of Luke, is the earthly ministry of Jesus. Until he was taken up.

[6 : 34] And Luke has talked about all those things that Jesus did and taught. But now there's a second phase of Jesus' ministry where he still teaches and he still works.

He works from heaven through his Spirit and the Apostles. And he bears testimony to the words written in Scripture. And that is really important for us.

It's important that Jesus didn't just go back up to heaven and forget about it. He spent three years creating the Church. And now he's about to send his Holy Spirit upon them.

And he continues to work through his Spirit. The whole of this passage, the first eight verses that we're going to look at today, tells of the incredible importance of the Christian Church in the plans of God for his world.

In every other religion, when the religious founder dies, the followers do their best, don't they, to keep the flame fanning.

[7 : 38] The flame burning, I mean. The followers do their best to practice that religion because the founder is now absent. But it's the opposite in the Christian Church. We are not, this morning, trying to do our best because Jesus is gone.

We are a Christian Church precisely because Jesus is here. And it's very important for us who call ourselves Reformed Evangelicals.

Or Reformed Presbyterians. We are rightfully disdainful. We don't want anything to do with deism. That philosophy that says that God is an absent creator, that he wound up creation like a clock and set it going, but he doesn't have any direct or personal involvement with it now.

Everything just continues along according to his immutable laws. That's clearly unbiblical, isn't it? And we're right to dismiss it when it comes to our Christian lives. And when it comes to the life of the Christian Church.

But I worry sometimes, actually, are we closet deists? Very often, we are very uncomfortable with God interfering with our lives.

[8 : 58] Except, maybe in the case of an emergency, and even then, in specific terms that are set down by me, we plan and we strategise, as if Jesus finished acting 2,000 years ago in our own lives.

We maybe hoard possessions, as if this life is all that there is. And there isn't really a life to come. And we invest our time in ourselves, to alleviate our fears and our anxieties.

We act as though Jesus wound up the Church 2,000 years ago. But this book tells you that, no, Jesus really is directly and personally involved with us now.

And right at the heart of the Book of Acts, the first thing that we have to be clear about with the Church is that Jesus Christ remains Lord of the Church and He is here with us now, by His Spirit. Active now. He continues to work with us now, by His Holy Spirit. He is very much engaged with us. [10:10] And I wonder what IPC would begin to look like if we really believed that. This is what this book is all about. It's going to show us what it's like to believe it.

The second verse, we're told that one of the things it looks like is a group of people trying to live under the command of Jesus, dependent on the Holy Spirit. Verse 2 is the first of about 60 references to the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts.

Right from the outset, we are being prepared for the fact that this organism, the Church, is unlike anything that the world has seen before. It's a place, yes, where Jesus is present and active, but it's also a place where the power of the Holy Spirit exists.

Where people are indwelt by God's Spirit. Enabling them to love and serve and proclaim Him to the ends of the earth. And I hope you listened as we read those words from verses 1 to 8.

And you hear this new thing that is about to happen. We are on the precipice of a new age. In these words. And every word of verses 1 to 8 trembles with anticipation and expectation.

[11:36] As Jesus prepares the world and His disciples for this new thing before He's taken up into heaven. There are two sections in verses 3 to 8.

And I want to look at them in reverse order. Because I want to. And so let's look at the second half.

And I'm going to call the second half, verse 6 to 8, the turning point for God's world.

Verse 6, the turning point for God's world. So when they come together, they ask Him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, it's not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority.

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 ends of the earth. Jesus has been raised from the dead.

He has spoken to them about the Holy Spirit. And this question from the disciples wonderfully shows that they still don't get it. They don't understand it really.

[12:48] They are looking for the restored kingdom of Israel. And Judea's answer to them is stunning. He doesn't kind of castigate them for their narrow political ambitions.

Instead, He lifts their vision and their desires to the worldwide purposes of God and to their place in His purposes.

He says, yes, the Spirit is coming. But He's not coming to make you powerful. He's not coming to make one nation in a particular place powerful.

But He's coming so that you would take my purposes to the ends of the earth when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and the ends of the earth.

And if you've read the book of Acts, which I hope you'll do, you will know that that verse functions like a table of contents. So chapters 1 to 7 is about the apostles' ministry in Jerusalem.

[13:51] Chapters 8 to 12 is their ministry in Judea and Samaria. And chapter 13 to the end of the book is their ministry to the ends of the earth. Now I can't tell you how many sermons and talks I've heard on Acts chapter 1 that have been treated and demanded and commanded that we become witnesses and get out there and do evangelism.

One of the commentaries I've got has six sermons on this verse telling us how to be great witnesses for Jesus. There's an awful lot of truth in those sermons but I want to tell you that this verse of Jesus is not a desperate plea for him not to be forgotten.

This is not a hurried strategy from Jesus that he hopes might work out in the world that you and I have somehow got to fulfill.

The scene of verse 8 is not a motivational rally. It is a law court. It is a cosmic law court.

And each of the three pivotal phrases in verse 8 are all taken from the prophet Isaiah. when God the Lord of Heaven and Earth announces a lawsuit against all the idols and against all the false religions in the world because he says to the false religions you're guilty of false advertising.

[15:28] You promise salvation. You promise life. And God says I want to have a lawsuit in fact to see who is the true God. And both sides Lord God Almighty and the false religions call witnesses to be presented.

But there's a problem. The problem is God's witnesses are blind. They've seen the mighty acts of God but they've closed their eyes and they've shut their ears.

And therefore they are blind witnesses. And I want to show you this. So keep a finger in Acts chapter 1 and turn to Isaiah chapter 43 and verse 8.

Isaiah 43 and verse 8. I'll give you a bit of time to get there. Isaiah 43 verse 8.

I would give you the page number but someone will shout it out. 603. Isaiah 43 verse 8. It's important you see this. And so what Jesus is doing in Acts is he's deliberately taking these phrases from Isaiah so that you and I will understand what Isaiah is saying.

[16:41] So verse 8. When God the Lord of heaven and earth announces a lawsuit against all the idols and against all the false religions in the world he says you're guilty of false advertising.

43 verse 8. Bring out the people who are blind yet of eyes who are deaf yet of ears. All the nations gather together all the peoples assemble who among them can declare this and show us the former things.

Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right. Let them hear and say it is true. You are my witnesses declares the Lord and my servant whom I have chosen that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

Before me no God was formed nor shall there be any after me. I am the Lord and besides me there is no saviour. I declared and saved and proclaimed when there was no strange God among you and you are my witnesses declares the Lord.

But the problem is they're blind. How is God going to heal the blindness of his witnesses? Well Isaiah says two things. The first he says I'm going to send a special person.

[17:51] I'm going to send a servant the servant of the Lord whose ministry will be what will he be what will he do he will bring light to the Gentiles to the nations to open the eyes of the blind.

That's chapter 42. And the second thing is he promises to pour out his Holy Spirit and when the Spirit comes he will open eyes and open mouths.

So turn over to chapter 44 and let me read to you from verse 3. Where Isaiah says this for I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground I will pour my spirit upon your offspring and my blessing on your descendants and they shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams and what will be the result?

This one says I am the Lord's and another will call on the name of Jacob and another will write on his hand the Lord's and name himself by the name of Israel. Thus says the Lord the King of Israel and his Redeemer the Lord of hosts.

I'm the first I'm the last besides me there is no God who is like me let him proclaim it let him declare and said it before me since I appointed an ancient people let them declare what is to come and what will happen fear not not be afraid I've told you from of old and declared it and you are my witnesses.

[19:12] Okay come back with me to Acts chapter 1. And so here is the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ and what is he doing? he's taking on his lips the words of God the Lord of Israel the words that God had spoken 700 years before Isaiah you shall be my witnesses and now Jesus Christ announces to his people you shall be my witnesses and it's a challenge to the world the point is not that Jesus is devising a strategy for church growth the point is this Jesus he is God and Lord of Israel it is Jesus who is the first and the last and besides him there is no God what I want you to see from this passage and I want you to see this when your eyes are opened you are a witness it doesn't matter whether you want to be or not

I was in the co-op in Greenford Avenue about three years ago all of life is in Greenford Avenue co-op and I noticed that there was a guy shoplifting and he went to the till but he only paid for one thing thankfully the guy behind the till kind of pointed it out caught him and they tried to kind of stop him going out he was confronted the guy started threatening the staff and I was there looking on and there was CCTV but I was a witness I was a witness I had to go to court in the end as a witness I was a witness whether I liked it or not I had no choice about that I saw what happened and so I was a witness I had no choice and when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see in Jesus Christ the glory of God and the wonder of our salvation we are witnesses

Jesus doesn't say to you in Acts 1 verse 8 you must be my witness you've got to try hard to be my witness he says you are you shall be my witnesses the real problem of course is hostile Christians there are times aren't there in civil cases where eyewitnesses will not testify hostile witnesses and you can understand that but why be a hostile Christian when what we are witnessing is the glory of Jesus Christ and again the issue is not our witnessing technique or our evangelistic programs the issue is simply this whether our eyes are open to the person of Jesus Christ and part of the essence of seeing him and worshipping him is bearing witness to him and saying

I'm Jesus' person I belong to him I have a friend who for the first years first couple of years after he became a Christian he used to write on his hand on the back of his hand every day before he went out three letters H I S his and it was there to remind him throughout the day who he belonged to you see the great issue in our world is not the issues that come up in the headlines as important as they are the issue is that every man and woman every boy and every girl comes to see the majesty and the love and the grace and the mercy of God in the face of Jesus Christ and to bow to him and call him saviour and Acts 1 verse 8 it's not a polite invitation for you to show your faith if you're feeling particularly gregarious and outgoing it's a summons from the Lord of all the earth for the world to bow and it's a promise that he is going to give his spirit to open our eyes and when our eyes are opened whether we like it or not we are his witnesses and that is why it's a turning point for the world the great contest the great prosecution the great issue in our world is Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit and he is here by his spirit in church this morning and in every Christian for the opening of our eyes and the paying of our testimonies so briefly let me turn to the second part of the passage which is verses 3 to 5 if it was a turning point for the world now it's a turning point for the church and the question that we should ask is how on earth do you prepare disciples for this ministry verse 3 he presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God 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 a great deal can happen in 40 days but here are some of the 40 most important days in all of history Jesus has risen from the dead and in a few days he's going back to heaven and will pour out his spirit what does he do how does he equip his church for this new ministry he does three things first of all he establishes the reality of his resurrection it's very important to Jesus that you as his follower are fully convinced and fully persuaded that he has bodily risen from the dead he presents himself to them by these many proofs many convincing proofs because you see we are not witnesses to a teacher or to a teaching who died years ago we are witnesses to the living and risen

[26 : 00] Christ Christ has died Christ is risen Christ will come again that's the first thing he does the second thing he does is he clarifies the gospel he clarifies the gospel the good news he speaks to them about the kingdom of God so let's go to the end of the book of Acts keep your finger in Acts 1 and this time go to the other direction go to the end the last verse of the book of Acts and I want you to see that Luke brackets the start of his book and the end of his book with a reference of the ending there is none.

Preaching the kingdom is speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you ever noticed that throughout the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the kingdom of God is used frequently. Something like 120 times in the Gospels. But after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the kingdom is only used occasionally.

Why is that? The reason I think is this, that during the 40 days when Jesus taught his disciples, the big plan of God and the rule of God is fulfilled in Jesus.

It's fulfilled in his life and his death and his resurrection. One last cross-reference, alright? We don't normally have many, we don't normally have any.

[28 : 09] We've got loads today. Luke 24. Luke 24. Come with me. Stay with me. Luke 24. And if you want to know what happened in the 40 days, you need to know this verse.

Luke 24 and verse 27. So Jesus is speaking to some followers. What happened between Jesus being raised from the dead and ascending up to heaven?

Verse 27, speaking to some followers, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

And then verse 45.

Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them, thus it is written, thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

[29 : 16] And you are witnesses of these things. Yes. When Christ first came into this world, he brought the age to come into our own evil age.

The age of the spirit. And when he comes again, he will do away with this present evil age. And so you and I find ourselves living in the overlap.

We live in the overlap of those ages. We participate in the age that's to come by the Holy Spirit and through Jesus Christ. And so that's why everyone who knows the Lord Jesus Christ knows that life is not about food and fashion and finance and fun.

But we know because we belong to the age of the spirit, that life is about righteousness and peace and joy through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. We begin to know now in part what we will know wholly when Christ comes again.

And your affections, which are changing now as you follow Christ, will one day be fully changed. And you come to value strange things like repentance from sin and the glory of Christ and prayer and giving.

[30 : 50] And so here is what Jesus does to prepare us. First of all, he assures us of the resurrection. And then he clarifies the gospel and then thirdly and lastly, he charges them to wait for the Holy Spirit.

Verse 4 and 5. I think this is the only time in the New Testament where he stops his followers from preaching. He taught them the gospel.

They believed in his resurrection, but they still lacked one thing. Without which, whatever they did would be useless. the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

And we're going to see this over the next few weeks. The church of Jesus Christ is made up of people who have been washed and drenched and submerged and flooded by the Holy Spirit.

Who have been born anew, who have been born from above to God. And we know that we are completely dependent upon God's Holy Spirit. Without him, we can do nothing.

[31 : 55] individually or as a group of people. And so here is the great turning point for the world. And here is the great turning point for the church.

And the Holy Spirit reminds us that it's not about our efforts and our cleverness and our endeavours and our schemes and our witness. But our membership in the kingdom of God and the progress of the faith and all these are spiritual realities that are carried forward by the Holy Spirit.

And there is but one thing to take place before the Spirit is poured out on his church. And you'll have to come back next week to find out what that is. My hope, this should have been my introduction, my hope is that this series on Acts will remind us that Jesus Christ is unstoppable. And it will remind us that Jesus Christ Church is growing and will grow. and it will give us a confidence in God and his purposes.

My prayer is that this room will be full to overflowing, that we'll have to have the difficult discussions of how do we church plant, when do we church plant, do we do a second service, do we put a balcony in, because Jesus Christ is unstoppable.

[33 : 20] And his church will grow and is growing. And his kingdom has come, is coming, will come. And we are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit.

Let's pray together.