

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

By Steve Zeisler

Acts is perhaps the most accessible of all the books of the Bible to contemporary Christians. From the beginning, the church has struggled with the same things we struggle with, has had the same power to obey that we have, and has been given both opportunity and responsibility just like ours.

In this message we are beginning a study of Acts. I invite you to use your imagination to enter into it. The story begins with 120 followers of Jesus obeying his command to wait for God to act. They were ten dozen ordinary people--hopeful, fearful, with a great message to declare. Imagine yourself among them.

Before we begin our study of chapter 1, we need to get oriented. The first two verses of the book provide helpful information: "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up [into heaven], after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen." This opening is unusual for a couple of reasons. First, an ancient historian didn't usually call attention to his own act of writing. Writing usually followed a period of oral transmission of events. The story was the important thing, not the writing. So the author (certainly Luke, though he does not name himself in the book) stands out in his self-awareness as an historian.

Second, verse 1 indicates a previous book. Luke's writing consists of two volumes fitted together in a set. The first volume is of course known to us as the Gospel of Luke. We know from the introduction of that account that he carefully sifted the sources for their accuracy. He can be trusted not only as a theologian but also as an historian.

Chapter 1 of Acts is a bridge between the ascension, the end of Jesus' first story, and his continuing story in the church which began on the Day of Pentecost.

As a final introductory note let me also call attention to the final two verses of Acts. They describe Paul under house arrest in Rome: "And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered." The word "unhindered" is important. Paul spent 2 1/2 years as a prisoner awaiting trial in Rome. He had told King Agrippa that he hated his chains and longed for the freedom to evangelize new regions. Yet when Luke tells Paul's story, he says that the preaching went on unhindered. The condition of the servants of God doesn't matter; the gospel message can't be stopped. It will do its work wherever it is proclaimed, under whatever circumstances. All efforts to block the message will fail.

Luke finished his second volume, but it has no real conclusion. He just stopped writing. Surely he knew that Jesus inhabited his church and offered life to the world, and will continue to do so until he returns. The story is still being written.

Let's look at chapter 1 now. It reaches back to the first volume and it gets us ready for the second.

An impossible calling

Verses 1-11:

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up [into heaven], after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”

Among the gospel writers, Luke gave the most information about the beginning of the Jesus story. He told of a baby who was born poor and rejected, his first crib a feed trough for animals. His birth was attended only by grubby and poor shepherds. Luke alone made reference to Jesus' childhood and his young manhood. He continued with the story as Jesus became an adult who began to teach marvelous insights from the Scriptures in Galilee and later in Judea. Jesus told compelling stories and accomplished astonishing miracles that witnessed to the power of God and his love for those who needed him.

Jesus' life and message threatened his enemies, and they executed him on a cross. And on that cross he went to war for us. He fought against all the forces of darkness and evil, against the power of sin to degrade, against the devil and all his minions. He was forsaken by his Father, having become sin for our sake. He suffered eternal punishment for every human being who would ever live. His sacrifice was an act of love. And he was raised. Luke refers to that in brief here: “He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering. . . .” The King James translation uses the word “passion,” an old term for suffering but powerful in this context. In this simple reference to his suffering and resurrection we find the great culmination of Christ's story.

Nothing in our imagination serves us as we try to understand all that that is described here. Death itself was dealt a deathblow on the cross. The sacrificed Lamb took away the sins of the world. The tyrant ruler of this world was judged. The kingdom of God was brought near. Slaves were emancipated, prisoners set free, orphans adopted, the guilty made righteous. A baby born as nobody had become the Savior of the world. He was welcomed in his ascension to the right hand of God the Father.

Reflecting on the ascension, Paul said this in Philippians 2:9-11: “Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” This is what happened at the ascension, when Jesus disappeared from their sight into a cloud, attended by angels who spoke of his second coming as they saw the end of his first stay on earth melt into the *Shechinah*, the glory of God.

Jesus' story was breathtaking, and the disciples knew it. They were the ones given this extraordinary truth about what was accomplished in Jesus Christ, now exalted to the right hand of God the Father. They were the ones given the opportunity and the responsibility to witness to these things. What stands out to me in the first chapter of Acts is how impossible their calling was. They were utterly inadequate for the task. This group of 120 who represented all the Christians there were in the world, were just ordinary people--some accomplished, some not, some well educated, some less so, some well-to-do, most not. They were neither braver nor wiser than most people. Given a chance to speak to the risen Christ during the forty days before the ascension, they typically asked the wrong questions. Their vision was too small. The twelve apostles seated among them were instructed to lead the rest, but no realistic observer at the time could have predicted anything great of the apostles.

However, this inadequate, small, mostly frightened band of people were the ones that Jesus intended should have this message. They were chosen. This incongruity between the greatness of the calling and the inadequacy of the troops can encourage us--God has long experience using ordinary clay pots to great ends.

Let's read the rest of the chapter.

Preparatory waiting

Verses 12-26:

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

And at this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was counted among us, and received his portion in this ministry." (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the book of Psalms,

'Let his homestead be made desolate,

And let no man dwell in it';

and,

'His office let another man take.'

"It is therefore necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us --beginning with the baptism of John, until the day that He was taken up from us --one of these should become a witness with us of His resurrection." And they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, "Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two Thou hast chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go and to his own place." And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

There are two major ideas here. One is the requirement that they wait for God to act. Waiting was in this case preparatory. It was not negative, like stalling to avoid a problem. It was energetic, purposeful, leaning forward in expectation but without taking action. That's hard for all of us, isn't it? We don't like to wait. But the requirement to wait was for good reason: so that when God acted, they would be sure that it was he. We would do well to learn to wait, to prefer God's timing to our impatience and self-reliance.

The other major theme here is that they were assigned first and foremost to be witnesses to Jesus. A witness is someone who points to something else. Christian disciples are to give testimony to a truth that has changed their lives. It is a truth that exists outside of them and is greater than they are. They are to be talking about and living for and displaying the Lord.

Looking at what we are told of these ten days before Pentecost, the tone is somber. There is a grisly description of Judas' terrible end. Peter stood and spoke to his friends, but not with boldness or great certainty. Peter at this point was only beginning to grasp that he could be forgiven for his failure. We have already noted that there was nothing special about this group of 120. Even their choosing of another apostle to replace Judas was done without confidence-casting lots to avoid making a mistake. They were attempting faith, but it was mixed with reticence and uncertainty.

But there are as well some wonderful truths in these final paragraphs. I'll mention three of them and then we'll consider some application.

First, verse 14 says that they were of one mind. They hung together because they knew they needed each other. Daunting circumstances can overcome any tendency to pride or petty bickering. Second, verse 14 also tells us they devoted themselves to prayer. In their waiting, prayer was a central priority. Third, during this time Peter went to the Scriptures for guidance in determining the responsibilities of the apostles.

We will do well to make community, prayer, and the word of God our priorities at all times, but especially when our circumstances overwhelm us.

How can the experience of 120 Christians in the days before Pentecost serve as a challenge and encouragement to us?

His name the only one

First, the reason we consider these folks so unlikely for the task, as they did themselves, is because we respect the wrong things. We think that the powerful people in the world are the ones who make things happen. We imagine that wealth, genius, military authority, political power, cultural savvy, and advanced degrees are really what direct events. But it has never been true for very long. The gospel is what shapes history in the final analysis, and will until the end.

What do you think is important right now? The Las Vegas odds makers can tell us who is likely to win this afternoon's game. They can say who will be rich a year from now, or who will be important, or get elected. They will be wrong much of the time, but even if they are right, those things aren't as important as we think they are. Why do we listen so intently and care so deeply? What do we respect too much, and in the process disrespect ourselves and the work of God?

A second question concerns our witness. When the church promotes itself and offers life in Christ as a byproduct, it is both foolish and blasphemous. We should speak of Christ and allow him to create community. We very often witness to the wrong things, articulate the wrong priorities.

Ray Stedman was the first pastor of this church, and was also a highly regarded evangelical leader with worldwide influence. I think it was for his sixtieth birthday that we flew in Howard Hendricks, Ray's longtime friend, as a

surprise on a Sunday morning. Howard ushered Ray to a chair on the platform, explaining we were celebrating his birthday, and then preached a sermon about how God works in the life of a man, frequently gesturing to his friend as an example. It was a fine message, but I could see that Ray was growing increasingly uncomfortable. He got up afterward, and was quiet for a moment. Finally he just pointed up to a decorative banner on the wall that had the text of Zechariah 14:9, and read it aloud: “The LORD will be King over all the earth; in that day, the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one.” And he sat down. The Lord Jesus, not his servants, deserves our praise.

We should speak of Christ. It is he who gives us identity, authority, and opportunity. It is he who makes life worth living.

The Jesus story started with the unexpected birth of a baby. The story of the church is similar. It started with 120 nobodies who were overwhelmed by the responsibility God gave them, but their fears were unfounded. God is doing his work, making us beautiful, a bride made ready for the Bridegroom. He is accomplishing what he intends. We should not despise what God values.

Too many of us cannot believe that God intends us to participate in the greatest story ever told. But if we have imagined ourselves present with the 120 in the upper room, perhaps we can believe that the same God who changed the world through them will do so through us as well.

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