

The book cover features a stylized, layered illustration. The top half shows a sky with light blue and white clouds, some with orange outlines, and a background of small, repeating leaf-like patterns. A dark silhouette of a sun with rays is centered in the middle. Below the sun, the bottom half of the cover depicts a dark brown, textured landscape with wavy, light blue lines representing water or paths. Numerous small, light-colored crosses are scattered across this landscape. A dark blue boat with a white sail is positioned in the lower right, navigating through the wavy lines.

SAVED

EXPERIENCING THE PROMISE OF
THE BOOK OF ACTS

NANCY GUTHRIE

“*Salvation* is a favorite term of Luke’s. Nancy Guthrie faithfully and skillfully walks through Acts, showing that God’s heart is for all people to be rescued from their greatest enemies: sin and death. Even though Jesus has ascended to the heavens, the life-giving presence of Jesus continues to spread. This is a must-have book as you work through the narrative.”

Patrick Schreiner, Associate Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The introduction alone is worth the price of this book, and the book doesn’t disappoint. In it you’ll find deep nourishment for your soul and experience an increased desire to apply yourself to the study of God’s word. With careful exposition and passion, Nancy Guthrie leads us to see our Savior’s work in the book of Acts and (to paraphrase her) ‘makes us long to live in God’s kingdom and experience his power more than ever before.’ This book is an invaluable resource for individual or group study.”

Donna Dobbs, Women and Children’s Ministry Director, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi

“Nancy Guthrie’s *Saved* gets at the heart of Acts. Her volume reminds the church of the resurrected Lord sitting on the Father’s throne. Christ pours out the Spirit upon believers, and the Spirit ensures the arrival of God’s glory to the ends of the earth. What began in the first century continues today, and we must reconsider our calling as it relates to our community and the world around us.”

Benjamin J. Gladd, Executive Director, Carson Center for Theological Renewal; series editor, Essential Studies in Biblical Theology

“Nancy Guthrie walks us through the book of Acts, helping us marvel at the big themes and enjoy the unexpected details, all of which come together to give us confidence that as the news of the risen Jesus is proclaimed, God is saving people. Getting to know Acts can be a daunting prospect, especially if you want to teach through it. I’m thrilled to have a resource like this, which I will be turning to on a regular basis.”

Amy Wicks, Associate for Women’s Discipleship and Pastoral Care, St. Silas Church, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Saved

Saved

Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Acts

Nancy Guthrie

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With respect and gratitude, I dedicate this book to some of my female friends who are boldly moving out of their comfort zones to cross significant boundaries with the good news that Jesus saves.

Emanuela Artioli, Coram Deo, Italy

Shamsia Borhani, Afghan refugees around the world

Carol deRossi, Coalición por el Evangelio

Robin Dillard, Servant Group International

Keri Folmar, United Christian Church of Dubai

Jenny Manley, RAK Evangelical Church, United Arab Emirates

Mary Trapnell, Nashville Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition

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Introduction

Acts of the Apostles?

IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT, Acts is kind of a funny name for a book, isn't it? It immediately raises the question, "Whose acts? What acts?"

Of course, the fuller name we find in our English Bibles for this book is Acts of the Apostles. Luke, the author of this book, didn't actually give it that title. It wasn't until the third century that the early church gave it this designation. Why might they have given it that title?

This book certainly tells the story of what happened to and through the twelve apostles and the apostle Paul in the thirty or so years following the death and resurrection of Jesus. It particularly focuses on the ministry of Peter in the first part of the book and then on the ministry of Paul in the second part.

But if this is a book about what the apostles did, it is interesting that after the twelve are listed in the first chapter, we don't hear anything else about most of them, while we have several chapters about the ministries of Stephen and Philip, who were not among the twelve apostles, and Paul, who was added as an apostle. So perhaps providing an account of the actions taken by the apostles was not the primary focus or purpose of Luke's writing.

Acts of the Holy Spirit?

Some have suggested that this book is really about the acts of the Holy Spirit. Certainly the descent of the Holy Spirit is central to this book. It begins with the dramatic descent of the Holy Spirit on the 120 believers gathered in the upper room and Peter's Spirit-empowered sermon in Jerusalem during the feast of Pentecost. From there, the narrative is driven by the expanding circle of those on whom the Spirit descends—on Samaritans (8:17), on Saul (9:17), and on God-fearing Gentiles gathered at the house of Cornelius (10:44; 11:15).

We see the Spirit at work to make the disciples bold in speaking the word of God (4:31), to enable Agabus to foresee a coming famine (11:28), to provide divine instruction and direction (8:29; 11:12; 13:2; 16:6; 19:21; 20:22; 21:4), to provide divine transport (8:39), to comfort God's people (9:31), to provide clarity on the requirements of God (15:28), and to reveal coming persecution (20:23; 21:11). Significantly we see the same Spirit who enabled Jesus to do signs and wonders (2:22) enable his disciples to do signs and wonders again and again throughout the book to authenticate their ministry as being connected to his (2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6; 14:3; 15:12; 28:8–9).

We could rightly say that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on those who put their faith in Christ was a watershed event in human history. Indeed, it marked the dawn of a new age in redemptive history, the dawning of "the last days," the age that stretches from Pentecost until the return of Christ.

Certainly the descent, filling, and work of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts is important and unique to this book. Yet if we're trying to get at the purpose or aim of the book, we recognize that the descent and indwelling of the Holy Spirit was not an end in itself, but rather served a greater end. What is that end?

Acts of the Preached Word?

When we examine how the Spirit works throughout the book of Acts, we see again and again that the Spirit works through the preached word. Yes, the Spirit speaks and acts directly at numerous points, but most significantly, we see the Spirit working through the means of the preached word of Christ. On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit gave his people the supernatural ability to announce the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ in languages they didn't know before. Peter preached and the Spirit worked through it, and those who heard were cut to the heart.

So perhaps another possible title for this book could be Acts of the Word. The word almost seems to take on an identity of its own in this book, as it is spreading. The Spirit works through the word to accomplish a work of new creation. Indeed, we could organize the book around the statements of what the word is doing and how it is spreading:

- Immediately following Pentecost we read that three thousand people heard the word preached by Peter and received it (2:41). And from there the word continues to spread.
- The apostles are arrested and beaten and told not to teach. But they do it anyway. And in Acts 6:7 we read, "The word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."
- Stephen is stoned to death and James is killed by the sword, but we read in Acts 12:24, "The word of God increased and multiplied."
- Saul and Barnabas make Antioch their headquarters, and we read, "The word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region" (13:49).

- In his second missionary journey, Paul and Silas go to farther-out places, “so the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (19:20).
- When we come to the end of the book, Paul has faced storm and shipwreck, and he is imprisoned in Rome, facing execution. And what does he do? “From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (28:23).

So the book of Acts is about the acts of the apostles, the acts of the Spirit, and very much about the acts of the preached word. But there is yet another option to consider as a possible title.

Acts of the Enthroned Lord Jesus?

In the first verse of Acts, Luke writes, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach” (1:1). In his Gospel, Luke wrote about the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Implied in his statement is that in this second part of his two-part work, the book of Acts, he is going to present what Jesus *continued* to do and teach.

This means that the transition from Luke to Acts is not from what Jesus did to what the apostles did. Rather, the transition is from what Jesus did while on earth to what Jesus continued to do from heaven. So perhaps another alternative title for this book could be, Acts of the Enthroned Lord Jesus.¹ As we read through the book of Acts, the Lord

¹ One of the books I found most helpful in writing this book is *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus* by Alan J. Thompson (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2013). Another is *In the Fullness of Time* by Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), who, in discussing the title of the book of Acts, suggests, “‘Acts of the Exalted Christ through the Apostles,’ or, going all out (in quasi seventeenth-century Puritan style), ‘Acts of the Exalted Christ by the Holy Spirit in the Church as Founded by Him through the Apostles,’” 59.

Jesus is at the center of the action. We hear him calling to himself those who are far off (2:39); adding new believers to his church (2:47; 11:21); sending his angel to open prison doors (5:19; 12:11); providing direction to his disciples (8:26; 9:11); appearing to Stephen and Saul (7:59–60; 9:17); speaking to Saul (9:5; 18:9; 23:11), to Cornelius (10:4), and to Peter (10:14); striking down those who persecute his people (12:23); opening the hearts of hearers of God’s word (16:14); and appointing ministers of his word (20:24).

We can never think that Jesus is unconcerned or uninvolved in the affairs of his people and the spread of his gospel. The heart of Jesus is still with his people. The hand of Jesus is still at work among his people.

But, we might ask, at work to accomplish what? The risen and enthroned Lord Jesus is at work by his Spirit giving his apostles boldness to preach, adding to their number, equipping them to establish churches. But to what end? We’re left, once again, searching for the deeper purpose toward which the apostles, the Spirit, the word, and the enthroned Lord Jesus are acting.

God’s Plan of Salvation Being Carried Out

Perhaps we find help with this by looking at the bookends to Luke’s two-volume work. One bookend is Luke’s birth narrative of Jesus, where we are told numerous times that the child Mary is carrying is the one who will “give knowledge of salvation to his people” (Luke 1:77). When Simeon takes the baby Jesus into his arms, he praises God saying, “My eyes have seen your salvation” (2:30). In Luke 3, Luke quotes Isaiah 40:3–5 and says that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (3:6). The other bookend is Acts 28:28. After quoting Isaiah 6:9–10, Paul proclaims, “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” In between these two bookends, we’re told that the content of the message that the apostles have been empowered by the Spirit to declare is “the message of salvation” (Acts 13:26), or “the way of salvation” (16:17). Peter declares,

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (4:12). So, if we wanted to capture what the whole of the book of Acts is about in a sentence, perhaps one way to say it would be this: *The enthroned Lord Jesus is at work by his Spirit through his apostles who are preaching the word, taking the gospel to every nation, and it is accomplishing its intended purpose: people are being saved.*

No other Gospel writer uses the word *saved* and its various forms as much as Luke. In the book of Acts, he uses *saved*, or some form of it, twenty-one times.² Indeed, salvation is at the heart of the promise of the book of Acts, the promise that we want to experience for ourselves and for everyone we love. And that is: “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:21). What generosity of grace!

But what does it really mean to be saved or to experience salvation? In the Old Testament, salvation was about deliverance, preservation, and rescue from enemies. Moses told the people cornered and scared on the shores of the Red Sea that they should “fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today” (Ex. 14:13). They were saved from the Egyptian army when the Lord rolled back the waters of the Red Sea. But as the Bible’s story progresses, we begin to see that the salvation he worked for this one nation throughout the Old Testament was really a shadow of a far greater and more pervasive salvation he intends to work for people from every nation.

The Bible is a book that recounts the work of God accomplishing his great purpose for history: to save his people from their greatest enemies, sin and death, and deliver them into the safety and rest of his presence. In the Gospels we see how God is working for the salvation of his people through the incarnation, Jesus’s sinless life, his death, and his resurrection. And in the book of Acts we see how the Lord Jesus is continuing to work out God’s eternal plan of salvation for his people

2 Patrick Schreiner, *Acts*, Christian Standard Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2022), 21.

through his ascension, his session as he sits at God's right hand ruling over and interceding for us, and in pouring out his Spirit at Pentecost. We also discover that "his people" includes people from every nation, of every culture and race. God intends to save a people for himself made up of people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). We await the final great work of salvation to come, when the Lord Jesus will return to destroy his enemies and usher in the new creation. On that day we will experience salvation in all of its glorious fullness.

I wonder how the realization that salvation is at the heart of the story Luke is going to tell us in the book of Acts hits you. Oh, I hope it doesn't make you yawn and think, "Yeah, salvation, I've taken care of that. Let's move on." Instead, I hope the recognition that Acts is most profoundly about the salvation of God will generate in you at least three responses.

First, I hope you'll say, "I have a vested interest in this 'salvation of God.' In fact it's my only hope. I am in need of salvation." For some, this may mean that for the first time you will recognize that you are an outsider to this salvation. Perhaps you will realize that you need to be rescued from sin, forgiven, restored, reconciled. What Acts clearly shows us is that God is not sitting back waiting for you to find him or figure things out. He is at work in his world by his Spirit through his people to make known that salvation is available to you, no matter who you are or what you've done. God is a God who loves to save! He is actively in pursuit of people in need of his salvation.

Others of you may find that you need to adjust your understanding of salvation. Rather than solely pointing back to a day in your past that you "got saved," perhaps Acts will help you to adjust your understanding of this salvation of God to see its past, present, and future manifestations so that you can say, "I have been saved; I am being saved; and I will be saved." I pray this study of Acts will restore to you the joy of your salvation (Ps. 51:12).

Perhaps this study will also cause you to say, “I don’t want to settle for being saved myself. I need to have my heart expanded, my vision enlarged, maybe even the purpose toward which I’m investing the ordinary days of my life redirected, as I gain a more thorough understanding of how God is working out his salvation purposes in the era in which I am living.”

Second, I hope you’ll say, “I want to experience the power of the Holy Spirit as presented in Acts.” I pray, as we work our way through Acts, that you will long for the Holy Spirit to work in you and through you as you see the vibrancy of his work among the first believers in Christ. The Spirit’s work in and through us likely won’t look exactly like what we see in Acts. What is recorded for us in the book of Acts concerns a unique period of redemptive history. Just as we do not anticipate that the crucifixion or resurrection will be repeated, we do not anticipate the events of Pentecost will be repeated. In Acts, we’re given a record of a unique time in redemptive history when the Spirit was at work to establish Christ’s church throughout the world through the witness of the apostles. But the same Spirit that worked in and through them is still at work in us. The Spirit can empower us to change, empower us to pray, empower us to obey, empower us to proclaim to all who will listen, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (16:31).

Third, I hope you’ll say, “I believe the tool that the Spirit used in the book of Acts is the same tool he uses today—the word of God. And because of that, I want to hear the word, receive it, submit to it, share it. I want it to increase in my own heart, and I want to have a part in the word of God increasing and multiplying in my home, in my city, in my generation, in the world.”

Many of us long to have a sense that God is really at work in our lives. We want more than to merely go through the motions of church attendance. We want a fresh vibrancy to our walk with Christ, fresh insights into who he is and what he is doing in the world. What we

need to know is that God has a particular means through which he accomplishes his work of creating newness in the world and in our lives. He works through his word. It is usually slow rather than instant. It is more often ordinary rather than dramatic. But it is certain. I can promise you that as you lean in to listen to what he has to say, as you chew on it, tease out its implications, as you ask it questions and find answers to your questions, God will be at work in your life, remaking you from the inside.

To help you to really work this word into your life over the course of this study, I've prepared a series of personal Bible study questions that I hope you'll complete before you read each chapter in this book. The companion *Saved Personal Bible Study* on the complete text of Acts is available as a download and in a printed version.¹ Do you find it hard to find the time to invest in doing something like that? Can I suggest that you carve out time on Sunday, the Lord's Day, to spend in his word? Maybe you don't typically work through questions on the text of the Bible because you find it difficult. Two heads are better than one. Is there someone you could get together with to work through the questions? Here's the purpose of the questions: to get you into the text before you take in what I have to say about it, to get you thinking and asking questions that hopefully I will answer in what I've written. I want you to be familiar with the facts of the text, but more than that, I want you to invest some thought in seeking to grasp the bigger picture and the *why* behind what we are reading.

Why do we want to invest ourselves in studying Acts? Aren't the stories from this book that some of us learned in Sunday school good enough? (I do wish I still had that salt map of Paul's missionary journeys that I made in vacation Bible school.) We want to see how those stories fit into the larger story of the way God is working out his salvation purposes in the world. We want the power that only comes as the

1 The *Saved Personal Bible Study* is available to download or to purchase at Crossway.org.

Spirit works through his word in the interior of our lives. We want the salvation at the center of this book to become the joy and longing of our hearts. We want to revel in the reality that we have been saved; we are being saved; and we will, one day, be fully and finally saved. So, let's study Acts.²

2 You will find that in a few of these chapters, out of a desire to keep this book to a manageable length, I don't have space to cover every part of the biblical text. I didn't want to make this book about the longest book in the New Testament too long. But I do hope you'll at least read through all of the text yourself. If you work your way through the companion personal Bible study, you will find that it covers all of the text of the book of Acts.

PART 1

SALVATION IN JERUSALEM



You Will Be My Witnesses

Acts 1:1–26

IS THERE AN EVENT OR A SEASON in your life that you can look back on and say, “That changed the course of my life”? I can think of a number of those events or seasons in my own life.

The first chapter of Acts covers a period of fifty days—fifty days that changed the course of the lives of the 120 followers of Jesus who spent these days together. Most significantly, it changed the course of the lives of the twelve apostles of Jesus, who were among those 120 people. And I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to suggest that what took place in those fifty days also had a significant impact on the course of your life if you are a follower of Christ.

- The resurrection of Jesus, which happened on the first of those fifty days, is what gives you hope that this life is not all there is, and that you follow a living Savior.
- The forty days Jesus spent with the apostles, opening their minds to understand how to rightly read the Old Testament and preparing them to explain it in the pages of the New

Testament, is what provided the gospel witness that the Spirit used to draw you to Christ.

- The fortieth day, when Jesus ascended to the right hand of God the Father in heaven, where he rules over all things, is what gives you confidence that everything that happens in your life is purposeful and working together for your good and for his glory. His promise as he ascended that he will return the same way situates your life in a grand story of future glory.
- The selection of a replacement for Judas so that there were twelve apostles provided the foundation for the new community in which you find your home and identity as a partaker of the new covenant.

What took place during those fifty days is significant, not just for those we read about in the pages of Acts, but also for us. So let's work our way through Acts 1 to get a better sense of it.

Jesus Continued to Do and Teach

In Luke 1, Luke said that he was writing “an orderly account” of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus based on eyewitness testimony so that his audience, Theophilus, could have certainty about the things he had been taught. He summarizes the content of the Gospel of Luke in the first verse of Acts:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (1:1–2)

This implies that what he intends to present in the book of Acts is a fully reliable account of all that Jesus *continued* to do and teach. Though Jesus has ascended to heaven, Luke wants Theophilus and the rest of his readers, including you and me, to know that Jesus has not stopped working and teaching his people. In this book Luke is going to tell us what Jesus continued to do and teach from his throne in heaven.

Jesus Appeared to Them Alive

Luke writes that Jesus “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking about the kingdom of God” (1:3). That word *alive* is significant. The apostles are not merely to be witnesses to his ministry, his teaching, and his death. He wants us to know that they saw him alive after his death. He did not simply appear to them as a ghostly figure or spirit. He’s human. And he’s alive. Over forty days Jesus presented “many proofs” of the genuineness of his resurrection that filled them with confidence. These followers were privileged to see and hear and touch the physical body of the resurrected Lord Jesus.

Jesus Taught Them about the Kingdom

Luke writes that during the forty days he appeared to them, he was “speaking about the kingdom of God.” They were enrolled in a course of study, The Kingdom of God 101, taught by the King himself. In some ways these early verses of Acts overlap with the final verses of Luke’s Gospel, where he gives us a bit more detail about the syllabus for this Kingdom of God 101 class.

The text for the class was the Old Testament. How do we know that? From what we read about these forty days at the end of Luke’s Gospel:

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of

Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:44–47)

And they couldn’t help but understand it like never before because their teacher “opened their minds to understand” the ways in which what they read in the Old Testament was about Christ, specifically about his death and resurrection. He even opened their minds to see how the task he was about to set before them—proclaiming this good news to all nations—had always been a part of God’s plan according to the Old Testament.

In “speaking about the kingdom,” perhaps Jesus pointed to the kingdom of Israel that took shape in the writings of Moses and throughout the History Books of the Old Testament, and explained the ways in which the nation of Israel was a preview or precursor to a far greater kingdom that will be made up of people from every nation. Surely Jesus must have talked about the fact that he was the promised Son of David, and how many things David wrote about in the psalms were most profoundly about him, because we’re going to hear Peter interpret two psalms that way later in Acts. As Jesus worked his way through the prophets who wrote about what the kingdom would be like when God’s king would come and establish his rule on the earth, surely Jesus connected those kingdom realities of peace and provision, security and authority, to the previews he had given to them in the miracles he had performed during his three years of earthly ministry. And surely he talked to them about the future of his kingdom, when what he taught them to pray for—“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10)—will become the reality we will live in for all eternity.

Jesus Told Them to Wait for the Promise of the Father

Over those forty days, as they grew in their understanding of the kingdom of God, I imagine that there must have been a sense of “What do we do now? How do we get started?” And, fortunately, Jesus told them exactly what they needed to do. They needed to wait. Luke records:

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.” (1:4–5)

What are they waiting for? They’re waiting for “the promise of the Father.” What had the Father promised? The prophet Joel described a day when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28). God’s people had longed for that day. Indeed numerous Old Testament passages indicated that the Father’s gift of the Spirit would be an indication of the arrival of a new era when God would establish his king and kingdom (Isa. 32:1; Ezek. 39:29; Joel 2:28–29).¹ The night before he was crucified, Jesus had said to this same group, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

This is what the Father has promised: the pouring out, or the baptism, of the Holy Spirit. Up to this point in redemptive history, the Spirit had been among his people and had occasionally filled a particular individual for a particular task. But God was promising something different. The Spirit’s work and power in and among his people, which had been like the trickle of a stream throughout the Old Testament era, would become like Niagara Falls.

1 G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 528.

The forty days of listening to Jesus speak about the kingdom of God must have made all who were enrolled in the class long to live in that kingdom and experience this power more than ever before, which led them to ask Jesus a question:

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6)

What did they mean by “restore the kingdom to Israel”? It could be that they were simply longing for Jewish autonomy from the Romans. Certainly that was the expectation of the Messiah that a majority of the Jews shared. But these disciples have just spent forty days immersed in the writing of Moses and the prophets, so it seems more likely that they were longing for the kind of kingdom restoration that the prophets wrote about. The prophets repeatedly spoke of a day when the twelve tribes of Israel, who had been separated when the northern kingdom split from the southern kingdom, would be regathered and restored to God and each other. A regathered and restored Israel would be a beacon of light beckoning the nations to stream to Mount Zion to worship the one true God (Isa. 11; 60; Ezek. 37:16–19). The prophets wrote of a future kingdom that would be garden-like in its atmosphere and abundance. It would be perfectly peaceful, completely secure, and pervasively righteous. Surely their understanding of what this would be like developed over forty days with the risen Jesus and caused them to long for what God promised in a greater way. Who wouldn’t want that kind of kingdom to come right now? I do!

Or perhaps it was Jesus’s telling them that the Holy Spirit would come “not many days from now” that prompted the question. Throughout the Old Testament, the coming of the Spirit was always a part of “the last days” (Isa. 44:3, 5; Ezek. 36:27). And Jesus had confirmed to them that the last days were upon them.

So how did Jesus answer their question? Or maybe we should ask, Did Jesus answer their question?

He said to them, “It is 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 end of the earth.” (1:7–8)

In his answer, Jesus seems to shift their orientation away from *when* the kingdom will come toward *how* and *where* and *to whom* it is going to come. Rather than coming in an instant, it’s going to come over a period of time that only the Father knows. It is going to come as the testimony of these apostles is used throughout the world to call people of every nation to bow to Jesus as King and thereby enter into his kingdom.

Yes, it is going to be for Israel, but not Israel alone. It is going to be for people from all nations. Jesus wants to expand their grasp of and expectations for what his kingdom is going to be like and who will be included in it. Dennis Johnson explains it this way: “Their concept of restoration needed to be expanded to worldwide, even cosmic, dimensions. . . . They needed to see the expanding horizons of the Lord’s work of rescue, repair, and restoration, embracing not only Israelites, but all peoples, in a triumphant conquest of grace.”²

Jesus Said They Would Be His Witnesses

Central in this passage, in the second part of his answer to their question, is Jesus’s statement: “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” (1:8). This statement, in fact, provides an outline for the whole book of Acts. In

² Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 35.

chapter 2, these first followers receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they begin to preach in Jerusalem (chapters 2–7). From there they will witness to Christ outside of Jerusalem in Judea and in Samaria (chapters 8–11). Then, from chapter 12 on, Paul and others will take the gospel throughout Asia Minor, Asia, and all the way to Rome, the ends of the earth in his day.

But for now, let's focus in on the part of this statement in which Jesus says to them, "You will be my witnesses." I grew up in a tradition in which "witnessing" was something that every Christian was expected to do. It was a general term for telling someone about Jesus or perhaps sharing my "personal testimony" about becoming a Christian. But when Jesus says to this group that they will be his witnesses, he actually means something different. To get the sense of what Jesus means, we need to think about how this term is used in context of a courtroom. A witness in a courtroom is someone who testifies to what he saw and heard firsthand. Since you and I didn't live in the first century and didn't see Jesus after he was raised from the dead with our human eyes, we can never be witnesses to his resurrection in the way Jesus meant when he told these first followers that they would be his witnesses.

That means that we can't apply this statement directly to ourselves. Jesus is not pleading with you and me here to be his witnesses. Rather, Jesus is announcing that God has appointed the eleven (soon to be twelve) apostles to witness to what they saw and heard. Notice that Jesus doesn't *ask* them to be witnesses or even *command* them to be witnesses. He simply *announces* that they *will be* his witnesses.

Think back to what Jesus said during his earthly ministry: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). What we see in Acts is how that building of his church is going to come about. It will be built as the Holy Spirit comes upon the twelve apostles, and later upon Paul, enabling and empowering them to witness to what they saw and heard from Jesus himself. The

apostles are the divinely commissioned eyewitnesses to the life, death, resurrection, and, as we're about to see, the ascension of Jesus Christ.

But does that mean that there is nothing here for us to do? Absolutely not! In the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament, we have the record of what these reliable witnesses saw and heard and were taught by Jesus. Our role is to proclaim what these witnesses saw and heard and were taught from the Scriptures. We are to proclaim the gospel according to the apostles as recorded in the New Testament. We are to hold fast to the gospel they proclaimed rather than embellish or alter it. And in the same way that they were dependent on the Holy Spirit to make their witness effective, so we are to be completely dependent on the Holy Spirit to use our proclamation of the gospel to bring those who hear it into the kingdom of King Jesus.

Jesus Ascended to Heavenly Glory

Perhaps the apostles were still processing the implications of Jesus's answer to their question when, "as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (1:9). Having spent the previous forty days in the Old Testament scriptures, when they saw Jesus lifted up to heaven in a cloud of glory, surely they immediately thought about the vision given to the prophet Daniel, who saw that "with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (Dan. 7:13–14).

What Daniel foresaw in a vision from heaven's perspective, these disciples now saw in history from the perspective of earth. Jesus, the Son of Man, ascended with the clouds into the heavenly throne room where his Father gave him dominion and glory and an everlasting kingdom. This was his coronation day as King. Indeed, as the apostles considered the instructions they had just been given by Jesus in light of what Daniel wrote about the expansive nature of his kingdom in

this Daniel 7 passage, it must have been increasingly clear to them that the kingdom of Jesus was not simply a kingdom for Jewish people. Rather, it was a kingdom for “all people, nations, and languages.” This is why Jesus had appeared to and taught them, and why he was going to send his Spirit to them. They were going to be his witnesses so that people from every nation would become a part of his glorious eternal kingdom. The apostle’s lives were filled with purpose and significance and confidence that their king had not abandoned them, but would empower them for their mission until the day when he descends in the same glorious way they saw him ascend.

Jesus Chose a Twelfth Apostle

From a magnificent scene of heavenly glory, Luke seems to plunge us as readers into what may seem like a mundane list of names followed by a gruesome account of the death of Judas. Consider that many things must have happened and been discussed during the ten days that followed the ascension of Jesus, and this is the one thing he recorded. If this is the one thing he recorded, then we need to try to grasp its significance.

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, 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. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. (1:12–14)

Earlier in his Gospel, Luke recorded that Jesus “called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles” (Luke 6:13). The picture is of a large number of disciples following him, and from

that large group of followers, Jesus chose twelve that he named as apostles. Why would Jesus specifically choose twelve to be named as apostles? Israel as a nation had been built on the foundation of the twelve tribes of Israel. To be a part of God's people was to be connected to these twelve tribes. I imagine that as Jesus spent those forty days speaking about the kingdom, he had talked about how God had set his love on those twelve tribes and how those twelve tribes had rejected God's covenant. Jesus had come as the mediator of a better covenant and to establish a new people of God. He had said to his apostles the night before he was crucified, "I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29–30). In other words, Jesus's kingdom would not be founded on the bloodline of the twelve sons of Jacob but rather on the gospel witness of the twelve apostles.

Following Jesus's ascension as they waited in the upper room, perhaps still poring over the Old Testament scriptures, Peter realized that there was a problem. Because of the betrayal and death of Judas, there were now only eleven apostles. Evidently the forty days of having their minds opened by Jesus to understand the Scriptures was effective. As Peter read Psalms 69 and 109, he recognized that some things that David wrote about himself and his enemies were more profoundly about Jesus and his enemy, Judas:

In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all

the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

“For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

‘May his camp become desolate,
and let there be no one to dwell in it’ (1:15–20a; cf.
Ps. 69:25)

Luke includes the gory details about Judas’s death because they help connect Judas to the curses mentioned in Psalm 69, an imprecatory psalm that pronounces a curse on the life and the land of the evildoer who opposes God’s king. Peter sees in the way and the place where Judas died that he died under God’s curse for his treachery against God’s King, Jesus.

Peter goes on to apply another curse against an opponent of God’s king in Psalm 109 to Judas:

“Let another take his office.” (1:20b; cf. Ps. 109:8)

Peter concludes from reading the Psalms, in the way that Jesus spent forty days teaching his disciples to read them, that Judas needed to be replaced. But Peter had no interest in picking the replacement himself. Just as Jesus chose the initial twelve, including, in his sovereignty, one that would betray him, so Jesus had to choose the one who would replace him. They surveyed the 120 people who were gathered in the room to determine who had the proper qualifications. It had to be someone who had been with Jesus from the time John baptized Jesus through the forty days of being enrolled in his kingdom classroom. And there were two among them who fit the requirements—Justus and Matthias. How would they choose? They prayed and asked Jesus to show them whom he had chosen. And when the dice were rolled and

landed on Matthias, they recognized him as Jesus's choice. They were again complete as the twelve, ready and waiting for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to witness to Jesus for the rest of their lives, at the cost of their lives.

These twelve apostles formed the foundation of Jesus's new community. Paul will write to the Gentile believers in Ephesus that they have become "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God . . . , Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). And John will record his vision of the new Jerusalem as a city with twelve foundations and on which are written the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Rev. 21:14).

This is why what happened during these fifty days has an impact on the course your life will take. If you have believed the witness of those twelve apostles and have thereby taken hold of the Christ they testify to by faith, then one day you're going to make your home in the new Jerusalem, the eternal city of God. I imagine the twelve apostles will still be testifying not only to the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, but at that point they'll also be able to testify that Jesus really did return in the same way as they saw him go into heaven. Perhaps we'll hear them say, "Finally the time has come. The Lord has, at *this* time, fully restored his kingdom. He's brought all his people in. And he will reign forever and ever."

