

Acts Series Part 1

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn with me to the passage that we've read in the book of Acts in chapter 1. As I was mentioning in the morning, we're beginning what I would hope would be a series that would take us to the end of the book of Acts.

And even as I said in the morning and I repeated, even as I say that, I do wonder what I've let myself in for. I perhaps should have gone for a series on 2 John or Jude or Ruth.

That might have been a bit more manageable, but in my folly, I have chosen the book of Acts. Well, we'll start and we'll see how we continue.

And this evening, we're going to be considering these verses that we've read in chapter 1, the first 11 verses. A few years ago, as we approached the year 2000, there was, for some anyway, a significant measure of what we might call eschatological excitement.

It sounds quite painful, but for those who thought that there was great significance in the dawn of the third millennium. I remember in late 1999, a lady in the church in Moyabamba telling me about her maid, who had been working with her very acceptably for a number of months.

[1 : 2 4] And they got on very well, and she was very happy with the work that this young lady was doing and helping her there in her house. And as they approached the end of December, the young girl came up to her and said, I'm not going to be able to work with you anymore.

She was very disappointed and surprised. She said, well, what's the problem? Maybe is there something I said or something you're not happy about here in the house? She says, oh no, I want to go home because I want to be at home with my family when Jesus comes back.

And she was sure that come the year 2000, Jesus would come, and she didn't want to be in a stranger's home when that occurred.

Well, we may think that's a rather curious attitude to take, and yet behind it there is a serious point that we can consider. Why doesn't Jesus return?

In the early church, it's evident that for many there was an expectation of an imminent return, perhaps even within the lifetime of those who had known Him, but it was not to be so.

[2 : 3 7] And while the years have gone by, the first century and the first millennia, now the second millennia, and still Jesus does not return. And all we can really say with confidence as we would consider that prospect, that sure and certain prospect, but as we consider when it might be, all we can say with a degree of certainty is that today we are 2000 years closer to that event than we were 2000 years ago.

That certainly is something we can say confidently, but beyond that, we perhaps can go no further. But again, the question arises, is why? Why the delay if we want to use that word to describe it?

Now we have an answer to that question in the Scriptures in Peter's second letter. We can just read that briefly as we just consider this introduction.

In 2 Peter chapter 3 and verses 8 and 9, we read as follows, But do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

[3 : 59] So there we have an answer, certainly in part and in great part, to the question we might pose. Why is it that Jesus does not return?

And the answer that we've identified there allows us also to identify the primary purpose of this age that we live in, this age between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and His return, and the age that we live in.

This is an age where the church is fulfilling the mission that Jesus commended to it. We could call this age that we live in, as I say, between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and His return, this age is the age of ingathering, the age of opportunity, or as we would describe it for the purposes of this evening's sermon, the age of mission.

This is the age of mission, and this age is extended with this gracious purpose on God's part, that none might perish, but that everyone might come to repentance.

The passage that we've read presents us with information about this mission. If this is an age of mission, well, what can we say concerning the mission?

[5 : 23] Well, this passage helps us and provides us with information concerning this mission, and information that was relevant not only for the original audience, but relevant also for us as we consider the passage and as we engage in the mission that God has commended to us.

Now, on this general theme then of mission, I think we can identify the following elements that I'll just mention briefly, and then we can consider them one by one.

The following elements that we can identify in this passage, and they are elements that provide the foundation for and revolve around, in a sense, the words of actual commission that we find in verse 8.

Then in verse 8, we read Jesus addressing the disciples, and He says, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And there is, in this passage, truths that, as I say, serve as a foundation for these words, and that, in a measure, revolve around them.

[6 : 36] Elements of mission, of teaching concerning mission, and they are as follows. So these are the ones, at any rate, that we'll consider this evening. We have, in this passage, identified the foundation for mission.

We have also identified who is the director of mission. We have also clear and helpful teaching concerning the nature of the mission. What is it that we are indeed to do?

We are also told who is our companion and enabler in mission. The missionaries are also identified. And then, finally, the passage closes by presenting to us that which will constitute the climax of mission, the climax of the age of mission.

So let's consider these elements. Some in greater depth, and others almost simply mentioning them in the passing. First of all, then, the foundation for mission.

What or who is the foundation for mission? Well, if we read that in verse 3, how Luke begins his book having addressed Theophilus, to whom he is writing, he then goes on to express himself in this way.

[7 : 52] After his suffering, the suffering of Jesus, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

The foundation for mission is, as we suggested, more than suggested, stated this morning, the resurrection of Jesus. The fact that Jesus is alive, this historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead, constitutes the foundation for mission.

Jesus is alive. And without this foundation, there is no message to proclaim, no truth to bear witness to, no basis for our faith. And for that reason, Luke does more than just presume that the resurrection actually happened.

Here, as we have read, he makes explicit reference to the fact that Jesus gave, and we quote from the passage, many convincing proofs that he was alive.

Now, Luke doesn't explain to us what these convincing proofs were, but it seems reasonable to understand them to be the varied and numerous post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples.

[9 : 12] Now, if indeed these are the proofs, then it seems eminently reasonable to understand that that is what Luke is referring to. These proofs could have been checked by Theophilus.

As this book was written, we don't know for sure, but the range of dates that are given for the book of Acts range from about 60 A.D. to 70, 75, or perhaps a little later.

Now, within that range, we can be sure that many of those who are presented as witnesses would have still been alive. And so for Theophilus, if there were any doubt in his mind as to whether these things were true, it would have been a simple thing or a relatively simple thing for him to look for and identify those who are being presented as witnesses to establish if indeed what Luke is claiming was true.

So Luke, recognizing the fundamental importance of the resurrection as foundational for mission, as foundational for the early church, so he seeks to establish with clarity and with full assurance that these things are indeed true.

Paul also, in his writings, in his letters, was conscious that the gospel message that he was giving his life to proclaiming, the proclamation of which constituted his and our mission, stood or fell on the truth of the resurrection.

[10 : 43] And we remember the words that he uses in addressing the Athenians. And he spoke in this way, For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

This is one element of the gospel message. And then what does he say? He has given proof of this to all men by raising him, by raising Jesus from the dead. So Paul also recognized that the reality, the truth of the resurrection was foundational.

If this was true, then the message could be believed. If this was true, then it could be announced and proclaimed with confidence. If not, then he was to be pitied above all men.

This then is our foundation, the foundation for mission, the foundation for this very age in which we live, the age of mission, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Death has been conquered, and the conqueror is alive. So, we can move on to a second element that we find in this passage concerning mission.

[11 : 51] Here we have identified who we might describe, and no doubt other words could be used, maybe more helpful ones, but these are the words I have chosen. We have identified who is the director of mission.

In other words, who is in charge of this great enterprise of ingathering the people of God? Who is in charge of this great enterprise of establishing the kingdom of Jesus Christ in this world?

We might pose the question in this way, Who is at work? Who directs the work? Who leads the work? And the answer, at least in part, and we will be able to identify other elements, but the answer, and a fundamental answer, is that Jesus himself, Jesus himself is the director of mission.

We are beginning to study this book that is generally known and described as the Acts of the Apostles. And some have said, it's helpful, a helpful insight, it's a valid perspective to say, well, let's not call it the Acts of the Apostle, but the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Because evidently, the Holy Spirit plays such a prominent role even in this passage. And so we say, yes, that's a helpful manner of describing this book. But we could also say that this book describes the Acts of Jesus, the Acts of the Ascended Jesus, the Director of Mission.

[13 : 18] And I say that, and no doubt there could be many reasons and justifications for saying that. But I say it on this occasion, on the basis of one very significant, I think, word, an interesting word that we find in the passage that we are considering.

Then if we look at the beginning of the passage, and in verse 1, let's read what it says. In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven.

And my focus is on this word, began. Let's not forget that Luke is writing a two-volume work. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. And as He introduces this second volume, He says, the first volume tells us about what Jesus began to do.

Now isn't that interesting? I've already told you about what He began to do. And what's the implication? Well, the implication is that now I am going to tell you about what He continues to do. You see, Jesus remains actively and minutely involved in the mission of His church.

Luke had described what Jesus had begun to do in the first volume and now He goes on to describe what Jesus continued to do and indeed we can say today continues to do as He directs this mission, as He is involved in extending His kingdom, using His disciples in the power of the Holy Spirit.

[14 : 53] But it is Jesus who directs this great enterprise. So the director of mission, I think we can reasonably and helpfully identify and find even in this passage as being described, as being presented as the risen one Himself, the conqueror.

He is the one who goes before us and opens the way for us that we might reach even to the end of the earth. So the foundation for mission, the director of mission.

But also, and here we have to detain ourselves a little bit more carefully, the nature of mission. What is it that we are to do?

What is it that the church has been commissioned to do? What does the mission involve? Now that is a big question and big questions usually require big answers.

And unfortunately, big answers tend to be quite long answers. But for our purposes this evening, I think we can narrow it down by focusing on the false ideas of the disciples and how they were corrected by Jesus.

[16 : 07] We are going to notice in a moment how the disciples had their own conception as to what this mission was. They had their own ideas as to what would be involved in the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke to them about.

As we are told, this was His topic of conversation. Not only before His death, but after His resurrection. Here we have read that He spoke about the kingdom of God. Now the disciples had a conception of what that was.

And as we see what their conception was, and more importantly, how Jesus corrects their errors, we will be given insights as to the nature of the mission that they were given and that we too have been given.

We have the question that they ask that reveals, that betrays their misconceptions in verse 6. There in verse 6, we read, So when they met together, they asked Him, Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

The disciples are expecting. They've been told to wait and they're willing to wait, but they're itching to see what is going to happen. They want to know how this will pan out, what will be involved in this kingdom that Jesus is speaking of.

[17 : 25] And the question that they ask, though it is a question, and a question would seem to suggest that they don't know what the answer is. And I suppose in a measure they didn't know the answer, but the question does reveal some misconceptions that they had.

John Calvin, who's, this year we celebrate the 500th anniversary of his birth, and he in making comment on this question that the disciples ask, comments perhaps a little harshly in the following way.

He says there are as many errors in this question as words. Now I think that is a little harsh as we count the amount of words that there are, but it does pithily and helpfully identify that the disciples did indeed have great misconceptions concerning the mission.

And as we consider them and as we consider how Jesus corrects them, we will have, I hope, a better conception of what this mission involves. What are then these errors that are revealed in the question, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

Certainly, I think we can identify three errors or misconceptions in the mind of the disciples. First of all, the use of the verb restore. Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

[18 : 54] Now restore speaks of bringing us back to something we've already experienced, the golden age of David and Solomon. They say, that's what we want. We want to go back to that golden age.

We want to go back to those great days of glory for Israel. And as they use this word, what they reveal is that what they are expecting, what they are looking for is a political and territorial kingdom.

No longer under the yoke of Rome, but Israel as a great nation among the nations. When will you restore our fortunes? When will we be able to go back to those glory days?

And so the question reveals this error in their thinking. Indeed, as they speak and identify Israel as the focus of their concern, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

Israel. We see that in their mind what they were expecting was a national kingdom. Their concern was not for the other nations in any great measure, but for Israel, the nation that they were part of.

[19 : 56] When will you restore the kingdom to Israel? And so there again we have an expectation that reveals a false understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God.

But then we can identify maybe a third misconception, even in the words of this question, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

What they were looking for, what they were itching for, what they were expecting was the immediate establishment of this kingdom with Jesus as the king. And they, of course, occupying prominent positions in the new administration of that, we can be sure.

And so, here this question reveals a misunderstanding of the very nature of the kingdom of God about which Jesus had been teaching them and continued to teach them even following His resurrection.

We can say that they were wrong in all three counts, and yet right in identifying the mission as involving the establishment of a kingdom. At least, in that, they were correct.

[21 : 05] And let's now notice how Jesus provides a corrective for all three misconceptions of the disciples. The misconception that the kingdom that Jesus was speaking about involved a political or a territorial kingdom, the misconception that its focus would be on the nation of Israel, and the misconception that this would be something that would be immediately established.

How does Jesus correct these misconceptions? Well, in Jesus' reply, in the words that He addresses to the disciples, He identifies the kingdom in the following way.

And there is a direct contrast between the errors that they are making and the truth of the matter that Jesus presents. He identifies the kingdom not as being political or territorial in nature, but as being spiritual in nature.

There in verse 8, as He responds to this question, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

This reference to the Holy Spirit defines the nature of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is His rule set up in the lives of His people by the Holy Spirit.

[22 : 27] This is the nature of this kingdom. It is a spiritual kingdom where the reign of Jesus Christ finds expression in the lives of men and women as they are born again by the Spirit of God, as they are transformed by the Holy Spirit of God, as they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God.

So, men and women, you and me, recognize the kingship and the reign and the sovereignty of King Jesus and the kingdom of God is established. Now, for certain, as that is done in the lives of men and women, it will have social and political implications, but the kingdom itself is a spiritual kingdom.

And so, Jesus gently but firmly corrects the misconceptions of the disciples in His reply. The kingdom is spiritual in nature.

But then, as we move on and see how Jesus corrects their second misconception that it would be a national kingdom and that Israel would be the focus of its activity, we find in Jesus' words that the kingdom of God is rather global in its extension.

Verse 8 again, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, yes, by all means, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[23 : 47] And so, Jesus says, don't be focusing on the nation of Israel because My kingdom goes beyond the nation of Israel. It includes Israel, but it is not limited to Israel.

Rather, My kingdom is one whose extent is to the very ends of the earth. Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth.

The disciples certainly are to begin in Jerusalem, but they do not end in Jerusalem. As we consider that, it is rightly highlighted and importantly and helpfully highlighted that even in the Old Testament, Gentiles were welcome.

to form part of God's people. We have many examples of that. Time does not allow us to make mention of them, but Gentiles were welcome to form part of God's people.

And yet, there is in the New Testament age a fundamental difference introduced. And it can be described in this way. In the Old Testament, the Gentiles had to come to Jerusalem.

[24 : 52] They had to come to Mount Zion to be received as part of God's people, but now, the direction has turned around completely. Now, the disciples will radiate out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

And the whole focus is radically different. There is a fundamental shift in the manner of God fulfilling His purposes. And as we consider that, that shift, I wonder, and I throw it out that others might wonder and ponder with me, to what extent do we, as believers and as a church, subconsciously still operate on what we might call the Old Testament model?

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, with the Old Testament believers, we might say, well, yes, all are welcome to come. All are welcome. All those outside, they're welcome to come.

The doors are open. The Word is preached. And I think we are genuinely pleased when those from outside come in to worship with us.

And we welcome them and we are pleased that they come. The doors are open and we are genuinely of a mind to welcome them and to have them form part of our family.

[26 : 12] But you see, they have to come. And you see, in the New Testament, the shift is different. In the New Testament, that's not the way things should operate. In the New Testament, we have to go and to find them. And so, let us be careful with that Old Testament mentality if we can describe it in that way.

There has been a shift. Now, it is different. Now, we must go out to Jerusalem and to Judea and to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And there, where people are, as they bow the knee to King Jesus, the Kingdom of God is established.

They don't need to come back with us to the place from where we had gone. No, where they are, there the Kingdom is established. Indeed, that is how it must be that to the very ends of the earth, the Kingdom of God would be made visible and evident as men and women and boys and girls bow the knee to King Jesus and grant to Him the rule and sovereignty in their lives that He is Jew.

So, the Kingdom of God in its extension is global. The words of Jesus here that we have read also, briefly we can notice, highlight an order, though I would say not a priority, an order as to how we are to go out and fulfill this mission as witnesses.

There is an order presented there in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. We start from where we are. For the disciples it was Jerusalem. Well, that's where you are.

[27 : 42] That is where you begin. But then you continue going beyond your home territory. You go beyond your comfort zone to Samaria. That was certainly well beyond the comfort zone of self-respecting Jews.

But you had to go beyond your comfort zone to Samaria and then continue. Continue, we might say, until there is nowhere left to go to the very ends of the earth. And so as we consider that, so without delving into the details that we perhaps could do so, we can maybe just ponder on what the challenges of these words of Jesus are for us as a congregation in this place in Aberdeen where God has placed us.

So Jesus corrects their misconceptions. He corrects their misconceptions that the kingdom of God was a political or territorial entity. No, it is a spiritual kingdom. He corrects their misconceptions that it was limited to the nation of Israel.

No, he says it's global in its extent and in its scope. And he corrects also their misconception that this kingdom would be established there and then in their very presence as he presents to them the truth in his answer there in verse 7 that rather the expansion of the kingdom is gradual and it is dependent on the sovereign will and purposes of God.

There in verse 7 he responds to this question of the times. They asked about the times and what does he say? He said to them it is not for you to know the times or dates the father has set by his own authority.

[29 : 13] It's not for you to establish the when and the how. The father knows. He establishes the times. He establishes the dates as his work is fulfilled as his kingdom is extended.

Now as we consider that I think there is a place for what we might call a holy impatience to see God at work.

Such a holy impatience I think is a healthy thing but we have and we experience this healthy impatience together with a humble submission to his sovereign prerogative of establishing the times and the dates even of the work of mission that we are engaged in.

So then some thoughts to consider concerning the nature of the mission and we have limited ourselves to focusing on this question the disciples asked the misconceptions that the question reveals and the correctives that Jesus presents.

But let's continue and more briefly notice another element presented here concerning mission and that is who is the companion and enabler of mission. Well we've read the verse now on two or three occasions but we'll do so again to come face to face with this wonderful companion that we are given for the task of mission.

[30 : 38] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses and so the verse continues. We know that the disciples were unwilling to accept that Jesus would leave them.

Even the passage that we've read we have a vivid picture of that unwillingness in verse 11 when Jesus ascends into heaven and the angels address the disciples in these words in verse 11.

Men of Galilee they said why do you stand here looking into the sky? Why do you stand here looking into the sky? They were transfixed on Jesus going away. They were distraught that the one they loved their precious Jesus was leaving them and yet this Jesus who loved them so was not leaving them alone.

Rather he would send at Pentecost their companion the one who would enable and empower them for this work of mission the Holy Spirit himself.

He is the one who Jesus sends to serve as our companion in mission to serve as the one who would enable and empower us to fulfill the mission granted to us by Jesus.

[31 : 57] And this companion and this is a touching I think truth for us this companion that we have is the same companion that Jesus had been given as he performed his mission.

Notice the manner in which Luke speaks of how Jesus had given these very instructions we are considering here in verse 2 of our passage. Luke is speaking of how Jesus gave these instructions he then goes on to explain what those instructions were but in verse 1 and 2 it's more a summary of what has gone on and notice the manner in which he describes Jesus' giving of these instructions until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

Even this seemingly simple task of giving instructions that Jesus performed was through the Holy Spirit indeed all of Jesus' ministry was in the power of the Holy Spirit through the Holy Spirit who had been Jesus' companion as he performed his mission it was the Holy Spirit of God and that same companion is our companion isn't that a wonderful thing?

We have the same companion that Jesus had as we perform our mission the companion and enabler of mission the Holy Spirit of God he is our companion he is our enabler and with the Holy Spirit would come power and again here I think there is an edge an ironic twist to Jesus identifying that with the Holy Spirit would come power because again there is a contrast with the disciples thirst for worldly power that they would be the key men in this kingdom this political territorial kingdom that Jesus would establish and they would be powerful men and Jesus says yes there will be power there will be great power but not the kind of power you're thinking about the power that will be given to you by the Holy Spirit that is the power that you will enjoy a far greater power than you imagine in your worldly expectations with the

Spirit would come power power to fulfill the mission power to be witnesses power to extend the kingdom power to go to the very ends of the earth without the Holy Spirit they could do nothing but with the Holy Spirit they could do everything and nothing has changed the Holy Spirit remains for the church today our companion and enabler and we must depend on him we must be filled by him we must be sensitive to his voice we must be obedient to his prodding our companion and enabler but we continue and we notice as we come almost to a close one further element and this really we will only just mention who are the missionaries there is this great mission there is one who directs the mission there is one who helps in the mission but who are the missionaries well again really we come again to verse 8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you who are you the disciples the disciples they are the missionaries they are the ones who will witness they are the ones who will go to the ends of the earth they are the missionaries and in this verse

[35 : 15] Jesus addresses his disciples and identifies the one requirement for missionary service I don't know I'm just thinking out loud the thought comes to my mind of the many missionary agencies that there are and no doubt they have many requirements that they establish that if you're going to be a missionary well you have to tick all these boxes and no doubt that is wise and appropriate and yet here it's interesting that Jesus identifies one requirement to be a missionary and what is that requirement that requirement is that you be a witness to Jesus that you have seen Jesus that you know Jesus if you know Jesus if you have met with Jesus you take the only box there is in order to be a missionary there are no other boxes you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth to be a witness to have met Jesus to have a story to tell if you have a story to tell then you are given these words of commission to go and to tell the world the good news of the one you know the one you have met

Jesus Christ we then are the missionaries but then finally this passage presents us with what we might describe as the climax of mission and in verse 11 we find reference to that climax men of Galilee say the angels why do you stand here looking into the sky this same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven and then what do the angels say will come back in the same way as you have seen him go into heaven and on that great and glorious day we have the climax of mission on that great and glorious day the mission will have been accomplished and that day will not come until the mission has been accomplished if the age of mission begins with the resurrection ascension and Pentecost it ends with the return of Jesus when he returns the mission will have been completed he will not return until the mission is completed a day to look forward to a glorious day but one that will not come if we are with the disciples gazing into the sky if we are gazing into the sky then the mission will not be completed and so

Jesus will not return he will have to wait even more and so let us stop gazing into the sky let us stop us being consumed with things that are of no importance and let us be up and doing let us be up and testifying and witnessing in Jerusalem in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth that we might hasten that day when the climax of mission comes as Jesus returns for a second time the challenge then for us individually as Christians but maybe particularly as a people of God as a family of God as a congregation of God's people that we would and I repeat the phrase that we would hasten that day as in the power of the Holy Spirit we are witnesses in Aberdeen in the northeast in Scotland and to the ends of the earth may God help us and let us pray