

Part 1: Same Story, New Chapter

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My son recently found an author that he loved, and within this past year he has read all of the series written by him. He normally reads in bed at night and one morning he came up and his first question was, “Dad, do you think he’ll write another one?” Not knowing the author, I said, “I don’t know.”

A couple mornings later he came up again, and he had read all the various acknowledgements and clippings at the end of the book and discovered a series of questions the author had answered about his life. He came up with a sense of optimism and said, “Read this, he’s not saying he won’t right anymore, but he’s not saying he will--what do you think?”

When we are caught up in a good story, when it grabs our imagination, we never want it to stop. Even secular figures over the millennia have found the story of Jesus fascinating. Albert Einstein himself said, “I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of Jesus Christ.”

What Jesus accomplished in his life and death has left an indelible mark on the world simply from a political and cultural perspective. Theologically speaking, his resurrection and ascension vindicate his divine role and the reality of hope for all who believe in him—hope that through faith and repentance his death becomes our life, and our sin becomes his righteousness.

But for any who follow the story, it seems to have come to an end. He left. He’s not here. One of my favorite Narnia books is Prince Caspian where everyone seems to be grappling with a post-Aslan world. Today as we begin the book of Acts, the disciples themselves seem to ask Jesus right before he ascends to heaven: “Is this the end? Is the book over? Is there more?”

It’s often said that the book of Acts, written by Luke, is a sequel to Luke’s first book, the Gospel of Luke. This is how Luke himself introduces this book in **Acts 1:1**, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all Jesus began to do and teach.” But if you’re like me, you are often always disappointed in sequels because they are never as powerful as the original.

But this is why the book of Acts is so important for us today. To prepare us for this series, I want to make four quick introductory remarks.

First, the book of Acts is essential to the Christian. Luke wrote as a Christian to Christians. Luke not only was a close traveling companion with Paul, but he was also the early church’s version of Tom Brokaw and your Grandma. He was the journalist and the scrapbooker. From a mere literary perspective, no one has more words in the New Testament itself than Luke. The combination of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts constitute nearly a third of the New Testament. One 4th Century pastor was asked why Luke wrote two books instead of one to which he responded, “For clearness, and to give the brother a pause for rest.”

But Luke didn’t primarily write a cumbersome history for an academic library, but instead a paperback for the people. He addresses both books to a man named Theophilus which in Greek means “Dear to

God,” or “Lover of God.” For the Christian this book is not mere history—but it is a memoir of the lover of our soul.

Second, the book of Acts answers key question regarding Christianity and the Christian life. Christian or not, this book has answers to your important questions. We will encounter people who ask, “Who is Jesus?” In Acts 16:30 a pagan jailer asks life’s most important question, “What must I do to be saved?” In Acts 2, Peter teaches us the requirements of salvation—repentance and belief—and the response to salvation—baptism and joining the church. What is a church? What are pastors? What does Christian community look like? How do we pray? How do we handle persecution? What is the message we share in evangelism? What is God’s goal for all history?

In this way, thirdly, this book explains the whole story of our lives. This book is written thousands of years ago, but it describes things that are still happening today. Why do we have life today in the church? To bring the message of salvation to the nations! Why do you have life today in general? Paul says in Acts 17 that we live and move, “So that you should seek God and find him.”

But lastly, and most significant to our passage today, Acts reminds us that the work of Jesus is not done.

Did you notice how Luke opened? He didn’t say, “In the first book, I have shared with you all that Jesus did and taught.” Instead what does he says, **Acts 1:1-2**, “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.”

The book of Acts begins describing in more detail the events the gospel of Luke closed with—but Luke’s point in revisiting this narrative is to show that while Jesus is ascending, while the gospel is accomplished, Jesus is not done—he is ruling and reigning, working and wooing the church by the power of the Holy Spirit for the joy of the Father.

The book is not done, and the sequel isn’t a knockoff. It’s the same work, carried on by the same person. The book of Acts is the same story of God’s glorious plan but a different chapter. The story of Acts, especially these opening chapters is: The same, but different.

Today’s text will help clarify for us what is the same, and what is different—but our main point is simple: **Jesus’ story is not done, and we are in the middle of it.**

The physiologist Carl Jung once said, “The world will ask you who you are, and if you don’t know, the world will tell you.” Daily, the world asks you to justify who you are and what you are doing, and that’s why Acts is so helpful for us. For the non-Christian it shows you who you are and calls you to Jesus. But for the Christian, it shows you who you are, and explains how you might find peace and purpose amidst all of life’s various demands.

But if we want to have peace in the midst of life’s pace, we need to see how our life fits with this divine plan of redemption. And that’s what we will look at today in three parts: First we will see **The Plan of God in Conversion**, then **The Plan of God in Commission** and lastly **The Plan of God in Consummation**.

Our passage today includes the 40-day teaching ministry of Jesus after he was resurrected and before he ascended into heaven. And here Jesus emphasizes our first point this morning: the **Plan of God in Conversion**.

Luke says this, **Acts 1:3** "He presented themselves alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking of the Kingdom of God."

Just as Jesus performed miracles prior to his death to vindicate his divine identity, so too in resurrection glory Jesus showed himself as *the* miracle which vindicates his divine identity. And in **Luke 4:43**, Jesus defines his teaching ministry this way: **Luke 4:43**, "I must preach the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose."

And here, in Acts 1, the newly resurrected Jesus continues to preach about the kingdom of God. The fresh work of God is accompanied by a preaching of the historic message of God. It's as you hit the reset button expecting something new, but Jesus can't stop teaching about the kingdom of God. For Jesus the gospel and the kingdom are synonymous. The gospel is what gets us into the kingdom, and the kingdom is the gospel. The good news of Jesus dying for our sins is the gateway, but the good news of living in God's direct presence is the goods.

For many of us, as soon as we believe the gospel—we become zealous and eager to move on to what is next. We have believed in Jesus, we understand he died for our sins, what more is there to know? This often leads us to seek some sort of secret meaning in scripture, or maybe preoccupation with prophecy or numbers. Or it leads us to the well of the world's wisdom as a necessary addition to the gospel.

But here, Jesus didn't introduce Christianity 2.0. He continued the same teaching. But now the events of the cross brought what was in black and white into HD color. We don't see something different here, we see the same thing—but better.

There's an old 17th century song that goes, "Tell me the old, old story, of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love...tell me the story softly, with earnest tones and grave; remember I'm the sinner whom Jesus came to save...tell me the story always if you would really be, in any time of trouble a comforter to me."

The story of how God brings broken sinners into his kingdom is the story that sustains, satisfies and sanctifies the sinners who are now saints by grace in the kingdom. Losing the dazzle of the gospel work of Jesus inside of our salvation is just as impossibly tragic as getting married in hopes of finding the joy to be something other than your spouse.

But, even though it's the same message, Jesus shows us in HD what was previously hidden in the black and white of the Old Testament. This is where he reveals the Trinitarian nature of the Kingdom: **Acts 1:4-5**, "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.'"

Jesus' teaching on the kingdom is in direct connection with the Trinitarian work of God. How can we understand the kingdom of God? We need to see that it is wrapped up in our restoration to the Father of Promise, by the work of the Son, through the sending of the Spirit.

And the analogy Jesus uses to symbolize this kingdom work is baptism with the Holy Spirit. Baptism was not a new idea for Jews. John wasn't called Baptist for nothing. It symbolized a desire to be cleansed from sin, and John's anticipated the washing of Jesus' blood.

So it would have been very easy for the disciples to think only in terms of what is the same. The classic rock band, "The Who," has a song called, "*We Won't Get Fooled Again*," it concludes with them saying, "Meet the new boss. Same as the old boss." The disciples could have easily thought: "That's it? That's the big change? John baptized people, and now there's just a new baptism?" Like when a grocery store gets bought out and you just get a new rewards card, but the experience is the same.

Maybe you've wondered if Christianity is anything different than the same person with new morals. The same model with a new paint job. But Jesus is drawing our attention to a qualitative difference between these two ministries. John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

While Jesus will command the disciples to baptize with water people who repent and believe, Jesus here isn't talking about any baptism that any human can give anyone. The Greek verb is passive. They will be baptized. By who? By John? No. he's dead. By each other? No.

By God, with God. On account of the work of Jesus, these believers are going to receive the promise of the Father, by being baptized with the Holy Spirit himself.

That is to say, the plan of God doesn't just make wet people, it makes new people. Christians are converted. They are not gussied up from the outside, but they are made new from the inside. Notice how Isaiah spoke these words of hope to a sinful Israel: **Isaiah 44:3-5**, "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and the streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. This one will say, 'I am the Lord's' another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'The Lord's and name himself by the name of Israel.'"

For the first time, and in the fullest way God's people are not marked off by physical circumcision, or by a preparatory spirit of repentance, but on account of repentance in the completed work of Jesus they are made new by God himself. You don't become a Christian because you cleaned up your life. You become a Christian because God changes your life with God himself by faith in God himself.

Like water on parched ground, life, new life, eternal life would spring up. The commands that Jesus gives to the church to steward human baptism is a visible and corporate representation of this Spiritual baptism—the power of God to make sinners new by the work of the Holy Spirit.

The question is: What does that get you? Does it elevate your dating profile to a new level? Does it give you a secret decoder ring to financial peace? Does it give you the grounds to be worshipped as God because you are filled with God?

The disciple's response to this draws us to consider how the reality of conversion is wrapped up in the reason for our conversion. Conversion makes us into who we could never be, so that we could do a work that we could never do, in order that the kingdom can be offered among those who have never heard.

This is our second point this morning: **The Kingdom Plan in Commission.**

There's nothing more we long for in our fallen humanity to be done with something. We are built to rest. The disciples in hearing this, are probably remembering that Jesus said they would get to rule over the 12 Tribes of Israel, and that they would get to enjoy the Kingdom of God.

And notice how easy it is for us to slip into an idea of God's plan that assumes we no longer need to work: **Acts 1:6**, "So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel.'"

John Calvin says of this question, "It has more errors than words." The question itself isn't terrible. Jesus was just teaching about the kingdom, and because these disciples knew passages like Isaiah 44, they knew whatever was about to happen with the Spirit was connected with an aspect of the kingdom being fulfilled.

The disciples knew God's promise in the Old Testament included a restoration of Israel's kingdom, so that the promise God made to Abraham to be their God and for them to be a people would be fulfilled.

But Jesus' answers here show them that they are thinking too soon, and too small.

They are thinking too soon because he says, **Acts 1:7**, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority."

This is a reasonable question for the Jews because it had been some 1500 years since the Exodus, and in that many years Israel only new a united kingdom for 120 years—only 80 of which were under good kings (David and Solomon). For the Jews a restored kingdom was where everything was better. That's why they wanted it.

That's the beauty of God's kingdom for all of us. It's everything we've ever wanted. It's where we finally have a good king who rules directly over us, he protects us, loves us, satisfies us, and keeps all pain, evil and death safely outside the gates. Every longing you've ever had for such an experience is a longing for something we will only have in the kingdom of God.

But Jesus says, not is not the time for that. This time period, is not the time period of a full restoration. Just as we often do in the car with kids, the answer was, "You'll know when we get there." Trust the Father. For us, we should check our goals—many of our goals are to get kingdom rest now in worldly things, but Jesus warns us here that is a fool's errand! The kingdom is coming, but not yet in full.

But in the meantime, he gives them the power to wait and to work not only in light of that kingdom but in line with that king: **Acts 1:8**, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Have you labored hard to finish an assignment only to finish it and find your boss hand you another one? That's a bit like what these disciples probably experienced here going from the question of endless rest and honor in the kingdom to being sent out to do more work to the edges of the whole world.

But the wonderful promise of this work is that we will have power to do it. That's why Jesus is sending the Holy Spirit. He will empower us to this task. Christianity is work, but it is work we were converted for. We are designed to do it so that when we feel tired, when we feel weary, when we feel we have nothing left—we are reminded that we are filled with the endless, unwearied and all sufficient Spirit of God.

And it's here where they thought too small. They wanted the kingdom restored to Israel. "When we will rest in our name?" But Jesus' answer shows them how and where they will work for his name.

God's promise to Israel was the door to the foundational promise that God made in the garden to rule over and bless all people through Jesus.

Israel was always meant to be a signal to the nations calling the lost of the world to see the goodness of their God. That's why God made a promise to Abraham. So Israel's full restoration and reunion is wrapped up in her commission not to her own kingdom, but to the kingdom of God.

Acts 1:8 is basically an outline to the literary structure of the book of Acts. But it's also the theological outline to how God restores not only Israel, but through Israel all his church to himself. Jesus' commission in verse 8 includes three specific allusions to passages in the Old Testament which talk about how and when Israel will be restored.

In **Isaiah 32:15**, God says that he will not restore Israel "until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high." That's the first part of Acts 1:8. In **Isaiah 43:9:10** God says that when Israel is restored that they will be God's witnesses to the nations. And in **Isaiah 49:6** he says Israel's restoration will, "be a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

When will Jesus restore the kingdom—he is right now! By converting his physical people through the spiritual new birth in the Spirit. But this conversion also immediately sets us up for the commission to no longer live for kingdoms far too small to satisfy. All Christians, who come to faith through Jesus are grafted into this promise, and this commission.

Our deepest joy is not found in bearing witness to our kingdom, or resting in the kingdoms of this world. We are called to bear witness to Jesus' kingdom, to every nation, across the globe, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is an ominous task! It's hard enough work to tell all four of my kids that it is bed time.

But this is the work of Jesus! He's the one working—he's working by the power of the Holy Spirit, according to the promise of the Father—but in, through and by his church. Believe it or not, this is what you are created and converted for. We were saved for the joy of knowing God, and serving God. This might seem overwhelming, but if you are a believer, take heart that he gives what he demands.

This week, I would encourage you to take notice of who you come in contact with. What are their ages, their socio-economic statuses, their ethnicities, genders, and nationalities? Notice that we are called, empowered and entrusted to bear witness even to them. Acts tracks the increase of the gospel to the ends of the earth, and while we will find the ends of the earth, and the end of our limits, we will never find the end of the power and glory of the God who has saved us, converted us, and commissioned us.

And because of that, we labor in light of a hope of enjoying that eternally. This is our final point this morning: **The Kingdom in Consummation.**

Acts 1:9-11, "And when he said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

I love this image, as if the resurrected Lord wasn't confusing enough, here the disciples are presented with an ascended Lord. Again, our John Chrysostom comments, "Then, that they make no more enquiries, straight away he was received up."

And as the angels appear they say, "Stop staring, he's not coming back right now. He has risen, into heaven...but you've got work to do."

Now remember, the disciples already admitted something that we should never forget! Though they thought to small of the kingdom, they thought rightly about who could do it! "When will you restore!"

Jesus is doing the work, he's just working through you as the Holy Spirit works in you. He will come back, he will restore it. There is a beautiful ending to what seems like difficult and often dreary work. But take heart that the work is not up to us in fruitfulness, it's only up to us in faithfulness.

You can't convert souls. You can't reach the nations. But Jesus can, and he's promised to do it through us. I love this quote by Patrick Schreiner: "The church is not a side story to God's work in the world. It does not sit on the bench as the clock ticks on. Rather, the church is central to God's plan. If people want to be caught up in what God is doing in the world, then the stage upon which this play is unfolding is the church. The church is the hotspot where God works, where his glory is displayed."

Right now that work is veiled in sweat, persecution and difficulty. But one day the glory will be displayed in full. Jesus will come back. The next big event is not the restoration of Israel. The next big event is not the church ascending to heaven. The next big event is the Jesus who ascended being the same Jesus who descends to bring about his kingdom in full.

We always sit between right now and that glorious moment. Each second we live is a dripping with eternity. And as the church, we get to proclaim to all nations tomorrow's news today. He is coming back—but take heart—he has already come. He has come and made it possible for us to be delivered from sin and death, and he has filled us with his Holy Spirit so that we might have a holy preoccupation with his work today.