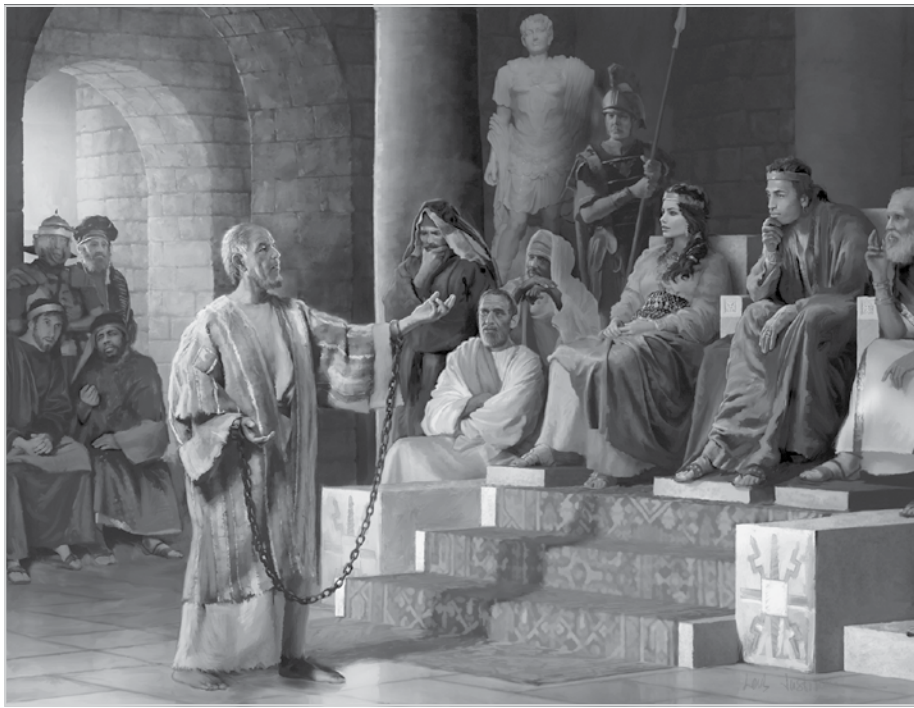


The Book of Acts



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1 CHAPTER

You Will Be My Witnesses

Acts 1

*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”*

—Acts 1:8, NRSV

Modern TV series often finish one episode with a preview of the next one, and that episode usually opens with a brief review of the previous installment. Luke uses this approach when he previews the book of Acts in the closing paragraphs of his Gospel account. He reports Jesus’ post-Resurrection appearances to the disciples, His final instructions to them, His promise of the Holy Spirit, and His departure to heaven (Luke 24:36–53). He then begins the book of Acts with a similar account (Acts 1:2–14). In Acts, however, Luke goes beyond a simple recounting of events and sets the perspective for what follows, including the disciples’ failure to understand Jesus’ mission, the promise of His return, and the plan for taking the gospel “to the ends of the earth” (verse 8, NRSV).

The restoration of Israel

According to Luke, the main issue the risen Christ dealt with during the forty days He stayed with the disciples was the nature of the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). Up to that moment, they had not been able to make sense of the Cross and, despite all Jesus’ efforts to warn them about His fate (Matthew 16:21), none of them were expecting Him to die (cf. verses 22, 23). They expected a literal kingship on earth, not the salvation of

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humankind and the reinstatement of God's spiritual kingship on earth (Matthew 4:17, 23). When they left everything to follow Jesus, they believed He was the Messiah (John 1:41). In their minds, however, they viewed the Messiah as a warrior king; one who would deliver them from the Romans and restore Israel to its past glory.

This notion was typical of first-century Judaism. Though the term *Messiah* occurs only twice in the Old Testament (Daniel 9:25, 26), the concept of a Messianic figure as an agent of deliverance is inescapable. Sometimes the Messiah is quietly presented as one who would restore the Edenic condition that was lost at the Fall (Isaiah 11:6–9) or as a new Moses who would lead Israel into a second and greater exodus (Isaiah 51:9–11). In the case of Moses, his own prophecy clearly shows he understood that a new prophet was coming (Deuteronomy 18:15–19).

When it comes to explicit references, the most prominent Messianic concepts are those of the Davidic King who would establish His throne and rule forever (Psalm 2:6–9) and of the Suffering Servant who would be rejected and die for the sins of the people (Isaiah 52:13–53:12). Though such prophecies seem contradictory, they simply indicate the two consecutive phases of the Messiah's work: first He would suffer, and then He would become king (cf. Luke 17:24, 25; 24:25–27, 44–47).

Unfortunately, the Jews allowed the idea of a kingly Messiah, who would bring political deliverance, to obscure the notion of a suffering Messiah, who would bring spiritual liberation. Of course, the Messiah's kingship was not political in the secular sense of the word because it was concerned with the eradication of sin and the reestablishment of God's kingship in the universe. This is why Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36, NKJV).

So it is not difficult to understand why the Jews were confused about the Messiah. Since the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 B.C., they had rarely enjoyed political freedom. Even when they did—during the Hasmonean period (142–63 B.C.)—the occupants of the throne were of Levite lineage and not descendants of David, meaning they had no traditional

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right to rule (cf. Genesis 49:10; 2 Samuel 7:16).

Due to their successful leadership during the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids (beginning in 167 B.C.), they appropriated not only the kingship but also the high priesthood. Their procurement of the priesthood was illegitimate because they were not from the house of Zadok, who was a priest in David's time (2 Samuel 15:24–29). It was Zadok's descendants who were given a monopoly on the priesthood (1 Kings 2:26, 27, 35; 1 Chronicles 27:17), and the combination of king and high priest on the part of the Hasmonean family only intensified the desire by various orthodox Jews for a Davidic King. These circumstances led the Essenes, a conservative Jewish group, to leave Jerusalem and settle in the desert, near the Dead Sea. Here they waited in anticipation of the coming priestly Messiah who would restore the Zadokite priesthood.

Since the Babylonian exile, the Jews had longed more than ever for a kingly Messiah. The continuing oppression and humiliation by foreign powers fueled their nationalistic ideals and distorted their Messianic expectation. This explains why Jesus avoided the term *Messiah* altogether and warned the disciples not to share His Messianic identity with others (Mark 8:27–30). On only three occasions did Jesus explicitly acknowledge being the Messiah: in Samaria, outside the Jewish borders (John 4:25, 26); to the Twelve, only a few months before His death (Matthew 16:13–20); and before the Sanhedrin, the very day He died (Mark 14:60–63). He understood that it was unwise to use the term because of its political and self-serving connotations.

This is illustrated in the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1–15). That the crowd wanted to make Jesus king shows they thought of Him in Messianic fashion, the same short-term earthly interests about the Messiah that prevailed in contemporary Judaism. They saw Him as one who could lead a revolt against the Romans, feed the troops, heal the wounded, and free the land from its hateful invaders (verses 14, 15). They only wanted to use Him to pursue their own ends (verse 26), so He slipped away into the hills.

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Even the Jewish religious leaders suffered from the same misconception. Aware of Jesus' charisma and Messianic reputation among the people, they feared He would worsen their political situation by attracting the fury of the Romans and thus bring the destruction of Jerusalem (John 11:47–50; 19:12). Since, in their view, Jesus did not have Messianic credentials, they considered Him an impostor, like several others in recent Jewish history (Acts 5:36, 37).¹

It is not surprising, then, that the disciples would nurture wrong ideas about Jesus. They sincerely believed Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and were concerned about which of them would sit on either side of Him in the kingdom (Mark 10:35–37). Thus, when Jesus died, their disappointment could not have been greater. Their dreams of glory were shattered, and with great sorrow, they cried, “We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21, NIV). The Roman yoke remained, and “their expectation of a Messiah who was to take His throne and kingly power,” Ellen White writes, “had been misleading.”²

Jesus' death was a devastating blow to the disciples, but the Resurrection raised their political expectations to an unprecedented level. Finally, the long-awaited Messianic kingdom would be established! But their Acts 1 question (Acts 1:6) about restoring the kingdom of Israel shows they were still confused. Even after the Resurrection, they continued to think politically.

In His reply to their kingdom query, Jesus intentionally left the issue unsettled. He did not reject the premise behind the disciples' question of an imminent kingdom, neither did He accept it. He only reminded them that the time of God's actions belongs to God Himself and, as such, is inaccessible to humans (Acts 1:7). It was in this context that Jesus must have explained to them once again the real nature of His Messianic mission (Luke 24:44). They were familiar with the prophecies, but their minds had been preconditioned to think of the Messiah as an earthly ruler. Now they were able to have a fresh understanding of what the prophets had written and see the kingdom in a new light—a light shed from the empty tomb (verse 46).

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The disciples' mission

What came next were Jesus' instructions regarding the ultimate purpose of the disciples' calling (Acts 1:8). It is clear that chronological speculation about the Messianic kingdom (cf. verses 6, 7) was to be replaced with bearing witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and all over the world. This huge shift in God's plan for Israel encapsulated four important points concerning the disciples' mission.

1. *The gift of the Spirit.* In a striking passage, Josephus states that in the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 there were so many crosses outside the walls that there could hardly be room for more. The reference is to the hundreds of Jews who were caught and mercilessly crucified every day while trying to escape the horrors of famine and despair inside the city.³ In another passage, he describes how in 4 B.C. Quintilius Varus, the Roman governor of Syria, crucified two thousand Jews who were fighting for freedom from the Roman yoke.⁴

There were thousands of other crucifixions during this period in history, so it is reasonable to ask, What is it that sets Jesus' cross apart from all others? The answer is the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the real power behind the gospel (1 Corinthians 2:12, 13), and without Him, Jesus' cross would have been only one among many in the ancient world. It would have had no redemptive significance. No one would be attracted to it. There would be no conviction of sin, no conversion, no transformation of heart, and no sanctified life. The church would not exist, God's kingdom would not be established, and no one would be inspired to preach the gospel.

The mission of the disciples, therefore, was entirely dependent on the Spirit's intervention. This is why Pentecost was necessary. It was Jesus' victory on the cross that granted God the authority to send the Spirit in full measure as never before, and it was the Spirit who, through apostolic preaching, would reveal all the benefits of the cross to a lost world (verses 7–13).

2. *The role of witness.* Jesus chose twelve disciples to work with Him and witness His ministry (Matthew 11:1). In just a few short years, they observed miracles, listened to sermons,

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and marveled at His love. Above all others, they were qualified to give a firsthand account of what they had seen, heard, and experienced during their time with the Master (1 John 1:1–3). Jesus called them “apostles” (from the Greek *apostellō*, “to send”) (Luke 6:13) and commissioned them to share the gospel, which is the good news that forgiveness and salvation are available through Jesus Christ, and only through Him, to all who believe (Acts 4:12).

They still had much to learn about the plan of salvation, and the forty days Jesus spent with them after the Resurrection were crucial for their understanding that His death was not in conflict with His Messianic identity. He deflected their concern about the timing of the establishment of His kingdom, although the two angels’ promise of Jesus’ second coming (Acts 1:11) and Pentecost itself (Acts 2) must have naturally strengthened their anticipation of its nearness. A careful reading of Acts shows that it took time for the disciples to reconcile their hope of Jesus’ soon return with the notion of a worldwide mission. As it turns out, it was Paul, not any of the Twelve, who deployed the first systematic efforts to evangelize the Gentile world.

3. *The plan of the mission.* The disciples were to witness first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and finally to “the ends of the earth,” an expression taken from Isaiah 49:6 that simply means the whole world. It was a progressive plan that began in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious life and the place where Jesus had been condemned and crucified. Judea and Samaria were neighboring areas where Jesus had also ministered (John 3:22; 4:1–42), and familiarity with His life and teachings would likely make the people more receptive to the gospel message. In the Samaritans’ case, there were many points of contact between their religion and that of the Jews. They shared the hope of a Messiah, whom they called *Taheb* (“Restorer”)—a prophetic figure like Moses (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15–18) who would bring about a new order of things, pray for the guilty, and save them.⁵ But the disciples were not to limit themselves to Palestine. The scope of their mission was

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worldwide, fulfilling God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). The spread of the gospel, as recorded in Acts, clearly reflects the plan outlined in Acts 1:8.

4. *The orientation of the mission.* The centrifugal pattern of the disciples' mission was exactly opposite that of ancient Israel. In the Old Testament, surrounding nations were to be attracted to God through Israel. There was no explicit direction for Israel to *take* God to the nations. The mission pattern was centripetal, as evidenced by Solomon's dedicatory prayer for the temple, "Come and see what God has done" (1 Kings 8:41–43, ESV).⁶ The story of Jonah, and a few other exceptions, do not invalidate this general rule (Isaiah 2:2–4).

Now the strategy was different. By renouncing theocracy (John 19:14, 15),⁷ national Israel would no longer be the agent through which God's saving plan would be conveyed to the

Acts and the mission plan

1:1–7:60	Witnessing in Jerusalem
1:1–2:47	The beginning of the church
3:1–7:60	The church in Jerusalem
8:1–11:18	Witnessing in Judea and Samaria
8:1–9:43	The church begins to expand
10:1–11:18	The inauguration of the Gentile mission
11:19–28:31	Witnessing to the ends of the earth
11:19–14:28	The mission in Cyprus and south Galatia
15:1–35	The discussion concerning the Gentiles in the church
16:6–18:17	The mission in Macedonia and Achaia
18:18–20:3	The mission in Asia
21:1–28:31	Paul's arrest and imprisonment in Caesarea and Rome

world; the messengers would be those who believed in Jesus, irrespective of their ethnicity (cf. 1 Peter 2:9, 10). It was a seismic missional change. Jerusalem was still the center; but rather

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than remaining and building roots there, the disciples were expected to move out to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Concluding remarks

Upon the completion of the instructions to the Twelve, it was time for Jesus to return to heaven and give way to the Holy Spirit. While His followers readied themselves for Pentecost, they were together in Jerusalem, waiting in prayer for that great event (Acts 1:14). A new age in God's redemptive plan would soon begin, an age in which the good news of the gospel would be taken to the entire world in preparation for the complete establishment of God's kingship (Matthew 24:14). The long-awaited Messianic kingdom, whose legitimacy was vindicated at the cross, would finally be revealed in the fullness of its glory and power (Luke 21:27). The Messiah would reign forever (Revelation 11:15).

1. See Lester L. Grabbe, *An Introduction to First Century Judaism: Jewish Religion and History in the Second Temple Period* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 53–72.

2. Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press®, 1898), 799.

3. Josephus, *The Jewish War* 5.11.1.

4. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 17.10.10.

5. See Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 397n47.

6. George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 21.

7. See White, *The Desire of Ages*, 737, 738.