

King Jesus sends out his witnesses

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Date: 07 September 2025

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[0 : 0 0] So let's turn back to the book of Acts. So from now until just before Christmas time, we're going to think about this wonderful book. We'll look at the first seven chapters, really part one, As Luke unpacks the mission of Jesus to the ends of the earth. But we begin with this introduction where here King Jesus sends out his witnesses. But just to take a step back and to ask this question, and maybe you've thought about it, what explains the growth and the impact of Christianity on the world at a distance of, you know, 2,000 years? So that right now you may have heard or read, you know, former, you know, hardened atheists, writers and scholars, guys like Tom Holland or Douglas Murray, now saying they recognize the foundations of Western society are built on Christian faith. So our school system, our hospitals, a justice system, the fact that there is a charitable sector all emerge from Christianity. Christian values are being recognized as, to borrow from Glenn

Scrivener's book, the air that we breathe, that people care about tolerance and fairness and mercy are all distinctly Christian values. How do we explain that? How do we explain the fact that we could be dropped anywhere in the world today and we would find a Christian church of some sort meeting? How do we explain the fact that this message of Jesus has broken through all the barriers of culture and language and geography? So today on our planet, hundreds of millions of people are doing what we're doing right now? Well, I would suggest that Luke's introduction to this book actually helps to give us the answer. In verse 1, we learn that Luke's gospel is about all that Jesus began to do and teach, the implication being, the book of Acts and the history of the church shows what Jesus continues to do and continues to teach. The Lord Jesus didn't finish His work when He returned to heaven, He continues to work today. He didn't stop speaking when He left this earth, He continues speaking to us today. And a vital way that He does that, verse 8, He does that, verse 8, He commissions these men known as apostles to continue His mission.

And He still is sending the church today to share His message in the world. So the book of Acts, it is the book of the history of the early church, the mission of Jesus, showing that the message of Jesus, the mission of Jesus, continues to work, continues to turn the world right side up.

So we're going to jump straight in. Got two things to talk about. First, we need to talk about the Acts of Jesus. We need to think about the title for this book. So it's commonly known as, you know, a title that was added later, the Acts of the Apostles. That's a helpful title, emphasizes, you know, those human messengers and witnesses. There's an alternative that's often suggested. We should call it the Acts of the Holy Spirit, which emphasizes the divine, emphasizes what God does in the mission of the church. And as we read the book of Acts, we'll see the Spirit is everywhere. Getting the right title matters. Just a little, did you know, some of our most famous books had alternative and often inferior titles. Lord of the Rings was originally going to be called The War of the Ring. That's not too bad. Pride and Prejudice was originally going to be called First Impressions. Not quite so catchy. John Steinbeck's classic of

Mice and Men was almost called Something Happened. This is a truly awful title, but a truly wonderful book. But getting the right title matters, and that's true for the book of Acts. As we read verse 1 and 2, as we read, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day He was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen. Let me suggest that the best title that captures what's going on in this book is the best title, the best title that captures what's going on.

[4 : 50] What we have in this book are the acts of the ascended Jesus by His Spirit through the apostles. Jesus is working, the Spirit is working, the apostles are working, but it's the acts of Jesus.

What we read are what Jesus continues to do and to teach. And just as we get going in this book, it's also important to recognize there is a theme alert here. Verse 3, Jesus anticipates what this book is going to be about. Look at the end of verse 3. He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God. So, the book of Acts is a book explaining how the kingdom of God grows and expands through the world. That kingdom that is established as God becomes king through His Son, Jesus. And what we're going to see now is that these first 11 verses are like a hinge between Luke's first volume, the gospel of Luke, and His second volume, the book of Acts. So, there's going to be a drawing us back. You know, you watch your shows on Netflix and you get the previously or the recap. He's going to draw us back to consider, here are the things that I told you about what Jesus did while He was on earth until He returned to heaven. But then it's also going to point us forward to what Jesus is going to continue to do.

That He will send the Spirit. He will send out His witnesses. He will build His kingdom. More people will be brought in until He returns. Luke in his gospel, first four verses, Luke chapter 1 verses 1 to 4, he gives us an introduction that covers both sections of his book. And he writes about wanting to make Theophilus and us certain about the things that he writes about. So, as we get going in the book of Acts, Luke wants us, Jesus wants us to be certain that Jesus is the King at the heart of Christianity.

He wants us to be certain about these great acts that He has done. And He wants us to know why those great acts matter. So, there are four acts of Jesus that Luke records in these first 11 verses. And to help us to see how they fit together, let me give you a picture to keep in your mind. So, we need to go back in time to ancient Israel or ancient Rome. So, think about that kind of time period. So, okay, so picture the scene.

Word comes that an enemy from another country is riding out to come into battle against Israel or against Rome, say. So, the response, the king or the emperor with his armies, they march out to face their enemy on the battlefield. And there on the battlefield, there's this decisive battle, there's great conflict.

[8 : 09] The king, the emperor wins. And after that, after that great victory, we then have the king or the emperor leading a victory march back to their city, back to the place where they rule, and they're welcomed back with great joy and celebration. A familiar picture, I imagine, for many people in the first century living in the Roman Empire. But keep that picture in your head, because that picture mirrors the works of Jesus, as we will see. So, let's begin with the first act of Jesus that Luke draws our attention to, and it's here in verse 3. His death. He introduces us again to Jesus, the suffering king.

Look at verse 3. It begins after his suffering. If you've ever read Luke's gospel, you might have asked the question, why does he spend so much time focusing on the death of Jesus? Why is there so much attention drawn towards the cross where Jesus dies? If you've never read Luke's gospel, let me encourage you to do that.

Well, Jesus understands. You go to the end of Luke's gospel, Luke chapter 24, and you hear Jesus explaining so much in such few words. Let me read, for example, Luke chapter 24, and verse 26. Here is Jesus speaking the day of his resurrection, and he says to his confused followers, did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? Or then as he appears in the evening towards to his fearful disciples, chapter 24, verse 46, he told them, this is what is written, the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. So, Jesus knew all along what the Bible teaches, that God's Messiah, Savior, King must suffer, must die before the glory of resurrection. It's woven into the storyline of the

Old Testament. There is this promise of a king who will save, one who will be a light to the nations, but he will come as a servant, who will be a suffering servant. He's come to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And so, Jesus knows his Bible, and Jesus knows that God's rescue plan comes through a substitute, Jesus living a perfect life for us, then dying the death we deserve in our place.

God's rescue plan involves a sacrifice, not an animal sacrifice, but of a perfect human. Jesus becomes one of us to take on himself and to atone for our sin. And Jesus knows it, and that's why he focuses on teaching about his suffering. And the suffering of Jesus, the cross of Jesus, is central to our good news. To go back to our picture, the cross of King Jesus becomes the battlefield, where he fights and he wins the battle over the forces of darkness, the devil and sin and death. And there, through the cross, God's wrath on our sin is satisfied. He is the king who tastes death so that we can be given life. He is the Savior who sacrifices himself to pay the price in full for our sin. So, it's vital that we're certain about the suffering of Jesus and why it happened. But then, to go back to verse 3, here's the second act of Jesus. It's his resurrection. He is the risen king. Verse 3 again, after his suffering, he presented himself to them 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. And this, and we'll see this in the book of Acts, this becomes the message of the church from the beginning. That Jesus claimed victory in this life death-for-death battle, that Jesus broke the chains of death as easily as you or I untie our shoelaces.

[12 : 29] That fearful disciples become courageous disciples because they have seen the convincing proofs that Jesus is no longer dead, he hasn't lost, but he is alive. What are some of those convincing proofs that Jesus gave? Well, perhaps we think about the empty tomb in Jerusalem. Everybody acknowledges it, friends and enemies. Historians now acknowledge the tomb was empty. Nobody has ever produced the bones of Jesus. Nobody produced the body of Jesus to say, see, it's all a lie. The empty tomb speaks convincingly of the resurrection. There is connected to the empty tomb the message of the angels. Remember the message? He is not here. He has risen, just as he told you. There's the convincing proofs of his multiple appearances. He presented himself alive to the disciples over 40 days. Sometimes he appeared to huge crowds of his followers up to 500 at a time. And such was the nature of his glorious resurrection that even his half-brother, who was skeptical, becomes a follower, having met the risen Jesus. Or we can think about his meals. Another convincing proof. Jesus really did have a physical glorified body. He ate bread and fish. He prepared and ate a barbecue with his disciples. And what we're going to see in the book of Acts is that the church from the beginning boldly proclaims the great miracle, which is also Jesus' great decisive victory. And by faith, his victory is ours. Just as King Jesus passes through death to new life, so in him we too die to sin and are raised to new life in him. God has become king through his son

Jesus by way of the suffering of the cross and the glory of his resurrection. And that takes us to a third great act, which is actually the first one that Luke mentions. Look at verse 2.

I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven. Or we can go down to verse 9. After he had said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. He also closes the gospel with Jesus ascending. I wonder if you've ever asked yourself, why the ascension? Have you ever wondered, where does this ascension fit into the story of Jesus and into our good news? Because this is not just, you know, it's not a cheap magic trick. This is not just an empty spectacle. As Jesus goes back up to heaven, this is actually a vital part of our good news. And here's why. So, we've already said that Jesus has gone into battle for us.

He represents us in that fight over sin and death and the devil that we could never win, but Jesus has. He's won that great victory. The resurrection is proof. And the ascension is the point where he is welcomed back into glory. It's where he returns to his rightful place, where he now sits on the throne.

He's welcomed back with joy. We have that saying in English, to the victor go the spoils. And the spoils for Jesus, the spoils of war having won that battle. Well, firstly, all heaven praises him. God's son is crowned as king. But now he has won a people for himself. The ascended Lord Jesus is the one who is building his church. He is the one who rules over us. He is the one who powerfully saves us.

[16 : 25] The ascension really matters. I think Luke mentions the clouds in verse 9 to help us to see this. Maybe you're familiar with the Old Testament book of Daniel and that famous scene in chapter 7, where we see the Son of Man come before the Ancient of Days, and the Son of Man is given glory and a kingdom forever. And that Son of Man, he comes in the clouds. And so Luke wants you and I to be certain Jesus is God's chosen forever king. And to enjoy life in his kingdom, we need to trust in the ascended Lord Jesus, the one who is still for his people, the one who is still acting and speaking from heaven.

He sends his spirit. He speaks in the Bible. He prays for us. He builds his church. He meets with us to give us grace. It's a great act we often overlook, but it's a wonderful part of the gospel.

Now, the fourth act of Jesus is different because it's not looking back, it's looking forward. And we need to think about the returning king and Jesus' second coming. Look at verse 10.

We find the apostles looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly, two men dressed in white stood beside them. Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who's been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. So we catch the disciples gazing upwards, lost in wonder, wrapped up in their own thoughts, and the angels come. And they said, listen, stop gazing. You need to be going.

Don't forget what Jesus said. You need to go to the city. Because there in the city, you'll receive the Spirit. And when you receive the Spirit, you'll be my witnesses to all the nations. And why does that matter?

[18 : 31] Because Jesus will come back again. And until the day Jesus comes back again, the church has work to do.

There is a day when King Jesus will return, and everybody will see that return. It won't just be limited to the apostles. It will be a public appearing of His glory. It will fill the earth, and everyone will see Him.

And in God's story of salvation, again, maybe we wonder, how do we connect with the second coming of Jesus? It can seem so remote. In God's storyline of salvation, the second coming of Jesus is the ultimate, and they all lived happily ever after for the people of God. If we trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, then this is our hope. There is a day coming when evil is finally defeated, when perfect justice is done once and for all, when all suffering, sin, and death are removed, when we get to live forever in a perfect world, seeing the glory of Jesus fill the earth, and we will be in the presence of our King forever. That's our hope. I wonder if you're beginning to sense why, as Luke chooses to begin this great book, he begins with the great acts of Jesus. The mission of the church is proclaiming the message of our King. And to proclaim the message of our King, we need to be certain of these great truths. And we need to be sure that nothing matters more than this. So, as we discover these great acts of King Jesus, we're also discovering that being right about the identity of Jesus. It matters. I imagine a number of us will have had an embarrassing situation like this. You know, you go into a shop and you pick up an item of clothing, and you go to somebody else and you say, do you have this in another size? And you discover they're also customers.

We've had that, and it's quite embarrassing. Or maybe you're speaking to someone and you ask, is this your mom? And actually, it's your sister. There's all those kind of embarrassing identity moments. But really, they're no big deal. It's a little bit of social awkwardness.

But Luke's introduction makes clear that it is a tragedy, an eternal tragedy, to fail to recognize Jesus is your Lord and your King.

[21 : 30] Here is God sent to save you and to bring you home to the life that you are made for. And to miss that ultimately is to miss everything. So, being right about Jesus' identity matters, and very much connected with that, being in right relationship with Jesus matters.

Because here, as Luke begins this book, he is introducing us to God's King on God's mission. And what's Jesus' mission? It's a mission to save people from sin. And you and I are guilty of sin, so we need saving. He has come to give us new life, and you and I are by nature spiritually dead, so we need this. King Jesus is on a mission to, by His grace, bring us into the family of God.

By nature, we are strangers to God, enemies of God. He has come to promise us the hope of a new world, when by rights. It's not salvation, it's judgment we deserve.

So, being in right relationship with Jesus matters, when we understand He is the King who rules and who saves, so that we would learn to bow the knee gladly. Well, if those are the acts of Jesus, let's turn next to Jesus' act of sending out His witnesses. So, much more briefly, secondly, the witnesses of Jesus.

So, we're going to see over the next few months, and we're only just going to be in the first quarter, that Acts is a remarkable book. The story of Jesus' unstoppable mission going global. So, by the time we get to chapter 28, we get the gospel coming right into the heart of the Roman Empire. And along the way, there's really remarkable scenes. We'll see hostile crowds who wanted Jesus to be crucified, being baptized, 3,000 added to the church. We're going to visit a city where there's a public bonfire of books on the dark arts, because the city turns to Jesus. We're going to discover a religious terrorist who encounters the risen Lord Jesus and becomes a follower and witness and missionary. And remarkably, it all comes from a very humble beginning. This group of men recognized as common and unschooled. To read the gospel, we understand there's not very promising raw material here. We see their fears, and we see their failures. But from this group comes explosive growth, as Jesus promised, and as God promised in the Old Testament. His design and desire was that the blessing of life with God would extend to all nations. And it happens because Jesus sends out the apostles He had chosen. The word apostle, by the way, means a sent one.

[24 : 36] And very briefly, we're going to see that there are four qualifications for these unique witnesses. But we're going to see there's parallels with the life of every believer. But there's unique qualifications that gives them authority as they speak, but also authority as they write. The New Testament has authority because it is connected, vitally connected, to the apostles of Jesus. So, four qualifications. First, we've just heard it. Jesus chose them. So, this group were those who had been with Jesus during His public ministry. So, they had witnessed His miracles. They'd heard Him teach the Sermon on the Mount. They were eyewitnesses to His rejection, His arrest, His suffering, His death.

And now they have been chosen to be ambassadors, to speak and serve their risen King. Jesus chose them. Jesus chose them. Verse 3, He presented Himself to them and appeared to them over a period of 40 days.

Forty days they get to be eyewitnesses of the resurrection. Forty days they get to listen as Jesus instructs them on His kingdom. Now, notice this. He instructs them in a different way. Verse 2, He instructs them through the Holy Spirit.

So, during Jesus' public ministry, He instructed them face to face. But now, recognizing that He's about to return to heaven, He begins to instruct them through the Holy Spirit. And that's how Jesus continues to instruct us today, through His Word and with the help of the Spirit. Thirdly, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to them.

Verse 4, On one occasion while He was eating with them, He gave them this command, Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.

[26 : 44] For John baptized with water, but in a few days you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Wait for the gift my Father promised. What gift did the Father promise? Well, in the Old Testament, Book of Ezekiel, chapter 36, there was this promise that with the new covenant, God's people would get a new heart, and we'd get God's Spirit coming to live in us. Jesus said, I'm going to complete that promise.

And then Jesus draws reference to the difference between His baptism and John's. John baptized with water, but Jesus will baptize with the Spirit. And this is amazing, because think about, if you know the story of Jesus, you'll know that when He is baptized, the Holy Spirit comes on Jesus. Jesus is the Spirit-empowered man. And now that same Spirit that Jesus received, that powered His ministry, is the same Spirit that comes to live in us. In sending the Spirit, the apostles are being told, Jesus will always be present with them, and the apostles will have Jesus' power for them to be His witnesses.

And that's the fourth qualification, that Jesus commissioned them. Verse 8, you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then what? You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. So, Jesus gives the church, the apostles, their marching orders. Go and make disciples. Go and be my witnesses. And he notices here this ripple effect that's going to take place. You know, when you throw a stone in a pool and the ripples spread out, the good news of Jesus is going to ripple out from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth as the apostles and the early Christians speak and live for Jesus, their King. There is this promise of global blessing that's going to be worked out in a whole new way. So, Acts, Luke in the book of Acts wants to tell us that there is something unique about the apostles in their calling and in their authority, because that way we can be certain about the words that they write. We can be certain that what we read in the New Testament are the words that come with the authority of the apostles, which means they come with the authority of Jesus Himself.

We can trust our New Testament. But I also want us to recognize that there is this wonderful parallel between the unique calling of the apostles and the calling that each and every Christian has.

If you are a Christian here today, God in His grace and His love has chosen you. That He has revealed in a saving way the truth of Jesus to you. And He has sent His Spirit to come and live in you. And now He sends you and He sends us to be His witnesses, to say and to show something of Jesus, that He sends us wherever we are. So, whether that's on campus and in a classroom, or whether that's in the workplace and a boardroom, whether that's reading the Bible with somebody, or whether we're just going about our day-to-day lives doing the shopping. It is true to say that right here, in our little church, here in our little city in Edinburgh, God has called, Jesus has called every Christian here to be His witnesses. And right now, that means to be His witnesses. In the South Side, in the city of Edinburgh, in our schools and universities, with the families that live around us, in the schools and small businesses. So, whether we've just arrived, and whether we've been here for decades, the marching orders for Jesus are the same.

[31 : 03] We are to go about our business, to go about our city as witnesses for Him. Now, it may be that He will call some of us to go to the ends of the earth. Maybe some of us are here from the ends of the earth, but for all of us, the calling begins right where we are. To share the same gospel message that was given to the apostles. That's why you and I need to know for certain these great acts of Jesus, which you can actually summarize with four R's. And let me close with this, because it may be helpful for some of us if we like. Is that alliteration? Yes, it's not in the Mnemonic.

Think about these four R's. Jesus, think about the cross, Jesus is the Redeemer for sinners. Fundamental to our gospel. Jesus is risen in victory. Also fundamental to the gospel. Jesus is ruling with power. Guess what? That's essential to the gospel. And Jesus will return in glory and in judgment.

And if you're here today and you're part of this great story, the story of Jesus' saving work, then our calling and our privilege is to share this story. Because the risen and ascended Lord Jesus, he still sends his witnesses out into the world on mission. And we're going to see more of that in the next few weeks.