

Acts 1:6–11

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[0:00] you like this. Assignment, verses 6 to 8. Ascension, verses 9 to 11. That said, if you prefer something more with a literary lens that would combine the ideas that get unfolded, I'll give it to you in one word. It's a sermon on questions. You'll notice the disciples ask a question at the beginning of the text, and one is asked to the disciples at the end of the text. However, if you're like me and you would prefer a bit of artistry to launch into a message, something that might, in a more evocative way, bring together these structural headings and thematic ideas, I offer you the following three minutes. There once lived a man named Theophilus, whose adult years were spent on the heels of a most remarkable era.

The one which included the strange and unaccounted for rise of something we know as the Christian faith. Now, this Theophilus was not only a man of means, but even better, he was of an inquisitive mind. He was a man with many questions. Evidently, a time came where his ongoing commitment to the Christian faith needed further footing. And from what we can surmise about him, he used his means to become a benefactor and engaged a physician named Luke, learned it in his own right, to get to the bottom of the things that puzzled him most. Of Luke, Theophilus would demand evidence, fieldwork, research, personal interviews. And from a mounting assemblage of notes and documents, in our day, what would have even been transcriptions of conversations, two riveting volumes were eventually published.

You and I know them as Luke Acts. The internal evidence in these two books suggest a list of questions that Theophilus wanted answered. Questions that Luke, through painstaking research, would have to give himself to solving. Let me list a few.

What do we really know about the birth and early life of Jesus? For all we've seen published, he seems to walk on the pages of history at the age of 30. What did his ministry consist of?

Why was he fixed on accomplishing his life work in the city of Jerusalem? How did he die? Is it really true that he rose again from the dead? And if so, where is he now? All of those questions, Luke covered in volume one. If you were here over the years of 2013 and 14, you would have tracked our life through those issues. Last week, however, we observed that volume two is underway. Luke chooses to begin volume two by way of an expanded reprise. We find him elaborating on the same two questions he concluded with in his gospel. Is it true that he rose from the dead? And if so, where is he now? And what did that mean for those who were following him? That said, even here in these verses that were read this morning, verses six through 11, a host of questions that we will see emerge over the course of the year are already embedded? Let me give you some of those. How did this new faith transition from Jesus to Peter and then to Paul? And were those three actually unified or not in their core message?

[4:16] Another one, what accounts for Christianity's shift from Jerusalem to Rome? How do we explain the expansion of Christ followers from a small Jewish sect of Galilean believers to what we have in the time of this volume? Gentile and ethnically mixed groupings popping up all over the world, even to the ends of the earth. In a nutshell, says Theophilus, as he gives the research grant to Luke, in a nutshell, your work, when complete, should aim to assure me that all I have heard and read about can be trusted.

In some sense that it's historically true. And that in studying your work, I and others who read long after I'm gone, they might have sound footing to stand on some lasting and transformative life to live.

Well, I prefer artistry over ideas or over headers. But there it is. Our text will consider not only the questions that Theophilus had of Luke, which they must, about Jesus, but the ones we have in reading Luke concerning his answers to Theophilus about Jesus. And our text today opens, we are immediately confronted with the fact that we are not the only ones who have questions of the

biblical text.

Theophilus had questions of Luke, and indeed, even the characters that were living through that remarkable era, they also had questions. And the first one is there. It's a question the disciples ask of Jesus.

Verse 6, So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? Well, right now, embedded in the characters of the era, Now, there are obvious indications here that their question was not of the best sort. You'll learn this if you're in education at all. There's a difference between giving yourself to the light of questions, questions, and giving yourself to better questions than other questions, or eventually the right questions, as opposed to the wrong questions.

[7 : 16] But this was actually the wrong question. Seems to me that John Calvin put it well when he said, There are as many errors in this question as words.

You see, the disciples thought that Jesus, on the basis of his resurrection, now had inaugurated an eternal, earthly kingdom that was nationalistic in nature.

In other words, their question is all in the terms of the here and the now, a reversal of political powers in the world, and the ascendancy of Israel overall, and unspoken, their own political rise with him.

So Jesus responds, Just as the disciples' question was interested in when, Jesus says, in a sense, verses 7 and 8, I'm interested in what?

what the resurrection means. He said to them, It's not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and at all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

[8 : 42] The implication of the resurrection, according to Jesus the Nazarene, is not about his own, and certainly not about their own temporal ascendancy in the world, but rather, their mission to the world.

Think about it. In other words, it was about assignment. Not about Israel's ascendancy. Not about the disciples' newfound supremacy, but about their apostolic assignment.

Not about time, but about task. Not about this moment, but about mission. Not ultimately about consummation, but about temporal commission.

In other words, paraphrase, Jesus says, Hey guys, drop the when. Get on with the what. In other words, their life was about to change.

Forever. Stunning. According to these verses, their task involves three things. Take a look at it. They're going to bear witness to Jesus. They're going to do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, until such a time as that message makes progress to the ends of the earth.

[10 : 12] Bearing witness to Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, to the ends of the earth. Put differently, your role, your task, your mission, is to speak about me, in the strength of the one who comes after me, until the whole world shall know about me.

That's it. That's what they were given to do. And, you should know, if you've never read Acts before, this is exactly the way Luke begins to push this theory out.

Take a look. This Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth. chapter 6, verse 7, gives you a wonderful summary. I hope you turn it over and take a look. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

And all of the work between where we are in the book now, and 6-7, reveals with their witness in Jerusalem. But then, verse 8, chapter 8, verse 1, the movement progresses beyond, and Saul approved of an execution of Stephen, and there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

The movement was transformatively, spatially, in progress. And then, that great thing where people are always wondering, when do we finally get to the ends of the earth?

[11 : 33] Some have suggested, not until the end of the book, when you finally get to Rome. I don't think that's correct. Some would suggest, it hasn't even happened yet, because we're continuing to try to get the gospel out.

I don't think that's correct either. I think, we're at the ends of the earth, by the first moment, non-Jewish people begin to hear the gospel. Let me explain.

Look at chapter 13. First missionary journey. Out the door. He's begun to talk to those who were of bearers of the promise. But they rejected the message.

So then it says in verse 47, For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, and then he quotes, the Old Testament scriptures, I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation, where?

To the ends of the earth. And he dusts off his feet, and he is immediately planted in the ends of the earth ministry. Now, a thinking person than today, should never approach the biblical text, in such egocentric manner, as to say, Jerusalem is wherever I live.

[12 : 39] And Judea and Samaria, is the two neighborhoods on either side, of where I live. And the ends of the earth, well that's the check I write, to the one who gets on a plane, to go to where they live.

No, that's not true. The scriptures purport, that the work of the Christian message, was pre-proclaimed in the Old Testament, by way of promise, to begin not where you live, but in Jerusalem.

And from there, to where you are, the outer regions, of the end of the earth. Now watch this.

The disciples' question of when, which gave way to Jesus' answer on what, had a direct bearing on Theophilus' desire to know how.

Remember, one of Theophilus' questions, living as he was, some decades only removed from that movement, was how do we explain the expansion of Christ followers, from a small, Jewish, Galilean sect, to a Gentile, ethnically mixed grouping, that is all over, to the ends of the earth.

[13 : 57] How do you explain that? This is what historians, have always been puzzled by. What accounts, for this rapid expansion, of this message, on this itinerant preacher? Well, the answer's there, in the text.

Power, by the Holy Spirit, and their proclamation. These are the two things we'll be returning to, over the course of the coming weeks.

What accounts for Christianity? Well, in one sense, an empowered, Holy Spirit, driven, proclamation, that can be accounted for, in no other way.

In other words, the power of God accounts for it. put God in your equation now, and the persistence, of a people, who would proclaim a message, about him against all odds.

That's it. In the words of Margaret Mead, cultural anthropologist, of the 20th century, I love this quote, never doubt, that a small group, of thoughtful, committed citizens, can change the world.

[15 : 03] Indeed, she says, it is the only thing, that ever has. What accounts for, you and I, sitting here, centuries, behind this flow?

A small group, of people, who heard those words, and did it. Stunning.

Well, the disciples' question of when, which turned to Jesus' question of what, which enlightened Theophilus' question of how, then has benefit for you and me.

Something we ought to take to heart. Why don't, or why do, why should, or why should you not, believe?

Do you really, want to leave here today, telling your friends and family, that Luke's telling of Jesus, is the stuff of myth, and legend, and an outdated, first century cosmology?

[16 : 15] That takes some real time, real faith. An equally plausible notion, is that this small group, of thoughtful, committed citizens, reordered the rest of their lives, having been truly, endowed, with power, from the spirit of God, who has intention for the world, and through their proclamation, people yet believe.

Always, ever, adding, to their number. at least, at least I would tell you this, the global, fact, that they fulfilled, their assignment, is not up, for historical, debate.

The only question, remaining, for present readers, of the text, is on the basis, of that truth, with, the proclamation, of Jesus, what, what will you do?

Well, we've got to move on. I know I can't hold you, any longer than lunch. The text shifts anyway. The text moves, verse 9, from the disciples' assignment, to the ascension, of, Jesus.

That ascension is told to us, by Luke. Look at verses, 9 to 11. And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him, out of their sight.

[17 : 36] 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.

Now, in that little paragraph, three fascinating lines, of questions emerge, that I want to explore, with us, over a few minutes time. Remember, Luke is interested, in helping Theophilus, get hold, of where is Jesus now?

The men in white, are interested, in why are these, Christ followers, standing around? And, you and I, have long been puzzled, by a different question, altogether.

What are we to make, of Luke's account, of this ascension, especially, in light of the way, he closed it out, in his gospel? Let me take them, one at a time.

Our question, is one of, chronology, when did the, ascension, happen? Theophilus's question, was one of, legitimacy, did it, really, happen?

[18 : 52] The two men in white, question, is one of, veracity. What are you doing, with the fact, that it did, happen? The first one, might be, a little unknown, to you, but worthy, of, this, time.

What are we to make, about the, sequencing, of the ascension, in, in accordance, with the two, things, put forward to us, by Luke, both from Luke, 24, and Acts, 1.

In particular, one question, that is centered, puzzled readers, of Luke, Acts, for centuries, is on the, chronology of things. Let me explain. At the close, of Luke's gospel, if you turn over there, to Luke, 24, it could read, as though, the ascension, takes place, on the same day, as the resurrection.

It's just recorded, flat out, as the next thing, that happens. Yet, as Acts, opens, verse 3, has been interpreted, to read, as though the ascension, took place, 40 days, after the resurrection.

And bringing, those two, accounts together, in ways, which, don't, diminish, the veracity, of either, has been, a tricky set of questions, for people, over the centuries.

[20 : 31] I decided, to spend, five minutes, on this, after looking, at, one of my, more, enjoyed, preachers, of the 20th century. A man, who ministered, in the neighborhood, of Cambridge, England, by the name, of John Stott.

And I wondered, do I just blow by this? Do people, really need to, all of a sudden, go out of church, wondering, whoa, did he ascend, 40 days after, or the day, of the resurrection?

And then, I noticed, that John Stott, who I admire, stood in his pulpit, and gave some, considerable time, to trying to work, through the puzzle. Well, because it's, this is the kind of thing, preachers shouldn't just ignore.

Go to churches, where preachers, ignore difficult questions, well, that's not really a church, I want to be a part of. Certainly, not one I, plan to lead. In recent years, there was an article, written by a scholar, Hank DeYoung, who makes a, well-reasoned effort, that the two accounts, are not in conflict, with one another.

Although, he would argue, that our reading of Acts, might be inaccurate. In a nutshell, he would have us, reconsider the reading of Acts, verses 3 through 9.

[21 : 48] Consider, he would say, that even in the telling, of the ascension, and the appearances, verses 1 and 2 and 3, it's the ascension, that Luke records first, and it's followed, sequentially, by the 40 days, of appearances.

Sequentially, the ascension happens, and the, ministry of 40 days, follows. Secondly, notice this, interesting word, in verse 3, 4, and while staying, says my, my reading, which is obviously, glossed with an, interpretive lens, literally, it's in a sense, while eating with them, which actually, concurs with what happened, in Luke 24, on the evening, of the resurrection, he was eating with them, if the logic holds, and I'm sure people, are going to wrestle, with this for, some time to come, then the appearances, of Jesus, to the disciples, over the period, of 40 days, may have actually, been subsequent, to the ascension, not prior, prayer, and if that's correct, then the text, we're considering today, think of it, it actually, may have occurred, on the day, of resurrection, while eating, and he speaks to them, about their witness, and he tells them, to return to Jerusalem, and then he's ascended, and then verse 12, next week, they return to Jerusalem, and enter into their, days of, prayer, that's a fascinating, thing to consider, the question, that we have, of Luke, and his chronology, but let me put it, aside for a moment, there's a more, important question,

I think, for what our, congregation, needs today, and that's, Theophilus's question, of legitimacy, did it really happen, did Jesus really, rise bodily, from the earth, and ascend, to the right hand, of the father, was there really, a man, who died, and rose again, and stands, in the presence of God, representatively, for all humanity, that's what was reported, and here, in verses 9 to 11, Luke's help, to Theophilus, is unequivocal, look at it, the ascension, of Jesus, according to Luke, is a matter, of history, not mythology, not a misguided, or outdated, first century, cosmology, Luke, wants Theophilus, to know, yes, what you heard about it, actually happened, how do I know that, well look

at the way, he writes, verse 9, look at how much, he's appealing, to the nature, of eyewitness, verse 9, as they were looking on, and again, the language, he's received, out of their sight, or verse 10, while they were gazing, or verse 11, why do you stand looking, he will return, as you saw him, five times, in the shortest span, of sentence structure,

Luke is saying, these guys, really, saw it, seeing, is believing, I've done the research, I've talked to those, who were there, they saw this, it wasn't an illusion, it wasn't a metaphor, it wasn't something, misguided, he ascended on high, to the right hand, of God the Father, and from there, he, rules, the implication, the legitimacy, of the event, and their having seen it, actually authenticates, their witness, these followers, who were present, at that event, are the genuine, guardian, for all of us, in regard to, truth, what happened, you'll accept, their testimony, or reject it, but that, is their, testimony, take a look over, Acts chapter five, fascinating,

Acts chapter five, when, the apostles, are arrested, and you're trying, to get hold, of the kind of gospel, they preached, preached, take a look down, at, oh, don't tell me, I didn't write this, down correctly, here it is, verse 29, but Peter, and the apostles, answered, we must obey God, rather than men, the God of our fathers, raised Jesus, that's resurrection, whom you killed, by hanging him, on a tree, that's death, God exalted him, at his right hand, that's ascension, as leader, and savior, to give repentance, to Israel, and the forgiveness, of sins, and we are witnesses, to these things, death, resurrection, ascension, and they actually, interpret ascension, ascension, then means, not historically, but theologically, it means this, we have a savior, and a king, there is a real man, who was able, of his own accord, to get from this earth, back to the presence of God, because he was absolutely blameless, and therefore, he rules, and saves all, who look to him, that's the implication, of the resurrection, that's the witness, of the apostolic gospel, what it means then, is that Jesus, was a righteous man, unlike any other, that Jesus, was God's promised ruler, go back and read,

[27 : 43] Psalm 2, go back and read, Psalm 10, they predicted, one who would actually, accomplish this, and rise into the presence, of God, ascension means, that Jesus eternal reign, has already begun, go back and read, Daniel 7, when the seat of judgment, is laid, and the son of man, goes into the presence, of God, and receives the kingdom, it means that he, has now, all rule, all authority, over all people, for all time, that's the ascension, that's the significance, of it, much more important, than it had come, 40 days earlier, 40 days later, this I know, he rules, he reigns, and he forgives, all who come, to the father, through him, one more thing, then I find my seat, the two men in white, we had a question, of chronology, Theophilus, had a question, of legitimacy, and the two men in white, who close out this text, are questioning, the disciples, on what they're going, to do, in light of its veracity, you can see it, right there, one of my favorite moments, in the text, 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, and, if our questions, of the text, are trying to get hold, of the chronological, sequence of things, if Theophilus's questions, of Luke, were needing to get hold, of the legitimacy, of things, then the text closes, by presenting two men, who appear to the disciples, that are clearly bent, on helping them, with the implication, of the things, what are you doing here, he's going to come, get on with, what he told you to do, which was to return, to Jerusalem, and wait for that power, that your proclamation, might alter the course, of the world, in effect then, the doctrine of the ascension, could be likened, to the words,

Winston Churchill used, to celebrate, an early victory, over the German forces, in the middle of 1942, of that moment, when the tide changed, Churchill said, these words, it is not the end, it is not even, the beginning, of the end, but it is perhaps, the end, of the beginning, that's the ascension, the beginning, of my blessed, Savior's reign, the beginning, of forgiveness, offered in his name, the beginning, of access, for any, who want relationship, with God, the beginning, of a temporal scope, that will run thousands, of years, that more and more, might know him, the very beginning, the very beginning, is not Jesus, in a cradle, the very beginning, is right here, his rule commences, and believe me, the world, is about, to change, well how do I, close this out, theophilus, had his questions, on the origins, of the Christian faith, he was in pursuit, of real knowledge, because only real knowledge, will inform life, in a transformative way, don't buy the lie, don't buy the lie, out there, that merely says, your role is to ask, questions of life, and that becomes, your purpose in life, and you ought to remain, non-committal on, ever retaining, something of real knowledge, that's not the way, the classical education, system works, the classical system, works this way, you ask real

questions, thoughtful questions, provocative questions, in order to, secure something real, that can be trusted, and in securing, something real, you have hopes, of a purpose, fulfilled life, too many people today, running around going, okay I get it, so since, a purposeful life, revolves around, the asking of questions, then I must remain, ever non-committal, on things like, the Christian faith, that's ridiculous, don't be among the ranks, of the endlessly, uncommitted, don't find yourself, among those, who are never a believer, never a follower, and yet also, never completely committed, to not being a believer, believer, or a not follower, always the questioner, you want to be, ever the asker, you will be, but never able, to commit to an answer, or arrive, or not arrive, at a knowledge, of the truth, what brings me, and you this year, great benefit, in giving ourselves, to the book of Acts, is this, an ever increasing, number of men, and women, thoughtfully, who give their lives, to Christ, and say, well, now what, to which you'll have to come back, next week, let me pray, our heavenly father, we give ourselves, to these wonderful texts, this year, in hopes that we, would meet, Jesus, in whose name we pray, amen.