

Jesus is alive, His Mission Continues

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[0 : 00] One of the great advantages of living in the world's most livable city is that all the nations come to us. Maybe you came to Melbourne from overseas or interstate, and maybe you're here for work or to raise your family.

Maybe you're here because of peace and prosperity and freedom in Australia. Whatever the reason, here's the question. What are you doing here? What are you doing here? If you're like me, you were born in Melbourne.

You've always been here, and so now you're just living your life. And if that's the case, then here's the question. What are you organising that life around? Today we're starting a new series in the book of Acts, and week after week this book will ask us those big questions.

What are you doing here? And what are you organising your life around? And that's because Acts is the story of what God is doing here, and what God is organising his activity around.

Acts is the story of Jesus' mission to the world. And so we're at point one, and please keep your Bibles open. One of my favourite things to do is watch movies.

[1 : 08] And my favourite movie is the original Star Wars saga. A saga is an epic story of heroic achievement. I had to look that up. But anyway, that's what the Star Wars saga is.

Well, Luke is our author in Acts, and he too has written a saga. Part one is Luke's Gospel, which in verse one he calls his former book.

Verse one, he says, In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach. Today we're starting the sequel.

Acts is part two of the Jesus saga. We're going to see him continue what he first began from the Gospels. But by verse nine, things have taken a very sour turn.

Verse nine, after Jesus said this, he was taken up before their eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. It's not going to be much of a sequel if Jesus is not in Jesus too.

[2 : 09] And so the apostles, they say in verse six, they show what they were expecting. Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? And that's a perfectly reasonable question.

Because in verse three, Jesus has convincingly come back to life. He spoke about the kingdom of heaven. In verse four, he says, Don't leave Jerusalem, but wait for the Holy Spirit.

You see, in kingdom terms, Jerusalem is ground zero for God's plans in the world. The Old Testament reading, which Allison gave us, it showed that the Holy Spirit was the sign of the full restoration of God's kingdom.

And so the apostles put pieces together and they say, verse six, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Is now the time, Lord? And the answer is yes and no.

So verse seven, no, it's not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. Not yet time. But also yes, because some serious kingdom activity is about to begin.

[3 : 16] Verse eight. You see, verse eight is the plot for part two of the Jesus story.

In fact, Luke has structured the whole book around verse eight. So Ryan, can I have the slide on the screen? This is the structure of Acts according to verse eight. So chapters one to seven, the witness about Jesus will reach all of Jerusalem.

By eight to twelve, the witness will reach Judea and Samaria. And chapter 13 ripples onwards until we get to chapter 28, where the gospel is established in Rome, the center of the empire.

You see, the apostles thought the saga about Jesus was a two parter. But in movie terms, it was a trilogy, a three parter. So between Jesus' first appearance and his final return is verse eight, part two, part two of the Jesus saga.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.

Thanks, Ryan. And I put that sort of part one, part two, part three on your handout.

[4 : 30] We are in part two in the book of Acts. A lot of people's jobs here are split up into territories. So my wife, Rachel, when she worked for a bank in London, her territory was Europe, Middle East and Asia.

Yeah, which is basically half the world. Well done, darling. But part two of the Jesus saga begins with 11 ordinary apostles whose responsibility is not just Jerusalem or Judea and Samaria, but to the very ends of the earth.

These 11 apostles, they're like a cricket team, a cricket 11. And they're not a good team like Australia or someone else, like England, maybe.

I don't know. But they're a hopeless cricket team, like Surrey Hills Juniors when I used to play for them. Hopeless is how you might describe the apostles from part one of the Jesus story from Luke's gospel.

They're all pretty hopeless. Not to mention there's no email. There's no postal service. How are they going to get this message out? Aeroplanes won't be invented for 2,000 years.

[5 : 39] How will they reach the ends of the earth? Already, part two is in trouble. How is it going to happen? And the answer is our second point. What I'm going to do is read verse 8 again.

And as I read it, I want you to ask yourselves, what is Jesus telling them to do? Okay? So I'm going to read it. What is Jesus telling them to do? 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. What is he telling them to do? The answer is nothing. This is not, please will you go and be my witnesses.

It is a promise about what Jesus will do in them. You will receive power via the Holy Spirit. You will be my witnesses. It's a promise and not a command.

Now, we tend to be skeptical when people make promises. We live in a culture where leaders over-promise and under-deliver. But when God promises something, you can take it to the bank, as they say.

[6 : 43] Remember the Jacob series we had? God made huge promises to him. I will bless you. I will be with you wherever you go. I will watch over you. I will not leave you.

And week after week in Genesis, we kept ticking off God's graciousness as he did exactly what he said he was going to do. And Acts is similar because, again, God is going to do something dramatic in our world.

You will be baptized by the Holy Spirit, verse 5. You will receive power, verse 8. You will be my witnesses even to the ends of the earth.

When God makes promises, we can take it to the bank, as they say. And actually, we can see this even more in our passage. We can see that all of God is involved.

So have a look at verse 5 and 7. It's the Father promising and authorizing. In verse 5 and 8, it's the Holy Spirit baptizing and empowering.

[7 : 45] And in verse 8, it's the Son promising that his witness will continue. All of God, Father, Son, and Spirit, will be following or directing their power wherever these 11 hopeless apostles share the testimony about Jesus.

In fact, we can even cheat and go to the end of the book if we want. Do you ever do that, go to the end of the book? I do that all the time. So, Ryan, the next slide, please. This is the very end of the book of Acts. It says this.

For two whole years, Paul stayed in Rome in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. And here it is, with all boldness and without hindrance.

We can see that by the end of the book, the gospel will reach Rome. It will be established there. Back then, all roads led to Rome. To reach the center of the empire was to reach the ends of the earth.

You see, just like Melbourne today, lots of people back then went to Rome for different experiences. They went for work and a better life, to experience the melting pot of cultures in Rome, for more safety and peace in the capital.

[9 : 01] But while they were there, lots of them ran into the apostles and heard about the message of Jesus. History shows that they took this good news about Jesus back with them to Africa and to Asia and to Mauritania and Espania and Britannia.

Everything has gone according to the plot of verse 8, just as Jesus promised. I wonder if you've ever heard of Richard Johnson.

He doesn't live around here. He lived 200 years ago. So he's not a local of Doncaster. But anyway, Richard Johnson lived 200 years ago in England. And he used to minister to prisoners.

And at about that time, the very famous John Newton and William Wilberforce, they realized that England was sending a first fleet to Australia. And so they said to Richard Johnson, you need to go down there and witness in the Antipodes.

And so they encouraged Richard Johnson to go. And he took his brand new wife and they set sail to the very ends of the earth. And on the 3rd of February, 1788, Johnson conducted the first church service in Sydney.

[10:15] You see, from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, to Rome, to Britannia, to Australia, the very ends of the earth. I want to try a little experiment with you now, just to keep proving this idea that God is in control.

So, can you raise your hands if you first heard about Jesus in Jerusalem? Good. That works. What about Judea or Samaria?

Great. That proves... This is good. This is going to work now. That means the rest of us all heard about Jesus somewhere at the ends of the earth. And so, can you forget the fact that you're grown-ups and just shout out where you first heard about Jesus.

Shout it out. Okay. That was too much. So, Doug, South Africa. Can we do more exotic than South Africa? Canada.

Canada. Ireland. Ireland. Thank you. Sierra Leone. Wow. Canberra. Brilliant.

[11:20] Brilliant. I first heard about Jesus in Deep Dean in Baldwin. Not that good. It certainly doesn't compare to Sierra Leone from Gus. So, thank you.

And I wonder, do you know who first told you about Jesus? And do you know who told them about Jesus? I was first told about Jesus in Deep Dean by a lady called Alison Prescott.

Who used to run a kids club in Deep Dean Gospel Chapel. And I just got in contact with Alison this week for the first time in over 20 years. And she sent me a message that she first heard about Jesus from her parents in a church in Camberwell.

And they heard about Jesus from their parents and so on and so forth. There's a lady called Olive Wilkinson. I don't know if lots of you know her. Olive comes to the nine o'clock service.

Olive told me this week that she first heard about Jesus, wait for it, from her dad in 1927. Which is pretty fantastic. And he heard about Jesus from his dad in 1890.

[12:25] And what that means is you only need about 30 chains like that to go from Olive Wilkinson, who sits in our church this morning, through to Acts 1 verse 8, the very mouth of Jesus.

You will be my witnesses even to the ends of the earth. See, down through the centuries, around the world, the Jesus story has survived the most wicked persecutions, natural disasters.

It's crossed the most unlikely boundaries. Empires have come and gone. Ideologies have come and gone. But the witness of 11 ordinary apostles continues to spread even to the ends of the earth.

It's a miracle, we might say. Or actually, it might have been a dead certainty from the start. And this is our third point.

In my family, there are a few pregnancies at the moment. So my sister-in-law, Alice, over there. Put your hand up, Alice. Alice, she can't hide her pregnancy anymore because she's a skinny thing.

[13:34] But Alice is my sister-in-law over there. My other sister and her husband there are having their first baby in a couple of weeks. And Rachel and I went to see them. And when you go to their house, even before the baby's here, the whole sort of place is totally organised.

So they've got the nursery set up. They baby-proof the cupboards, which means I couldn't even get a fork out. And they've got the little gates that cover the stairs. They've got all that set up. And you see, that's the thing with pregnancies, isn't it?

You don't want to start reorganising the house or choosing the names too early. Certainty is key. And certainty is the key in Acts as well.

You see, just as Luke wanted Theophilus to be certain about what Jesus began to do in part one, so he wants his reader to be certain about Jesus' mission here in part two.

The story in the passage here, the event is about Jesus' ascension. And it's a very hard event to prove. It's certainly much harder to prove than the resurrection of Jesus.

[14 : 34] But Luke is very good at dealing with doubts. And so we need to be certain about Jesus' resurrection, because that means Jesus is alive and ruling in heaven.

So we need to be certain that it really happened. And so Luke, in his passage, in verse 3, he includes many convincing proofs that Jesus was still alive. In verse 9 and 10, there's a repeated emphasis on what the apostles saw.

He says, Jesus was taken up before their very eyes. A cloud hid him from their sight. Verse 10, They were looking intently. He'll return just as you have seen him.

It is eyewitness testimony that we are dealing with. Luke includes language about clouds and men dressed in white, about going up into the very heart of heaven.

And all this language ticks the Bible's boxes for the one who sits in the oval office of heaven, the president of the universe, if you like.

[15 : 35] And verse 8 is the president's first executive order. You will be my witnesses, even to the ends of the earth. We can be certain it's going to happen, because we're all a product of it here in this room.

Now, of course, the kingdom is not fully physically restored, as the apostles wanted just yet. But in part 2, we're going to see that the kingdom is well and truly underway.

We're going to see that there are spirit-empowered apostles. We're going to see cities and religions and lives turned upside down. We're going to see a new community of love, where no one is in need.

You see, against all the odds, the Christian church is the greatest social movement the world has ever seen. Jesus' mission continues, point 1.

God is in control. That means we can be certain it will happen. And so point 4, here's the question. What are you doing here? What are you doing here?

[16 : 42] It does seem strange, doesn't it, that these huge epic things we're talking about, none of them will be mentioned tomorrow in Parliament. None of them will appear on the news tomorrow. In your workplace tomorrow, the conversation will be about Father's Day and not Jesus' mission.

But please understand that verse 8 is the big thing that God is doing in Melbourne in 2019. Lots of us are worried that the church might be one day outlawed by the government.

And maybe it will be. But Christianity actually grows where there is opposition, sometimes even because of it. We saw that in the 20th century under communist regimes.

We see that today in China. And we will see it every single week in the book of Acts. Because Luke wants to say very clearly that this community who gathered around the apostles' testimony is God's hope for the world.

He wants to invite us into the drama as well. And so the question is, what are you doing here? What are you organising your life around? Did you know that the gospel has spread so far to the ends of the earth that the third world is now sending missionaries back to the first world from where they came from?

[18 : 01] It's called reverse missionaries. Isn't that amazing? Do you know that Brazil sends missionaries to Asia? Do you know that Africa sends missionaries to the north of England? Did you know that China is sending missionaries to the Middle East, to the Muslim world?

What are you doing here? What are you organising your life around? You see, in a city like this, there is so much you can give your life to. Don't aim too low.

Don't aim too low. Why not get involved with the business of changing the world? Let's not be too narrow. Let's not just look after our lives and our families.

God kindly invites us to be actors in the Jesus saga. A great advantage of Melbourne is you don't have to buy a plane ticket to go to the ends of the earth.

They're already here. They're in our church. They're in our workplaces. They're in our neighbourhoods, our universities. They're in our kids' schools. Imagine if the people you ran into contact with, imagine if the people you met went back to their homes or even their countries if they're from overseas.

[19 : 12] Imagine if they went back with the message of Jesus which you gave to them. Why not build up relationships now with that goal in mind? Why not invite them to church each week?

Every week is a safe event to invite them to here at our church. They will be safe here. Why not invite them to that Maroondah Singers event that we heard about?

Why not start thinking about Christmas? It'll be here before you know it. It's never too early to plan for Christmas. The carols event will be coming up soon. Why not start a relationship so you can invite them to that where you know they will hear the gospel for sure.

What are you doing here? Maybe you've tried to share your faith with others without much success. Maybe you're wondering if all this is worth it. Maybe you're nervous about the state of religious freedom in this city.

Well, verse 8 is a steadying verse. Remember, it's a promise from God. And when he decides to make himself known you can be certain that it will happen.

[20 : 20] Lots of you might not be able to get out and about and share your faith with others. Maybe you work from home or maybe you can't really get out and about. Luke gives you another way to take your part in the drama.

And it's verse 14. It says, They all join together constantly in prayer along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and with his brothers. Men and women join together constantly in prayer for Jesus' mission.

This Wednesday is our Kingdom Growth Night which is probably the most perfectly titled night in light of this passage. And men and women will join together in this room at 7.30 on Wednesday to pray.

We pray for Christian missionaries on university campuses. We pray for the Reeds in Singapore, the Knights in Port Headlands, the Davies in Sri Lanka just to name a few.

If you're able please join with other men and women who join together to pray constantly. If not, please pray that Jesus' kingdom would continue at home.

[21 : 28] Remember Richard Johnson, that missionary I spoke about from the First Fleet? As he set sail to Australia, John Newton gave him this poem. It says, Many in quest of gold or empty fame would compass earth or venture near the poles.

But how much nobler thy reward and aim to spread his praise and win immortal souls. It's great to be a Christian, isn't it? A great to be able to have the news that can restore our family and friends, restore our colleagues that can win immortal souls.

Lots of them, their lives are focused around the gold and that empty fame and other things. We get to be part of a mission that can bring them to full and final restoration before the Lord.

And so tomorrow as you start your day, please, as you say your prayers in the morning, please pray that you would remember that verse 8 is the big thing that God is doing in Melbourne in 2019 and ask yourself, what am I doing here?

Shall we pray that we would do that? Let's pray. Father God, thank you that you included us into your family. We thank you for the people who told us the gospel about Jesus.

[22 : 54] We thank you for the people who told them. We thank you, Father, for your promise that Jesus' witness will go to the ends of the earth, even to our workplaces and homes and amongst our families and our neighbourhoods.

please, would we not be distracted by gold and fame and silly things? Would we not be tunneled into only looking after our lives? Please, would we be on board with your mission to spread the good news of Jesus even to the ends of the earth?

We thank you that this will happen. Help us to get on board. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.