

Promise and Mission

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you take your Bibles out please and open to the Acts of the Apostles on page 112. I think Neil has a great idea when he was talking to the kids.

I knew there was something missing in our services. It is craft. There's a chocolate biscuit for someone who can think of the craft we ought to do when we come to Pentecost.

So start thinking. I have wanted for a long time to preach in the book of Acts. Never preached from this book and I do so because it's far more than the story of the birth of the church and the spread of Christianity across the Roman Empire.

It reveals God's purpose for his world and specifically the place of the church in the purposes of God. And the book is tailor-made for a church which is half asleep and that finds serving Christ a great inconvenience, has no heart for mission and is in danger of forgetting who she is.

The book of the Acts is written for a church which is turned inward on itself, where the worship is predictable and routine, where ministry is relegated to paid professionals, where compassion is sometimes fit in around my day planner.

[1 : 29] It's for a church that is under risk and in uncharted waters, none of which of course is relevant for us today. That was a joke.

It's a terrible thing when you have to say that. When I go back to Australia now I have to say it. I thought it was because I was Australian, but it has to do with me, doesn't it?

That was a joke. Let's get back to the Bible. Where were we? There is of course no other book in all of Scripture like the book of Acts.

It functions as a bridge. It forms a bridge between the first half of the New Testament, the Gospels, and the second half, the letters.

It forms a bridge between the Jesus Christ in the New Testament and the church of today. And it forms a bridge between Jew and Gentile as the Gospel goes from Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism, to Rome, the heart of the Gentile world.

[2 : 35] And in the first two verses, the writer who is Luke reminds us of this bridging purpose and introduces the book to us. He says, 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 commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

The first book, of course, is the Gospel which Luke wrote. Luke, an educated man, a physician, some of the finest Greek in the New Testament comes from him, widely travelled.

We discover in some later chapters that he travels with the Apostle Paul and he goes back into Palestine, into Israel. He interviews the eyewitnesses to write the Gospel.

And I think, my theory is, he spent quite a lot of time with Mary, Jesus' mother. Because at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we have the tenderest details of the annunciation of the coming of the birth of Jesus Christ.

But the point is more important, that Luke, in verse 1, wants us to know that the subject of volume 1 was Jesus and the subject of volume 2 is also Jesus.

[3 : 55] The key to this is, he says, I dealt in my first volume with what Jesus began to do and teach. In other words, this book of Acts is about what Jesus continues to do and teach.

Some people think that the Gospel is about Jesus and the book of the Acts is about the Church. But the contrast is not between Jesus and his Church. The contrast is between two different phases of Jesus' ministry.

The first phase, which is in the Gospel, is the earthly ministry of Jesus until the day when he was taken up. And Luke has talked about all the things that Jesus did and taught. And now there is a second phase of Jesus' ministry where he still teaches and he still works from heaven through his

Spirit and the apostles as he bears testimony to the words written in Scripture.

It's important for us, isn't it? Jesus didn't just go back up to heaven and forget about it. He spent three years creating the Church and now he's about to send his Holy Spirit on the Church and he continues his work through his Spirit now.

And the whole of this passage, the first eight verses that we're going to look at today, tell us of the incredible importance of the Christian Church in the plans of God for his world.

[5 : 23] You see, in every other religion, when the founder dies, the followers do their best to practice that religion because the founder is now absent, the opposite of the Christian Church.

We are not trying to do our best because Jesus is gone. We are a Christian Church precisely because Jesus is here. And it's very important for us who call ourselves evangelicals, particularly, I think, Anglican evangelicals.

You know, we're rightly disdainful of deism, the philosophy that says that God is an absent creator, that he wound the creation up like a clock and set it going, but he doesn't have any direct and personal involvement with it now.

Everything just continues according to immutable laws. Well, that's clearly unbiblical, and we are right to dismiss it when it comes to our Christian lives.

And when it comes to the life of our Church, I fear we are closet deists, very uncomfortable with God, interfering in our lives now, except in the case of emergency, and even then under specific terms set by me.

[6 : 47] Our prayers are feeble. And even when we pray, we pray without really expecting that God is going to act. We plan and strategise as though Jesus finished acting 2,000 years ago.

In our own lives, we hoard possessions as though this life is all that there is, and there isn't really a life to come. And we invest our time in ourselves to alleviate our fears and our anxieties.

We act as though Jesus wound the Church up 2,000 years ago, but he's not really directly and personally involved with us now. And here, right at the start of this book of Acts, the first thing that we have to be clear about with the Church is that Jesus Christ remains Lord of the Church and that he is here with us now, active now.

He continues to work by his Holy Spirit. He's very much engaged with us. And I wonder what St. John's would look like if we began to believe that. Well, this is what this book is about.

It's going to show us what it looks like to believe it. And in the second verse, we are told that the Church, one of the things it looks like is it's a group of people trying to live under the command of Jesus, dependent on his Holy Spirit.

[8 : 16] In verse 2, it's the first of 60 references to the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. So right from the outset, we are being prepared for the fact that this organism, the Church, is unlike anything the world has ever seen before.

It's a place, yes, where Jesus is present and active, but it's also a place where the power of the Holy Spirit exists, where people are indwelt by God by his Spirit, enabling us to love him and to serve him and to proclaim him to the ends of the earth.

And I hope you listened as we went through these words, verses 1 to 8, and you heard this new thing that is about to happen. It is, we're on the precipice of a new age in these words.

And every word trembles with this anticipation and expectation as Jesus prepares the world and prepares his disciples for this new thing before he is taken back to heaven.

And there are two sections in verse 3 to 8, and I want to look at them in reverse because I want to. So let's look at the second half and I've called verses 6 to 8 the turning point for God's world.

[9 : 39] When they had come together they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? And he said to them, it's not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus has been raised from the dead. He has just spoken to them about the Holy Spirit. And this question from the disciples wonderfully shows that they don't understand it really yet.

They are looking for a restored kingdom of Israel. Jesus' answer to them is stunning. He doesn't castigate them for their narrow political ambitions.

Instead, he lifts their vision and their desires to the worldwide purposes of God and to their place in those purposes. He says, yes, the Spirit is coming but he is not coming to make you powerful or to

make one nation powerful but to take my purposes to the ends of the earth.

[10:52] When the Holy Spirit comes upon you he says, you shall be my witnesses. Jerusalem, Judea, to the ends of the earth. And if you've read the book of Acts you know that that verse, Acts, is a kind of a table of contents.

So chapters 1 to 7 we find out ministry in Jerusalem, 8 to 12, Judea and Samaria and 13 to the end of the book of Acts to the ends of the earth.

And I cannot tell you how many sermons and talks I have heard on Acts chapter 1 verse 8 in treating and commanding and demanding that we become witnesses and we get out and do evangelism.

One of the books I read this week had no fewer than six sermons on this verse telling us how to be really great witnesses for Jesus. but I want to tell you this is not a desperate plea from Jesus so that he won't be forgotten.

It's not some sort of hurried strategy for Jesus that he hopes is going to work in the world. The scene in verse 8 is not a motivational rally it is a law court it's a cosmic law court and each of the three pivotal phrases that come from verse 8 are all taken from the prophet Isaiah when God the Lord of heaven and earth announces a lawsuit against all the idols and all the false religions in the world because he says you are guilty of false advertising you promise salvation and you promise life and I want to have a lawsuit to see who in fact is the true God and both sides call witnesses to be presented but there is a problem God's witnesses are blind they've seen the mighty acts of God but they have closed their eyes and they have shut their ears and therefore they are blind witnesses [13:00] I want to show you this if you keep your finger in Acts chapter 1 and turn left to Isaiah 43 verse 8 on page 638 Isaiah 43 beginning at verse 8 bring forth the people who are blind says God yet have ears who are deaf sorry have eyes who are deaf yet have ears let all the nations gather together and let the peoples assemble who among them can declare this and show us the former things let them bring their witnesses to justify them let them hear and say it is true you are my witnesses says the Lord and my servant whom I have chosen that you may know and believe me and understand I am he before me no God was formed nor shall there be any after me

I he says I am the Lord and besides me there is no saviour I declared and saved and proclaimed when there was no strange God among you and you are my witnesses says the Lord but the problem is that they are blind and how is God going to heal the blindness of his witnesses Isaiah says two things the first is he's going to send a special person a servant his ministry it will be to bring light to the Gentiles to open the eyes of the blind chapter 42 but the second thing that he does is he promises to pour out his Holy Spirit and when the Spirit comes he will open eyes and open mouths look over to chapter 44 for just a moment and we read from verse 3 I will pour water on the thirsty land the streams on the dry ground

I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants my blessing on your offspring they shall spring up like grass amid waters like willows by flowing streams then what will be the result this one will say I am the Lord another will call himself by the name of Jacob another will write on his hand the Lord and surname himself by the name of Israel thus says the Lord the King of Israel and his Redeemer the Lord of hosts I am the first and I am the last besides me there is no God who is like me let him proclaim it let him declare it and set it forth before me who has announced from of old the things to come let them tell us what is yet to be fear not or be afraid have I not told you from of old and declared it are you not my witnesses let's go back to Acts chapter 1 here is the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ and what is he doing he is taking on his lips the words of God the Lord of Israel the words that God said 700 years before in Isaiah you shall be my witnesses Jesus Christ now announces to his people you shall be my witnesses and it is a challenge to the world the point is not that Jesus is devising a strategy for growth the point is Jesus he is God and Lord of Israel it is Jesus now who is the first and the last besides him there is no God I want you to see this you see when your eyes are open you are a witness it doesn't matter whether you want to be or not a number of years ago there was a film by starred Harrison Ford called Witness

I think and it's a story of a young boy who witnessed a murder accidentally and the baddies became aware that the boy had seen what they had done and so they sought to kill the boy enter Harrison Ford hero policeman his job was to protect the boy so he took him to Amish country where he nearly fell in love with a young Amish woman and finally the real baddies are crushed in a grain silo with a whole bunch of Amish grain and the boy is safe and they all lived happily ever after and I've often wondered whether there's a symbolism in the baddies being crushed by the Amish grain but

I'm not sure Harrison Ford would be in a film that was that deep although of course it was made by an Australian director what am I talking about the point is this that what the boy saw made him a witness he had no choice about that and when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see in Jesus Christ the glory of God and the wonder of our salvation we are witnesses

[18 : 33] Jesus doesn't say in Acts 1.8 you must be my witnesses you've got to try hard to be my witnesses he says you are you shall be my witnesses the real problem of course is hostile Christians I mean in the Air India case there are eyewitnesses who will not testify and they are hostile witnesses and you can understand it perhaps in that situation but why be a hostile Christian when what we are witnessing to is the glory of Jesus Christ again the issue here it's not our witnessing techniques or our evangelistic programs the issue is just simply whether our eyes are open to the person of Jesus Christ and part of the essence of seeing him and worshipping him is bearing witness to him and saying I am Jesus person I belong to him I have a friend who for the first years after he became a Christian used to every day write on the back of his hand three letters

H-I-S to remind himself during the day of who he belonged to see the great issue in this world is not the issues that come up in our headlines as important as they are the issue is whether every man and every woman and every boy and every girl comes to see the majesty and the love and the grace and the mercy of God in the face of Jesus Christ and bow to him and call him saviour so Acts 1-8 is not a polite invitation for us to share our faith if we're feeling gregarious it's a summons from the Lord of all the earth for the world to bow and a promise that he is going to give his spirit to open our eyes and when our eyes are open whether we like it or not we are his witnesses that is why it's a turning point for the world the great contest the great prosecution the great issue in our world is Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit is here in this church and here in every

Christian church for the opening of our eyes and the paying of testimony to him so briefly let me turn to the first part of the passage if that's the turning point for the world in verses 3-5 we hear about the turning point for the church and the question we ask as we come to these verses is of course how on earth do you prepare disciples for this ministry verses 3-5 to them Jesus presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs appearing to them during 40 days and speaking of the kingdom of God and while staying with them he charged 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 before many days you shall be drenched baptized with the Holy Spirit now a great deal can happen in 40 days and here are 40 of the most important days in history

Jesus has risen from the dead he is in a few days going to go back to heaven and then pour out his spirit what does he do how does he equip his church for this new ministry simply he does three things the first is this he establishes the reality of his resurrection it's very important to Jesus that his followers are fully convinced and fully persuaded that he has bodily risen from the dead he presents himself to them by many proofs many convincing proofs because you see we are not witnesses to a teaching or a teacher who died years ago we are witnesses to the living and risen Christ that's the first thing he does the second thing he does is that he clarifies the gospel he speaks to them of the kingdom of God now if you keep your finger in chapter 1 and turn to the last verse of the book of Acts

I want to show you that as Luke writes this book he begins and ends he brackets the books the book with a reference to the kingdom of God so in 28 chapter 28 verse 30 and 31 we read speaking of the apostle Paul he lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him now preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ what's the difference there is none preaching the kingdom is speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ have you ever noticed that throughout the gospels the idea of the kingdom of God is used frequently something like 90 times in the New Testament but after the death and resurrection of Jesus it's only used occasionally the reason is because during those 40 days what Jesus taught his disciples was how the big plan of God and the rule of God is fulfilled in him in his life death and resurrection one last cross reference let's turn back to Luke 24 for a moment turn just left a few pages

[24 : 17] Luke 24 on page 86 if you want to know some of the details of what happened during those 40 days please read Luke 24 in verse 27 speaking to some followers we read beginning with Moses and all the prophets Jesus interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself the plan of God down in verse 45 to the disciples he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all

nations beginning from Jerusalem and you are witnesses to these things when Christ first came into our world he brought the age to come into our old evil age the age of heaven the age of the spirit and when he comes again he will do away with this present evil age but you and I we live in an overlap of those two ages we participate in the age to come by the Holy Spirit and through Jesus Christ that is why everyone who knows

Jesus Christ as Lord knows that life is not about food and fashion and finance that life is about righteousness and peace and joy through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ begin to know that you are part of the kingdom of God when your affections for this world start to be transferred to God himself when you come to value strange things like repentance from sin and the glory of Christ and prayer and giving so here is what Jesus does to prepare us first he assures us of his resurrection second he clarifies the gospel and thirdly he charges them to wait for the Holy Spirit in verses 4 and 5 and I think it's the only time in all the New Testament where Jesus stops his followers from preaching would that he might do that some other times however he had taught them the gospel and they believed in his resurrection but they still lacked the one essential thing without which anything they do will be useless the baptism of the Holy Spirit we're going to look at this over the next few weeks the church of Jesus Christ is made up of people who are washed and drenched and submerged and flooded by the person of the Holy Spirit who have been born and new to God we know that we are completely dependent upon him individually and as a group of people in all things so here is the great turning point for the world and the turning point for the church and the Holy Spirit reminds us that this is not about our efforts and our endeavours and our cleverness but our witness in the world our membership in the kingdom the progress of the faith these are all spiritual ministries carried forward by the power of the Holy Spirit and there is yet one thing to take place before the Spirit is poured out and you'll have to come back next week to find out what it is let's pray

Father we bow before you and recognise you as the Lord and God of all the earth and we praise you for your Son our Lord Jesus Christ whom you raised from the dead who is now seated at your right hand we thank you for your Holy Spirit who's opened our eyes to him open our eyes further and open our mouths that we might be your witnesses so that we might know the power of your Spirit even for your glory we pray Amen Amen and past P and stand here because