

New Mission

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. It's great to be with you in person on this as we kick off our new series in the Book of Acts. And if you've never met me before, either in person or here on the screen, my name is Steve Jeffers.

I'm the senior pastor here at St. Paul's. And it's great to be regathering again for those who are able to do that. So if you've got, as Nick had indicated, if you've got a Bible in front of you, if you've got the St. Paul's app, that would be fantastic.

I've got an outline for today's talk there in front of you, and then you help you to follow along. So let me pray, and then we're going to launch straight into Acts chapter 1 and set the scene for us for this series.

Gracious God, we thank you for every life and for every life that is tuned in now to your word. We pray as we look at your word in front of us today, but also in the coming weeks, as we look at the Book of Acts, we ask that you would shape our lives.

Help us to get a big vision of what you are doing in your world. God, the work that you have been doing for centuries and are continuing to do now in all the confusion and the chaos of our world right now, that you are still working, transforming and changing lives.

[1 : 32] And we pray that you would change our lives. Align us as individuals, as a church, to your great storyline.

Amen. So, Lord, we pray that you would mercifully send your spirit and do your work through your word. Amen. Edward Lorenz was a physicist working in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1960s on the computer modelling of weather systems.

He devised a program which, once you typed in certain data, it could kind of predict what the weather pattern was going to be.

However, one day in his work, he typed in the wrong data. He made a mistake. It wasn't a big mistake. He meant to type in a six-digit number, 0.506127, but instead he only typed in a three-digit number, 0.506.

It's a very small error, really. I mean, you know, my calculations with the tape measure, I wouldn't even notice it. It's one in one thousandths of a difference, really. He didn't think it would make that much of a difference to the outcome, but he decided to test it anyway, what the difference would be.

[2 : 54] This is what he went on to describe. It's as if a tiny atmospheric disturbance in China, no greater than the beat of a butterfly's wing, a week or so later becoming a Force 12 hurricane in New York.

That's how big the difference was. And his discovery became known as the butterfly effect. When something very small, something very minute, minor, grows and grows and grows in its impact.

Now, what could be depressing for us is that on the most part for us as people, there's no butterfly effect in our lives magnifying the little contribution that we as individuals make to history.

Most of us have to face the fact that we will drop the little pebbles of our lives into the turbulent oceans of world events, and in no time at all, it will bear no trace of us ever existing.

It doesn't take long. It's kind of depressing, really. It's kind of depressing way to start a sermon. And it's depressing, particularly for two major areas in life or stages in life.

[4 : 30] When you are old and you see the end realized, the fact of it ends coming sooner rather than later, and you realize, well, will I be remembered? But also for a younger generation that have grown up and heard consistently the words said to them, you can make a difference.

You can change the world. You can be who you want to be and change the world. And there's a whole generation of young people growing up with the assumption that they are world changers until they leave university and sit at a desk and realize that it doesn't happen so fast as they would

imagine.

And so that's for most of us. There's not a butterfly effect amplifying the contribution that we make in history. But not so with Jesus Christ.

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village. He worked in a carpenter shop in obscurity until he was about 30 years of age. Then for three years, he was a traveling preacher. Never wrote a book. Never held an office.

[5 : 44] Never had a family. Never owned a house. He never went to university. Never traveled more than 300 kilometers from the place where he was born. He never did the things that we associate with greatness.

And he was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was handed over to his enemies. He was nailed to a cross, crucified, executed between two thieves because he was regarded as a criminal himself and he was laid in a borrowed grave.

Wasn't needing it for very long. 2,000 years later, right across the globe, penetrating all kinds of people, groups and cultures, this world is still enthralled by him.

All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that have ever reigned, put them all together and they're not even close to the impact on humanity as the one solitary life of Jesus Christ.

The ripples of the life, the death, the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus Christ of Nazareth have increased in amplitude and expanded in diameter right across the globe in every culture and people group and nation for centuries.

[7 : 20] That is what the book of Acts is about. It's where we see it starting to move on. And that is what makes Acts so relevant to us today.

The point here is that when you plug your one solitary obscure life into God's mission in Jesus Christ, you plug yourself into eternal life and hope and value and significance and joy, increasingly so forever.

That's the point. So to make that point, I've got four points. And if you've got your app in front of you, you can open it up and follow along with me.

Four points. God's mission, power for God's mission, weakness and the advance of God's mission and fourthly, living for God's mission. So first of all, God's mission.

And I'll spend more time on this one than on the others. What is God's mission? What is his storyline? What is his view, his worldview, if you like?

[8 : 34] And God's worldview, his storyline has four main chapters to it. First is creation. In Genesis 1, right at the beginning of the Bible, the God who stands outside of all of creation, who always existed, created all things by speaking them into existence, such is the power of his word.

He made the first people, Adam and Eve, in his image. And all people from Adam and Eve are bearers of the image of God, which gives us a special dignity.

The great American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, wrote that the only reason that God would have for creating us, humanity and all that exists, is not in order for this God, this creator, to get cosmic love and joy and relationship with his creation, but to impart it to his creation, that we might experience his cosmic love and joy.

And the storyline of the Bible contains the only storyline across every culture throughout all of humanity, the history of humanity, the only storyline, where the divine creator of all that exists creates in order to impart love and joy to his creation, not to extract it.

That's chapter one of God's storyline. Chapter two is the fall, Genesis three. The first people decide to reject God's love and rule and do things their way.

[10 : 17] And all people have followed suit in living life with no consideration with God whatsoever. And as a result, all relationships are cosmically fractured.

Our special dignity as image bearers of God means that God holds us rightly so, especially accountable for our rejection of him, all people.

And in his judgment in the early bits of the Bible in Genesis chapter 11, is to scatter people from his presence across the earth, confusing their languages and their cultures, so that we as humanity cannot work together in order to collectively oppose God.

That's chapter two. Chapter three is that God has got a plan to reverse all of that. God's plan of redemption begins with a promise to Abraham in the very next chapter in Genesis chapter 12.

And the promise is that all the peoples of the earth are going to be blessed through Abraham and through Abraham brought back to God in relationship with him.

[11 : 29] And it's a plan that he's worked out through history. So I'm fast forwarding a lot here. Still read the Old Testament, fast forwarding a whole lot here. This is how Galatians 3 in the New Testament puts it.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

Your trust in Jesus Christ means that you inherit all of Abraham's plans and purposes, or God's plans and purposes to bring everything blessing through Abraham.

Jesus is the one who takes the judgment of God for our sin, for rejecting God, the punishment that we deserve. He dies the death that we should have died, but he rose victorious over sin.

And everyone who puts their faith in the cosmic Lord Jesus is gathered back into relationship with God. And what Jesus does from that moment is he forms the new people of God, forms a new community, a new humanity that lives as it's meant to live under the rule of the cosmic Lord Jesus.

[13 : 07] It's called the church. The former dividing walls of hostility between people have been broken down. As a result of his work of reconciling people to God and to each other, Jesus calls his church to take this good news of reconciliation to the ends of the earth and to make disciples for the cosmic Lord Jesus from every people group and nationality and culture.

And this is what we're seeing the beginning of here in the book of Acts. We start to see that plan being unfolded in front of us. Chapter 4 of God's storyline is not the end of the story.

It's the beginning of a chapter that has no ending. It's a chapter where God reigns forever. There's no longer any carnage or evil and sin. Revelation chapter 5, we get a glimpse of how God brings history to its ultimate goal.

It was God's design in the death of Jesus Christ to ransom from every kind of race and language and people and nation to make a people for himself.

And these people would have one king. That is that they would live with Jesus as their supreme treasure and Lord. Jesus is the one who unites all people.

[14 : 43] God's big plan for all of time and eternity and space is for people to come under the authority of Jesus and turn to him in faith and repentance and enjoy his cosmic love.

Forever, increasingly so. And the book of Acts is saying, conform your life to that storyline.

Live for that storyline. Be involved in the work that God is doing in this world. The only work that will last forever.

So as we open up the beginning of Acts, we're in chapter 3 of God's storyline.

Chapter 4 is yet to come. We're still in chapter 3 ever since Jesus was here and until he comes back again. And did you notice there, as Nick read it out to us, in chapter 1, verse 1, it says, In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach.

[16 : 04] The word began there is the key word in understanding the relevance of this book for us right now, today. What Luke stresses here is that what Jesus did on earth 2,000 years ago was the beginning of his doing and his teaching.

And the clear implication is that now, now that Jesus has ascended, as we are told here in Acts 1, and sits at the right hand of the Father, ruling all that is, he's not done.

His work is not finished. He's not dead. He's not absent. He's alive in his presence. Jesus is continuing to build his church by drawing people into his cosmic love and joy as his family.

Wherever people come under the authority of his name and receive his forgiveness of sins, trust in his power, they get their obscure lives plugged into his eternal spirit.

He's not a story line. You see, the fact that Jesus is alive, the fact that he's ascended and he's seated and ruling all things, gives purpose to our solitary lives.

[17 : 35] He is the one changing the world one life at a time forever and he includes us in that.

He invites us to be part of it. So I think that Luke's desire here is for the unfolding message of Acts to have a transforming impact on our lives.

He wants us to be part of what God is doing in the universe now as what he's always been doing in the universe. You see, Acts is a two-part book, if you like.

It's part of a two-part book. It's a second part of a two-volume work. It's part of a two-part book, written by Luke, a first-century doctor. The Gospel of Luke and this book of Acts go together as one work, one piece of literature, and they are both addressed to a man named Theophilus.

Theophilus is most likely a Roman aristocrat because Luke addresses him as your excellency at the beginning of his gospel.

[18 : 58] And so Luke could well be writing both Luke and Acts to inform an educated Gentile of the extraordinary spread of the Christian faith across the Roman Empire and to convince this man of its extraordinary truth so that this man is drawn into it and despite his aristocracy and the important part he might play in the Roman Empire to show him there is something greater for his life to be included in, something much more significant for him to give himself to.

something much more important. See, Luke goes to enormous lengths in his gospel to show us that Jesus Christ rose from the dead in bodily form.

Not just an idea, not just a concept, but physically rose from the dead. It says in Acts 1 verse 3, after his suffering, that is his trial and his death, he showed himself to these men, his disciples, and gave many convincing proves, many convincing proves that he is alive.

He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God. You see, we are called here in the book of Acts to be witnesses to the gospel, the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and you cannot be an authentic instrument in the hands of the living and the reigning Jesus Christ if you don't think he's alive.

If you just think he's a great idea, you cannot be an effective witness. You must know that he is alive and he is reigning right now over everything, even the things we don't understand.

[21 : 11] Reigning as Lord of the universe of all time and space is in his hands. I mean, you need to be profoundly persuaded that Jesus has broken the power of death and that he is alive and alive with indestructible life.

He will never die again. He hasn't been resuscitated. He's been resurrected. Never to be defeated. And his kingdom is unstoppable.

His storyline will advance. You need to be profoundly, profoundly convicted of that. It's so important to constantly come back again and again and again to the death and resurrection of Jesus, to God's mission in this world so that our lives are constantly realigned with him and his work.

Because we get so easily distracted by our own storylines and our own missions and agendas. The disciples are no different. The apostles are confused.

Verse 6. Verse 6. Their vision is so small. Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

[22 : 31] Like, that's it. They're thinking of their homes and their villages and stuff. And Jesus' mission is global. You see, they, you know, don't entirely blame these guys, right?

I mean, they're as narrow-minded as we are. They knew that the Old Testament promise of the outpouring of God's spirit was a promise for the last days when God would establish his kingdom on earth and restore his people.

And so their question is, Jesus, is this it now? You know, is that time come? Will Jesus bring down the final curtain of history, beat up the Roman Empire, re-establish the kingdom as it used to be, take Israel to its glory days and reign over all creation with Israel at the top of the pile?

And Jesus corrects their thinking in verse 7 and then instructs them to basically, guys, lift your eyes. Lift your eyes to a much bigger storyline, a much bigger plan.

He's saying your primary concern is not the restoration of national Israel, but your primary concern is to receive the Holy Spirit, God dwelling in you, that you might fulfill the task that I have given you, my plan for all things.

[23 : 52] Have a look at verse 8. But you receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses. This is the reason why you get the Holy Spirit.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the earth. Isaiah 49 verse 6, God promised that salvation would be proclaimed to the ends of the earth and Jesus confirms that this promise here with these disciples.

That's the promise. Salvation must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth and these are his last words to his disciples. Jesus' last words to his disciples are to be their primary concern, their first concern.

There is more work to be done in God's mission before chapter 4 comes and chapter 4 has not arrived yet. That's what he's saying to his disciples.

First for the apostles, then for all who are called to faith in Jesus Christ through their witness are tasked with advancing God's mission to the ends of the earth as our primary first concern.

[25 : 19] It's a huge task. And the encouraging thing is what we see here from verse 8 is that we have power for God's mission to accomplish his task.

See, this is not merely human work. It is spirit-empowered witness. Jesus is calling them to a supernatural activity. They will no longer be mere advocates, not just mere advocates who can prove, like a good lawyer, argue really well that Jesus is risen from the dead.

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they will speak with an unwavering assurance of one who has tasted and knows in their heart the reality so immediately that all doubt about the resurrection of Jesus is gone.

Under the power of the Spirit of God, you move from being an advocate of Christianity to being a witness of the living Christ in your own life. You move from simply deducing Christian truths from valid premises to proclaiming them as boldly as someone who's experienced the realities in their own life.

This is the power and the witness that will take Christ to the ends of the earth. Not just mere facts, but facts, truths lived out and shaping our lives.

[26 : 49] And so the church is not merely a human institution. In all that the church does, it is to do it in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the promise here of the Spirit in verse 8 is valid until the Great Commission is complete and the witness of Christ is planted around the world.

In other words, it is a promise until chapter 4 comes. We are told in verse 9 that after Jesus said these things, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid them from their sight, hid him from their sight.

At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus is restored to his rightful place. And his rightful place is the seated ruler of all time and eternity.

The one who has the power of all things, control of all things in his hand. He now rules, occupying the highest place as Lord of all, and from there he exercises his universal reign that goes forever and ever and guarantees the success of his mission.

[28 : 09] It will not fail. His storyline cannot be altered. It will not fail. It's really important that we grapple with that because what you see in the rest of Acts from verse 10 onwards is weakness.

Weakness at the very beginning of God's mission. Having been commissioned to go to the ends of the earth, we see in verse 10 a rebuke.

Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? Like you bunch of stargazers, you've been given a mission and you stand, you've been told the Spirit will come, get on down to Jerusalem.

Why are you standing here? Get on with the mission. It seems like this is fundamentally inconsistent.

And so one has to ask, why does Luke include the second half of chapter 1 of Acts? You know, he's on this role of, you know, Jesus ascended on high, going to get the Holy Spirit, going to take this message to the end of the earth.

[29 : 37] I mean, it's like gusto, you know, like, whoa, we've got purpose in our lives. Why doesn't he just jump straight from there to Acts chapter 2 and the day of Pentecost and thousands of people coming to Christ?

You know, there's a logical connection between those two things. Instead, what we have is the details around Judas' betrayal, Matthias' selection, why include the lying, the mistrust, the betrayal, the death?

It's not like, you know, he's a great story writer here and he's wanting to build up Matthias and let's, you know, this guy's going to play a key role, you know, in chapter 15 of Acts, so we need to introduce his character now.

So let's get Matthias in on the scene now rather than drop him in from, Matthias doesn't even get mentioned again in the rest of Acts.

So why this diversion? Now on one important level, we could say that the appointment of Matthias shows us that the pursuit of the Spirit's power is not disconnected from the pursuit towards the teaching and the work of the historical Jesus.

[31 : 01] Let me just simplify that. It was absolutely important that the replacement for Judas was himself an eyewitness to the life, the teaching and the deeds of Jesus Christ.

The resurrected Jesus, absolutely essential that he himself was an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus. It is very clear here that the Holy Spirit has an unwavering zeal for the glory of the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus Christ.

They're not disconnected. There's not Bible-believing, gospel-centered Jesus people Christians and the Holy Spirit-filled Jesus Christian people.

They're not separated. God's God's God's God's God's God's God's God's God's approach.

He does not idolize it at all as it pursues God's mission in the world. Luke reveals a church of weakness, of frailty and failure, even though it has this astonishing power in the Holy Spirit, even as they supernaturally empowered to pursue God's mission in the world of redemption across the globe, through cultures to every people group, we are still weak.

[32 : 33] The power is not us. He records the apostasy of Judas, the casting of lots for his replacement, effectively the gambling to see who's going to come out the top dog, the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5, the bickering widows in chapter 6, Peter's reluctance to heed Christ's call in chapter 10, and even Paul's dispute with John Mark in chapter 15.

Luke is at least making the point that even though we have this astonishing power of the Holy Spirit, we need to acknowledge our sin, our failure, our frailty.

We need to deal with the sins and the failures and recognise our frailty and recognise our total, total dependence upon the Holy Spirit for the task at hand.

And so the pattern of the church is weakness and dependence, prayerful dependence upon God.

That's why I love verse 14. They all join together constantly in prayer. Constantly in prayer.

[33 : 51] That's why I love the fact that we're pushing the one plus one plus one, that the work of God to supernaturally change someone's storyline so that they embrace Jesus and get included in God's eternal work is a work of God in the heart, nothing less than that, nothing less.

And Acts is written to us to give us certainty that God's plans for his church are always fulfilled because of his great power, despite our frailty and our failure.

And so do you have confidence? Do you have confidence in this as we move together from this point as a church, as we look in this season of COVID-19 and our frailty and our weakness is evident amongst us, as we look beyond 2020 for the next stage of vision for us as a church here at St. Paul's, where is your confidence?

Is it in strategic planning? Is it in, I don't know what it is in, your ability to communicate truth or is it in God's spirit to bring transformation in people's lives?

And will that confidence lead you to vitally, vitally, radically align yourself with God's work in the world? It's an important question.

[35 : 18] Is your life living for God's storyline, his mission in the world? Or is it something that you hold out to one side, you dip in and out of?

You see, what we're going to realize is, there's another story that has arisen in the last 100 years, another storyline, another grand narrative, another vision, worldview, if you like.

It's become the purpose of life for most people in the Western world, particularly in the last 60 to 70 years. It has captivated the Western world.

The technical term for this particular storyline is philosophical naturalism. It's the fancy way of describing materialism as a worldview.

And it's worth comparing this worldview, which dominates the West, it dominates the culture here at Chatswood, to God's storyline. Philosophical naturalism, materialism, is a three-chapter story.

[36 : 24] First, the big bang. Secondly, evolution. thirdly, the end. In the big bang, there's no supernatural or spiritual power that rules the physical universe.

It says that everything that can be measured, which is the only thing worthy, by the way, it's the only valid things, the things that can be measured, is a result of an explosion that appeared out of nothing billions of years ago.

Freak accident. chapter 2 of the storyline is that on the back of that freak accident, against all odds, humanity has evolved from prehistoric soup to become, today, the dominant species on the earth.

Today. One day, maybe overtaken by something else. And despite what people might feel inside them, there is no such thing as absolute truth no such thing as absolute right, no such thing as absolute wrong.

Because everything is an accident and random, then life, therefore, has no absolute purpose, and so, therefore, every individual is free to make of it as they see fit.

[37 : 44] and the goal of life in philosophical naturalism is therefore to consume as much as possible of the material world for your own experiences.

Whatever it is that makes this moment in your storyline as happy and as agreeable as it possibly can. that's philosophical naturalism.

And you need to pursue your personal happiness because chapter 3 is coming at any time. And chapter 3 is the end.

Humanity will become extinct. There's no form of afterlife. This life is it. that's it. Now, where materialism says everything is random and therefore, there's no good, there's no evil, nothing to ever hope for, the biblical story says that we have a loving creator, a loving creator who has triumphed over evil at great cost to himself in order to love his creatures dearly.

And as we look forward to a day where when everything wrong will be made right and we will live with him in blissful joy for all of eternity, increasing joy for all of eternity as he embraces us with his cosmic love and joy.

[39 : 26] He imparts it to us forever. forever. There's a difference between two storylines.

Know this, whatever storyline you hold to, philosophical naturalism, the Bible storyline with Jesus as centre or any other storyline that you particularly want to grasp hold of, every single storyline requires you to surrender for it.

Every single storyline requires your time, your talents, your treasures. It requires everything from you, your storyline. And what we proclaim here as a church again and again and again and again and again and again and we will do so right through the book of Acts, the biblical storyline is compelling.

It is convincing. Not just convincingly truth-wise but it's also compelling from the heart. It draws you in to God's cosmic love and joy.

It's also more true and reasonable than all the grand storylines of this world. And so right now and throughout the book of Acts as we go through in the coming weeks, like Theophilus, I invite you, as Luke did to Theophilus, I invite you to jump on board with God's work in this world, in the Lord Jesus.

[41 : 06] Start investigating the claims and align your life with Jesus and his grand plan for all of humanity. Amen.