

**R. ALBERT
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ACTS 1-12
FOR YOU**



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Acts 1–12 For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Acts 1–12 For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- ESV: English Standard Version (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition
- NASB: New American Standard Bible

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS 1 - 12

The Gospel of Luke concludes with the disciples in Jerusalem praising God after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. As we see in Luke 24:49, Jesus left the **apostles** with the promise that he would send “the promise of my Father,” the Holy Spirit, to them. After that, Luke records that Jesus was “carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:51). Luke, however, did not want to end his history with the **ascension** of Jesus. Instead, he decided (and, from the heavenly rather than human perspective, was inspired by God’s Spirit) to write a second volume which chronicles the events of the early church—what we call the book of Acts.

There are many similarities between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. First, *both Luke and Acts focus on how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and inaugurates the **new covenant***. For instance, Luke concludes his gospel with Jesus teaching the apostles, “‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms [i.e. the entire Old Testament] must be fulfilled.’ Then 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** for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things’” (Luke 24:44-48). We see similar statements throughout Luke’s Gospel; in Luke 4:18-21 Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah and said that the Scripture was being fulfilled in himself.

The Book of Acts also focuses on how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. In Acts 1:15-26, Luke records how Peter taught that “the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of **David** concerning **Judas**.” Also in the next chapter, Peter’s sermon argues, on the basis of Old Testament Scripture, that Jesus

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 179).

is the Christ (Acts 2:14-36). Luke shows us the apostles, like Jesus, constantly returning to Scripture as the source of their teaching, and taking care to show repeatedly how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament.

By focusing on the fact that Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament, Luke is helping us to see that God's word never returns empty (see Isaiah 55:11), and that the basis of our Christian belief is found in the Scriptures. Jesus and the apostles appealed to Scripture and always rested their conviction on the authority of God's word. Likewise, the church must reason from the Scriptures in the same way the apostles did. If we are to be like the early church in Acts—if we are to be like Jesus—we must hold fast to the authority of Scripture. If we do not, we have no authority to speak or even to know. Luke wants his readers to trust the word of God, and to know the truth about Jesus Christ and his gospel.

In every generation, the church must be reminded to hold fast to Scripture's authority, because in every generation we are tempted to replace Scripture with something else. Instead, we must affirm that the Scriptures are a wonderful, unchanging, sufficient gift from God and the only source of truth and life.

Where we find a healthy church, we find that it is deeply rooted in Scripture.

Where we find a faithful church, we find that it is a church deeply rooted in Scripture. If we are going to have healthy churches, full of healthy Christians, we're going to need to answer a lot of questions. Those questions are answered in the book of Acts.

Second, both Luke and Acts focus on the person and work of Jesus. Obviously, the Gospel of Luke is primarily committed to teaching the church about who Jesus was and what he accomplished. Luke wrote a rigorously researched narrative of Jesus' life and teachings so that his readers might "have certainty" concerning the things that were taught about Jesus (Luke 1:1-4). But Luke did not say everything about Jesus that he wanted to in his Gos-

pel. Luke has much more to say about Jesus in the book of Acts. Interestingly, the first verses of Acts make this very point. In Acts 1:1, Luke states that his first book was about all that Jesus “began to do and teach.” The implication is that Acts is the record of what Jesus continued to do and to teach, by the Spirit, in his church.

Third, *both Luke and Acts focus on the people of God, the church.* Luke indicates through both his volumes that God’s purpose is to **redeem** a people as his own purchased and precious possession—his very own people. This redeemed group of people is known as the church. The book of Acts emphasizes that there is one people of God. One of the early controversies in the church was about whether **Gentiles** could be included in the church without first becoming Jewish. But Luke makes clear that the new covenant is for all peoples. In the new covenant, **circumcision** is no longer the defining mark. Instead, faith in Christ and **baptism** as a public declaration of that faith create the boundaries of the new-covenant community.

Finally, *both Luke and Acts focus on the sovereignty of God.* We meet so many individuals in these two books, but God is always the main actor. He uses the most unlikely of people to spread the gospel, like the impetuous Peter or even the murderous Saul. But it is his work, through people. Thus in Acts, Luke reminds us that God is **sovereign** in our life and in his world, even when we don’t understand what he is doing. We can be confident that the Lord is building his church and pursuing the good of his people—and we can feel privileged that he calls us to join him in this work. As we work through this wonderfully exciting book, keep these themes in mind and watch how Luke gloriously unfolds them.

1. THE PROMISE AND THE MISSION

The Book of Acts begins in the same way as the Gospel of Luke, showing that this is the second volume of Luke's two-volume history. In **1:1-2**, Luke reminds **Theophilus** that the first volume was dedicated to "all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles."

Luke also indicates the content of Jesus' teaching during the time after the resurrection but before Christ's ascension. Jesus was "speaking about the **kingdom of God**" (**v 3**). This mention of the kingdom of God is significant. As the rest of Acts unfolds, we will find that the apostles must have taken Christ's message to heart. Much of the preaching in the book of Acts focuses on the coming of God's kingdom in the person of Christ. In fact, not only does the book of Acts begin with God's kingdom; it also ends by declaring the kingdom of God. In 28:31, Luke indicates that Paul was "proclaiming the kingdom of God."

In **1:4-5**, Luke indicates that Jesus told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. These verses introduce another incredibly important **theological** theme that will develop throughout the book of Acts—the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit falls on the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), their lives and their ministries are radically transformed. Acts shows us that Christ sends the Spirit to

* All Acts verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

make the proclamation of the gospel effective. The church is built by God's word and God's Spirit.

This point is something we must remember especially today. God does not build his church through gimmicks or programmatic cleverness. The church is not dependent on marketing strategies for its success. Our only hope to see lives changed by the gospel is to faithfully proclaim God's word and then trust God's Spirit to make our proclamation effective. Even in our own lives as Christians, as we seek personal transformation into Christ's likeness, we must turn to God's word and then ask God's Spirit to make it effective in our lives as we trust in the gospel of Christ.

In **1:6**, the apostles ask Jesus, "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus responds by saying that they are not called to know when the Father will accomplish his purposes (**v 7**). Scholars have a wide range of opinions as to what is happening in these verses. What exactly are the apostles asking? What are the assumptions that lie behind this question? Why does Jesus respond with something of a non-answer?

Ultimately, we cannot reconstruct what was happening in the minds of the apostles. What does seem clear is that the apostles were expecting Jesus to make good on the Old Testament expectation that Israel would become an eternal kingdom with the **Messiah** reigning on the throne of David. We see, for instance, that Isaiah had spoken of a day when Israel would reign over the nations, which would stream to Zion to hear the word of the Lord (Isaiah 2:1-4).

The apostles are essentially asking if the end has come. Jesus rebuffs their question, indicating that their job is not to know the exact timing of the fulfillment of God's plan. Instead, their job is to be faithful as they wait. They may not witness the final culmination of God's plan, but they are to witness to God's Son (Acts **1:8**).

Immediately, Jesus describes what the Spirit will equip the apostles do: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and

Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (see map on page 188). This verse is one of the most important in the book of Acts. First, it shows us that the power the Holy Spirit gives to God’s people is the power to witness to Christ. Second, this verse also functions as a second “Great Commission” (see Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus describes the gospel moving out through concentric circles from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and finally to the entire world. Finally, this verse functions as a preview of the entire book of Acts, which will track the movement of the apostles as they travel from Jerusalem to the outer reaches of the Roman Empire.

Jesus Leaves

Immediately following this second Great Commission and the promise of the coming Spirit, Jesus is taken up into heaven (Acts **1:9**). The ascension marks a significant change in **redemptive history**. Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension, and the Spirit’s arrival at Pentecost inaugurate the era of the new covenant. As the prophet Jeremiah explained, the new covenant is not like the old covenant given at Sinai, because in the new covenant the **law** of God is written on the hearts of God’s people and not on tablets of stone (Jeremiah 31:31-33). The new covenant is also different from the old covenant because it includes men and women from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Whereas the old covenant was restricted to those who were physical descendants of **Abraham**, the new covenant comprises Abraham’s spiritual children—those who exercise saving faith in Christ (Galatians 3:29). As a result, the people of God in the new covenant are called to be a missional people. Instead of finding their identity in their ethnicity, God’s new-covenant people identify with Christ and with his global kingdom. In this new covenant era, the Christian church will evangelize and preach the gospel to the nations.

After the ascension, two men in white robes confronted the shocked disciples (Acts **1:10**). The disciples were evidently confused and fascinated as they continued to stare into the heavens long after

Jesus had disappeared. The angels asked the apostles why they were staring into heaven, and encouraged them to remember that just as Jesus had ascended into heaven, so also he would one day descend in glory and power at the second coming (v 11).

This mention of Jesus' second coming introduces yet another important theological theme in Acts—the *parousia*. This Greek word literally means “arrival” or “advent,” and it is often used to refer to the second coming of Christ. While the **incarnate** Christ came as a humble baby, Christ in his second coming will appear in power and ultimate authority. He will return as the King of kings and Lord of lords,

accompanied by an angelic host to claim his church and crush the head of his enemy once and for all.

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The fact that the angels reminded the apostles of Christ's second coming at the time of his ascension is incredibly significant for Christians today. It is surely striking that the very thing the angels wanted the disciples to know most just after

Jesus had departed was that he was coming back. As we live by faith and trust Christ as he reigns on the throne, we must do so with the ever-present thought that Jesus will, indeed, return and consummate his kingdom. In the absence of Christ's physical presence, we must behold his return with the eyes of faith and trust that our King will come again.

Another thing we must recognize is that Christ's ascension is perhaps one of the doctrines most often overlooked by evangelicals. Yet Jesus' ascension into heaven is essential to the Christian faith. The ascension proves that Christ actually resurrected from the dead and is currently reigning in heaven. The resurrection was not the finishing point of Christ's journey—it was part of the route to his ascension and **exaltation** (see Philippians 2:6-11).

Historically, the church has recognized the ascension in three distinct ways. The first aspect the ascension demonstrates is the reality of Christ's present lordship. Because Jesus ascended into heaven through the power of God, he is now reigning from the throne of God. Though Jesus is absent physically from the church, he is actively and unconditionally ruling over his church from his place at the right hand of God (Ephesians 1:20-23).

The second reality of Christ's ascension is that Christ has now become the **mediator** of those who believe in him. As the author of Hebrews asserts, Christ became the believer's superior great **High Priest** and is currently **interceding** for his church (Hebrews 4:14 – 5:10; 7:1 – 10:39). Thus, Christians can have hope that Christ is acting on their behalf at all times.

Finally, the ascension shows us Christ's active participation in judgment. Though God the Father is the ultimate judge, Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father (Ephesians 1:20; see also Mark 16:19), is also given the privilege and authority to judge. This authority was re-established when Christ returned to heaven and began to judge the hearts of men. When reading the entirety of the New Testament, all three of these realities are tied to both Christ's present reign as well as his promise to return.

Waiting Well

At the conclusion of their conversation with the angels, the disciples move to action. For almost three years, the disciples relied on Jesus for everything from their itinerary and food supply to spiritual guidance. Now they must manage on their own and carry the mantle of the church.

Luke doesn't give any indication that the disciples were uncertain about or divided over what they should do next. Rather, Luke records that the disciples returned from the Mount of Olives—the scene of the ascension—to the city of Jerusalem. Upon entering the city, the disciples went to a particular upper room (Acts **1:13**). While

it's possible that this room was the same one used for the meal Jesus shared with his disciples the night before his death (the "Last Supper," Luke 22:12), Luke does not make that clear. Instead, it seems far more likely that this room is the same upper room the disciples used after the crucifixion (John 20:19). This room would have held real significance for the disciples, and thus served as a meeting place in uncertain times.

After listing the disciples who were present (Acts **1:12-13**), Luke gives further details about others who also gathered with them in the upper room—"the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (v **14**). One person notably absent from this cast of characters is Judas.

The mention of Mary's presence in the upper room deserves special attention. Mary wasn't present simply because she was Jesus' mother, but because she was a faithful follower of Christ. She trusted her son as Savior. Mary believed in his death and resurrection, and thus joined together with the disciples and other believers. The mention of Jesus' brothers is highly significant as well. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' brothers are placed in opposition to Jesus and his ministry (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). Mark even notes that Jesus' own family thought he was "out of his mind" (Mark 3:21), and the apostle John states, "Not even his brothers believed in him" (John 7:5). Now, however, Jesus' family is counted among this small band of faithful believers in the upper room.

After describing who was present in the upper room, Luke specifically details what the group was doing. We're told that the group as a whole became joined "with one accord" (Acts **1:14**). Again, Luke is affirming that everyone present was committed to the unifying belief that Jesus is the Messiah, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. Faith in Jesus unified them together as one people.

Luke also indicates that these men and women were devoted to prayer. This devotion to prayer was an act of obedience to Christ (Luke 18:1). Trusting in the promise of the coming Holy Spirit, the group

relied on asking God in prayer to guide their actions. It was because of the disciples' devotion to prayer that the Lord began to work through them to build his church.

What Now?

Consider what must have been going through the minds of the disciples after Jesus ascended into heaven and left them alone. They undoubtedly would have been filled with uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. In a matter of a few days, they'd gone from lamenting the loss of their Savior to rejoicing over the reality that he was alive. After all this, they now faced a crucial and urgent question: what now?

We face this same question today. How ought we to respond to the news that Christ is not dead, but rather, is resurrected and ascended into heaven? How we respond to this question dictates not only how we live now, but also how we will spend eternity. Just as the disciples faced the uncertainty of the future, we too face the uncertainty of our immediate futures. Though we don't know what will happen this side of heaven, we must follow the disciples' example of trusting our King. If we respond to his commands in faith, then our eternal destiny will be secure in him.

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A second application from the text is made evident in Jesus' family. The gospel is capable of changing literally anyone. In the same way that Jesus' brothers came to believe in him after denying his identity and straying from his teaching, so too can the greatest sinner and most ungodly come to Christ. That Jesus' family was among the first post-resurrection believers to confirm his ascension is of considerable importance.

We all too frequently pass judgment on those around us whom we think are too sinful or resistant to the gospel to turn and believe in Jesus, unconsciously concluding that they're beyond the reach of

God's redemptive grace. We must allow God's word to remind us of his incredible power to redeem the lost. In Luke 23:42-43, a criminal condemned to death for sinful actions came to trust in Christ in his final moments on earth. Salvation is not dependent on someone's merit, but rather on a person's belief in the **atonement** and redemptive work of Christ. If a person believes that Christ died, rose again, and ascended into heaven for the sake of sinners, so too can they be like the thief on the cross and enter the kingdom of God. Everyone must believe this to be saved; anyone can believe this and be saved; and no one is beyond God's reach to bring them to this belief in order that they might be saved.

A third application is the need for unity in the church. When the group first gathered in the upper room after Jesus ascended into heaven, they recognized the importance of being unified together as one. Just as the early church desperately needed to be unified, so too is the church today in desperate need of unity—spiritual unity, not structural unity. The church doesn't need a central bishop or priest, but rather a central unification in one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Ephesians 4:5). One way we demonstrate our unity around the truth is by our praying together to the Lord of truth. We should not miss in Acts **1:14** the fact that the early church committed itself to prayer. Prayer is a powerful declaration of our dependence on him and our unity with each other. If we would have unified churches, we need to have praying churches. It's when our local churches are spiritually unified together in obedience to their King, both within themselves and with one another, that God's glory becomes evident. It's through this unity that our churches display the power of the gospel to the world around us.

Questions for reflection

1. How important is Acts 1:8 to the way you look at your own life, purposes, and priorities?
2. What difference would it make to you if you considered the reality of the ascension shortly after waking each day?
3. If we would have unified churches, we need to have praying churches. How committed are you to praying for your church, and with your church?