

# Chapter 1: The Return of the King

*Acts 1:1–11*

The Gospel according to Luke ends with the triumph of Jesus. After living a perfect life, suffering, dying, and being buried for three days, Jesus rises from the dead and begins teaching his disciples about the significance of all that he had done and taught (Luke 24:1–49). Then, the Gospel of Luke concludes with a brief story of Jesus’ ascension into heaven (Luke 24:50–53). But now what? What are Jesus’ disciples (not only the Eleven, but all the rest of Jesus’ disciples—including us living today) supposed to do in Jesus’ absence? Thankfully, in the Book of Acts, Luke offers us a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Here, we see not only the history of the early church, but a biblical pattern and vision for life in the church throughout the rest of history until Jesus returns again. While the full answer to the question, “now what?”, will require studying the rest of the Book of Acts, the opening verses of the book in Acts 1:1–11 set the theme of the book clearly: *King Jesus is reigning until his return.*

## Returning from the Dead (Acts 1:1–5)

Luke opens his second book with a greeting to a man named Theophilus that echoes the opening of the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:1–4). In that narrative, Luke sought “to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3–4). While many have suggested ideas to identify Theophilus, we really do not know whether Theophilus is a name, a warm nickname (“dear to/loved by God”), or even whether this is a reference to a specific reader, a generic reader (i.e., “Christian reader”), or a group.<sup>1</sup> Notably, Luke refers to the Gospel of Luke as a “first book,” or, perhaps better, the word λόγος (*logos*) might suggest a translation of “first account”<sup>2</sup> or even (very plainly) as a “first word” about Jesus.

Indeed, Luke states that this book is still about Jesus. In the first book, Luke explains that he spoke of “all that Jesus began to do and [to] teach.” There are several important observations to make about this simple phrase. First, by suggesting that the first book dealt with what Jesus *began* to do and to teach, Luke implies that the Book of Acts contains a narrative of what Jesus *continued* to do and to teach. Second, Luke draws our attention not only to what Jesus *did* but what he *taught*, both in the

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, however, says that the title used in the Gospel of Luke (“most excellent”) makes it most likely that this refers to a specific reader, even though we have no idea who that might be. (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, NICNT [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954], 31.)

<sup>2</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 17.

first account in the Gospel of Luke, and now in the Book of Acts as Jesus continues his ministry. As the great Messiah, Jesus is our Ultimate Prophet who came to *do* something essential: namely, to offer up a once-for-all sacrifice to atone for the sins of his people. More than that, he came to *teach* the gospel of his kingdom.<sup>3</sup> The Greek includes a small word *τε* (*te*) that suggests an even stronger connection between these two activities. This word is often left untranslated (including in the ESV), but the KJV uses “both” to bring this word into its own translation: “*both* to do and teach.” Third, Luke uses the present tense of the infinitives “to do” and “to teach,” which implies ongoing activity. In other words, this second account does not *complete* the narrative of what Jesus began to do and to teach during his earthly ministry. Rather, this second account narrates *more* of what Jesus began to do and to teach, with the idea that, even to this day, Jesus is *still* working and teaching his people throughout the world.<sup>4</sup>

For the introduction of this book, Luke is focused specifically on the time from when Jesus returned to life from the dead, “until the day when he was taken up” (v. 2a). During these forty days, Luke tells us that Jesus gave commands through the Holy Spirit “to the apostles whom he had chosen” (v. 2b). The latter half of this verse carries minor translation questions, so that a literal translation might be, “until which day (having commanded the apostles, through the Holy Spirit, whom he had chosen) he was taken up.” So, it is possible that the “commands” Luke describes here refer only to the *command* (singular) to remain in Jerusalem (see v. 4).<sup>5</sup> While the gift of the Holy Spirit is indispensable to the life and ministry of the church, it seems (in my opinion) too narrow to limit Jesus’ commands (plural) to his instruction for the apostles to await that gift in Jerusalem. Just as Luke wrote of Jesus’ forty days of preparation for *his* earthly ministry and mission during the time of temptation (Luke 4:2), so Jesus uses these forty days after his resurrection to prepare his disciples for their earthly ministry and mission.<sup>6</sup> Instead, alongside the “many proofs” that Jesus offered to present himself alive to his disciples (v. 3a), as he appeared to them during those forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God (v. 3b), it seems most natural to interpret the *commands* of Jesus as related to a wide variety of teaching concerning the gospel of the kingdom and their mission after his absence.<sup>7</sup> Luke is offering us a tantalizing glimpse into those forty days between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension, when he was appearing to and meeting with his people, teaching them about the kingdom of God, and commanding them about how they were to live in the kingdom of God in light of his resurrection.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge, trans. Christopher Fetherstone (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1:31–32.

<sup>4</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC 26 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 79–80.

<sup>5</sup> This is the position advocated by David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 103.

<sup>6</sup> “Just as it was a time when Jesus prepared for his ministry, so for forty days the risen Jesus prepared his followers for theirs.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 82.)

<sup>7</sup> “We may reasonably conclude that the teaching which He gave the apostles about the kingdom of God during these forty days was calculated to make plain to them the bearing of these saving events on the message of the kingdom.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 34.)

<sup>8</sup> “The kingdom, always with the meaning of God’s reign or rule, had been the main subject of Jesus’ teaching. In Acts the terms are much less common than in the Gospels, occurring only five more times (8:12;

Still, taking a broader interpretation of the word “having commanded” does not mean that we may overstate the importance of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts, as well as in the life of the church since then.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that Jesus gave these commands to his apostles *through* the Holy Spirit, which underscores the fact that these are the continuing works of Jesus *through* the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Jesus does order his apostles not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Holy Spirit, whom Luke here describes as “the promise of the Father” (v. 4). The Father promises the Holy Spirit, and the Son sends the Holy Spirit (see also Acts 2:33). Not only does the Holy Spirit appear to empower the church for ministry, but also to mediate Christ’s own presence among his people after his departure out of the world: “Formerly they had experienced the Spirit through the presence of Jesus. After Pentecost they would experience Jesus through the presence of the Spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

By this, we see one of the key principles for understanding simultaneously the three-ness and the one-ness of our Triune God: *the external works of the Trinity are indivisible*. While we may *distinguish* the work of the Father (promising, but not sending nor being sent) from the Son (not promising, but sending the Holy Spirit, having himself been already sent) and from the Holy Spirit (neither promising nor sending, but being sent), but we cannot separate these works. We can neither remain faithful to the teaching of Scripture by attributing this diversity of work to one person nor by explaining this as the coordinated work of three separate gods. Here, we see the one God acting as three distinct persons.

The final point to note about this section is the connection that Jesus makes between John’s baptism of water and the baptism of the Holy Spirit that the apostles would receive “not many days from now” (v. 5). John himself had made this distinction between his own ministry and the ministry of Jesus (Luke 3:16). The fact that Jesus makes this connection between John’s baptism and his own baptism does not mean that we have a different baptism today than what John administered (as some take Acts 19:3–5 to suggest), but only that there was a redemptive–historical advancement of the baptism that John administered as a *promise* and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Jesus administered from heaven as the *fulfillment* (Acts 2:33).

## Returning to Heaven (Acts 1:6–9)

On the day when Jesus ascended into heaven, his disciples asked a question that, to their minds, was the most pressing topic: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 6). As with many questions and statements that Jesus encountered during his earthly ministry, this is a bad question in the what they

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19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Other words like ‘gospel’ naturally replace the phrase in Acts, since in light of the resurrection one enters the kingdom by responding to the good news about Christ. In spite of the sparse references, God’s kingdom is a central concern of Acts, and it is interesting to note that the book begins (1:3) and ends (28:31) on that theme.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 82.)

<sup>9</sup> Bruce considers the work of the Holy Spirit to be “the chief theological keynote of Acts” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 33.).

<sup>10</sup> Although not succinct, Bock’s suggested title for the Book of Acts is helpful for a snapshot summary of the book as a whole: “The Acts of the Sovereign God through the Lord Messiah Jesus by His Spirit on Behalf of the Way.” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007], 50.)

<sup>11</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 80–81.

thought they were asking, but a critical question to ask nevertheless. For example, when Jesus' disciples proclaimed of him, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19:38), they were wrong to imagine by these words that Jesus would soon rise up, overthrow the Romans, and re-establish an earthly kingdom in Jerusalem. Yet, their words were perfectly accurate: Jesus *is* the King who comes in the name of the Lord, to establish peace in heaven and glory in the highest. They misunderstood not *that* Jesus was the King, but *how* Jesus' kingdom would be spiritual rather than earthly.

Therefore, Jesus rebukes the disciples for prying into matters that they do not understand: "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (v. 7). Instead, Jesus declares, "But 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" (v. 8). This would be the means by which Jesus would restore Israel—not as a political, national, earthly, and ethnic nation, but by expanding spiritual Israel to reach through the whole earth, as the Gentiles are grafted into the olive tree of Israel through faith (see Rom. 2:28–29; 11:11–24).<sup>12</sup> Thus, "concern for [ethnic] Israel alone is not the point of the gospel. The message will go to all and is for all because Jesus is Lord of all, a role that includes his being judge of the living and the dead."<sup>13</sup>

Jesus' emphasis, then, on serving as his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth," functions as "a sort of 'Index of Contents' for Acts. 'Ye shall be my witnesses' might be regarded as the theme of the book; 'in Jerusalem' covers the first seven chapters: 'in all Judaea and Samaria' [Acts] 8:1 to 11:18; and the remainder of the book deals with the progress of the gospel outside the frontiers of the Holy Land until at least it reaches Rome."<sup>14</sup> In relation to the role of Jerusalem, we see an connection with, and a change from, what Jesus began to do and to teach during his earthly ministry: "In Luke's Gospel, Jerusalem was central, from the temple scenes of the infancy narrative to the long central journey to Jerusalem ([Luke] 9:51–19:28), to Jesus' passion in the city that killed its prophets ([Luke] 13:34). The story of Jesus led *to* Jerusalem; the story of the church led *from* Jerusalem."<sup>15</sup>

Then, in the midst of these instructions, Luke abruptly narrates Jesus' ascension and return into heaven: "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (v. 9). The imagery of Jesus' ascending into heaven *on a cloud* alludes to the prophecy in Daniel 7:13–14 about the coming of the Son of Man into his kingdom: "I saw in the night visions, and behold, *with the clouds of heaven* there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was giving dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." In this way, clouds communicate that Jesus is ascending to his *heavenly* throne.

Importantly, then, the *ascension* does not simply describe a strange moment in history when Jesus began to fly upward. Rather, this is the moment when Jesus is ascending *to his throne*—a throne that is in heaven, at the Father's right hand. Having come down to earth and accomplished everything necessary in the royal rescue mission on which he had been sent, the King now returns to heaven to present his completed work to his Father. As Calvin notes, "the ascension of Christ is the end of the history of the gospel....our redemption was

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<sup>12</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 109–10. Although the "branches" of unbelieving Jews may be broken off for a time from the olive tree of Israel because of their unbelief, Paul adds that those who do not continue in unbelief will be grafted back into the olive tree of Israel (see Rom. 11:23–24).

<sup>13</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 86.

fully complete and finished then when Christ did ascend unto his Father.”<sup>16</sup> This is the great moment in redemptive history foreshadowed in Psalm 24 when the Messiah, having kept his hands perfectly clean and his heart absolutely pure, without lifting up his soul to what is false or swearing deceitfully, may now ascend the hill of the LORD in heaven to receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness (Ps. 24:3–5). Psalm 24 then records the scene in heaven, just out of the sight of the apostles, as the heavenly host call to the gates and ancient doors of the heavenly Jerusalem to be lifted up for the King of glory to come in (Ps. 24:7–10). All of these rich Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in v. 9, a verse that is so elegantly understated by Luke’s pen!

## Returning to Earth (Acts 1:10–11)

At the empty tomb, as the perplexed women could not find the body of Jesus, suddenly “two men stood by them in dazzling apparel” (Luke 24:4). Now, as the apostles are still gazing up in to heaven, again, “behold, two men stood by them in white robes” (v. 10). Although we are not told the identities of either, many commentators see a parallel between the appearances of two men in these two scenes. In this way, Luke establishes an important connection between Jesus’ return from the dead and his return into heaven.

Furthermore, just as the two men informed the women that their search was misguided (“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen”; Luke 24:5b–6a), so now these two men tell the disciples that their astonished gaze into heaven is misguided: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (v. 11). In this way, the connection moves beyond Jesus’ return from the dead (resurrection) and his return to heaven (ascension) into a future return to earth at the end of time: “For now when Jesus is received up they are once more to hear that he will come again in the same visible way.”<sup>17</sup> Just as the women needed to remember what Jesus had already told them about the necessity of his sufferings and resurrection (Luke 24:6–11), so the apostles need to remember Jesus’ instructions—not only to remain in Jerusalem, but *all* the things that Jesus had begun to do and to teach while he was still among them.

## Discussion Questions

1. What did Luke say to Theophilus in “the first book” (v. 1a; cf. Luke 1:1–4)? What does Luke say to Theophilus about his reasons for writing this sequel to the Gospel of Luke (v. 1b)? What does Luke suggest by speaking of what Jesus “began to do and teach” (v. 1c)? What does this passage tell us about the forty day period between when Jesus was raised “alive...after his suffering” and “the day when he was taken up” (v. 2, 3)? Why is the Holy Spirit so prominent in this section?
2. Were the apostles right to ask about Jesus’ kingdom (v. 6)? Did they have the right assumptions and expectations about the nature of the kingdom? Why is the power of the Holy Spirit so important for the accomplishment of the mission that God has given to his church (v. 8a)? Where do the witnesses of Jesus begin their work (v. 8b)? How far does this mission of bearing witness to Jesus take the disciples within the Book of Acts (v. 8c; see also Acts 28)?

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<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:33–34.

<sup>17</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 36.

3. Why must Jesus ascend to heaven (v. 9a)? How does his ascension relate to his kingship? What is the significance of the cloud (v. 9b; see also Dan. 7:13–14)? What light does Psalm 24 shed on the ascension of Jesus? How do the two men who appear to the apostles compare to the two men who appear to the women at the empty tomb (v. 10–11; see also Luke 24:4–7)? What hope do we have in the promise that Jesus will return in the same way that he ascended (v. 11)?

4. What impressions do you have about the Book of Acts? What do you want to learn about the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church? What do you want to learn about the church itself? Why is it so important to see the Book of Acts as the continuation of what Jesus began to do and to teach (v. 1)? How does this inform our understanding of how to read the Book of Acts? How does this inform our understanding of what Jesus continues to do and teach in the world today?