

CHAPTER 1

Final Ministry of Christ

(Acts 1:1-11)

Toward the close of his gospel Luke tells of Jesus' leading His disciples out to Bethany, where after blessing them "he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven" (24:50, 51, ASV). The disciples, he adds, "worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (v. 52). The gospel closes with the summary statement that they "were continually in the temple, blessing God" (v. 53, ASV).

The first eleven verses of Acts, which overlap the concluding portion of the gospel, form the connecting link between the Acts and that book. The passage falls quite naturally into three divisions: verses 1-5, which form the preface; verses 6-8, which contain Christ's final commission to the disciples; and verses 9-11, which record the ascension of our Lord.

I. THE PREFACE (1:1-5).

These verses contain a summary of the "former treatise" (vv. 1, 2) and a statement of the nature of Christ's activity during the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension (vv. 3-5).

1. *A summary of Luke's gospel* (vv. 1, 2). "Former treatise," which is generally interpreted as a reference to the gospel of Luke, calls attention to its character as historical narrative. The Greek term (*logon*) was customarily used in this sense. Zenophon, for instance, employed it of the narrative portions of his *Anabasis*. Lake and Cadbury observe that the word was "a customary name for a division of a book which covered more than one roll of the papyrus" (p. 2). The use of "former" (lit., "first") has led some interpreters (e.g., Ramsay) to conjecture that Luke intended to write a third volume. This view, however, is rejected by most scholars.

The former treatise concerns "all that Jesus began both to do

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and to teach" (v. 1b). It is debated whether any special significance is attached to the word "began." Lake and Cadbury, for example, take the negative view and assert that it implies no emphasis. It was, they say, simply a way of saying that the gospel contains the doings and teachings of Jesus "from the beginning." Haenchen calls it "a periphrasis for the finite verb" (p. 137). Others see in the word the notion that the gospel of Luke was a book of "beginnings," the suggestion being that Acts will set forth a record of what the risen Christ *continues* to do and to teach through his Spirit-led people. The gospel, says Walker, "contains an epitome of the Saviour's work on earth"; the Acts, "an epitome of His work from heaven" (p. 3).

"Until the day in which he was taken up" (v. 2a) defines the terminus of the gospel, and the point of beginning for Acts. The "commandment" (v. 2b) is interpreted by some as a reference to the so-called Great Commission (cf. Matt. 28:19, 20; Luke 24:47); others see it as pointing to the command to wait for the empowerment of the Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4). The context may be general enough to include both.

The reference to Theophilus ("God-lover" or "loved of God") is another point of connection between Acts and Luke (cf. Luke 1:1-4). The language of both the gospel and Acts suggests that both volumes were dedicated to Theophilus. He was perhaps the one who defrayed the expense of writing and undertook to disseminate the two books. The descriptive title ("most excellent") used in the gospel leads some to think that Theophilus may have been a government official. The same honorific title is employed both of Felix (Acts 23:26; 24:3) and of Festus (Acts 26:25). Nothing more is known of Theophilus than what is told us in Luke 1:1-4 and the present passage.

2. *The period between the resurrection and the ascension* (vv. 3-5). Three things were urgently needed by the apostles if they were to accomplish the task assigned them by their Lord: (1) assurance that He was alive, (2) instruction, and (3) empowerment. The activity of the risen Christ was designed to meet these needs and thus to prepare the apostles for their mission to the world.

Assurance of the resurrection was given when Christ "shewed [lit., presented] himself alive" (v. 3).¹ (A similar expression is

¹At least eleven appearances of our Lord following His resurrection are recorded in the Scriptures. There may have been others that were not recorded. Those which are mentioned are as follows: to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18; Mark 16:9-11); to the other women who went to the sepulchre (Matt. 28:9); to Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5); to the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35; Mark 16:12); to the eleven in the evening, Thomas being

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found in Acts 9:41, where it is said that Peter “presented [Dorcas] alive.”) This Jesus did “by many proofs” (v. 3). The Greek word, an unusual one which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, denotes a demonstrative proof or an evidence manifest to the senses. By such proofs the risen Lord gave the apostles convincing evidence of His identity and of the reality of His resurrection from the dead. They were of such nature as to guard against the thought that the disciples were victims of a delusion.

The appearances, we are told, occurred over the space of “forty days.” This is the only place in Scripture which defines the length of time which lapsed between the resurrection and the ascension. The suggestion made by the text is that the appearances were given from time to time during the space of forty days; that is to say, the risen Lord was not constantly seen by the disciples as He was before His passion. These appearances were not mere optical illusions but miraculous manifestations of the person of Christ.

During the forty-day period Christ taught His disciples “the things concerning the kingdom of God” (v. 3b, ASV). We know, in addition, that He opened the Scriptures to His disciples, explaining to them the necessity of His death and resurrection (Luke 24:46); that He commissioned them to preach repentance and remission of sins among all nations (Luke 24:47; cf. Matt. 28:18-20); that He assured them of His spiritual presence (John 20:21-23; cf. Matt. 28:20); and that He charged them to wait for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit before beginning their work (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4, 8).

The kingdom of God was not a new concept; it is found in the Old Testament, and the thought formed a prominent part of the preaching of John the Baptist. Essentially, it means the rule of God; in the present passage it must refer primarily to the messianic kingdom.

Verses 4 and 5 narrate an event occurring at one of the appearances of Jesus. Being assembled together with the disciples, He charged them not to leave Jerusalem until they had received the fulfillment of “the promise of the Father.”

The commandment to “wait for” the promise often is lifted out of context and urged upon believers as a condition of receiving the fullness of the Spirit. This, however, reveals a misunderstanding

absent (John 20:19-24); to the eleven, Thomas being present, one week later (John 20:25-29; Mark 16:14-18); to the seven apostles by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-24); to five hundred disciples on a hill in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20; 1 Cor. 15:6); to James (1 Cor. 15:7); to the apostles at Jerusalem (1 Cor. 15:7); and near Bethany at the ascension (Acts 1:6-11; Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50, 51).

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of the passage. The stress is on the words "in Jerusalem." The charge then does not concern spiritual preparation but geographical direction.

The promise, which concerns the gift of the Holy Spirit, is described in three ways: *First*, it is "the promise of the Father" (cf. Luke 24:49; "the gift my Father promised", NIV). The phrase suggests that there is something special about this promise. It was originally given in Joel 2:28ff. and was reiterated by both John the Baptist (cf. Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8, etc.) and by Jesus (cf. John 14:16, 26, etc.), but its ultimate source is in the Father. That is, it proceeds from Him. *Second*, it finds its realization in a baptism in (with) the Holy Spirit. References to being baptized in, with, or by the Spirit are found in the four accounts of John's testimony to Jesus (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33); in the present passage; in Acts 11:16, where Peter simply quotes this statement of Jesus; and in 1 Corinthians 12:13, which affirms that all Christians are baptized in or by the Spirit. The imagery of baptism suggests, among other things, abundant supply. *Third*, the fulfillment of the promise is at hand: the disciples would be baptized in the Holy Spirit "not many days hence," that is, within the next few days. The inference to be drawn is that the promise would find its fulfillment in the experience at Pentecost.

II. THE FINAL COMMISSION (1:6-8).

It is widely thought that the commission of Matthew 28 was given at the ascension and that other commissions found in Mark, Luke, and Acts are only variant reports of that. In reality, the commission was given on different occasions and to different groups. The passage before us appears to be the only record of the ascension commission.

The question asked by the disciples — "Lord, dost thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" — reflects their nationalistic feelings and thoughts. Since 63 B.C. their land had been under the dominion of Rome, and for more than six hundred years the Israelites had known no real independence. The disciples fully expected Jesus to effect a restoration of Israel's political sovereignty. They wondered if it was "at this time" that He would do it.

Jesus' reply was in two parts. In the first (v. 7) He asserted that it was not their business "to know times or seasons" (ASV). The Greek word for "times" is quantitative, denoting something like the English "era"; that is, it marks the general period of an event. The latter word speaks of the precise time of an occurrence. The NIV has "the times or dates"; Montgomery, "times and occasions."

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These, explains Jesus, the Father set (determined) by the exercise of His sovereign authority. It is implied that He reserves the knowledge of these decisions to Himself.

The second part of Jesus' answer (v. 8) contains both a promise and a command. The *promise* is of power (Gr., *dunamis*), that is, the dynamic needed for efficient service (cf. Luke 21:15). Three things are to be observed: (1) It was the Spirit's coming which was to bring this power (cf. v. 4; Luke 24:49). (2) The power was to be for a specific purpose: witnessing. (3) The promise of power was for all the disciples, and it was unconditional.

The *command*, given in the words "Ye shall be my witnesses . . .," is a reminder to the disciples that they are sent into the world not to make predictions about the future (cf. v. 7) but to bear witness² to Christ — to testify to what they had seen, heard, and known of Him. This, indeed, is the principal task of every Christian. Observe the following: (1) "My" witnesses, which reading is to be preferred over that of KJV, suggests the thought of *belonging* to Christ. It is implied, however, that they bear witness *to* Him. (2) "In Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (ASV) sets out the plan of Acts: witnessing in Jerusalem (chs. 1-7), in Judaea and Samaria (chs. 8-12), to the ends of the earth (chs. 13-28). (3) "The uttermost part of the earth" shows that Christ's parting concern was for the whole world. Moreover, the words presuppose that salvation is not restricted to Israel (cf. 9:15; 11:18; 28:28).

III. THE ASCENSION³ (1:9-11).

Luke describes the ascension briefly in his gospel (24:51), but here a fuller account is given. The significance of the event may be summed up as follows: *First*, it is a necessary corollary of the resurrection. That is, it is the abiding proof that the resurrection of Jesus was more than a temporary resuscitation. To accept the bodily resurrection but deny the ascension, one must affirm either that Christ is still an inhabitant of earth or that He later died again. *Second*, it conveyed to the disciples the realization that the appearances, which had occurred at intervals over a period of forty days, were at an end. Thus it relieved their tension, put their minds at ease, so that, with the arrival of each new day, they did not

²The reference to witnessing strikes the keynote of the entire Book of Acts (cf. 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:15; 26:16).

³Other references to the ascension are found in Ephesians 4:10; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:14; and 1 Peter 3:22. Passages such as Ephesians 1:20ff. and Colossians 3:1 presuppose the ascension. Jesus on three occasions made reference to His ascending to heaven — John 3:13; 6:62; 20:17.

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wonder whether their Lord would again reveal Himself. *Third*, it suggested that Jesus was no longer to be perceived by physical sensation but by spiritual insight. *Fourth*, it was symbolic of His exaltation to the right hand of God. *Fifth*, it was indicative of His entrance upon His heavenly priesthood.

The chief features of Luke's narrative are its references to (1) the time — after Jesus' final discourse was finished (9a); (2) the place — "Olivet" (v. 12); (3) the witness of the disciples — "as they were looking" (9b; cf. 10a); (4) the cloud — a symbol of the divine presence and glory (v. 9c; cf. Exod. 14:19; Matt. 17:5 and parallels; 1 Tim. 3:16); and (5) the appearance of "two men . . . in white apparel" who promised that "this same Jesus . . . shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (vv. 10b, 11). Some interpreters have identified the two men with Moses and Elijah (who were present on the Mount of Transfiguration), but most think of them as angels of God.

Three verbs are used to describe the Lord's ascent: "he was taken up" (i.e., lifted from the earth; v. 9b); "received" (i.e., caught up, enveloped, out of sight; v. 9b; "a cloud hid him from their sight," NIV); and "received up" (v. 11; "taken away," NEB) into heaven. The entire statement leaves the impression of calm grandeur.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1, 2.
2. Read Luke 24:13-53 and compare it with Acts 1:1-11.
3. Study and compare the "commissions" (Matt. 28:18, 19; Acts 1:8, etc.) of Christ to His people.
4. Using a work such as *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, *The New Bible Dictionary* (Eerdmans), etc., study the following articles: Theophilus; Kingdom; Witness; Power; Great Commission; Ascension.