

What now?
Waiting for Jesus' Promise to be Fulfilled
Acts 1:1-11
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This morning, we resume our study of Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts. We're studying these books together because the Gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus' life, and Acts picks up where Luke leaves off with an account of what happened during the first decades of the early church. Luke and Acts were written by the same person—a 1st Century physician and a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul on his missionary journey. Luke meticulously recorded what he had heard from others about Jesus and what he himself had experienced. Luke's Gospel begins with the words:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. – Luke 1:1-4

Luke knew that others had written about Jesus' life. It's likely that at the time Luke wrote, Matthew and Mark's Gospels were already written, but he wanted to provide another account of what he believed was critical information. So, he investigated everything carefully and wrote his own account. The recipient of Luke's writing was Theophilus, a name which means "lover of God." It was common for authors to dedicate their writings to their financial benefactors. Theophilus may have been financing Luke's writing, or the name may refer generally to Luke's audience as "lovers of God."

We finished our study of Luke's Gospel three weeks ago and now turn our attention to Acts. Luke begins the Book of Acts with this statement: "In my former book, Theophilus, I

wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen” (Acts 1:1–2).

In his commentary, F.F. Bruce claims that initially Luke and Acts were combined, and the two books were passed around as one document. Later, the four gospels were grouped together and read as companions, and Acts was read separately from Luke’s Gospel.

When we began our journey through Luke in December, I pointed out that while Paul is known as the most prolific New Testament writer—and he did write 13 of the 27 New Testament books—based on the number of verses in Luke and Acts, Luke actually wrote more than the Apostle Paul, penning nearly a third of our New Testament. Based on the last events that Acts records, Luke is believed to have written Acts in the early 60s of the 1st Century.

The official title for the Book of Acts is “The Acts of the Apostles,” but Biblical scholar N.T. Wright notes that Acts could more accurately be called “The Acts of Jesus, Part II.” Wright points out that Acts essentially has three interlinked levels. First, Acts is the story of the early Church: its founding on the Day of Pentecost and its growth and spread across the world at that time. Second, Acts is part two of Jesus’ story. The gospels record the story of all Jesus did while He walked on the earth, and Acts records all Jesus did through his Holy Spirit. But third, Acts records the story of all the Holy Spirit did working in and through Jesus’ followers. Wright says—and I don’t want us to miss this—that Acts is an unfolding drama into which we’re all invited to become actors as the Holy Spirit works in and through us.

N.T. Wright’s idea of the three interlinked levels of Acts—the story of the early church, Jesus’ story, and the work of the Holy Spirit—dovetails with something Emilio Alvarez points to in his book, “Pentecost.” Alvarez notes that the New Testament contains three different “sendings.” Jesus is sent by his Father to earth, the Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus on Pentecost following his resurrection and ascension to heaven, and followers of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, are sent out into the world by God as witnesses of Jesus.

Our current series, “What Now?” focuses on Luke 24 and Acts 1. Those chapters serve as a bridge between Jesus’ resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. I chose the title “What Now?” because that question had to be on the mind of Jesus’ followers after his death and resurrection as they waited for what was next. This series also provides us with an

excellent opportunity to teach on the nature of the Holy Spirit—what it means for you and me to be filled with and empowered by the Spirit.

Our tendency when it comes to the Holy Spirit is to gravitate toward two extremes. Either we focus on the Holy Spirit in such a way that we get caught up in what it means to be filled with or baptized in the Spirit and the experiences that come with that, or we ignore the Holy Spirit so that He becomes the forgotten member of the Trinity. Fixating on experiences that accompany being filled with the Spirit can lead to division among followers of Jesus as people view their personal experiences as normative or essential for others. An unhealthy focus on experiences surrounding the baptism or filling of the Spirit have also led people and churches into ideas not supported by Scripture. On the other side of the coin, ignoring the Holy Spirit leads us to live far below what God intends for us. We relegate our relationship and experience with Jesus to logic and intellectualism and miss the joy, peace and power that Jesus intends for us as his Holy Spirit fills us with his presence.

My desire is for us to avoid both extremes. I want us to experience the joy, peace, power, and life Jesus intends for us when He promised He would send one who would “walk alongside” us. I hope we’ll avoid focusing on our personal experience or elevating being filled with or baptized in the Spirit to a degree that supersedes growing in the character and knowledge of Jesus. As we explore Acts 1–2 over the next three weeks, we’ll focus on the person of the Holy Spirit and his work in and through us.

Luke’s Gospel ended with the disciples in Jerusalem worshiping together in the temple and waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit Jesus promised. Acts, after mentioning what Luke wrote about in his gospel, begins with these words in verses 3-11.

³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” – Acts 1:3-11

These verses mostly recap what took place at the end of Luke’s Gospel, but there are some powerful statements here that shed new light on the coming of the Holy Spirit that I want us to unpack together.

In Acts 1:5, we read, “For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Jesus talked in Luke’s Gospel about sending the Holy Spirit and his disciples receiving the Spirit, but being baptized with the Holy Spirit is the clearest statement He made foretelling what would happen on Pentecost.

Since I didn’t preach the past two weeks, I had time to do some extra study on what Jesus and the New Testament authors say about the Holy Spirit. I also had the opportunity to read a book by Chuck Swindoll titled “Flying Closer to the Flame.” The book was recommended to me by Jerry Dunlap, and I would encourage any of you who’d like to explore more about the Holy Spirit to read it.

I want to reiterate that when we invite Jesus into our lives and become his followers, the Holy Spirit is given to us as a gift. Swindoll lists two possible options for those of us who aren’t living with the fullness of God’s Spirit in us: either the Holy Spirit isn’t living in me at all because

I'm not a Christian, or I'm Christian and the Holy Spirit is in me, but I prefer to live life on my own and haven't given Him full authority in my life. The New Testament is clear that followers of Jesus have been given the Holy Spirit. The variable for each of us is how much we submit ourselves to Jesus and the work of his Spirit within us.

The phrase being "baptized in the Spirit" is used frequently in some Christian circles, but Swindoll points out that Scripture doesn't instruct us to be baptized in the Spirit. Being baptized in the Spirit happens naturally when we accept Christ and receive his Spirit. What we are commanded repeatedly throughout Scripture is to be "filled with the Spirit." The filling of the Holy Spirit is not something that simply happens to us but a choice we make to give ourselves fully to Jesus so his Spirit continually fills us. Swindoll uses the analogy of the Holy Spirit in us being like fuel in a car: we can't run without Him. As a believer, the Spirit is in us, and we have all the fuel we need. He is ready to fill us—to energize us and empower us at any time.

In verse 8, we read what may be the most well-known verse in all of Acts. Jesus said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This isn't the first time Jesus mentioned that the disciples would be filled with the Spirit after He left them, but it's stated succinctly and powerfully, and it foreshadows what eventually took place in the rest of Acts.

Who among us doesn't want power? Power is attractive to us. None of us likes feeling powerless or helpless. Emilio Alvarez, in his book "Pentecost," notes that power was especially important to 1st Century Jews, because they often felt so powerless under the confining grip of the Roman Empire. The New Testament references power 120 times, and the word used in Acts 1:8 is *dunamis*, from which we get our word *dynamite*.

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was all about power—the power of God released into the lives of Jesus' followers so that they could be his witnesses in Jerusalem where they lived, in the surrounding area of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the world. It's easy and tempting for us to become enamored with power and all that it can do for us and for others, but we can't lose sight of the truth that the power that accompanied the Holy Spirit's

coming at Pentecost had one primary purpose: that followers of Jesus who were filled with the Holy Spirit would be witnesses to Jesus' life.

Finally, I want us to look at verse 11 of Acts chapter 1, where we read these words that angels spoke to the disciples after Jesus' ascension to heaven: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have him go into heaven." I've always read this as pointing to Jesus' second coming—his return for his church—and it probably is referring to that, but as I read it again in preparation for this sermon, it occurred to me that it also might refer to the coming of the Holy Spirit from heaven that we read about in Acts 2. In Acts 2:2 as the Holy Spirit was falling on followers of Jesus, we read, "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting."

As Jesus ascended to heaven, returning to the right hand of his Father, his disciples stood and watched. We'll look next Sunday at the second half of chapter 1, where the disciples continued their wait for the fulfillment of Jesus' promise.

As we close our time together today and reflect on the Holy Spirit, I have a question I'd like us to consider. Do I need more of God (of his Holy Spirit) in my life, or do I need to act on all that I have? I ask that question because it's the heart of what we're talking about as we focus on the Holy Spirit. Do we spend our energy and focus on attaining some elevated spiritual status or acquiring some spiritual gift or blessing we don't have? Or do we, through God's strength and the direction of his Holy Spirit, act on what He has already given us as his followers? I'd like you to sit with that question in silence for a moment as you listen for the Holy Spirit's direction. Do I need more of God in my life, or do I need to act on all that I have? My desire for myself and for each of us is that we would repent of our inclination to live life on our own terms rather than submitting ourselves to Jesus and allowing Him to sit on the throne of our hearts. The act of repenting means we're going in a direction and turn around to go the opposite way. Jesus is calling us to turn away from self-sufficiency and turn toward Him and his desire to fill us with his Spirit.

In Charles' Swindoll's book, which I referenced earlier, he shared a prayer that he regularly prays. I believe this prayer is a fitting place for us to end as we move into our time of response in singing.

This is your day, Lord. I want to be at your disposal. I have no idea what these next 24 hours will bring. But before I begin, before I sip my first cup of coffee, and even before I get dressed, I want you to know that from this moment on throughout this day, I'm yours, Lord. Help me to be a branch that abides in the vine, to lean on you, to draw strength from you, and to have you fill my mind and my thoughts. Take control of my senses so that I am literally filled with your presence and power. I want to be your tool, your vessel today. I can't make it happen. Without you I can accomplish nothing. And so I'm saying, Lord, fill me with your Spirit today. Amen.