

Sermon Series: Acts: Loyal to Jesus
Jesus' Plan for the Nations
Acts 1:1–14 (ESV)

Have you ever thought that about how unlikely it is that we're here in the very center of North America worshiping someone who lived 2,000 years ago on the other side of the world? Google tells me that it's about 6,600 miles from Jerusalem to Manhattan, KS. After Jesus was crucified, everyone, including his inner circle of disciples, thought that the movement Jesus had started was over. Yet here we are.

It's interesting that in the gospels, Jesus' disciples often second-guessed him and resisted his ideas/plans. The most striking example is found in Matthew 16. After Jesus explained to his disciples that he ***must*** go to Jerusalem and be killed and raised on the third day, Peter took Jesus aside and "began to rebuke him," saying "This shall never happen to you." That's when Jesus turned and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" The disciples had many virtues, but they didn't trust his plan and follow his lead.

When we get to the book of Acts, Jesus has been raised from the dead. He appears to these same disciples and tells them the next phase of the plan, his ***plan for the nations***. We just heard it in Acts 1:8, ". . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The plan was for the disciples - the ones who had denied and abandoned him six weeks earlier - to take the message about Jesus to the nations, to every grouping of people on earth. And guess what? There's no more second-guessing Jesus; the disciples ***trusted Jesus' plan and followed his lead***. They became people who were willing to suffer the loss of everything (reputation, possessions, and even their lives), in order to tell others what they had seen and heard about Jesus. They weren't concerned about the cost; their concern was simply to be ***loyal to Jesus***. As Paul put it years later, "Since Jesus died for us, therefore we live for him" (2 Corinthians 5:15).

And here we are 2,000 years later in the middle of North America, 6,600 miles away from Jerusalem, worshiping Jesus. I think we have to conclude that the plan is working.

Today as we begin our study of the book of Acts, I want us to see the simplicity and the brilliance of Jesus' plan. I want us to be transformed the way that his original disciples were transformed. I want us to be disciples who also believe that Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said, "You will be my witnesses" both near and far.

In Acts 1:1-14, Luke tells us three realities that fuel Jesus' plan for the nations. Then we'll notice the disciples' response. Just so you know, I'm going to challenge us to respond the way that the original disciples responded.

The Realities that fuel Jesus' Plan for the Nations:

His Resurrection and his Kingdom (Acts 1:1-3) Luke begins by giving a one-sentence synopsis of the gospel he wrote. Listen again to verses 1 and 2.

1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

By saying that his first book (the gospel of Luke) records what Jesus **began** to do and teach, Luke is implying that this second book will explain what Jesus **continued** to do and teach. Even though Jesus would return bodily to his Father in heaven, he wouldn't be idle. He would continue to "do" the things he did on earth and to "teach" just as he had before. We'll see that Jesus continued to "do and teach" through the person of the Holy Spirit AND through his people.

Before Jesus returned to his Father, he made sure that the apostles were clear on two things: the reality of his resurrection and his kingdom.

3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Jesus **proved** to them that he had been raised bodily from the dead. If they weren't convinced that Jesus had literally been raised from the dead, they never would have risked their lives the way they did. He invited them to see and touch the scars in his hands and feet; he ate a piece of fish in front of them. He **proved** that he had been raised bodily from the dead.

Because Jesus presented them with "many proofs," they were credible witnesses. Throughout Acts, whenever the apostles **talked** about Jesus, they declared unequivocally that "God raised him from the dead" (2:24, 3:15, etc.). And everywhere they went people believed. And whenever the apostles (and those close to them - people like Luke) **wrote** about Jesus' resurrection, their credibility comes through.

The reason we believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is because the New Testament documents are so compelling. The resurrection is the most credible explanation for the empty tomb and the Christian movement that has changed the world. Like the original disciples, we can be credible witnesses because **we** believe in the resurrection and have **experienced** resurrection power in our lives.

As well, Jesus was "speaking about the kingdom of God." During his earthly ministry, Jesus taught about the kingdom of God, but nobody could really understand what he was talking about. But now that he had been raised from the dead his followers were in a position to comprehend. We read in Luke 24, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" - explaining how the Christ/Messiah must die, be raised from the dead, and that the message about him should be proclaimed throughout the earth.

The disciples needed to be clear that the Kingdom would move forward one heart at a time through their witness. We need to be just as clear about this: God's kingdom moves forward as we tell people about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

If you are a believer in Jesus, you have experienced something so miraculous that it's changed your life. You have a new heart, you have new appetites, you have hope beyond the grave. In other words, you've experienced something that EVERYBODY needs to experience. Jesus' plan is for you to share with them what you've experienced and how they can experience the same thing.

You might be thinking, "I agree in principle with this plan, but they can't imagine that I could actually pull it off. I'm not comfortable talking about spiritual issues. I'm not good with words. Etc., etc., etc." In the next few verses, Jesus assures us that his plan isn't fueled by our speaking skills or by our confidence in ourselves. His plan is fueled by the Holy Spirit.

The second reality that fuels Jesus plan is:

The Power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-8) Notice what happened next:

4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Jesus tells his followers to ***remain*** in Jerusalem and ***wait***. Why? Because God was about to make good on a promise that he had made in places like Joel 2, a promise that they had also "heard from [Jesus]": a promise to pour out his Spirit on all mankind. It turns out (as we'll see in chapter 2) that in Jerusalem devout Jews "from every nation under heaven" had gathered to celebrate Pentecost. God wanted them to ***see and hear*** and then to ***experience*** this outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 5 Jesus echoes a statement that John the Baptist had made when asked if he were the Christ/Messiah. His comment (Luke 3:16) was basically, "No, I baptize with water, but the Christ will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Just a few days later the disciples of Jesus - and devout Jews from every nation - would be "drenched" with the Holy Spirit himself.

Understandably, when the disciples pondered this, they had a question - a question about timing:

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

A few weeks earlier they thought Jesus was going to establish the Kingdom when Jesus had gone to Jerusalem; but he was crucified instead. Now that he'd been raised from the dead, perhaps it was now the time when Jesus would establish his Kingdom once and for all.

7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

He told them, “The timing is **not** something you need to know.” Rather, he redirects them to what they **did** need to know. **They needed to know the plan** and **the power** that would advance the Kingdom.

In verse 8 Jesus lays out the plan very concisely. Jesus didn’t gather them together and brainstorm with them. He didn’t say, “Hey guys, now that I’ve been crucified and raised from the dead, do you have any ideas on what should happen next?” No, Jesus had a plan (verse 8):

8 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.”

Jesus is stating rather matter-of-factly what will happen. They would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Before Jesus’ crucifixion, they were powerless to be his witnesses; Peter denied even knowing Jesus and the rest of them abandoned Jesus. But when the Holy Spirit had come upon them - the same Spirit that hovered over the surface of the deep at creation, the same Spirit that empowered the prophets, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead - they would receive power. And they would speak freely and boldly about Jesus both near and far.

Remember that Jesus had laid a solid foundation: he had given them many proofs and had taught them about the Kingdom. Their witness would come from a deep reservoir of faith and truth. But the power wouldn’t be their intellect; their power would be the indwelling Holy Spirit. In Luke 24 Jesus had told them that they would be clothed with power from on high.

The geographical references here in verse 8 provide an outline for the rest of the book of Acts:

- * Chapters 2-7 record how they were witnesses in Jerusalem.
- * Chapters 8-12 record how they were witnesses in the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria.
- * Chapters 13-28 record how they were witnesses to “the end of the earth”; the book Acts ends with Paul teaching about the Kingdom while in prison in Rome.

As we go through Acts we will see that Jesus’ original followers were **empowered** to be Jesus’ witnesses both near and far. They said and did things that went far beyond their human effort; they received power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. And thousands of people believed and were baptized from Jerusalem all the way to Rome.

The plan is the same for us. The vast majority of us are called to represent Jesus here at home. A few of us will be called to go to other cultures and be his witnesses there. In both cases, we need to believe that the indwelling Holy Spirit will empower us to tell others about Jesus. We’ll talk about what that means throughout this series. But today I want you be honest with yourself (and the God) about **whether or not you believe that the Holy Spirit will empower you to be a witness to others.**

Let me encourage you with an observation and a story.

Observation: If you have become a believer in Jesus, it's because someone was empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the gospel with you. Your parents or a Sunday school teacher or a friend or roommate or classmate or a coworker or somebody you met somewhere told you that Jesus died on the cross to pay for your sins and that he rose on the third day. They told you that ***you can be saved by grace*** (it's a free gift) ***through faith***. If you believe that, something miraculous has happened in your life. You are tangible evidence that the Holy Spirit still empowers people to share the gospel. If this happened ***to*** you, it can happen ***through*** you. That is Jesus' plan for your friends and neighbors and coworkers. The Holy Spirit wants to empower you to bear witness to others.

Story. Ten years ago I built myself a desk for my office. I'd been thinking about it for years. One thing I wanted to build into my desk was a "secret compartment," which is something that is found in lots of old furniture. I'd tell you where that compartment is, but then it wouldn't be secret anymore. But I will tell you what I've keep in that compartment since 2015: two hundred-dollar bills. That \$200 was given to this church by a man named Musa. Musa was from the Meyah people in Papua, Indonesia.

Musa came to the United States on behalf of his church to thank the churches that had sent missionaries to them and to ask for prayer. One of the first missionaries who took the gospel to the Meyahs was a man named Paul Rhodes. He contracted cerebral malaria while there and died; his wife stayed in Papua into her old age. The Holy Spirit empowered the Rhodes and others to take the gospel to the Meyahs; and many have believed. Musa visited the church that sent her and gave them \$200 - a significant sum of money to them - as an expression of their eternal gratitude.

Musa came here to Faith because we had sent Bob and Susan Cochran (and their 4 kids) to Papua years earlier. They were part of a Wycliffe team that did oral Bible storying so that the Meyahs could hear and learn the stories of the Bible in their own language.

* Photo #1 - Musa giving us \$200.

* Photo #2 - Praying for Musa.

* Photo #3 - Susan was here with Musa; she was sending the service back to Indonesia through Skype. This is a photo Bob took of some in the Meyan church watching with great joy.

This is a modern-day story about how the Holy Spirit still empowers people to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

As a footnote, I've decided that this \$200 should go for a scholarship fund for the Perspectives course. That seemed like a fitting use for a gift since Perspectives is a course about taking Christ to the nations.

The third reality that fuels Jesus' plan for the nations is:
The Ascension and Return of Jesus (Acts 1:9-11)

Luke next records that Jesus returned to his Father in heaven (that's known as his ascension) AND that he would one day return to earth. Remember that Jesus is preparing his disciples to be witnesses. Jesus wanted them to be able to give a first-hand account of his ascension.

9 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.

Remember that Jesus had been appearing to them periodically over the past forty days. This time he didn't walk away or vanish; he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. This signified that his periodic visits were over. He is now enthroned in heaven at his Father's right hand. From that place of power and authority Jesus is now our Advocate and High Priest. In Acts 7 when Stephen is about to be stoned to death, he gazed upward and saw Jesus "standing at the right hand of God" (which is striking because he's usually depicted as "seated" at God's right hand).

But they needed to know that Jesus **would** return one day.

10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "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."

These two angels wanted them/us to know that Jesus will return from heaven in the same way he went to heaven: bodily and visibly and on a cloud. The return of Christ isn't some obscure doctrine; it's mention in almost every book in the New Testament. The emphasis throughout is that since we don't know the timing of his return, we need to live in a state of readiness. We need to be living the lives he wants us to live and doing the things he wants us to do - including being his witnesses.

The Response of Jesus' Disciples: Devotion to Prayer (Acts 1:12-14) As I mentioned earlier, we see in Acts a new willingness on the part of the apostles to believe Jesus and follow his lead. He had told them not to leave Jerusalem, therefore we see in verse 12 that that's exactly what they did.

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

Luke records in verse 13 that the disciples gathered in the upper room.

13 And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James.

Luke mentions 11 disciples. Next week's passage will focus on the 12th disciple who is not mentioned, Judas Iscariot who had betrayed Jesus. In verse 14 we read their response:

14 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

They instinctively did what they had so often seen Jesus do: they prayed; they devoted themselves to prayer.

Would you commit yourself to respond the way they responded? If we are going to be like the disciples in Acts (and not in the gospels), we have to be people who pray about Jesus' plan for the nations. Is there anything mentioned in today's passage that got your attention?

- * Maybe you recognized unbelief - that you really don't believe that the Holy Spirit is willing or able to empower you to share the gospel with people. Confess your unbelief and talk to God about that.
- * Maybe as I was talking God brought to mind specific people in your life who need Christ. Pray for opportunities to tell them your experience and to share the gospel. Let's trust God and be people who believe that Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said, "You will be my witnesses."