

The Lord's Final Commands to His Disciples and His Ascension

Acts 1:1-11

Acts 1:1-11: *"The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach,² until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen,³ to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.*

⁴ And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me;⁵ for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."⁶ Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"⁷ And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.⁸ But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

⁹ Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.¹⁰ And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel,¹¹ who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."

Background Notes

Suppose the book of Acts was not in the Bible, and the New Testament record went straight from the Gospels to the Epistles that were written to the churches. If that were so, we would have no idea how these churches got started. And we'd wonder, who was this "Apostle Paul"? He wasn't one of the original disciples – where did he come from, how did he become a believer in Jesus, and where did he get his authority to teach? And we'd have many other questions as well.

The book of Acts is a bridge from the Gospels to the Epistles - from the life of Christ to the life of the Church. In fact, one of the primary purposes of the book of Acts was to show how the Church emerged from Judaism, and how it expanded from its early beginnings in Jerusalem to Rome - the capital of the Empire and center of world civilization at that time. All this was according to God's plan that was given in the commission to the apostles in verse 8: *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*

The Gospels are the record of all that Jesus “*began both to do and to teach*” while He was here on this earth (v1). “*The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.*” The book of Acts reveals what Jesus continued to do through His body, the Church, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 1 tells us that Luke was the author of Acts, even though his name is not mentioned. “*The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.*” What was “*the former account,*” and who was Theophilus? If we go back to the Gospel of Luke we read, “*Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us,² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us,³ it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed*” (Luke 1:1-4). Theophilus may have been a Roman official of high rank since Luke addressed him as “Most Excellent Theophilus.” Perhaps Theophilus became a believer through the ministry of “Dr. Luke.”

So Luke, the “beloved physician,” wrote two books of the New Testament: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Both are long books. In fact, volume-wise, Luke wrote most of the New Testament - unless the apostle Paul wrote the epistle to the Hebrews. If Paul was not the author of Hebrews, Luke wrote most of the New Testament, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord ascended to heaven *visibly and bodily.*

Between the Lord’s resurrection and ascension, He appeared a number of times to His disciples over a period of forty days (v3). He appeared ***visibly and bodily*** – not in a vision, or as some kind of “spirit body” - no! The Lord was resurrected ***bodily***, and he appeared in His resurrected body on numerous occasions. He invited doubting Thomas to touch His hands and His side (John 20). He ate food in His resurrected body (Luke 24).

Notice the topic of conversation on these occasions during those forty days: “*Speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God*” (v3). The disciples certainly would have had many questions. In reference to the glorious Messianic kingdom that was predicted in the Old Testament, what was the program now? After all, the King had been rejected and crucified. But now that the Lord had been resurrected, and the Church was going to be set up, so how did all this fit in with the prophecies of the Old Testament about the coming Messianic kingdom?

The Lord must have explained to the disciples that the literal earthly kingdom would be postponed to the future. In the meantime, the Church would be formed and the gospel of God’s grace would go out to the whole world. During those

forty days, the Lord would have discussed with them the present form of the kingdom, since the King would be absent. He may have explained the Parables of the Kingdom to the disciples again to help them understand.

Notice that the Lord did not tell the disciples *when* He would return. In fact, when the Lord referred to the baptism of the Holy Spirit that would take place at Pentecost, the disciples thought that maybe that would be the time that the Lord would return and set up His earthly kingdom. After all, the prophet Joel and others had prophesied about the outpouring of God's Spirit at the time of the Messianic kingdom. But the Lord said "No." In essence He said, "*Don't* spend time trying to figure out the date of my return! Your job is to preach the gospel."

That admonition is good for all of us to hear. Why do some Christians ignore *both* of these exhortations? Some Christians try to predict the date of Christ's return, and others don't preach the gospel.

Notice that the Lord did not correct the disciples' concept of the kingdom being restored to Israel (v6). The Lord did not say something like, "Israel rejected the Messiah, so Israel is no more." And He didn't say, "The Church is the new Israel." No! Israel is still Israel, and God will fulfill the promises He made to Israel. Israel will be restored spiritually and as a nation. It will be restored as a nation, but it will not just be a secular state of Israel. There will be a spiritual restoration for Israel. Israel will be spiritually restored when the Lord returns and sets up His earthly kingdom. The disciples were right about the kingdom being restored to Israel - they were just wrong about the timing.

After forty days of many bodily appearances and teaching sessions with the disciples, the Lord ascended to Heaven in His **literal** and **material** body. "*Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight*" (v9). The cloud here was not a rain cloud – it was the "glory cloud" of the presence of the Lord! The Lord ascended to heaven visibly and bodily.

2. The Lord will return from heaven **visibly** and **bodily**.

"And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven'" (v10-11). The two men in white clothing were angels - and just maybe they were the same two angels who were at the tomb on Resurrection Sunday. We can't be sure, but it's very possible.

The angels asked the disciples why they were standing there staring up into the sky! They promised that "**this same Jesus**" would return some day, just as He went - but in the meantime the disciples were to get on with the job of the Great Commission. And that's our job as well.

We can be sure that the Lord will return – personally and bodily. The Lord will return to this earth visibly and bodily in the same way He ascended. Zechariah 14:4 says that on that day, His **feet** will **stand** on the **Mount of Olives**. The angels' point was that the very same Lord Jesus will definitely return to this earth, and it will be a **visible** return and a **bodily** return and a **personal** return. *“This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”*

This return to which the angels referred is not the Rapture of the Church. The Rapture, we believe, will take place about seven years before the “Return” of which the angels spoke. The Return referred to in Acts 1:11 is the Lord’s return to the earth to set up the postponed Messianic kingdom – a Kingdom that will last for a thousand years, according to Revelation 20. The Lord will return from heaven visibly and bodily.

Practical Application

Start in your own back yard!

Because the book of Acts is a record of the early spread of Christianity, including the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, there are a lot of principles of missionary strategy in the book of Acts. There’s one in verse 8: *“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* In other words, start in your own back yard!

The Lord’s Great Commission to believers is to go into the entire world to spread the gospel. But notice how the commission was to be carried out: begin in Jerusalem. Then move out to Judea and Samaria, and then to the end of the earth. The disciples were to begin *right where they were*. The gospel would spread from there.

In the same way, we are to start right where we are. The Lord may call you to be a missionary in another country, but it’s unlikely if you are unwilling or afraid to witness right where you are - where you live, and where you work, or where you go to school.

Do you want to be involved in spreading the gospel around the world? Start in your own back yard!