Acts 1.1–11

Forty days with the risen Jesus

Summary

Luke begins the second part of his story by summarizing the first (the Gospel of Luke) and expanding the last phase of Jesus’ earthly ministry, with the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Notes

1.1a. In the first book: The ‘first book’ refers to the Gospel of Luke, which is about ‘all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning’ until the day of his Ascension. Luke now begins the second half of his ‘orderly account’ about what Jesus did through his followers. Luke’s Gospel describes his subject: ‘the events that have been fulfilled among us’, suggesting the continuing relevance of the story (Luke 1.1).

1.1b. Theophilus: Luke follows the literary convention of the day by dedicating Luke–Acts to Theophilus, possibly a Roman official (‘most excellent’, Luke 1.3). The name means ‘lover of God’ (theo-philos) and some think that the name is a fictitious literary convention.

1.2a. Until the day when he was taken up: Verses 2–11 repeat, and partly add to, the conclusion of the first book (Luke 24.36–53).


1.2c. The apostles whom he had chosen: By ‘apostles’ Luke usually means ‘the Twelve’ (Luke 6.13–16). One glaring exception is Acts 14.4 and 14.14 where it refers to Paul and Barnabas (cf. Acts 1.21–22). The word, literally meaning ‘someone who has been sent’, can sometimes be used more broadly (Luke 11.49; John 13.16; 2 Corinthians 8.23; Philippians 2.25). In Hebrews it is used of Jesus (3.1).

1.3a. He presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs: So these disciples are ‘eyewitnesses’ (Luke 1.2) of Jesus’ resurrection. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they will soon act as its witnesses (Acts 1.8, 22; 3.15; 4.2; 5.30–32; 10.39–41; 13.31).
1.3b. **Over the course of forty days:** Only here do we learn that the risen Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples before his Ascension. In Luke 24 one gets the impression that the period was only one day. It does not mean that Jesus stayed with them throughout these 40 days but that he made frequent visitations during this period. The number 40 may be symbolic; just as Jesus prepared for his ministry for 40 days (Luke 4.1–2), now his disciples prepare for theirs by being instructed by the risen Jesus for 40 days.

1.3c. **Speaking about the kingdom of God:** In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus’ preaching focuses on the kingdom (or reign) of God. In Acts it summarizes the content of the gospel (8.12; 19.8; 20.25; 28.23, 31). Although there are some indications of its presence (Luke 17.21), it predominantly refers to the future kingdom that believers are to enter or inherit (Acts 14.22).

1.4a. **While staying with them:** The word ‘staying’ literally means ‘eating (salt) with’. Meals provide important contexts for the ministry of Jesus (Luke 5.29; 7.36; 11.37) as well as for the resurrection appearances, especially for proving the bodily resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24.30–31, 36–43). See what Peter says in Acts 10.41.

1.4b. **He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem:** Luke accords Jerusalem special importance as the salvation-historical centre: the final destination of the way of Jesus, the place of receiving the eschatological Spirit, and the birthplace of first community and its mission. The disciples naturally followed this order (1.12–14; Luke 24.52).

1.4c. **Wait there for the promise of the Father:** The promise of the Father means what the Father promised, i.e. the Spirit (2.33; Luke 24.49; John 14.16). Jesus repeats the promise in 1.8.


1.5b. **Baptized with the Holy Spirit:** This promise continues in 1.8 with more detailed information. It finds its initial fulfilment in Acts 2 (‘not many days from now’), but its validity extends to subsequent comings of the Spirit (8.14–17; 9.17; 11.16; 19.1–7).


1.6. **Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?** The disciples mean restoring Israel’s political independence. Interestingly enough, however, Jesus does not rebuke them for such a misunderstanding; he simply warns them not to concern themselves with ‘the times and periods that the Father has set by his own authority’. Instead (‘not . . . but’), they have to ‘mind their own business’; the task set before them by the risen
Jesus in 1.8. One should not press the distinction between ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the political’ too far here, since God’s sovereignty covers both.

1.8a. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth: This verse is a succinct summary of the whole book. The promise, setting the outpouring of the Spirit as the prerequisite of effective witness, recalls the preaching of Jesus at the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4.18–19). The Holy Spirit gives the disciples the power necessary for effective witnessing. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is the Spirit that takes the initiative in the Church’s witness to Jesus (e.g. Acts 8.26, 39; 10.19–20; 16.6–7). Hence the popular epithet: ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit’.

1.8b. In Jerusalem: See 2.14–36; 3.12–26; 4.1–5; 5.27–32; 7.1–56.

1.8c. In all Judea and Samaria: See 8.1, 4–40; 9.31—11.18.

1.8d. To the ends of the earth: The reference is somewhat ambiguous. It may refer to:

1 the end of the inhabited world (geographically);
2 Paul’s arrival in Rome (politically, 28.16); or
3 the conversion of the Gentiles (racially, 10.1—11.18).

Luke 24.47 renders (2) most likely. In this sense it provides a corrective to the disciples’ nationalistic attitude.

1.9a. As they were watching: In vv. 9–11 Luke emphasizes that the disciples saw the Ascension of Jesus no less than five times, also stating: ‘out of their sight’; ‘they were gazing up towards heaven’; ‘stand looking up towards heaven’; ‘as you saw him go into heaven’.

1.9b. He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight: Both are related to each other. In the Bible the ‘cloud’ often signifies divine presence (Exodus 19.9, 16; 24.15–16; 34.5; Daniel 7.13; Revelation 1.7). So what Luke means is that Jesus has now ‘entered into his glory’ (Luke 24.26) and is ‘exalted at the right hand of God’ (Acts 2.33). Jesus’ Ascension marks the end of his resurrection visitations (appearing and disappearing).

1.10. Two men in white robes: They are probably angels. They remind us of the ‘two men in dazzling clothes’ in Luke 24.4, as well as Moses and Elijah conversing with Jesus on a mountain (Luke 9.30–31). Luke views them as witnesses (Deuteronomy 19.15) to Jesus’ resurrection and his future parousia, i.e. the second coming.

1.11a. Men of Galilee: This reference seems to be related to one of the apostolic qualifications set down in 1.21–22. Mere ‘standing’ and ‘looking up towards heaven’ is not a proper thing to do at this point of time; they should set to the task entrusted to them by Jesus. Just as the two women
returned ‘from the tomb’ and reported what they saw to the disciples (Luke 24.9), so now these Galileans should return ‘to Jerusalem’ (v. 12) and begin to obey the orders given by Jesus.

1.11b. This Jesus . . . will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven: Jesus will come as the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven (Daniel 7.13), bringing the whole of history to its proper end (Mark 13.26; 14.62). Yet Jesus continues to work with his disciples through his Spirit, as the whole of Acts makes clear. In that sense, the Ascension signifies the beginning of the reign of Christ which will last until the time of final consummation.

Interpretation

Bridging the Gospel and Acts

Luke sets out to write an ‘orderly account’ of the ‘events that have been fulfilled among us’ to convince Theophilus of the truth of the Christian gospel he has learned (Luke 1.1–4). In the Gospel of Luke, the first of his two-volume project, Luke wrote ‘all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven’ (Acts 1.1–2, NIV). Now in the second part of this account, he describes how the apostles, commissioned by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, continued what Jesus himself began.

Acts of the Apostles, dedicated to the same Theophilus, begins with a brief résumé of the first volume (1.1–2). Luke then proceeds to recount those stories originally told at the conclusion of the Gospel (Luke 24). But as he does so, he also adds some new facts and explanations necessary for the unfolding of the new story. In this way the last phase of the Gospel grows smoothly into the beginning of Acts. The point is: we are reading the latter part of one and the same story.

Certainty of the resurrection

This bridging section highlights a few themes which will dominate the book. First, the risen Jesus has left the apostles with no shred of doubt about the reality of his resurrection. It is already clear in Luke 24, but Luke further adds that Jesus convinced them ‘by many convincing proofs’ over the long period of 40 days. He spoke to them about the kingdom of God, just as he had done in his earthly ministry, before his suffering. At the Ascension too, Luke repeatedly emphasizes that the disciples saw Jesus leave with their own eyes. In the following stories, the apostles will be testifying to the resurrection of Jesus (1.22), even at the cost of their lives. So they need such assurance, for otherwise they will not be able to proclaim its truth so boldly (cf. 1 John 1.1–4).

Acts of the Holy Spirit

The importance of the Holy Spirit also stands out quite clearly. The risen Jesus tells his disciples to wait for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit
before they set to work as his witnesses. Even such extensive and intensive instruction by the risen Jesus is not enough; they have to be ‘clothed with power from on high’ through the Holy Spirit (Luke 24.49). Thus what we hear in Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit empowers and guides the disciples in their work of witnessing to the risen Jesus. Jesus began his ministry with the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4.18); so will his disciples. In this sense we can say that the story of Acts still continues in the lives of faithful Christians, including ourselves.

The spread of the gospel
The empowered disciples were to proclaim the gospel ‘in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (1.8). This did not mean just crossing rivers and climbing mountains but also taking down the barrier of racial prejudice, especially on the part of the Jews. Yet, this was not an easy thing to do, as we will see over and over again in the following chapters of the book.

Witnesses need power
We should also note Luke’s interest in power. His purpose for writing is to show the ‘truth’ or ‘certainty’ (NIV) of the Christian gospel (Luke 1.4). But this truth cannot be proven by mere words; it also takes power. Luke repeatedly stresses that the apostles’ confident testimony to Jesus was accompanied by ‘many wonders and signs’ (Acts 2.43; 3.1–10; 4.13–14, 29–30; 5.12; 6.8). This recapitulates the pattern found in Jesus himself (10.38). We also remember that Paul defines the gospel in terms of the ‘power of God’ and tells us how Christ works through him ‘with words and deeds’ (Romans 1.16; 15.18). In a way, this is the biggest question ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit’ poses before us modern Christians: how effective are we in demonstrating the power of the name of Jesus?

STUDY SUGGESTIONS

Word study

1 What is the meaning of ‘power’ in the New Testament?

2 What did Jesus say about the ‘kingdom of God’ in the Gospel of Luke?

Review of content

3 How does Luke summarize the content of ‘the first book’?

4 What promises did Jesus make to his disciples?
5 Why do the disciples need the gift of the Holy Spirit?
6 What is the intent of the two men’s question?

Bible study

7 Read Matthew 3.11–12; Mark 1.7–8; Luke 3.15–17; Acts 2.33. What does it mean that Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit?
8 In both Luke 17.21–22 and Acts 1.6–8, Jesus receives questions about the ‘time’ of the kingdom. Compare the answers Jesus gives. How are they similar to or different from each other?

Discussion and application

9 The disciples asked Jesus about the ‘time’ but he said, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods’ (1.7). Instead he drew their attention to what they would have to do. Can you think of any situations or incidents around you where this phrase might apply?
10 Luke says that Jesus ‘was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight’ (1.9). How are we to understand this depiction of Jesus’ Ascension?
11 What are the ways in which the power of the gospel becomes manifest in our lives? And what are the barriers to effective witness?