

Focus

Acts 1:1-11 on September 13, 2020

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

Please pray, then read Acts 1:1-11 before going further in this transcript.

“Acts” is a curious title for a book of the Bible. Whose acts are we talking about here? Most commonly, we probably think of the “Acts of the Apostles.” However, that’s a little misleading, because even though the book of Acts clearly begins with a list of the 12 Apostles in chapter 1, the fact is, we’ll only learn about a few of these Apostles. By the time we get to chapter 2, we are not told much more about most of them. In fact, we really only hear about Peter, James, and John. And the only thing that we read about James is that he is martyred for his faith.¹ We hear quite a bit about the ministry of Peter and John. But other than that, none of the rest of the 12 is ever mentioned again, by name, in the book of Acts. The book of Acts will actually tell us about quite a few different Christ-followers who WEREN’T Apostles. We’ll learn about other “Fully Devoted Followers” of Jesus. People like Stephen, Philip, Lydia, Priscilla/Aquilla, Cornelius, and so on. As we travel through the book of Acts, we’ll learn about their acts (or we could say “actions”).

John Stott gives this helpful introduction to the book of Acts: “[It’s good for every local church] to compare itself with the church of the first [century], and to seek to recapture something of its confidence, enthusiasm, vision and power.... At the same time, we must be realistic. There is a danger lest we romanticize the early church, speaking of it with bated breath, as if it had no blemishes. For then we shall miss the rivalries, hypocrisies, immoralities, and heresies which troubled the church then as now. Nevertheless, one thing is certain. Christ’s church had been overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, who thrust it out to witness.”²

And this is an important insight for each and every Christ-follower to note. As important as the 12 Apostles are and were to Christianity, God’s agenda has never been about selecting just a few elite people to represent Him. God chooses all levels of talent and experience. He gives each and every believer access to the same HS and commissions every one of us to be His witnesses in this world. In other words, anyone whom God calls to salvation, He equips for Christian service and ministry. With this in mind, I’ve titled our new sermon series on the book of Acts, “Fully Devoted Followers.” As we go on this journey, we’re going to learn more about how God works in/through all kinds of men/women to bring His message of salvation to all peoples, living on every corner of the planet.

Please open your Bible to Acts 1:1. Acts records for us the true story of various “Fully Devoted Followers” of Jesus. “Fully Devoted Followers” who were called to FOCUS on their gospel witness.

A focus on our gospel witness means that we should...

1. Understand the gospel’s continuing ministry. Acts is the continuing sequel to Luke’s Gospel. Effectively, this is “part 2” of Luke’s report to Theophilus. Acts 1:1 begins, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach.” Here the author, Luke, is referring to the other book of the Bible that he wrote, the Gospel of Luke. But Luke is also telling us something very important: Jesus’ ministry wasn’t done when He completed His earthly ministry. Now, just to be very clear, certainly He was finished purchasing our salvation through His death/burial/resurrection; but after His ascension, in many ways, Jesus’ ministry was just getting started! Jesus Himself predicted this back in John 14:12, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”³ In other words, those who would come to believe in Jesus after His return to the Father in heaven, would continue on with the work of Jesus. Brother or Sister in Christ, that’s you and me! Even though Jesus’ glorified body has ascended up into heaven, it’s accurate for us to say, that the book of Acts is “the continuing ministry of Jesus.”⁴ Acts continues the story of God’s redemptive plan for mankind. To

¹ See Acts 12:2.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, pp. 5-6.

³ Also consider Jesus words to Peter in Matthew 16:18, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

⁴ Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Christian Focus Publications, Scotland, 2018, p. Acts 1:1-5.

put it another way, the Gospel of Luke is about what Jesus BEGAN to do and teach. The book of Acts is about what Jesus CONTINUES to do and teach, even right up to our present day in 2020.

The author of both of these books of the Bible is Luke. Luke was a Gentile Dr. and a fellow missionary with Paul. In both books, he is writing for Theophilus, who was also a Gentile.⁵ Back in Luke 1:3-4, Luke tells us, "...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." In other words, Luke's Gospel and Luke's book of Acts are written from a Gentile perspective with a Gentile readership in mind. Therefore, since most of us listening to this message are Gentiles, Acts is perfectly designed to help us learn about "the gospel's continuing ministry." A focus on our gospel witness also means that we should...

2. Guard against gospel distractions. Right when Jesus is giving His followers His final, vital instructions, right before His ascension, they are on the brink of becoming distracted, by something less important.⁶ Acts 1:6 tells us, "Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" One Study Bible notes, "Like their fellow [Jews], they were looking for deliverance of the people of Israel from foreign domination and for the establishment of an earthly kingdom. [Jesus'] reference to the coming of the Spirit had caused them to wonder if the new age was about to dawn."⁷ Another Study Bible adds that "...the disciples are thinking of the kingdom of Israel in nationalistic terms. While Jesus does not deny the future consummation of the kingdom, the 'times or dates' are not to be their concern. Their role is to complete Jesus' mission by taking the message of salvation to the ends of the earth."⁸ You see they wanted to focus on their particular nation, but Jesus was calling them to have a vision for all nations, for the whole world.

Have you ever become distracted from your gospel witness by some other area of theology; perhaps even by an overemphasis on the End Times? It's not that the End Times themselves are unimportant, but here, Jesus is warning them, that they are LESS important than the main thing He is trying to convey before His ascension. Let me share an illustration of this from my own life: Do you remember shopping for groceries before they invented UPC codes? UPC codes go back as far as the mid-70s but didn't really come into popular use until the 1980s or so. Now, some of us who are a bit younger may not realize, that before UPC codes, each individual item's price had to be manually entered into the cash register. Think calculator. (You can probably imagine just how slow and labor-intensive this used to be! 1.27 enter, 2.99 enter, 8.57 enter, and so on...)

Personally, I remember two particular things about when UPC codes first became popular in the United States. One has to do with the President of our country at the time. You probably already realize this, but most US presidents don't shop for their own groceries like you and I do. Apparently, one day, for whatever reason, the President happened to be in a grocery store.⁹ Reportedly, when he saw the bar code scanner, he was amazed at this "new" technology, that had been out for quite a few years by that time! Now, as it turns out, the details of this story later clarified that the President wasn't quite as "out of touch" with the real world, as the initial report suggested. None-the-less, I've never forgotten that story.

The other thing that I remember about UPC Codes was the knee-jerk reaction of some Christians, who immediately jumped to the conclusion that UPC bar codes were the "mark of the beast" from the

⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1695.

⁶ Some of us are particularly gifted at managing distractions through multitasking. Multitasking can be a real strength in many situations. There are lots of different responsibilities and opportunities that we juggle in this life. Perhaps you can picture the busy parent who is caring for a few young children, trying to help their aging parents, managing their career, keeping the lawn mowed, ministering to a close friend who's going through a time of crisis, and somehow squeezing in time for personal devotions. All of this, while navigating the new realities of COVID-19! To some degree, if we don't learn to juggle lots of different things at the same time, we aren't going to make it very far. It's hard to survive, let alone thrive, if we can't manage more than one thing at a time. That said, some of us are particularly good at managing distractions by single-tasking. Single-tasking can be a real strength in many situations. There are times when we really need to focus on just one thing. When a paramedic shows up at the scene of an accident, we certainly hope that he/she will be focused on the task at hand. Single-tasking is also important when doing things like driving a car, or being a good listener for our significant other, or worshipping the LORD on Sunday morning. Single-tasking can be a real strength in many situations, including our focus on our gospel witness... BUT, it's SO easy for us to become distracted from those few things that are truly most important in this life.

⁷ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1825 footnote on Acts 1:6.

⁸ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2215 footnote on Acts 1:6-7.

⁹ <https://apnews.com/61f29d10e27140b0b108d8e12b64b839>

book of Revelation.¹⁰ Public statements were made that UPC codes were a “clear sign” that the times/dates for End Times prophecy were being fulfilled in our day and age. Now mind you, this was back in the 1980s! Why do I share this? Simply to illustrate, that much like the early disciples, many of us are eager for the Lord’s return. And rightly so, we SHOULD be eager. But, rather than allowing that eagerness to distract us, let’s listen to Jesus.¹¹ Let’s pay attention to Acts 1:8, “you will be my witnesses.” Let’s allow our eagerness for Christ’s return to fuel our passion for winning the spiritually lost. Let’s let our lights shine. Let’s love God and love people so radically and so sacrificially, that people are drawn to Jesus.

Now, a few of us might still be thinking, “But Pastor Jerry, the End Times fulfillments that are happening in our world today are SO exciting! Just think about what’s been happening in Russia lately. Just think about Jerusalem being recognized as Israel’s capital.¹² Just think about microchip technology, how far can we really be from the “Mark of the Beast”? Brother or Sister in Christ, it’s fine to wonder about these things. It’s reasonable that we should keep watch for the Lord’s return.¹³ We actually talked about this back in March, when we studied Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24-25. BUT ironically, just like the early Apostles, our fascination with the End Times can become a dangerous distraction, from what our most important FOCUS should be: our gospel witness.¹⁴ We need to “guard against gospel distractions” of all kinds. As Jesus was ascending into heaven, two angels appeared and asked an interesting question: Acts 1:11 tells us, “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?” Now to me, it sure seems reasonable that they’d want to watch Jesus’ ascend up into heaven. I mean, what an INCREDIBLE eye-witness experience! And yet, this question from the two angels is informative for us today. “Why are we standing around looking into the sky?” Didn’t Jesus just leave us with some very clear instructions to FOCUS on? “You will be my WITNESSES.” And that leads us right into our 3rd and final point. A focus on our gospel witness means that we should...

3. Actively be a witness for Jesus. In Acts 1:8 Jesus declares, “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 is a key verse for the entire book of Acts. In fact, it’s basically an outline for the entire 28 chapters:¹⁵ In other words, in the first several chapters, their gospel witness begins, centered in Jerusalem. But very soon after that, we see their witness spreading out beyond the city to the entire region of Judea and then as far as Samaria. And in a relatively short matter of time after that, their witness goes on to spread to the very ends of the earth. Eventually, even to Bemidji, MN and beyond! I bet most of us can remember the geographic location of where we came to faith in Christ. Most of us probably weren’t in Jerusalem, or Judea or Samaria. We were more likely somewhere in the “ends of the earth.” Aren’t you glad that the message got across the ocean and into whatever state you were living in, where you heard and responded to the message of salvation?

To be fair, Acts 1:8 is initially directed at the Apostles; and I’m pretty sure that none of us listening to this sermon are Apostles. But any of us who are following Christ, have been called to be His ambassadors, wherever we happen to live in this world. We’ve been given the same Great Commission: to “go and make disciples of all nations.”¹⁶ Sometimes that gospel witness comes in the form of serving in organized ministries like Kids Min, Youth Ministry, or on a short-term mission trip. Other times, that gospel witness comes in the form of living out our daily lives for Jesus. Our day-in/day-out interactions with our neighbors, classmates, and fellow community members.

We’re going to talk about the Holy Spirit a lot more in the weeks to come, but let’s not miss a VITAL component to our gospel witness: the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Consider Jesus’ words

¹⁰ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/a-scan-of-wealth-and-taste/>

¹¹ Earlier this week I listened to a podcast by Phil Vischer called The Holy Post. He shared a story about his old college roommate, who rushed off to quickly get married, right after reading a book about End Times fulfillment. He was so convinced that Jesus was returning soon, that he didn’t want to risk missing out on getting married. Sadly, Vischer reports that shortly after this rush to marriage, his roommate and his new bride ended up getting divorced, due to a poorly constructed spousal match.

¹² Here is one perspective <https://www.marshallindependent.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/2020/08/revelation-is-unfolding-right-before-us/>

¹³ See Matthew 24:42 and consider the sermons from Matthew 24-25 back in March of 2020.

¹⁴ 2 Peter 3:11-12 speaks to this FOCUS, “...You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming....”

¹⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1825 footnote on Acts 1:8.

¹⁶ Matthew 28:18-20 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-20.

in Acts 1:4, "...Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about." In other words, DON'T think that you need to be a gospel witness on your OWN strength. DON'T be intimidated by your own lack of strength; rather, depend on God's strength. Of course, Christ-followers today are no longer waiting in Jerusalem for the HS to arrive. We live in the days after Pentecost and we received the HS on the day of our salvation. But, that doesn't mean that we are any less dependent on the Holy Spirit than the Apostles were. Just like these 12 men, we need to allow the power of the Holy Spirit to enable our witness.¹⁷ Let me state this plainly: we are powerless apart from the Holy Spirit. We are wasting our time and other people's time if we try to share the Good News in our own power.¹⁸ Just like the early Apostles, we are desperately dependent on the empowerment of God's Spirit, in order to have an effective Christian witness. This is a good reason for all of us to come to our prayer meeting on the 2nd Sunday of each month.

Let me close by sharing one of my favorite Bible verses. It's a verse where Jesus prays for ALL believers. Not just for the believers who were there with Him, 2,000 years ago, but for those who would come to believe in Him, years later. Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus prays in John 17:20-21, "...I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Jesus' prayer included praying for you and me. He prayed that those of us, who would come to believe in Jesus in the future, would be unified. And that THAT unity, would help the world believe that the Heavenly Father sent His Son.

In addition to this beautiful picture of our oneness in Christ, these verses also anticipate the progression of how our gospel witness would spread. Jesus knew that the gospel witness of the early church, would bring people in the future to faith in Him. In other words, each one of us, has come to know Jesus through the gospel witness of someone else. Jesus had us in mind when He prayed this prayer. Part of that prayer, was knowing that we ourselves would come to believe. But, another part of that prayer, was knowing that we ourselves would also then become His gospel witnesses, for the salvation of still others.

That we'd "*understand the gospel's continuing ministry*" through us.

That we'd "*guard against gospel distractions*" in our own lives.

That we'd "*actively be a witness for Jesus.*"

Brother or Sister in Christ, we need to FOCUS on our gospel witness!

¹⁷ In John 15:5 Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

¹⁸ This is why we need to pray. 2nd Sunday Prayer gathers each month at 6:30 p.m.