

ACTS: THE SEQUEL

CHAPTER ONE

We have all seen movie sequels. Unfortunately, many times, the sequel fails to live up to its billing. The sequel often pales in comparison to the first movie. There are some exceptions of course – and we all have our opinions as to whether or not the second or even third movie is as good. But today we begin our study of the book of Acts. And this book, in fact is a sequel. But I don't believe there should be any argument as to whether or not it is as good as its prequel – the Gospel of Luke.

I believe Luke wants us to see the book of Acts in at least two ways, which will lead us into a third way or level. First of all, Acts is the story of the early church. It is a history – though a selective one. You can't write down everything that happens on a daily basis. If you did, you will have quickly filled all the pages of your notebook. The book of Acts is already the longest book in the NT, spanning a period of about 30 years. In fact, it is so long that it would have reached the limits of just how long a scroll could be.

Secondly, Luke wants us to read Acts all the way through and see that it is a “play” of sorts, to continue our movie/ play analogy where Jesus is the main character, even though, if the narrative were being played out on a stage, we wouldn't see Jesus in too many scenes past the opening act. We will see the Holy Spirit moving throughout the play, but the role of the Spirit is to always point back to Jesus. So, while the main characters in the narrative are primarily Peter and Paul – all they do and say points to Jesus and His work which leads to a kingdom, His kingdom.

And if we see these two layers of the book, then we have to see a third layer in which we to have a part to play. Because Jesus gives the apostles marching orders – orders that we also have and are to carry out within our day and time. So, if we read carefully, we will see that we are quickly thrust into the mix ourselves. There is early church history – history which going on still today. Jesus and His kingdom are still the focus of all it and we are the actors in this narrative as it unfolds in our day and time.

Read Luke 24

Now begin Acts chapter one.

1 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.

In the grand scheme of things, things had probably settled down a bit in Jerusalem after Passover and Jesus' crucifixion. There are 50 days between Passover and the feast of Pentecost. And we are now in that 50-day period between the two feasts. The Roman authorities are pretty happy that things have been kept to a dull roar in this time. The Jewish powers that be are most likely happy with themselves. As far they are concerned, they have avoided the runaway freight train of an heretical sect. Jesus is dead in their eyes. Any hint of scandal has been done away with through intimidation and/ or bribery. The disciples of this Galilean rabbi are keeping things on the down-low. They are keeping a low

profile. Hopefully, they have all gone back to fishing or tax collecting and will fall back into the status quo of daily life in Israel.

But though that is the way they see it, they are mistaken. Jesus didn't stay in the grave and His followers were at that very time, gathered together in an upper room where Jesus had returned to instruct them before the next wave of the operation gets into motion.

Jesus appeared to them for forty days. This number is important. Forty, when used in the Bible usually refers to a time of testing. We see it in the story of Noah. We see it in Jesus' own trials. At this point, the apostles are feeling a bit tested. After all, they still aren't sure what is really about to happen. But they do know Jesus won't be with them in person, much longer. And this would cause anyone a great deal of anxiety. If you have ever been part of a group with a great, charismatic leader, one who always knows what to do and say, you know the gut-wrenching you feeling you get when you find out they will soon no longer be with you. The immediate questions are, "What are we going to do? Who will replace this person whose lead we have been following all these years?"

I imagine there was a great deal of consternation and anxiety. But Jesus calms them by trying to explain the kingdom to them. And the kingdom is the basis of their mission. We just read that in verse three. And we see the question of the kingdom bring itself to the fore once again.

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.”

In verses four and five, Jesus tells them that they can't just go out randomly through the streets teaching and preaching the kingdom. They must wait there in Jerusalem until they are given power from on high. Unfortunately, there are many who believe that once they know a little about Jesus that they can just go out without any marching orders or the tools to complete their mission. While I commend the zeal of people like this, and I pray more of us have that sort of zeal, there was a reason Jesus told them to wait. And that reason was that they were still not capable of doing what they had to do. First of all, as we will read in the next verses, they still don't have a firm grasp as to what and how the kingdom operates. And, they were still scared and in shock from the fact that Jesus was going to leave them once again. There had to be something, indeed someone to fill the vacuum that would form when Jesus ascended. That person would be the Holy Spirit. And He would come in a mighty way. Once again, as they were all in the upper room listening to Jesus, there was a great deal of tension, concern and uncertainty. We can see this by what we read in the next few verses.

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The first question of which we read is, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

That question, and more importantly their misunderstanding of the kingdom still plays in Christian circles today. You see, they were basing their understanding of God’s kingdom on their understanding of worldly kingdoms. In their minds, they thought of Jesus like King David – not only as an earthly king, but they also thought of Jesus taking the kingdom sort of like David did. If you remember, David didn’t just ascend the throne of Israel. He was a “king in waiting” of sorts for a few years as he and his rag-tag band of followers hid in caves, running from Saul, until Saul’s death when it was time for David to take the throne. They thought this was the sort of thing for which they had signed on when they began following Jesus. This is why some of them had asked Jesus for chief positions in His government. But the truth is that they were envisioning the wrong idea of a kingdom – at least at this time.

You see, the kingdom is one of the heavenly sphere. In that day, the Jews didn’t see Heaven as some place far away beyond the edges of the universe. When Jesus ascended, He wasn’t taken away in a sort of tractor beam like we see in Star Trek. He wasn’t seen to be leaving for the vast outer reaches of the universe. For them, the temple was the place where Heaven and earth came

together. In some strange way, at the temple, heaven and earth interlocked or overlapped. We would describe this in our more modern terms as two dimensions coming together. We see this in the language used when speaking of Jesus' "appearing." The word is used of one who peeks out from behind a curtain.

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."

In Matthew 24, Jesus spoke of his "coming." We tend to always link that with His Parousia, the Greek word used for His Second coming. But about half-way through the chapter Jesus changes terms, almost in mid-sentence. He switches from Parousia to erchomai. And He does this by quoting Daniel chapter seven, where we read of, "One like to Son of Man **coming** to the ancient of days in the throne." And Jesus continues to use that same word for the duration of the chapter. Both words are translated, "coming" but they refer to two different directions. Parousia refers to Jesus' second coming, whereas erchomai refers to His enthronement in Heaven. You see, at His ascension, Jesus was enthroned and a new kingdom was inaugurated. And it is in the book of Acts that we see this new kingdom and how it is to begin. Jesus has to steer them into a new way of thinking about the kingdom. And we have to be steered in that same direction. Yes, there will come a time when Jesus will return to set everything straight, but until then, we have a purpose and a vocation. Our home is not Heaven. If we read Revelation, we see that our home is actually a new earth. But until that happens, we are to spread

the kingdom, give a glimpse of what that looks like, here on earth.

The Jews saw the earth as part of a good, albeit tainted creation. Heaven and earth were part of the same creation, they were/ are interwoven. Go back to the idea of two dimensions. And although it is hard for us to grasp, hopefully, as we go through the book of Acts we will begin to see it as they eventually came to see it also.

Are we there yet?

It isn't for you to concern yourselves with the timetable. I wish modern Christians would heed these words. Jesus is saying, "You have a job to do. I've given you your orders, now get busy and don't concern yourselves with when things will end. There is plenty to do until that time comes."

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey. 13 And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. 14 These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

15 And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, 16 "Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; 17 for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry."

18 (Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity;

and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out. 19 And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, Akel Dama, that is, Field of Blood.)

20 “For it is written in the Book of Psalms:

“Let his dwelling place be desolate,

And let no one live in it’; and,

‘Let another take his office.’

21 “Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”

23 And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen 25 to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.” 26 And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

We should be familiar with Judas and his end. He hanged himself and then fell from his branch, his rotting corpse bursting when he hit the ground. And now he had to be replaced. Peter quotes the Psalms as speaking of this very thing, and the need to replace him. But why the need? There were plenty of people in the room – as many as 120 followers of Jesus were in the immediate area at least. The number 12 was very important to them and should serve to remind us of the context in which they lived. The church, as Jesus said, would be birthed in Jerusalem, where the vast majority, at the very least, were Jewish. The Gospel, the kingdom had to be preached to them first. The kingdom was/ is the story of

a re-constituted Israel. Israel had 12 tribes and this is why Jesus chose 12 apostles- one “representing” in a sense, each of the 12 tribes. That typology went a long way in their world to link the story of Eden, the call of Abraham, the exodus, the temple and the presence of God to the Gospel of the kingdom. That number and all that went along with it was and I would argue is important to the entirety of the NT.

Now that Judas had been replaced, all that was lacking was the person and power of the Holy Spirit on whom they were waiting.

The book of Acts doesn't have a true ending. It is sort of open-ended. And the book of Acts is the same way. There is a purpose in that. Luke didn't have a true ending because it had a sequel. The book of Acts didn't have an ending because the mission was to continue beyond the Apostle Paul reaching Rome. The church continues to grow and spread the Gospel around the world. The church is spoken of as the new Israel. We, as individuals are spoken of as temples of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom continues to spread around the earth. Every time a new believer is born, another temple takes up sacred space. And in this, we see a type, a cloudy version of what things will be like when Jesus returns to set things straight.

We have a part in this! We are blessed to have a part in this! We, through the work of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit are now able to carry out the dominion mandate of which Adam Eve failed. We are able to carry out what ancient Israel as a nation was supposed to have done. We have a part in the sequel. I pray that in 2020, we will take that to heart and that the power of the Holy Spirit will move us to do what Peter, Paul and the others of whom we will read in the book Acts did, in our contexts, our spheres of

influence.

God bless...