

## Acts 1 – 1-11 Jesus taken up into heaven

*1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup> For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>6</sup> Then they gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' <sup>7</sup> He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> 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.' <sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. <sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'*

We're going to look at Acts chapter 1 for the next few weeks which will take us up to Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell on the believers – 50 days after Easter.

The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke, who was not a disciple of Jesus when he was alive. He wrote the Gospel of Luke having heard what happened from some of the eleven disciples and others who were eye witnesses of the events described. In this second book, again dedicated to Theophilus (lover of God), the narrative continues from where it left off in Luke's Gospel. The author greatly admired the apostle Paul and is believed to have accompanied him on some of his journeys because the first chapters tell the story of the early church, and then in chapter 16 "we" did this and "we" did that, creeps in, suggesting Luke was there himself. The book is written probably after Paul was in Rome and probably shortly after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, but some date it 62AD. While Luke portrays the impact the early church had and in particular Paul's journeys, his picture of the early church is very positive, with its enemy being the Jews and not the Romans. This book leaves out the warnings and negative things that Paul mentions in his letters to various churches, which were written around the same time.

Some may think that the book would be better entitled "Acts of the Holy Spirit", rather than what the apostles did. It is meant to be a narrative of events in the right order. This is written in the same manner as Luke's Gospel, which begins:

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye witnesses and servants of the Word. <sup>3</sup> With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write **an orderly account** for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

Luke begins Acts by saying he revealed all that Jesus did and taught until he was taken up to heaven, and gave instructions to the eleven remaining disciples, now named as apostles. All through the gospels the twelve are referred to as disciples, which means learners, trainees or pupils, who follow the teaching of a master. Here in verse 2 the eleven are referred to as apostles which means those who are sent off, usually on a mission with a message of some sort. This change of emphasis indicates from the start that Luke wants to portray the former disciples as being trained up and

given a new role to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, now that Jesus was no longer on earth to do it himself.

*<sup>3</sup>After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*

Luke wants to emphasise that Jesus was alive and walked on earth after his crucifixion and was seen by many witnesses. Luke needs to prove Jesus is alive and had around 40 days to reveal himself and teach. He had things to say which unfortunately are barely recorded. Matthew has 5 verses, Mark has 12 verses, Luke 41 verses in the last chapter of their Gospels and John 1½ chapters on what Jesus said and did after his resurrection. Luke repeats what he already wrote in his first book in these 11 verses, but it's not quite the same. Luke 16: 44-53:

*He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. <sup>46</sup> He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." <sup>50</sup> When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. <sup>53</sup> And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

Here Jesus refers to the Old Testament which points to him from the start in Genesis, the first book of Moses, to prophetic books and psalms. In Acts, it just says in verse 3 that he spoke about the kingdom of God. In verses 4 and 5 Jesus explains what will happen:

*On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup> For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'*

Here the baptism of the Holy Spirit is promised, while the Gospel says the disciples will be "clothed with power from on high". This power or "dunamis" is the power to do supernatural signs and wonders, miracles of healing, have knowledge of human minds and thoughts, and the ability to communicate effectively the message God wants people to hear. The literal Greek says "but you (plural) in Spirit will be baptised Holy, not after many days". (*after not many days*). This at first glance may appear to have a different meaning, but both the words Spirit and Holy are dative singular agreeing with each other and so are linked even though separated by a verb. Greek word order is not quite the same as English, so words can be jumbled up a bit so long as they are matched by case endings rather than being next to each other. So the promise was to be baptised (which means dunked, put under water, drenched) in the Holy Spirit in the same way water would drench you in John the Baptist's water baptism. Being drenched gives this a clearer meaning as it conveys being covered and filled with the Spirit of God; it conveys a fullness lost by centuries of theological use of the word "baptise", which has been diminished to being used when a baby is being sprinkled and blessed as opposed to falling under the control and influence of the Spirit of God himself. At this time none of the disciples really knew what Jesus was talking about, and that remains the case with so many who have never experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which we'll be looking at in a couple of weeks' time at Pentecost. We can see from verse 6 how the disciples still didn't understand that the kingdom of God was not an earthly kingdom. Despite all they had experienced

the eleven still had this mindset that the Messiah would restore Israel to its glory days in the time of Solomon: an independent, powerful, God fearing kingdom of Israelites who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Temple and where supernatural help from God maintained peace, stability and prosperity.

*<sup>6</sup> Then they gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'*

Had the disciples learnt nothing? They've asked this question before and it hadn't sunk in. Jesus replies in a patient but enigmatic way which is a rebuke and a promise of power to equip them on their mission – the same mission mentioned in the Gospels that they will be witnesses of Jesus and not rulers of a new kingdom. The times and dates for the kingdom of God to be established are not for us to know, but we do know that it will come as revealed in the Revelation of John, and the words of Jesus himself.

*<sup>7</sup> He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> 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.'*

The disciples had faith in Jesus which as we saw during the arrest almost evaporated, but seeing him alive after he'd been crucified, strengthened their faith in him. They remained unsure of what they had to do, despite Jesus telling them what their mission was. In modern terms, it requires the willingness to depend on Jesus for your existence. We had Daniel Gitau visit last week, and he has for the last 35 years had no salary, no job other than giving the Gospel and looking after people in need. He has no pension scheme, and for much of the time has no money in his pocket to pay for anything: he survives by faith in Jesus. There are others who live by faith in the same way and who depend on what they receive from the wider church to support themselves. Over the centuries the Church has amassed buildings, lands, investments, and most denominations provide those entrusted to work full time with salaries, pensions and housing. There is security of sorts. In the early church none of this existed, and probably as we shall see from church history, it wasn't really part of the plan, though for worshippers to gather, as we do here, having somewhere to worship is better than meeting in people's houses or outside when it's cold and raining. The disciples had it in mind that to worship God, the Temple in Jerusalem was the place to be, and that mindset with a dedicated place of worship, like the synagogues throughout Israel, has been carried over into the Church. For most of us, to give up our day job without having any dependable source of income is pretty scary: in fact too scary for most of us to even contemplate. For the disciples - fishermen from Galilee, living high up in the hills around Jerusalem away from the sea with no job, no income, no housing, depending on the kindness of strangers and relatives - what Jesus was asking was pretty scary, even though for the past three years travelling with Jesus, they had seen that they had food and clothing and places to sleep without having to do very much fishing. No wonder they preferred thinking that they might be part of elite who would be ruling in the new kingdom under the authority of Jesus.

*<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*

*<sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'*

Jesus tells them their mission and promptly leaves, ascending to heaven. Two angels tell them to stop looking up and remember Jesus will return. Again, an enigmatic or puzzling statement. In Matthew 24 Jesus explained what would happen:

<sup>3</sup> *As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"*

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. <sup>5</sup> For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. <sup>6</sup> You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. <sup>7</sup> Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. <sup>8</sup> All these are the beginning of birth pains. <sup>9</sup> "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. <sup>10</sup> At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, <sup>11</sup> and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. <sup>12</sup> Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, <sup>13</sup> but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. <sup>14</sup> And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. <sup>15</sup> "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— <sup>16</sup> then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. <sup>17</sup> Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. <sup>18</sup> Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. <sup>19</sup> How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! <sup>20</sup> Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. <sup>21</sup> For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equalled again.*

<sup>22</sup> *"If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. <sup>23</sup> At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. <sup>24</sup> For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. <sup>25</sup> See, I have told you ahead of time. <sup>26</sup> "So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. <sup>27</sup> For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup> Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.*

<sup>29</sup> *"Immediately after the distress of those days "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.' (Isaiah 13)*

<sup>30</sup> *"Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup> And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. <sup>32</sup> "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup> Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. <sup>34</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. <sup>36</sup> "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup> Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>42</sup> "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. <sup>43</sup> But understand this: If the owner of the*

*house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*

There's a lot in this passage in Matthew 24, which you might read at home. There are many commentaries on these words and how they relate to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD70 and beyond to the present day and the future. A key verse is verse 14 of Matthew 24: *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* When all in the world have heard the Gospel, Jesus will return. Many have not heard the Gospel in Asia and North Africa because of other religions and Communism. Increasingly many in the rest of the world have not heard it either because of secularism, though something about Jesus will be made known to all in most European, Australasian and American countries. Perhaps the disciples remembered this, but in all likelihood it wasn't fresh in their minds as they were looking up to see Jesus disappear behind a cloud. Yet after the two angels spoke, it will have come back to them, and they went away joyfully anticipating what was to come. It says in Luke Gospel 24:50-52 <sup>50</sup> *When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.*

Next week we'll look at what happens next (but before Pentecost) in Acts 1:12-26.

Let's pray.