



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613
(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG
WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

The Call to Bear Witness

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Pr. Tim Boettger

Acts 1:1-11 (ESV)

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

It is great to have you all with us. We're just diving into this new series called *Unstoppable*, the unstoppable work of Christ in the world and the work of building His church in the world. And we're looking at this era in history—actually, that is our era—that we're living in.

We went through an entire Bible overview before Easter, and we just wrapped that up. We covered the Old Testament, which was a different time, an old covenant that God had with His people, and then the arrival of Christ. We just celebrated Easter and, of course, the work of Christ in the world. And now we're heading into this New Testament time, which is the era we're living in.

The New Testament begins, of course, with these recordings of Jesus' life, and then starts right into church history in the book of Acts—one book in there about church history—and then these letters encouraging us and describing for us, teaching us about the Christian faith.

As we're diving into this era, it's a time when we can consider what this era is we're living in and what is our responsibility before God. The book of Acts lays the groundwork for that. It's the beginning of this time that we're in.

And so, what I want to do is dive right into it, where the writer of Acts, Luke, first sets the context for this book. So we're going to spend a lot of time in this book.

I want us to understand the context of it. And that's what Luke does at the very beginning when he says this: "In the first book, O Theophilus." So this is Luke's second writing. He was, of course, one of the Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And *Luke* was also written to a gentleman named Theophilus.

Now, Theophilus is an interesting name. Many scholars believe there likely was a man named Theophilus who wanted to know about Jesus and what this might mean for his faith, and so he commissioned Luke to gather information for him as sort of an investigative journalist and report back to him.

Other scholars aren't sure whether there was really a Theophilus, because Theophilus, divided from Greek words, is *Theos* (God) and *philio*, the Greek word for friendship and love. And so this word literally means "the lover of God," which could be anyone in human history who wants to love God.

And Luke is, in a sense, writing to Theophilus because he wants to love God. If it's a real person—and I would believe, by the Holy Spirit's power, probably both—that he wrote to a gentleman named Theophilus, but it's also for anyone who wants to be a lover of God.

And then he gives information not only about Jesus but about how God is working in the world in this new era.

So he says, "In the first book"—Luke's account of Jesus' life—"O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach." It's interesting that he separates the two. It was the great reformer John Calvin who said this is the whole knot of Christ's life. If you don't take the two tied together, you're going to miss the revelation of God in Christ.

He gave us everything that He taught us to do and what He said to teach. He uses both things: words of Jesus and the works of Jesus. He lists them here together.

And why does he do this? Because human beings have a propensity to bend toward one or the other, or just parts of things that they like. We love in our culture to lift up the compassionate works of Jesus. We really do. We love the empathy and the compassion and the tenderness that Jesus shows.

But there are also works that Jesus does when He clears out the temple. And there are words that He says that are controversial. As a matter of fact, it's not necessarily so much His actions that got Him killed—though He did violate many laws of the day, sort of written laws that people had written on their

own hearts in some of His actions—but it's His words that got Him killed and crucified, things that He was claiming.

And so we never want to just separate them out. Jesus said, "If you see Me, you see the Father." That's the whole picture of God—what He has taught us and the demonstration of His works.

So Luke says he's writing about Jesus' life first until the day He was taken up. Now we're entering this different chapter, this different era in human history after Christ.

Now, what did He do before He was taken up? He had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen—His early followers. So He gave them some instructions before He ascended into heaven.

And then Luke further explains here that He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs. There's great evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. One of the great evidences is He ate breakfast with these people. They could literally eat breakfast with Him, go and say, "Hey, He resurrected. I just had breakfast with Him. Why don't you go down to the local whatever café and see Him for yourselves?" He has come back to life.

The Bible says He appeared to over 500 people appointed by God. He gave many convincing proofs while He was alive. And He did this over a period of 40 days.

Then, specifically, Luke mentions He spoke to them about the kingdom of God. That's significant. Luke is not messing, you know, words randomly here. He's trying to get a message across. And Jesus is speaking to them about the kingdom of God because He's trying to transform their thinking—broader than they were thinking in the past.

While they were staying with them, he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, you have heard from me. He also spoke of this promise.

For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. You're not going to have to wait long in Jerusalem, he said, but I want you to go there and wait because what I have for you—he's preparing them—is something you can't do on your own.

The future that I have for you as my people, you can't accomplish by human effort. You need to go and wait for the promise that I've spoken of and that my Father has spoken of. And so they were going to have to wait, and it would only be ten days that they would wait.

Now the Scripture says this: when they had come together, they asked him—this is just fascinating—Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?

Notice that Jesus has been talking about the kingdom of God—the eternal, unseen kingdom, a kingdom that will reign forever. It's a kingdom that has no end. But they are going back to their ethnicity, their

tradition, their history, and they are wondering if he's going to give them self-preservation of what they've had in the past.

Jesus is speaking about eternity, a much bigger kingdom, a kingdom not of this world. And the disciples don't yet get it, but they're going to. But it's going to take a lot of work of the Holy Spirit to help them understand that God Himself has something far bigger in mind than their thinking.

Lord, will you at this time restore back to us sort of what we had in the past? And he said to them, it is not for you to know the times or the seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

He didn't answer them directly, but he encouraged them in what's coming. He said to them, you don't know these times, but here's what's going to happen. And now Luke gives us a summary of his entire writing here—the birth of the church and how the Christian church will start to spread in the world.

He says this, and I believe this is sort of the centerpiece of this whole first section of Acts: You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will, in a sense here, go well beyond your past. You'll go well beyond your small thinking. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, then in Judea, then in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts records this time in history when God ushered in this new covenant. And Luke writes here, I would say, in just a very simple way about three things happening. The first would be this: God would pour out his power in a whole new way.

We love power. We love it. Some people are resistant to authority, but when you think of power and strength and energy and these things—we all like that. We need it. We want it. We enjoy it.

I find it fascinating how many gentlemen still like muscle cars in our world—the revving of strong engines, the feel of power. It's fun to experience strong power. It's fun to taste strong power.

I remember one time I was standing beside a silo at our farm in western Iowa, and lightning struck the silo, and I felt the power of the lightning just drive me to my knees in the mud. I'll never forget that day because I've never experienced such power. And I look back on it, yes, with a trembling and a fear, but kind of a joy at having experienced that.

Because here's what I know: the power that we experience in creation is just a foretaste of the power of the Almighty. The power of the Almighty is hard to even comprehend. His spoken word brings all of this into existence.

We try to capsule this power. We understand a bit of the nature of it when we release atomic power. But all of this is a part of creation. It breathes into us a sense of the wonder and the marvel and the power of God. But we can't really comprehend it.

But Jesus is saying here, there's a time now—we're in this time in history—when God is pouring out his power in a new way. And we're going to need it because we can't live the Christian life without it.

And so he pours out this power. The word "power" actually means in Greek—it's actually the word *dunamis*, from which we get our word *dynamite*. And it's a kind of explosive, infusing power.

So Acts says, this is the time when God poured out his power in a new way into people—people like you and like me. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

The Bible says the Holy Spirit was hovering over the surface of the deep at creation, and the Triune God went together to bring what is into existence. The Holy Spirit was there in Daniel in the lion's den. He was closing the mouths of lions. He was there with the donkey, with Balaam, and he was speaking through the mouth of the donkey.

He was there in the time of Moses. He was parting the waters for Moses and the Israelite people when they walked across there. The Bible says the Holy Spirit then entered the tomb of Jesus.

And that power that came into Jesus and resurrected his body would now be poured out into all the believers in the world. It is a power that is to be poured into people, and it separated like tongues of fire.

After this blowing wind, and these tongues of fire settled on all the people, they began to speak in tongues that were heard in every language known to the world at that time. It's a power poured into people.

And then it says this: For God's divine purpose, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

God's purpose in doing this was to get the message of Jesus to the known world at the time. He was going to empower these early followers to be his messengers, his witnesses in the world, for his divine purpose.

The Bible tells us that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. And how does he do this? It's as if we are his ambassadors, and God is making his appeal through us: Please be reconciled to God through Christ.

Why? Because God loves the world. He wants the world restored to its original plan in the midst of our rebellion. And he does this by sending his people into the world with the good news of Jesus—to be his messengers, to be his witnesses.

And what he was telling these early followers—it was going to go well beyond Jerusalem, well beyond Israel, to the known parts of the world, to the whole world. And until the message goes forth around the world and people have a chance to hear, the end of the age will not come. And this is the age we're living in, friends.

Now Acts is divided this way. The message went and Christians started to mature and grow in Jerusalem from Acts chapter two through Acts chapter seven. Then we go eight and nine—Samaria and Judea. Judea, which they had a lot of trouble figuring out that God was doing this.

They couldn't believe. Peter especially couldn't believe and had to hear from God himself that God was going to reach beyond the Jewish people to the very ends of the earth.

And this is a great, great book we're going to look into, friends, where God empowers his people in this era that we're living in to be his witnesses in the world. It's going to be fun to walk through this, friends.

This—this is the excitement in our world today: the work of God in the hearts of human beings, expanding his eternal kingdom by the work of His Spirit through his people. There's nothing greater going on in the planet. We ought to bend our whole hearts towards this.

So when we get to heaven, you know what we're going to hear? Well done. It's not about the kingdoms of this world. It's not about the material things in this world. It's about the eternal kingdom of Almighty God.

And you and I are invited to participate in this work in the here and now. It's well beyond what we can comprehend. God is inviting people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. His family is eclectic. It's all around the world.

And we will be caught up together—those that come to know him, those that respond positively to the message—will be caught up together forever into eternity, where we will, as the Bible says, help rule the world to come.

And this will be an undefeated venture for God. He is going to accomplish this through his people, whether you and I as individuals choose to participate or not. But he's inviting us to do this, and we're just simply praying that God will continue to do this work in this era.

Because it's our time. This is our generation. And this is our opportunity. And we have this chance.

And what happened as these people came together—we'll see in the book of Acts—they got unified in this, and they came together to do this. And of course, they reached tensions and disagreements.

And we're going to look into all this in the days ahead, and I hope you'll find it to be a great encouragement in your spiritual journey.

Let's pray together, shall we?

Father, thank you for this opportunity to continue freely in this country, looking into Your Word in such a way as this—publicly and out in the open. Thank you for our forefathers who went before us and provided for us the opportunity to do this.

We don't have this opportunity—Christians don't, your people don't—have around the world, but we do. And we don't want to take it for granted.

Father, as we look into this text that you inspired through Luke, teach us about your ways. Stir in us this desire to pray and seek you like they did—to come before you and find a sense of unity and togetherness in this mission, to work through the challenges and the differences that we have so that we might actually be a part of your divine purpose, empowered by your Spirit in an ever-increasing, joyful, and powerful way.

Please work this in and among us. Thank you, Father, for your kindness, your tenderness, your gentleness in drawing us to you.

Continue to soften our hearts to be pliable and moldable before you so that we could live into your work, knowing that you're the potter and we're the clay. Shape us and mold us into what you have for us and what is your call on our lives.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.