
Continuing What Jesus Began to Do

A sermon on Acts 1:1-5 by Coty Pinckney |
preached at Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte NC, September 7, 2008

Think of an important historical figure. What was his or her greatest accomplishment?

- For Thomas Jefferson, perhaps authoring the Declaration of Independence.
- For Abraham Lincoln, keeping our country together.
- For Martin Luther, taking his stand on the Word of God, and returning much of the church to biblical authority.

Some of you may be thinking of scientists, missionaries, authors, or explorers. Different men, different women, different fields of endeavor - but for all their varied accomplishments, the question makes sense.

Now: Consider Jesus: Can we ask the same question about Him? What was Jesus' greatest accomplishment?

I hope when you hear that question you're somewhat uneasy. For if we were to judge Jesus' accomplishments on the same basis as the others we've mentioned - frankly, there's not much there. For a period of time shorter than one US presidential term, he traveled around with a dozen men, in a backwater province of the Roman Empire; He taught publicly, and made some pretty outrageous claims. He healed people, a few rather dramatically. Perhaps during His lifetime as many as 200 people believed He was the promised Messiah. But one of his closest associates turned Him in to authorities for a few thousand dollars. The Roman governor executed Him.

That doesn't sound like much of an accomplishment compared to Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther, or Isaac Newton, does it?

But there's a huge difference with Jesus: *His death is not the end of the story.*

We celebrate what Jefferson, Lincoln, Luther, and others accomplished *prior* to their deaths. For Jesus: We celebrate what He accomplished in His death, in His resurrection, *and* what He *continues* to do after death.

We begin today a series on the book of Acts. This is the second volume written by Luke, the traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. This volume was written about 30 years after the crucifixion. Each volume begins with a note to a man named Theophilus, who seems to be a prominent Roman official who has heard much about Jesus, but needs assurance of the truthfulness of the reports. So Luke says he writes: "that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4).

Luke opens the book of Acts with these words.

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up

This is a pretty strange statement. Imagine two-volume biographical study of Lincoln, written decades after his death, with the second volume beginning, "My first volume dealt with all that Lincoln began to do until his assassination."

That makes no sense for Lincoln. Why does it make sense for Jesus?

To speak this way implies that *Jesus is still at work.*

John Wilkes Booth's bullet ended Lincoln's accomplishments. But the cross did not end Jesus' accomplishments. The cross was only the beginning

The Gospel of Luke records much of great importance:

- Jesus' birth and perfect life;
- His teaching on sacrifice, on leadership, on the kingdom, and on money;
- His predictions of His own death - He knew He came to die;
- His predictions of His resurrection on the third day.
- It also records the fulfillment of all these predictions: He is arrested, tried, condemned, crucified dead and buried.

But that's not the end. Jesus *rose* from the dead and showed Himself to His disciples. They saw Him. They are eyewitnesses.

Acts 1:3 emphasizes this

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.

The risen Christ is not an illusion. He is not a vision. He eats fish. The disciples touch Him. They interact with Him. He is alive.

And He continues His work *to this day.*

This is the message of the book of Acts: Jesus began His work during His earthly life *and He is still completing it.*

This book records the continuing acts of Jesus Christ.

This morning, I want to introduce the book by considering what Jesus does in the first five verses, and then looking briefly at what He does throughout the book. Our outline will have three headings:

Jesus Assigns a Task to His Followers

Jesus Promises Power to Fulfill the Task

Jesus works!

I pray that by the time we finish, you will have confidence that today we have the *same task, the same power.* I pray that you would have no doubt that the *same Lord continues to work* - as today we complete the works of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Assigns a Task to His Followers

He was taken up after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (Acts 1:2)

What commands had Jesus given His disciples? At the end of Luke we read:

Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:47-48).

Note the nature of task: Jesus is not instructing them to go and accomplish a great, challenging deed - to climb the highest mountain, to discover electricity, or to invent a car that gets 100 miles per gallon.

Instead, the task is this: "Speak the truths you know to others. You are witnesses, so bear witness! Tell others of their need for repentance. Tell others that God created man in His image to show what He is like. God created us so that we might love Him with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength. Yet we rebelled against that purpose. From the very beginning we sinned against the infinitely holy God, and thus deserve infinite punishment. But," continues Jesus, "tell them also that

God sent me, His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, paying the penalty for sin. Tell them that God raised me from the dead, proving the penalty was sufficient, proving that I remain alive and active. Tell of the opportunity to find true forgiveness in me, if they repent and believe in My Name. And tell this to all nations, all people groups, including your enemies and oppressors."

This is task: His disciples are to bear witness to all peoples: "Jesus died for your sins! Jesus is risen from the dead! He reigns! Repent! Trust! Believe! Have eternal life! Fulfill the purpose of your creation!"

Jesus Promises Power to Fulfill the Task

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; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:4-5)

Jesus here clearly associates the promise of the Father and baptism with the Holy Spirit. Luke 24:49 contains same idea, using somewhat different language. Jesus first says, "I am sending the promise of my father upon you." Then He says they will be "clothed with power from on high." So the promise of the Father concerns the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit gives power.

But what promise is Jesus referring to? Where in the Scriptures of Jesus' day, the Old Testament, did God promise the Holy Spirit?

Let's look at three passages that allude to this promise. First, Joel 2:28-29, which Peter will quote at Pentecost explaining what happened that day:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

In this prophecy, God says that He is going to do something different in the last days. Note carefully: What is different? What is unusual about this prophecy?

The difference is not that the Holy Spirit is active. Many times in the Old Testament, individuals are filled with the Holy Spirit. Recall Fred's first sermon on Gideon several weeks ago. Judges 6:34 (NIV) says "The Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon" (NIV). Elsewhere in book of Judges alone, we find similar statements about Othniel, Jephthah, and Samson.

So what is Joel prophesying that is different?

The difference is that God promises to pour out His Spirit on *all* flesh. His Spirit will not only come upon important individuals called to great tasks, but will be on *all* of His people.

The prophecy then elaborates on this point, detailing some of the many categories of people: sons and daughters, old men and young men, male servants and female servants – *all types* of people.

As we make our way through Acts we will see the fulfillment of this prophecy. In this book, God's Spirit falls on both women and men, both old and young, both free men and slaves, both Jews and Gentiles. God indeed pours out His Spirit on all flesh.

The second Old Testament passage that contains the promise of the Father is the promise of a New Covenant, found in Jeremiah 31. God says this covenant will not be like the one that the people broke:

³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother,

saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

So do you see the difference with the previous covenant? In the New Covenant, the Law, instead of being an external set of rules as it was for so many of the Israelites, will be *internal*. It will be written *on the hearts* of *all* the people.

And note the picture of intimacy: *Every one* of God's people, from the least to the greatest, will know the Lord – unlike the Israelite community, in which many, many were stiff-necked and hard-hearted. Knowing God is now the defining mark of the people of God. Ancestry is not important. Ethnicity is not central. *Knowing God* is central.

This writing of the Law on the hearts of the people, this intimate knowledge of God, can only result from the work of the Holy Spirit. The promise of the New Covenant, then, is the promise of the Father – the promise of baptism with the Holy Spirit.

The final Old Testament passage that points to the promise of the Father is found in Ezekiel 36:25-28. Note that God is speaking to "the house of Israel" in these verses, and that the word "you" is always plural in this passage, thus referring to the entire house of the true Israel:

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Here again is the promise of the Father. God's covenant people would no longer have hard, stony hearts that resist God's work. Instead, God gives them a new heart, a new spirit – a spirit that is soft, compliant, willing to follow Him, willing to serve Him. Indeed, God gives them His own Spirit who – in words similar to Jeremiah 31 – will enable them to obey Him, to walk in His statutes, to obey His rules. Thus they truly become God's people.

This is the promise of the Father. The days of God's people being rebellious and stiff-necked are over. He will send His Spirit on *all* His people – and they become truly His.

In Colossians 1:26-27, Paul makes the same point *after* Pentecost, *after* the promise of the Father has been fulfilled. In this New Covenant time, Paul speaks of:

the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ . . . which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Paul says, "Christ is in *all* of you! Every true believer has God dwelling in Him. The Spirit has come. The promise of the Father is fulfilled."

So this is the promise of the Father: The Holy Spirit within us, Christ within us. And this is what John the Baptist refers to when he speaks of Jesus baptizing us with the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of Joel 2, Jeremiah 31, and Ezekiel 36. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is what Paul looks back on in Colossians 1: Union with Christ. The Spirit of God in you, Christ in you, giving you power to obey His commands, giving you power to know Him, and giving you power to complete the task He assigns.

So we've seen the task, and we've considered the promised power; finally:

Jesus Works!

The book of Acts displays this truth clearly. God has given the disciples a task, and has promised them power. In the narrative, again and again and again Luke shows clearly that *God* is the one at work, even while Peter, Paul, John, Philip, and Silas are traveling, preaching, and suffering.

Consider four ways God acts in the book.

1) God saves

In Acts 2:47, after Pentecost, Luke notes:

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Note: *The Lord* added to their number. Salvation is *God's* work, not the work of the apostles.

In Acts 13:48, Paul and Barnabas are preaching in Antioch of Pisidia, in what now is Turkey:

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. (emphasis added)

Who appointed them to eternal life? Only God could do that. He saved them. They believed – by the power and grace of God.

In Acts 16:14, Paul is in Philippi. The text refers to a woman named Lydia:

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

In the text, this is almost an offhand comment. But God had to open her heart. God was the one at work. Paul spoke – the Gospel had to be proclaimed! Thank God for Paul's faithfulness to his calling. But God is the one who uses the proclamation of His Word to open Lydia's heart. *God* saved Lydia.

In Acts 18:9-10, Paul is in Corinth, where he faces significant opposition:

⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people."

This is more than a promise of protection. God promises that He has a purpose for Paul in this city; God will save *His chosen people* through Paul's proclamation of the Gospel. God will bring it about. Jesus Christ is continuing His work. God saves.

God not only saves, but also:

2) God sends

God does not depend on His apostles figuring out where to go. He guides and directs their steps.

In chapter 8, God tells Philip, one of first deacons, to go down to the desert road. Philip obeys, and finds a royal official from Ethiopia reading Isaiah. Philip explains the meaning of the passage, and God saves the official. Then, after Philip baptizes him, verse 39 tells us "the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away" to another place where he continues to preach.

In chapter 10, God gives Peter a vision three times. Then the Spirit tells him to go with the Gentile servants who have just arrived at his house. The result: The servants' master, Cornelius, and his entire household is saved.

In chapter 13, Paul and Barnabas are serving in the church in Antioch:

2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:2-3)

Philip, Peter, Paul, Barnabas: In each case, Jesus continues His work. God calls. God directs. God sends.

3) God judges

In chapter 5, many in the early church are selling property, then giving the proceeds to the church in order to help the poor. A married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, sell a piece of property, and give money to the church. They claim to have given all the proceeds, but they lie. They have retained some for themselves. God kills them both.

In chapter 12, Herod has put the Apostle James to death; he then arrests Peter, planning to execute him also. God saves Peter miraculously and then, while Herod is exulting in the crowd proclaiming he is a god, the one true God strikes him down. And Luke notes that his body was eaten by worms.

Jesus continues to act – in part, through exercising judgment.

4) God sovereignly works through evil acts of evil men

Virtually every chapter has an example of this. We've already seen that God worked through Peter's arrest and his miraculous release. Paul's conversion when he is headed to Damascus to destroy the church is another example. The arrest of Paul and Silas in Philippi is another, for God saves the Philippians jailor and his family.

But let's look in more detail at chap 4. The church is praying, marveling at God's sovereignty. This is part of that prayer:

"There were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." (Acts 4:27-28, emphasis added)

The crucifixion – the most evil of all acts – was planned and predestined by God and used for His very good purposes, even our salvation. Indeed, God uses this evil act to save some of the very priests who plotted against Jesus.

Do you see the overall picture here? This book is not the Acts of the Apostles. This book is the Acts of Jesus, the Acts of God, the Acts of the Holy Spirit. God is the one who saves, who sends, who judges. God is the one in control – even when it looks like evil has the upper hand. God acts. He is sovereign.

The Result of Jesus' Work

Five verses scattered throughout Acts highlight the result of God's work. The church faces many challenges in these pages. But through it all – through dissension, through persecution, through trials and difficulties – God's Word prevails:

Acts 6:7: After the resolution of the dispute over the care of widows, Luke records that:

the word of God continued to increase.

Acts 9:31: After the persecutor Paul is converted and sails to Tarsus:

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Acts 12:24: After Peter is miraculously released and Herod has been eaten by worms:

But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Acts 16:5: After the decision in Jerusalem that Gentiles need not culturally become Jews to be saved:

So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Acts 19:20: After Paul performs miracles in Ephesus, and former magicians burn their paraphernalia:

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

This is the result of Jesus' work. The Word of God multiplies and prevails; the church increases. God is at work. Nothing can stop His plan.

Jesus is risen. He builds His church. And the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

Conclusion

This is the message of the book of Acts: Jesus continues His work.

- No enemy can thwart Him
- No barrier can stop Him
- No people can resist Him

He is mighty! He prevails! He destroys all opposing powers!

And this almighty God, this conquering King calls to you. He invites you to Himself. He says: "Come to me – I will comfort. I will forgive. I will restore. Come to me! Why be stubborn, resisting, to your own destruction? Turn! Turn and be saved!"

He calls to you. So throw yourself on the mercy of the ever-living, ever-active, crucified and risen Lord! Trust in His saving blood.

And then: Having been saved by His blood, will you fulfill His task by His power?

That's the question this morning for all who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. You have a task. You have His power; His Holy Spirit is within you.

Will you play your role? Will you be His witness?

He has proven Himself alive – to *us*.

He has given the promised Holy Spirit – to *us*.

He has given the task – to *us*!

Will you fulfill the task?

Copyright © 2008, Thomas C. Pinckney. This data file is the sole property of Thomas C. Pinckney. Please feel free to copy it in written form, but only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice.

This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, posted on the internet, copied for resale or incorporated in any products offered for sale, without the written permission of Thomas C. Pinckney, www.desiringGODchurch.org, c/o Desiring God Community Church, PO Box 620099, Charlotte, NC 28262.