



The Mission ... We Are Witnesses

Acts 1

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia
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The Bucket List is a movie about a billionaire and an auto mechanic who share a room in the hospital. They have nothing in common except both are terminally ill. This odd couple ponders the short time they have left and come up with a “bucket list,” a list of things to do before they “kick the bucket.” So they escape from the hospital and set out on an adventure to experience every thrill imaginable. The billionaire and the auto mechanic help each other squeeze the most out of their last days.

We’ve all thought about things we’d like to do before we “kick the bucket.” Perhaps you would like to take a European vacation or play the great golf courses in Scotland or take your grandchildren to see the Grand Canyon. Or maybe your “bucket list” is less glamorous and you’d be satisfied just to clean out the garage.

It’s okay to dream about adventure. It’s more than okay, even worshipful, to enjoy God’s creation and visit great places in the world. But the goal of this one and only life is not to experience a personally thrilling life. Rather, the goal of this one and only life is to experience a spiritually fulfilling life, a life in personal relationship with Jesus and in service to Him. For us, as Christians, life is not about what we extract from the world, but how we impact the world. It’s not about thrills, it’s about significance. And true significance is found in answering the call of God on our lives.¹

British theologian and sociologist Os Guinness writes that “answering the call of our Creator is ‘the ultimate why’ for living, the highest source of purpose in human existence ... offering everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have to God.”²

So, what is our calling? And who is calling? The invitation comes from the one who took our place on the cross. The invitation comes from the one who died, was buried, and rose again. The invitation comes from the one who ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God.³ The invitation comes from the one whose name is above every name, and before whom one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.⁴

Jesus is the one who is calling us. He is our “ultimate why.” And the call on our lives is found in Acts 1.

This morning, we begin a spring and summer series in the book of Acts. The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. Who were these people? What inspired them? And what sparked a movement?

They heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They were there when He was crucified, and they saw Him alive again. They believed He was the Son of God and that everything He said was true. They were convinced it was true. They were compelled to talk about it. And they were courageous to take a stand.

Studying the book of Acts is like holding up a mirror and comparing ourselves to the first Christians, and honestly asking ourselves, “Do we live like they lived? Do we do what they did? Does our church look anything like their church?”⁵

When Francis Chan’s California church grew larger and larger, it became more about maintenance than ministry. It was all about keeping the organization going and pleasing people so they would keep coming. Which, by the way, is too often true of the American church. Francis writes, “I became frustrated with the way things were, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was missing. I began to wonder was this really what the Church was meant to be?”⁶

As we read the book of Acts, on the one hand, the way they lived rebukes us and humbles us. On the other hand, the way they lived should challenge us and inspire us. These first Christians are our mentors, and we need their 1st century passion for our 21st century world. The book of Acts says, “They turned the world upside down.”⁷ How? Because they saw Jesus alive again and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Our prayer should be that their faith would revive our faith, that their passion would revive our passion, that their courage would revive our courage. The challenge of this series is to be the church Jesus wants us to be rather than the church we want to be. The book of Acts continues to be written, and every generation adds their chapter. We are living and writing our chapter. ***The story continues, the mission continues, and it’s still about Jesus.***

THE STORY CONTINUES ... AND IT’S STILL ABOUT JESUS

The book of Acts was written by Luke. He also wrote one of the four gospels in the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Luke was not one of the original 12 disciples. He was a Gentile and a later convert to Christianity. He was also a doctor and a companion of Paul. Luke wrote 25% of the New Testament. His gospel is about the life of Jesus, and the book of Acts is about the birth of the Church and the lives of the first Christians. Both Luke’s gospel and his book of Acts were written to a man named Theophilus. Called “most excellent Theophilus” suggests he was some honorable figure, perhaps a government official.⁸ Luke writes as a careful historian, researching and interviewing eyewitnesses, and motivated to preserve the story of Jesus and the story of the early Church.⁹

“In my former book, Theophilus,” a reference to Luke’s gospel, “I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men 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” (Acts 1:1-3, NIV).

This book is about the people who were there, who were eyewitnesses. Notice the three great events of Jesus’ life mentioned in these three verses. “His suffering” refers to His crucifixion, to the horrible execution of Jesus as He was nailed to a Roman cross. “After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.” After such a horrific death, Jesus rose from the dead. “He appeared” and there were eyewitnesses. And the

phrase “taken up to heaven” refers to His ascension. Luke interviewed eyewitnesses of the three great events in the life of Jesus – crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

These first Christians heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They were moved by His words and amazed by His wonders. They followed Him and they put their hope in Him. But their faith was devastated by the cross. They watched Him suffer and they watched Him die, and they were devastated. But on Sunday morning, the impossible happened. They looked inside the tomb and it was empty. He was not there! Over a period of 40 days, they saw Him several times, proving He was alive! And on the Mount of Olives, they heard His last words and watched His feet lift from the ground as He ascended into heaven. They were there. They were eyewitnesses.

That’s why they were convinced it was true. That’s why they were compelled to talk about it. And that’s why they were courageous to take a stand.

Again, these first Christians are our mentors. We need their 1st century passion for our 21st century world. The book of Acts continues to be written, and we are living and writing our chapter. ***The story continues, the mission continues, and it’s still about Jesus.***

THE MISSION CONTINUES ... AND WE ARE WITNESSES

Acts 1:8 records the last words of Jesus before He ascended into heaven. This is the theme verse of the book of Acts. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you,” Jesus said, “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NIV).

This is the mission of the church. This is mission of every follower of Jesus Christ. To “go and make disciples of all nations,” Jesus said in Matthew 28. To “go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel,” He said in Mark 16. This is the Great Commission. Jesus is calling us to join a long line of followers and take the Gospel around the world and across the street.

If this is not the mission of our church, then our church is not aligned or fully devoted to Jesus Christ. If this is not my mission and your mission, then we are not aligned or fully devoted to Jesus Christ.

Again, they were witnesses and the mission was clear.

Under threat of being beaten Peter declared, “We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard,” and he was flogged for saying it (Acts 4:20, NAS). Paul said, “I am obligated ... I am so eager to preach the Gospel ... and I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,” and he was beheaded for it (Romans 1:14-16, NIV). And John, the only apostle to escape martyrdom, reminisced when he was 90 years old, “The one who existed from the beginning is the one we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is Jesus Christ ... he is the one who is eternal life ... We are telling you about what we ourselves have actually seen and heard” (1 John 1:1-3, NLT).

They were witnesses. They were convinced it was true. They were compelled to talk about it. And at great risk, they were courageous to take a stand.

Historian Michael Green writes about the passion of the early Christians. “They were passionately convinced of the truth of the Gospel. They were persuaded that men and women were lost without it. (The Gospel was) the key to eternal life, without which they would perish. They shared in God’s love (and wanted) to pour it out on a needy world. They (embraced) the Great Commission. They sought to penetrate society with the Gospel which had such a profound effect upon them ... It affected everything they did and everyone they met ... In the early days, the quality of their lives was *blazingly distinct*.”¹⁰

And that’s why the way they lived rebukes us and humbles us. And that’s why the way they lived should challenge us and inspire us.

They were witnesses, and so are we. Not philosophers or professors or even theologians. First and foremost, we are witnesses. A witness in a courtroom is sworn to tell the truth about what they have seen and heard. And Acts 1:8 is our subpoena. Our witness is not based on hearing Jesus with our own ears or seeing Him with our own eyes. Our witness is based on hearing the Gospel and Jesus penetrating our hearts. We bear witness to that experience. And Jesus is just as real to us as He was to those who heard and saw Him in person. We are “witnesses” of the love and grace of Jesus, and witnesses must tell what they have seen and heard.

Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (Acts 1:8, NIV). He told them to stay in Jerusalem until they were “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49, NAS). He said, “John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5, NIV). And in a few days, the Holy Spirit fell on the day of Pentecost.

Jesus knew the Christian life would be difficult. That’s why the Holy Spirit is called “the Helper.”¹¹ That’s why Jesus left a part of Himself to be with us and in us. The Bible says, “You are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you” (1 Corinthians 3:16, NAS).¹² As witnesses, we can rely on His presence and His help because He promised, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.”

Power to do what? Jesus said to His disciples, and He says to us, “Anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works” (John 14:12, NLT). The Spirit-filled life means living with supernatural potential, no longer relying on our ability. The Holy Spirit empowers us to accomplish the mission. Living the Spirit-filled life is living with expectation, anticipating what God will do next. It’s living with confidence and boldness and courage that only comes from knowing Jesus Christ. And with that boldness, we are to take the Gospel around the world and across the street.

To understand the church’s mission, think of the difference between a cruise ship and a battleship. Life for a week on a cruise ship is about being pampered. Soaking up the sun, elegant dinners, first-class entertainment, and drinks with little umbrellas. It’s about enjoying yourself. Life on a battleship is a bit different. It’s being crammed on a ship with hundreds of other sailors. It’s being deployed for months away from home and family. It’s about going to dangerous places.

It's about readiness for war. A cruise ship is about a vacation. A battleship is about a mission ... and so is the church.

I've traveled and preached on five continents, and based on my observations, the church in other parts of the world looks much more like the church in the book of Acts than the American church does. Too often we settle for being the church we want to be instead of the church Jesus wants us to be. It's so easy to settle for comfort instead of mission. Singing our favorite songs instead of falling on our knees before a holy God. Being spectators who are entertained instead of disciples who are equipped. It's so easy to settle for a classroom, for Bible study that satisfies our theological curiosities instead of allowing God's word to challenge who we are and how we live. It's so easy to settle for friendships talking about our grandchildren or our golf scores instead of challenging each other spiritually, holding each other accountable, and urging each other to press on to spiritual maturity. It's so easy to settle for membership instead of mission, faithful to attend church but not so faithful to share the Gospel.

Studying the book of Acts is like holding up a mirror and comparing ourselves to the first Christians, and honestly asking ourselves, "Do we live like they lived? Do we do what they did? Does our church look anything like their church?" On the one hand, the way they lived rebukes us and humbles us. On the other hand, the way they lived should challenge us and inspire us. Again, a cruise ship is about a vacation. A battleship is about a mission. We're meant to be more than the nice church on the hill. We're meant to be a light and a voice to our neighborhood.

Coca-Cola is one of the most famous brands in the world. Some 2.2 billion drinks are consumed every day around the world. Coke is everywhere. It's advertised in bright lights in Times Square and on double-decker buses in London. It's distributed in the jungles of South America and by elephants in Africa. Coke is sold from bicycles in Morocco and from walking vending machines in China. Everyone loves Coke, from Tibetan monks to camels. Today, the Coca-Cola brand is worth \$327 billion, and you can drink a Coke anywhere in the world, except North Korea.

Surely the mission of the church is more significant than Coca-Cola. We're not selling sugar water. The church is the greatest enterprise on the planet, with the sole purpose of changing the eternal destiny of as many people as possible. The mission of the church is to take the Gospel around the world and across the street, and every Christian plays a role in that mission.

CONCLUSION

After the ascension of Jesus, Acts 1 says, "The apostles returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, a distance of half a mile. They went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying ... They all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus ... *about 120 believers were together in one place*" (Acts 1:12, 14-15, NLT).

Jesus left the Gospel in the hands of 120 faithful few. They were witnesses of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. They were filled with Holy Spirit and filled with boldness and passion to spread the Gospel. The book of Acts records what happened. Every story,

every speech, every miracle, and every person points to Jesus. They were witnesses, and so are we.

In his book *Crazy Love*, written almost 20 years ago, Francis Chan defined the mission of the Christian life when he said, “The point of your life is to point to Him.”¹³ That was the mission of the first Christians in the book of Acts, and that is our mission as well. To point to Jesus.

They were convinced it was true, they were compelled to talk about it, and they were courageous to take a stand. These first Christians are our mentors. So may their passion revive our passion, may their faith revive our faith, and may their courage revive our courage.

The book of Acts continues to be written, and we are living and writing our chapter. ***The story continues, the mission continues, and it's still about Jesus.***

NOTES

¹ This invitation, Dallas Willard adds, is an invitation “into the heart and life of God.” [Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy – Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), page 11.]

² Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998, 2003), page 4. Os Guinness continues, “Personally summoned by the Creator of the universe, we are given a meaning in what we do that flames over every second and inch of our lives. Challenged, inspired, rebuked, and encouraged by God’s call, we cannot for a moment settle down to the comfortable, the mediocre, the banal, the boring. The call is always to the higher, the deeper, the farther ... The call of God jerks us wide awake ... Calling is the supreme motivation, the ultimate ‘why’” (page 144).

³ See Psalm 110:1, Ephesians 1:20, Hebrews 1:3, 1 Peter 3:22.

⁴ See Philippians 2:9-11.

⁵ This theme is found in Francis Chan’s book *Letters to the Church* and in Michael Green’s book *Thirty Years that Changed the World*.

⁶ Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018 Crazy Love Ministries), pages 13-15.

⁷ See Acts 17:6.

⁸ See Luke 1:3.

⁹ Luke’s introduction to his gospel account – “Since many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting to me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it out* for you in an orderly sequence, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4, NASB 2020).

¹⁰ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970, 2003), pages 17, 20.

¹¹ See John 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7, 13.

¹² “The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you” (Romans 8:11, NLT).

¹³ Francis Chan, *Crazy Love* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), page 44.