

# Jesus Makes a Promise

Devotional Reading: [Psalm 24](#)

Background Scripture: [Acts 1:1–11](#)

## Acts 1:1–11

**<sup>1</sup> 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 baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”**

**<sup>6</sup> Then they gathered around 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.”

## Key Text

*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.*

—Acts 1:8a

# Jesus Calls Us

## Unit 3: The Birth of the Church

### Lessons 9–13

## Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State the initial sequence of the geographical progression of the gospel message.
2. Analyze what the disciples meant when they asked Jesus about the restoration of Israel.
3. Recommit to the work Jesus has given him or her in accomplishing the gospel mandate.

# Lesson Outline

## Introduction

- A. Flashbacks
- B. Lesson Context
- I. **Promise Number 1 (Acts 1:1–5)**
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  - B. Looking Forward (vv. 4–5)
- II. **Promise Number 2 (Acts 1:6–8)**
  - A. Lingering Question (v. 6)
  - B. Exasperated Response (v. 7)
  - C. Worldwide Ministry (v. 8)
    - Be One or Support One?*
- III. **Promise Number 3 (Acts 1:9–11)**
  - A. Dramatic Departure (v. 9)
  - B. Angelic Urging (vv. 10–11)
    - Why Not Right Now?*

## Conclusion

- A. Luke’s Great Commission
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## How to Say It

Bethany *Beth-uh-nee.*

Galilee *Gal-uh-lee.*

Judas Iscariot *Joo-dus Iss-care-ee-ut.*

Pentecost *Pent-ih-kost.*

politarchas (*Greek*) pawl-ih-tar-case.

Samaria Suh-mare-ee-uh.

Theophilus Thee-ahf-ih-luss (*th* as in *thin*).

Thessalonica Thess-uh-lo-nye-kuh (*th* as in *thin*).

## Introduction

### A. Flashbacks

Serialized television shows often feature brief flashbacks at the beginning of each episode. These flashbacks typically condense the key parts of the previous episodes into 90 seconds or less. The resulting salient points help viewers make sense of the new installment. These are particularly important for those of us who watch only one episode at a time rather than binge-watch multiple episodes!

Unlike any other pair of books in the New Testament, Luke begins his second volume (the book of Acts) with a summary of the first volume (the Gospel of Luke). This is a little like a modern flashback, a highly condensed version of the previous “episode” as a key to understanding the installment at hand. That’s how the book of Acts begins.

### B. Lesson Context

We may find it surprising that a Gentile who was not an apostle wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else. We’re talking about Luke the physician ([Colossians 4:14](#)). His writings of the Gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts total 37,932 words in Greek across 2,158 verses. By comparison, Paul wrote 32,408 words across the 2,033 verses of his 13 epistles.

The sheer volume of Luke’s writing also explains why the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are separate. Writings were frequently on scrolls in Luke’s day, and the maximum practical length of a scroll was about 10 yards. Luke’s Gospel and the book of Acts have about two scrolls’ worth of material, making a physical division necessary. Luke did this thoughtfully by dividing the books into his account of Jesus and his account of the church. The bridge between the two is the ascension of Jesus, found in [Luke 24:50–53](#) and repeated in [Acts 1:6–9](#).

Careful study of these two books shows that Luke maintained high standards for accuracy. Where we can corroborate his historical details, he has proven to be completely reliable. For example, Luke refers to the magistrates of the city of Thessalonica by the Greek word *politarchas* ([Acts 17:6, 8](#)), a term not found elsewhere in ancient literature. This had led earlier scholars to wonder if Luke made up this word. However, archaeological excavations have since found inscriptions that use this title, confirming Luke’s attention to accurate detail.

## I. Promise Number 1 ([Acts 1:1–5](#))

### A. Looking Back (vv. 1–3)

#### 1a. In my former book, Theophilus,

The Gospel of Luke (which is the *former book*) and the book of Acts are both addressed to a certain *Theophilus* (compare [Luke 1:3](#)). Some students have proposed that this person may have been Luke’s patron—his financial backer for the resulting scrolls (see [Lesson Context](#)). [Luke 1:3](#) refers to him as “most excellent” Theophilus. Such language was used of high governmental officials, somewhat like our

addressing a judge as “Your Honor” or a queen as “Your Majesty.” Luke records Paul’s having used this honorific (or a variant) to address Felix and Festus, the Roman governors in [Acts 23:26](#); [24:3](#); and [26:25](#).

Others propose that the name Theophilus doesn’t refer to any specific person but to all those who would sincerely seek the truth by reading what Luke wrote. The basis of this theory is that the name *Theophilus* means “[any] one who loves God.” An extension of the first theory above is that this general meaning could indicate that it was a code name intended to protect a particular person’s identity. The bottom line is that we simply don’t know.

**1b. I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach**

This summarizes the content of Luke’s Gospel. (See the [Lesson Context](#).)

**2. until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.**

Luke highlights how his Gospel ends. In so doing, he established a chronological connection point to where the book of Acts begins.

**3. 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.**

Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances to the apostles (the *to them*; see previous verse) and others are attested in many places (see [Matthew 28:17](#); [Luke 24:34, 36](#); [John 20:19, 26](#); [21:1, 14](#); and [1 Corinthians 15:5–8](#)). Time periods involving the number 40 are significant in the Bible (see [Genesis 7:4](#); [Exodus 16:35](#); [Ezekiel 4:6](#); [Jonah 3:4](#); [Mark 1:13](#); etc.). Those instances often have figurative associations. But the *forty days* in the text before us should be understood in conjunction with the 50 days between the Passover (when Jesus was crucified, which was *his suffering*;

[Matthew 26:2](#)) and the Day of Pentecost (when the church was birthed; [Acts 2:1](#)). After Jesus' departure and before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, there remained a brief-yet-intense week and a half period of waiting and anticipation.

### What Do You Think?

How important is the evidence of history ("proofs") to your being a Christian?

### Digging Deeper

How do passages such as [John 14:11](#) and [20:30–31](#) establish that evidence is more important than personal testimony and personal experience in this regard?

## B. Looking Forward (vv. 4–5)

**4a.** On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem,

We should remember that most of the disciples were from Galilee, many miles north of *Jerusalem* and Judaea. After Jesus departed, they might have been inclined to leave Jerusalem and return home. In fact, they had already made one such trip after Jesus' resurrection (see [John 21](#)).

The apostle Paul knew of several meetings Jesus held with his followers during this 40-day period. One of them included appearing to more than 500 followers ([1 Corinthians 15:6](#)). We do not know how many such gatherings took place in total. But it is evident that Jesus did not maintain a constant presence with his disciples as he had before.

Even as the disciples were *eating* with Jesus, the food per se would have been secondary. They gathered for another purpose: God had

strategically chosen Jerusalem as the birthplace of his church (see [lesson 10](#)). We take this for granted today, but the choice would not have been self-evident to disciples like Peter, Andrew, James, and John. If the fellowship of Jesus' followers were to continue, why not out of the synagogue in Capernaum, surely a safer place? But this was not God's plan.

**4b–5. “but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”**

Here the promise of Jesus plays on the meaning of the word *baptized*. The water baptism practiced by *John* the Baptist was contrasted with a promise of pouring out of *the Holy Spirit* on the Day of Pentecost, which would arrive *in a few days*. The Greek word translated baptized means to engulf or immerse completely. The outpouring of the Holy Ghost to come would be like that: an immersion involving body, soul, heart, spirit, and mind.

### **What Do You Think?**

How do you discern God's will regarding whether to wait or act?

### **Digging Deeper**

How will you be “transformed by the renewing of your mind” ([Romans 12:2](#)) so that you can be attentive to God's will?

## **II. Promise Number 2** **([Acts 1:6–8](#))**

### **A. Lingering Question (v. 6)**

**6. Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”**



*They* likely refers to the core group of the 12, reduced at this time to 11 due to the demise of Judas (see [Matthew 27:5](#)). In this setting, a burning question comes out. Expanded, the intent of the question is something like this:

Lord, having thwarted the leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem, the Roman authorities, and death itself, wouldn't this be a good time to rally those who acclaimed your entry into the city a few days ago? Why not lead them to form an army and drive the Romans out? Come on, Jesus, we could do it!

This question would be comic if the setting were not so serious. Jesus knew that only moments remained for his time on earth with his disciples. But after three and a half years of close association, the disciples still misunderstood what his mission among them was. Rather than see the potential of humankind's complete freedom from sin, they were willing to settle for freedom from Roman rule.

## **B. Exasperated Response (v. 7)**

**7. He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.**

Jesus did not chastise those gathered with “you of little faith” as he had before ([Matthew 6:30](#); [8:26](#); [14:31](#); [16:8](#); [Luke 12:28](#)). Rather, he responded with patience and understanding, although we can imagine exasperation as well (compare [John 14:9](#)). Rather than answer the question about the kingdom of Israel, Jesus' reply regarding *the times or dates* refers to his return in glory and judgment. This future event is discussed extensively in the Gospel of Luke (see [Luke 17:20–37](#)).

Jesus revealed that the timing of the Day of Judgment was *set by* the

Father's *own authority* alone. Even the Son did not know the exact timing of his own return (see [Matthew 24:36](#); [Mark 13:32](#)). There is a warning here: if Jesus himself did not know, it would seem unwise for any human being to attempt to precisely determine the date of his return. These are things reserved for the power of the Father (compare [Deuteronomy 29:29](#)).

### What Do You Think?

How would you respond to someone who seems fascinated with speculating about Christ's return?

### Digging Deeper

How do texts such as [Matthew 24:27–31](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:13–16](#); and [2 Peter 3:3–15](#) inform your response?

## C. Worldwide Ministry (v. 8)

**8. “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.”**

This verse begins Luke's characteristic stress on the role and power of *the Holy Spirit* (compare [Acts 2:4, 17](#); [4:8, 31](#); [5:3](#); etc.; see also [Luke 4:1](#)). Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts together total about 27.5 percent of the New Testament, yet feature 60 percent of the designation “Holy Spirit” (55 of the New Testament's 91 occurrences).

Jesus proceeded to explain what the baptism of the Holy Spirit ([Acts 1:5](#), above) would accomplish. In speaking of the Spirit's accompanying *power*, Jesus used a different Greek word than the one translated “authority” in the previous verse. Differing translations of the two Greek words

appear together in nine verses (see [Luke 4:36](#); [9:1](#); [10:19](#); [1 Corinthians 15:24](#); [Ephesians 1:21](#); [1 Peter 3:22](#); [Revelation 12:10](#); [13:2](#); and [17:13](#)). Modern English understands the word *authority* as “the right to do something,” and *power* as “the ability to do something.”

But there is some overlap in meaning since the Father’s power regarding the timing of Christ’s return reflects his authority to determine that date. Similar can be said of the power that was to be bestowed on the disciples; it was a divine gift necessary to carry out their mission of sharing the gospel. To evangelize *to the ends of the earth* means that no person on earth would be overlooked.

These words of Jesus serve as an outline for the rest of the book of Acts. The public witness of the apostles began *in Jerusalem* on the Day of Pentecost ([Acts 2](#)). By the time we get to [Acts 9](#), Luke can speak of the church throughout “Judea, Galilee and Samaria” ([9:31](#)). If the purpose of the powerful coming of the Holy Spirit was to empower the spread of the message to the ends of the earth, we should be clear as to what the disciples were to be witnessing about: they were to give their eyewitness testimony about Jesus, especially concerning his resurrection from the dead.

All the subsequent messages in Acts include such testimony. That kind of testimony is different from what we call a “personal testimony” today. In this testimony, I may testify about my changed life, personal peace, acceptance in the church’s fellowship, the love of God, and many other things. But if I do not pass along the testimonies about the objective fact of Jesus the Christ risen from the dead, then I have left out the most important thing (see [Luke 1:2](#); [24:46–48](#); [2 Peter 1:16](#)).

## What Do You Think?

How will you order your life so that you might be a witness to your own “Jerusalems,” “Judeas,” and “Samarias”?

### **Digging Deeper**

What evidence do you see that God has brought people from all nations to your neighborhood?

## **Be One or Support One?**

It took five flights and a three-hour canoe ride for me to get from Dallas, Texas, to the village of Yar in Papua New Guinea. There I saw speakers of the Waran language celebrate the completion of the New Testament in their language. Another time I sat in an East African refugee camp with men who were translating the Bible into their Nilotic language.

As of the time of this writing in July 2021, there are 710 completed translations of both Old and New Testaments and 1,581 translations of the New Testament only. Further, efforts to translate the Bible into a whopping 2,753 languages are now underway. As great a blessing as that is, however, there are still more than 3,000 language groups who need Scripture, but no translation work is currently underway.

Visual for [Lessons 9 & 10](#). *Show this map as you review the spread of the gospel as commanded in [Acts 1:8](#).*

Think about it: What could be more foundational to achieving the mandates of [Matthew 28:19–20](#) and [Acts 1:8](#) than getting a readable Bible into people’s hands? Today you have a choice: either *be* a Bible translator or *support* Bible translators. The eternal destinies of those whose native tongue is one of those 2,753 languages hang in the balance.

—N. G.

### **III. Promise Number 3** **([Acts 1:9–11](#))**

## A. Dramatic Departure (v. 9)

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

We recall that the word *they* refers to the 11 apostles of [Acts 1:2](#). For Jesus to be *taken up* means he departed for Heaven, confirmed in [Acts 1:10–11](#), below (see also [Luke 24:51](#); compare [2 Kings 2:1, 11](#); contrast [Numbers 11:25](#)).

The text's wording with respect to how Jesus departed makes perfect sense in light of the ancient belief that Heaven is a physical space above Earth (compare [Psalm 102:19](#); [Luke 18:13](#); [2 Corinthians 12:2](#)). But given our modern understandings of a massive, spherical planet Earth and a vast, empty outer space, we naturally wonder, *Where exactly did Jesus go?*

A key detail here is the presence of *a cloud*. When the cloud did so, Jesus was hidden. This was not a random cloud parked in a handy place in the sky. Rather, it was a prepared, supernatural cloud. A cloud could be a sign of the presence of God ([Luke 9:34–35](#)), even a means of divine transport (see [21:27](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:17](#); [Revelation 1:7](#); [11:12](#)). Therefore, being received by the cloud in our text should be understood as being received by God.

The book of Acts reinforces this idea in the vision of the dying Stephen, where the martyr sees into Heaven and confirms that Jesus is standing by the throne of God ([Acts 7:55](#)). Stephen was not gifted with X-ray vision to look through the clouds; rather, his was a supernaturally granted view into the throne room of God in Heaven (compare [Revelation 4:1](#); [20:11](#)).

## B. Angelic Urging (vv. 10–11)

**10–11.** They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “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.”

While the apostles stare into the sky in stunned silence, *two men* enter the scene. Their *white* apparel and sudden appearance indicate that they are angels (compare [John 20:12](#); see [lesson 5](#)). The apostles do not seem to notice them immediately, since the apostles’ attention is still fixed skyward, *looking into the sky*.

The two speak, and this does get the disciples’ attention. In essence, the angelic message is, “What’s done is done. Now it’s time to get busy.” Although the angels knew that they were speaking to *men of Galilee* (compare [Acts 2:7](#)), we should remember that all this was taking place near Bethany ([Luke 24:50](#)), which was about two miles southeast of Jerusalem ([John 11:18](#)) and near the Mount of Olives ([Acts 1:12](#)). It was only 10 days until Pentecost, but Jerusalem—where the apostles were to wait ([1:4](#), above)—was close by. Therefore a 75-mile walk from Galilee was not indicated. Those were not to be an idle 10 days. Certain preparations were needed, including gathering fellow believers in Jerusalem ([1:13](#)) and choosing a replacement for Judas Iscariot ([1:21–26](#)).

What was definitely *not* needed was a repeat of [2 Kings 2:16–18](#), where several days were wasted looking for Elijah after he was taken to Heaven. Rather, the apostles’ task was to be busy witnessing for Jesus, beginning in Jerusalem and going outward to the ends of the earth.

### What Do You Think?

How can believers be ready for Christ’s return without disregarding

what he has called his followers to do?

## Digging Deeper

How do [Matthew 24:36–51](#) and [1 Thessalonians 4:15–5:23](#) apply?

## Why Not Right Now?

As my wife pushed the swing in which our 4-year-old sat, a natural back and forth rhythm developed. There weren't any other children on the playground to interrupt their conversation, which went something like this:

“Mom, what will it be like when Jesus comes back?”

“It will be wonderful, like a party, for those who love him! We'll get to see him and be with him forever.”

“I want him to come back now!”

“Well, there are other people we need to invite. Many people don't know that He's coming, and we need to give them party invitations.”

“Then why don't you call them and tell them right now?”

My son's response reminds me of the angel's question. Why procrastinate? We have work to do in sending out those invitations! Do you have anything to do in the week ahead that you consider to be more important than that?

—N. G.

## Conclusion

### A. Luke's Great Commission

When discussing the Great Commission given by Jesus, most Christians will think of [Matthew 28:19–20](#), where Jesus said,



Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Luke's version of this is found in [Acts 1:8](#), which could be summarized as, "Go to the ends of the earth and be my witnesses." There is no conflict between these versions. They are different ways of commanding the same thing. In both cases, the message is not confined to a small group of men who were physically present at Jesus' ascension, men who died some 2,000 years ago. Rather, these commands also apply to Christians today.

If we are truly Christ's disciples, we will be involved in spreading the saving testimony about Jesus to all the people of the earth. For some Christians, this involves strategic relocation to interact with people groups in countries that have no Christian witness. For other Christians, it means funding and supporting such cross-cultural evangelism. For all Christians, it involves ensuring that *talk* matches *walk* ([Colossians 4:5](#); [1 Timothy 3:7](#); etc.).

The New Testament teaches that all Christians are to be involved in making disciples. This is to be motivated by our love for those who do not know Jesus, as well the need to obey his commands as our Lord ([John 14:15](#)). Jesus went to the cross out of his love for the world and his obedience to his Father's will. We should do no less.

## B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may we be the generation that finally fulfills your desire to share our witness about your Son with all the people of the earth. May your Holy Spirit give us strength and courage to work toward

this goal. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

The gospel must be spread *now*.

## Involvement Learning

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

### Into the Lesson

Write the heading *I love history because ...* on a sheet of roll paper. Write the heading *I dislike history because ...* on a second sheet of roll paper. Display the sheets in two opposite corners of the room.

As learners arrive, ask them to sit or stand by the paper that best describes their feelings regarding history. After all learners have arrived, allow two minutes for each group to compare within their group regarding why they chose that heading. Ask for a volunteer from each group to give an overview of their group's reasons. Encourage learners to respond respectfully to each other's reasoning. Discuss why the study of history is important, despite a person's likes or dislikes.

*Alternative.* Complete the previous activity as indicated, but write the headings on the board. Have students raise their hands to indicate which heading applies to them.

Transition to Bible study by saying, "Today begins five weeks of

church history. Although the events that we will study happened about 2,000 years ago, each event is a remarkable story of God’s work and what he wants from us now.”

## Into the Word

To each learner, distribute a handout (you create) with the following headings:

- What Jesus did ...
- What Jesus said ...
- What the disciples thought ...
- What the disciples were promised ...

Have learners make notes under each heading as a volunteer reads [Acts 1:1–11](#) aloud two times.

Divide learners into groups of three to compare what they have written under each heading on their handouts. After five minutes, ask for volunteers to share their answers for the whole class.

*Option 1.* Distribute copies of the “In the Cloud” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated. Have pairs share with the whole class their answers to the last two questions.

*Option 2.* Display a map of the eastern Mediterranean region, like the map included on page [302](#). Highlight the locations of Jerusalem, Judah, and Samaria. Ask learners to describe the significance of Jesus’ promise regarding the geographic spread of the gospel.

## Into Life

Place learners in groups of four. Give each group a handout (you create) with the following prompts and have each group answer the prompts: 1—What are four modern-day equivalents that correspond to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth” ([Acts 1:8](#)). 2—How is our congregation helping share the gospel in these places? 3—What are the members of our group doing to help to share the gospel in these places? 4—What attitudes, beliefs, or situations prevent believers from following the gospel mandate in [Acts 1:8](#)?

After five minutes, ask for a volunteer from each group to share their responses to the first two prompts. For whole-class discussion, ask why the congregation’s influence seems to be stronger in some places than in others.

Ask for volunteers to share their responses to the third and fourth prompts. For whole-class discussion, ask how believers might overcome the attitudes, beliefs, or situations that prevent them from following the gospel mandate

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Circles of Influence” activity from the activity page. Have learners work in small groups to complete as indicated.

End class by placing learners in pairs and having them pray for guidance for how they might rededicate themselves to the work that Jesus has given them to accomplish the gospel mandate.