### Storyteller ACTS

THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS

## Storyteller ACTS THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS

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### THE STORYTELLER SERIES

God could've chosen to reveal Himself in any way that He desired, yet in His wisdom, He chose to reveal Himself in the context of a story. We come to know and understand this reality as we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures and begin to see the entirety of Scripture as one interconnected story. By becoming familiar with the individual stories of Scripture, we train ourselves to see each as one part of God's big story.

Storyteller is a series of devotional and group Bible study experiences designed to take people through Scripture in a way that is beautiful, intuitive, and interactive. Each volume uses a book of the Bible or a portion of Scripture from within a book to examine a key theme. This theme guides the Bible study experience and gives readers handles to help understand and digest what they're reading.

At the end of each study, you should have a deeper understanding of God, His Word, the big themes of Scripture, the connectedness of God's story, and His work in your life.

Let's enter the story together.

### **ABOUT ACTS**

### **SUMMARY**

The book of Acts begins where Luke's Gospel leaves off and unfolds the exciting story of God's post-resurrection work in the world as His Spirit empowers the earliest church. The book is outlined in Acts 1:8—"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And that is what happens! The first twelve chapters of Acts relate to us the coming of the Spirit to all believers and the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. They also relate God's determined purpose to extend the gospel to Gentiles through the Spirit-empowered ministries of men like Peter, Philip, and the newly converted Paul.

### TITLE

No early title for Acts has been discovered. Shortly before AD 200, Irenaeus referred to it as "Luke's witness to the apostles." Shortly after AD 200, Tertulllian called it "Luke's commentary." Sometime before AD 300, the book received its lasting title, "The Acts of the Apostles."

### **AUTHOR AND DATE**

Luke, Paul's physician friend, wrote Acts as a sequel to his first letter to Theophilus—the Gospel of Luke. He had firsthand knowledge of many of the events described in Acts, as he had traveled with Paul on his missionary journeys and remained with him during his Roman confinement. The events Luke records in Acts 1–12 occurred from about AD 30 to AD 46. Acts was most likely written no later than AD 64.

### **PURPOSE**

Acts provides for us an historical account of the first three decades of the early church, biographical information to set Paul within that historical context, and practical encouragement through those examples. Acts teaches us to rely on God's Spirit as we share the gospel, daily engage with other believers, and faithfully endure whatever difficulties come until Jesus returns.

### WHY STUDY ACTS?

God's Word lets us know that the Christian life is a life marked by power—power to trust God's promises not yet fulfilled, to obey God's commands in a hostile world, to selflessly serve selfish people, and to proclaim the gospel to an unbelieving generation.

Yet many of us often live powerless lives.

We struggle to keep our eyes on God's promises because our earthly circumstances seem ultimate. We find it difficult to obey His commands because there is often an easier, more socially acceptable path to take. To serve someone who acts selfishly is altogether counterintuitive. And we are often afraid to speak up about Jesus, uncertain what to say and worried what people might think.

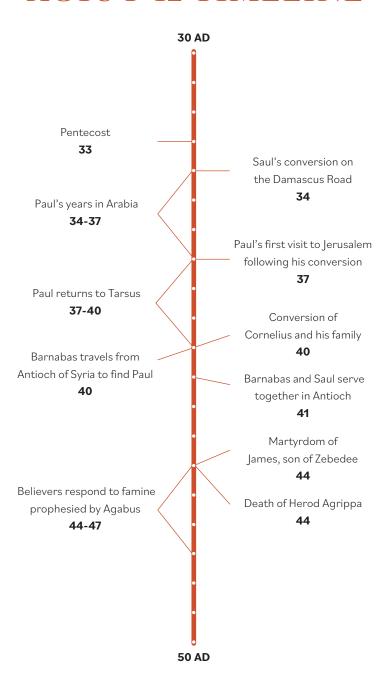
Through the experiences of the first Christians in the earliest church, the book of Acts helps us navigate the tension we feel.

In just three decades after Jesus's death and resurrection, a small group of scared and uncertain believers hiding out in Jerusalem transformed into a vast army of saints who changed the world. They trusted God's promises, obeyed His commands, served people, and spread the gospel far and wide. However, the power to do those things was not their own. God's Spirit was at work in and through them.

Their acts inspire us. They embolden us to step past doubt, fear, and human wisdom and assure us that we are meant to walk in power, too. The same Spirit at work in Acts is at work in us and in the world today.



### **ACTS 1-12 TIMELINE**



### **OUTLINE OF ACTS 1-12**

Acts 1:8 provides the introduction and outline for the book.<sup>2</sup> Once empowered by the Holy Spirit, the disciples proclaim the gospel boldly in Jerusalem. As the book progresses, the gospel spreads further into Judea and Samaria and then finally into the outer reaches of the known world through the missionary work of Paul.

- I. Empowerment for the Church (1:1-2:47)
  - A. Waiting for power (1:1–26)
  - B. The source of power (2:1–13)
  - C. Pentecostal witness to the dispersion (2:14-47)
- II. Early Days of the Church (3:1–12:25)
  - A. In Jerusalem (3:1-7:60)
  - B. In Samaria: the Samaritan Pentecost (8:1-25)
  - C. To the ends of the earth: Philip's witness (8:26-40)
  - D. Conversion and preparation of Paul (9:1-31)
  - E. In Judea: Peter in Caesarea (9:32-11:18)
  - F. To the ends of the earth (11:19–12:25)

### HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Each week follows a repeated rhythm to guide you in your study of Acts and was crafted with lots of white space and photographic imagery to facilitate a time of reflection on Scripture.

The week begins with an introduction to the themes of the week. Throughout each week, you'll find Scripture readings, devotions, and beautiful imagery to guide your time.



 $\begin{array}{c} \text{week 5} \\ \text{TRANSFORMATION} \end{array}$ 

ACTS 13-3

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Promise 2

Each week includes five days of Scripture reading, along with a short devotional thought and three questions to process what you've read.

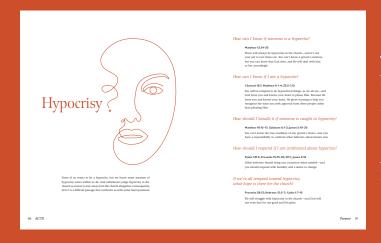
The Scripture reading is printed out for you with plenty of space for you to take notes, circle, underline, and interact with the passage.



The sixth day contains no reading beyond a couple of verses to give you time to pause and listen to what God has said through the Scriptures this week. You may be tempted to skip this day altogether, but resist this temptation. Sit and be quiet with God—even if it's only for a few minutes.

The seventh day each week offers a list of open-ended questions that apply to any passage of Scripture. Use this day to reflect on your own or meet with a group to discuss what you've learned. Take intentional time to remember and reflect on what the story of Acts is teaching you.





Throughout each week of study, you will notice callout boxes or supplemental pages provided to give greater context and clarity to the Scripture you're reading. These features will help you connect the story of Acts to the bigger story of Scripture.

### LEADING A GROUP

Each week of study contains a set of questions that can be used for small group meetings. These open-ended questions are meant to guide discussion of the week's Scripture passage. No matter the size of your group, here are some helpful tips for guiding discussion:

### **PREPARE**

**REVIEW** the Scripture and your answers to the week's questions ahead of time.

PRAY over your group as well as the Scriptures you've been studying. Ask God's Spirit for help to lead the group deeper into God's truth and deeper in relationship with one another.

### MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

We live in a time when our attention is increasingly divided. Try to see your group time as a space and respite from the digital clutter-from scrolling, notifications, likes, and newsfeeds. Commit to one another to give focused time and attention to the discussion at hand and minimize outside distractions. Help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

### **ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION**

A good small group experience has the following characteristics:

**EVERYONE IS INCLUDED.** Your goal is to foster a community where people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually.

**EVERYONE PARTICIPATES.** Encourage everyone to ask questions, share, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES. Even though you may be "leading" the group, try to see yourself as a participant steering the conversation rather than a teacher imparting information.

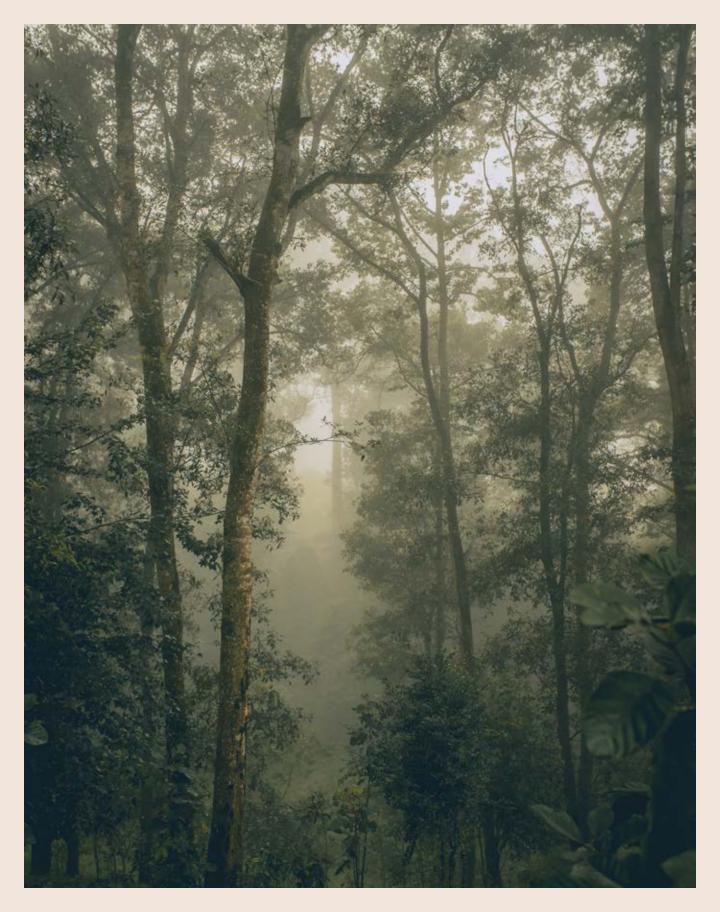
**DON'T RUSH.** Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People may need time, and we should be glad to give it to them. Don't feel like you have to ask all the questions or stay away from questions that aren't included. Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and to one another. Take your time.

**INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP.** Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking other people to share when they have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. Conversation stalls when people feel that you don't want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer. Engagement and affirmation keeps the conversation going.

**GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL.** The questions in this study are meant to steer the conversation back to God, His Word, and the work of the gospel in our lives. Opinions and experiences are valuable and can be helpful, but God is the center of the Bible, the center of our story, and should be the center of our discussion. Trust Him to lead the discussion. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

### **KEEP CONNECTING**

Spiritual growth occurs in the context of community. Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Your group will be more enjoyable the more you get to know one another through time spent outside of an official group meeting. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending. Reserve time each week to touch base with individual group members.



## WEEK 1 PROMISE

Believe the promise.

The events the disciples saw and experienced during the years of Jesus's earthly ministry were both glorious and, at times, traumatic.

They heard Him confront and silence authorities, and they saw Him stand silent as He was confronted and accused by authorities. They saw Him raise dead people to life, and they saw Him die a horrific death. They saw Him wrapped in cloths and buried in a tomb, and they saw Him raised to life.

And in the first days and weeks following His resurrection, the small group of believers had time to consider it all. What they had seen and experienced simultaneously inspired them and confused them.

It is in this state of being that Acts begins and pulls us in.

Believers in Christ know what it is like to consider His glory and be inspired to give ourselves wholly to Him. We also know what it is like to ruminate in confusion over the depth of earthly suffering. And Jesus's promise to His disciples in Acts 1 is the same for us today: The Holy Spirit will empower us to step forward in faith.

### **ACTS 1:1-3**

### **PROLOGUE**

I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

DAY

1

### STEP INTO GOD'S WORK

Acts, like Luke's Gospel, is a letter written from one friend to another. When Luke wrote to Theophilus in the Gospel of Luke, he wasn't thinking, *People around the world are going to read my words by candlelight every Christmas Eve for centuries.* When he wrote Acts, he wasn't thinking, *I bet this is going to help form mission statements for churches everywhere!* 

If anything, Luke may have wondered if he should attempt to write historical accounts of Jesus and the church to anyone at all. He wasn't one of the twelve disciples. He might have thought he should leave the task up to someone like Peter, James, or John. Luke was a doctor. He had sick people to take care of. And writing such lengthy manuscripts in that day involved a huge investment of time and money.

There were plenty of reasons not to write Acts, but Luke wanted Theophilus—and whoever else might read or hear his manuscripts—to know about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He wanted people to know the incredible ways the Spirit empowers those who, believing in the living Christ, join in His kingdom purposes.

So Luke grabbed a pen and got to work. He stepped into the calling Jesus had placed on his life, which is the calling He has placed on all of our lives: to go and make disciples.

From the first sentence of Acts, we see that the Spirit empowers us to live out that calling. Through the faithful work of writing two letters, God did a greater work than Luke could have imagined. Luke simply served. He committed to tell the truth about Jesus and His church, and look what God did! He inspired and empowered a work that has drawn people around the globe to Jesus and encouraged the church for millenia.

Are you waiting for God to use you? Do you wonder what you're supposed to do? Are you waiting for an invitation to serve the church in a particular way that you feel capable? The message of Acts is that the Spirit comes to those who believe and empowers us to live out the calling we have received. So, don't wait. Step into the faithful work of telling others about Jesus and the power of life in Him—and see what God will do.



### REFLECTIONS

According to Acts 1:1-3, what was Jesus's purpose following His resurrection and before His ascension? What was Luke's purpose?

What should be the recognizable purpose of every believer in Christ?

Do you ever find yourself wondering what you're supposed to do and waiting for God to use you in service to Him? Why? Name one way you can step into God's work now.

### **INSIGHTS**

We don't know much about Theophilus, to whom Luke addressed his letter. However, book dedications were common among the Greeks. Literary works dedicated to an individual helped ensure that work would be heard publicly.<sup>3</sup>

### **ACTS 1:4-5**

### THE HOLY SPIRIT PROMISED

<sup>4</sup>While he was with them, he commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. "Which," he said, "you have heard me speak about; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days."

DAY

2

### RELY ON THE SPIRIT

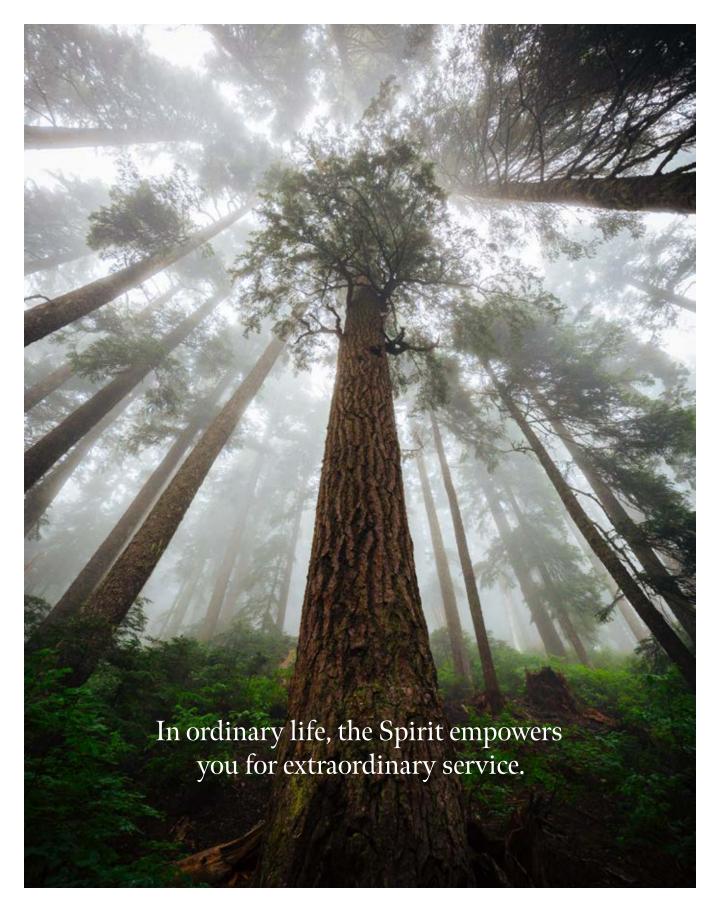
The disciples' heads were still spinning from everything that had just taken place. They were anxious to do something with the passion and excitement welling up inside them, but Jesus told them to wait.

In yesterday's study, we learned that we don't have to wait to join God in His kingdom purposes. So, Jesus's command for the disciples to wait in verse 4 might seem contradictory. It's not.

This moment in Scripture marks an important spiritual shift. A huge change was about to take place. Before the ascension, Jesus related to the disciples as a physical man. If they wanted to be near Jesus, they had to go where He was. But He was about to ascend to heaven to sit down at the right hand of the Father to reign and rule in a way that was no longer locked into a given space or time.

So, the disciples wouldn't be waiting for Jesus to walk through a closed door anymore (John 20:19). He wasn't going to come physically and let them touch His hands and feet to remind them He rose from the dead (John 20:27). He would come in a new way to guide them, comfort them, equip them, empower them, and remind them of truth. They would be baptized with His Spirit, who would indwell them permanently.

That promise is for all believers. Following Jesus requires no pilgrimage to Mecca. There is no place on earth where the power and presence of Christ dwells in a way that surpasses the way He resides in us in our most ordinary moments—at church on a Sunday morning, at work on a Monday, or at a restaurant or ballgame on Saturday. In those ordinary moments, the Spirit energizes and empowers us for extraordinary service.



REFLECTIONS
Why did Jesus tell His disciples to wait?
What might have been God's purpose in not immediately sending the Holy Spirit in Jesus's place following His death and resurrection?
How does this command to wait help you understand the role of the Spirit in our lives today?

## THE Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is central to the specific people and events in Acts—the overall story the book tells—and to the ongoing gospel story that continues today. He was active in the beginning. He was active in Jesus's earthly ministry. He is active in the lives of believers today. And He will be active throughout eternity.

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### **ACTS 1:6-8**

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?"

<sup>7</sup>He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

DAY

3

### EMBRACE THE MISSION

The disciples had one thing in mind; Jesus had another.

Their question seems reasonable. After all, the disciples wanted God's kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). But Jesus's reply made clear they didn't understand what that actually meant.

Jesus didn't deny the kingdom was coming but warned them that God's schedule wasn't their business. Then, He reiterated what was their business—and ours.

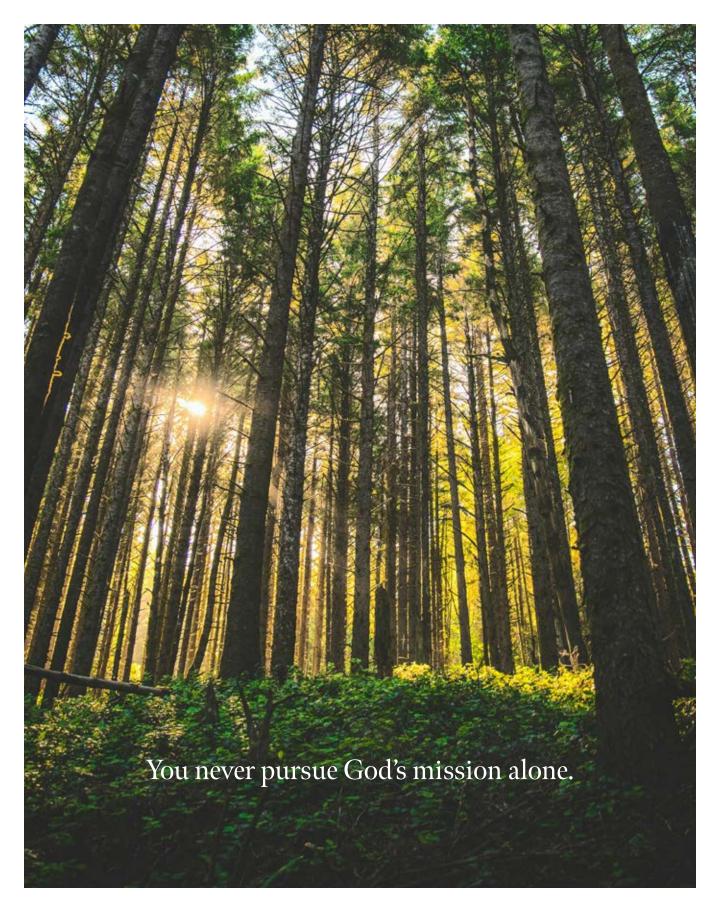
We often have one thing in mind we would like God to do. We want Him to help us with our jobs, relationships, health, or money. And He responds to those requests, but His Word always redirects us to His mission. We are to be His witnesses and to share the testimony of what we have seen and heard in Christ in our everyday lives and around the world.

Acts 1:8 summarizes the whole book, as well as our own roles as kingdom citizens today. From chapters 2–8, the gospel spreads in Jerusalem. In chapters 8–12, the gospel spreads throughout Judea and Samaria. And in chapters 12–28—and until Jesus returns—the gospel spreads to the ends of the earth.

Does "to the ends of the earth" seem intimidating or overwhelming to you? It should, except what comes before it assures us this mission will be completed in Jesus's power, not ours. The presence of the Holy Spirit imparts the nature of God into every believer.

If you are a follower of Jesus, God's power is at work in you!

You never pursue God's mission alone. He is with you. He equips you. He created you and made you for this. In and through your relationships, jobs, gifts, passions, desires, and even struggles, you can know this one thing: God's power is at work in you to carry out His mission.



REFLECTIONS
Based on these verses, what is God's ongoing strategy for restoring His kingdom?
What is your role in that strategy? What is one thing on your mind right now that may be distracting you from that Spirit-empowered role?
What would change in your life this week if you were to embrace the personal reality of Acts 1:8?

### ACTS 1:9-14

### THE ASCENSION

**UNITED IN PRAYER** 

<sup>9</sup> After he had said this, he was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven."

 $^{\rm 12}$  Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem — a Sabbath day's journey away.  $^{13}$  When they arrived, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. <sup>14</sup> They all were continually united in prayer, along with the women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

DAY
4

### PRAY WITH CERTAINTY

It's tough to fault the disciples for standing there dumbfounded, staring into the sky. Jesus, their Savior, Lord, and friend was literally taken up into a cloud right before their eyes. They had seen many incredible things as they'd followed Jesus, but this was perhaps the most unbelievable!

As they tried to process what was happening before them, God met them there. Two angels appeared to give focus in their confusion.

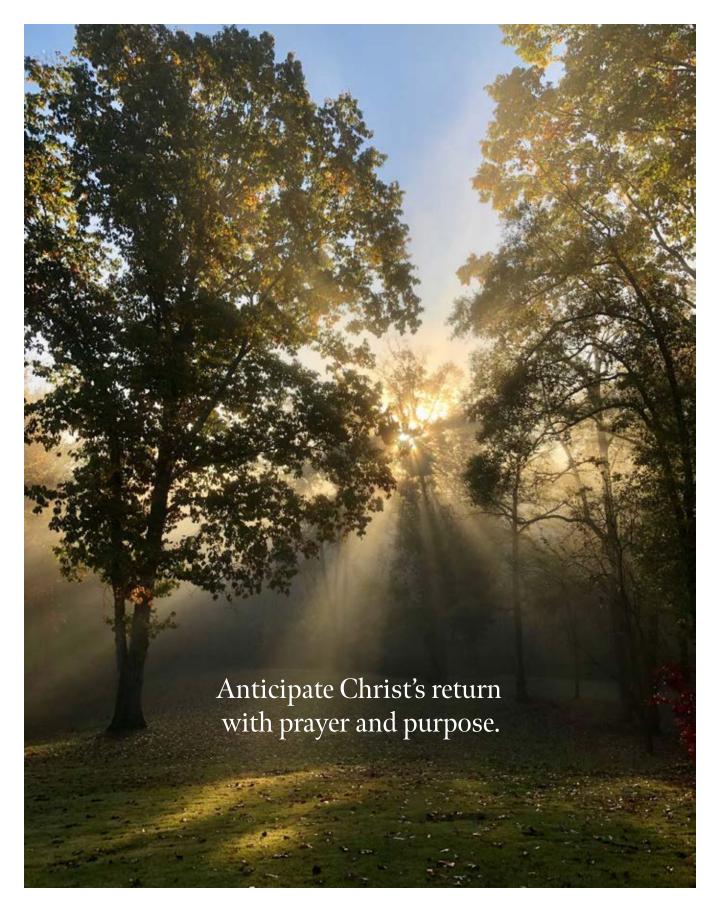
Jesus had told them to wait for His Spirit to come. The angels came to assure them that paralyzed bewilderment isn't what Jesus had in mind. He would return, and His followers should anticipate that day with hope-filled prayer and purpose.

God's message to us is the same. Each time we struggle to comprehend the work He is doing, we should remember that struggle will be temporary.

Each of us faces different situations in life that are confusing and difficult to navigate. But those should not paralyze us in bewilderment, despair, or apathy. The difficulties of those realities are met and rectified in the greater, ultimate reality of Christ.

In all the chaos and confusion, we can look forward and prepare for Jesus to come again. Our waiting is active, not passive.

God invites us to pray in light of the certainty of Christ's return, seeking to align our hearts and desires with His will. In our most perplexing struggles, the Holy Spirit will equip us every step of the way. His presence anchors us and reminds us that chaos is not the end of the story. Our Savior has a bigger plan at work and will come again as Lord over all things.



REFLECTIONS
Read Matthew 6:10 and Acts 1:6,11. What were the disciples likely praying about in Acts 1:14?
For many of us, prayer is often a last resort. We sometimes think, "When all else fails, pray." Why is this a wrong approach to prayer?
What are some confusing things going on in your life? How do the angels' words to the disciples in this passage give you hope in your own struggle?

### ACTS 1:15-26

### **MATTHIAS CHOSEN**

<sup>15</sup> In those days Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters — the number of people who were together was about a hundred twenty — and said, <sup>16</sup> "Brothers and sisters, it was necessary that the Scripture be fulfilled that the Holy Spirit through the mouth of David foretold about Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. <sup>17</sup> For he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." <sup>18</sup> Now this man acquired a field with his unrighteous wages. He fell headfirst, his body burst open and his intestines spilled out. <sup>19</sup> This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that in their own language that field is called *Hakeldama* (that is, "Field of Blood"). <sup>20</sup> "For it is written in the Book of Psalms:

Let his dwelling become desolate;

let no one live in it; and

Let someone else take his position.

<sup>21</sup> "Therefore, from among the men who have accompanied us during the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— <sup>22</sup> beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us—from among these, it is necessary that one become a witness with us of his resurrection."

<sup>23</sup> So they proposed two: Joseph, called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup> Then they prayed, "You, Lord, know everyone's hearts; show which of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take the place in this apostolic ministry that Judas left to go where he belongs." <sup>26</sup> Then they cast lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias and he was added to the eleven apostles.

5

### SEEK GOD'S WILL

The disciples had been through a lot. Their friend Judas had betrayed Jesus. Jesus had died, resurrected, and ascended to heaven. And now Judas was gone, too.

There was so much to process and grieve.

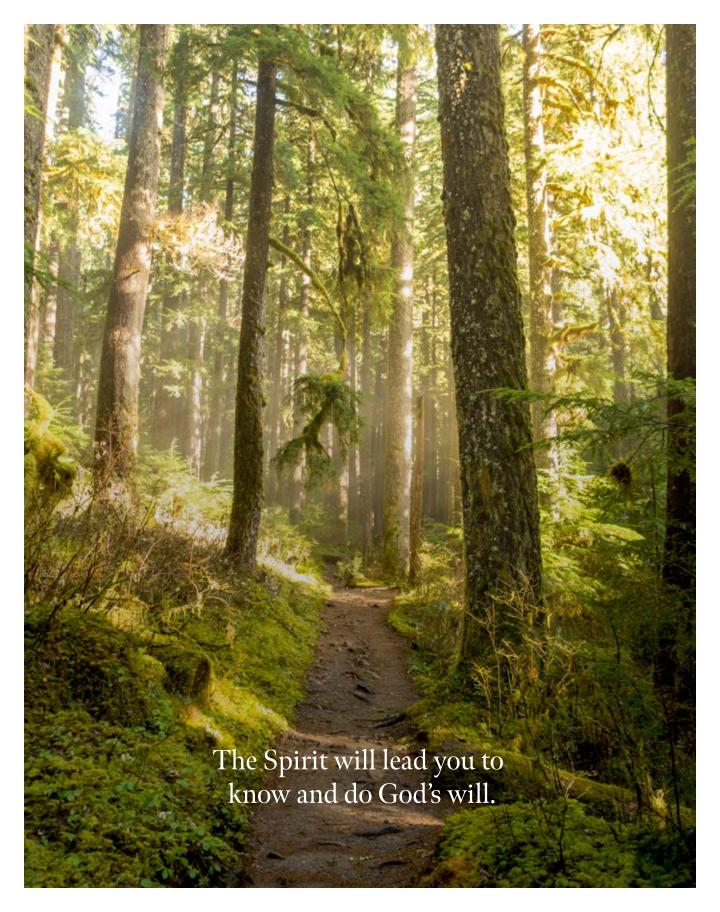
At the same time, life in the Spirit necessitates forward motion. So, after spending devoted time in prayer, Peter called everyone's attention to what God's Word said they should do next.

To even bring up Judas's name was painful. But it was necessary in recognizing what they needed to move forward. Peter quoted Psalm 69:25 and 109:8 to remind his friends that everything that had taken place was prophesied and ordained by God. He was neither stunned nor caught off guard. Though their circumstances had changed, God had not.

There were two good candidates among them who could fill Judas's place in accordance with the Scriptures. Though trusting anyone would be difficult after such a betrayal, they needed to choose.

The disciples were uncertain about many things, but they knew God was not. So they prayed that God would show them who should take Judas's place, and then used a method of discernment ordained throughout the Old Testament to discern His will.

The Spirit-empowered life is not a life void of grief or uncertainty. In those times, it is difficult to know how to move forward in faith. But God is always faithful. He is always worthy of our trust. Every time we seek Him in His Word and in prayer, His Spirit leads us to know and do His will.



# REFLECTIONS Were these believers active or passive as they waited for God to move? How so? What are some principles you can take from this passage about how to move forward in uncertainty? What decision do you need to move forward with in faith? How can you seek God in that decision?

### **INSIGHTS**

It might seem strange that these believers made their decision by way of rolling two stones, but they were acting within an established biblical tradition (Proverbs 16:33). The disciples had prayed and sought God in His Word. The sum of their actions showed that they trusted God's knowledge over their own. By way of sovereign selection, God chose Matthias to become the twelfth apostle.<sup>4</sup>

DAY 6

### PAUSE & LISTEN Spend some time reflecting over the week's reading.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

**ACTS 1:8** 

### DAY

### REFLECTION

Use these questions for personal reflection or group discussion on Acts 1.

What stuck out to you most in this week's reading? What surprised you? Confused you?
What did this week's Scripture teach you about the Holy Spirit?
What did this week's Scripture teach you about humanity and our need for God's Spirit?

What would it look like practically for you to live as someone who believes the promise of the Spirit's power?
What steps of faith and obedience is God asking you to take through these Scriptures?
PRAY Pause for a few moments to thank God for the promise of His Spirit. Invite Him to energize and empower you for extraordinary service as you commit to daily rely on Him.