

Acts

Acts 1:1-28:31

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2020-05-31

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Introduction - the kingdom has come (Acts 1:1-11)

I had a Premillennialist friend challenge me with the question, “If the kingdom has come, why is there so much evil in the world?” And I quickly responded by quoting Psalm 110, the kingdom Psalm most quoted by the New Testament, where the Father says to Jesus, “Rule in the midst of your enemies.” There will be enemies around while he is ruling. And then I quoted 1 Corinthians 15, which says that the whole purpose of His reign is to *gradually* subdue all enemies over the course of history, with the last enemy being conquered at His Second Coming, and that enemy is death. After that, He rules forever with Father and Spirit. So everything we see in the world is evidence that Christ’s Mediatorial kingdom has come and is growing.

Well, the same misunderstanding was embraced by the Jewish majority in Luke’s day. They had been taught that when the Messiah came, Roman rule would end, and there would be no more enemies. In their mind, the fact that Jesus didn’t instantly set up a political kingdom and instantly bring shalom was proof positive that the kingdom had not come. Which meant that Jesus was a fraud who needed to be put down and Christians were dangerous subversives who needed to be eliminated.

And as these Christians were being tried in court, Theophilus (with his influence) would submit the books of Luke and Acts as the defense that what the Christians say is true - the kingdom has come. When I preached on Luke I proved that Theophilus, the man to whom both Luke and Acts were written, was the former high priest who ruled from AD 37-41. Like the apostle Paul, he too had persecuted Christians out of theological ignorance. But he had been converted some time shortly before AD 57 and was in a precarious place - the other leaders hated him because he still had influence with the people. But that’s precisely why Luke wrote to him. Though he had been kicked out of the high priesthood by Rome (probably because his Sadducean family had disowned him), they could not kick him out of influence. Josephus says that he remained an influential leader all the way up to AD 66 and even commanded an army. So two weeks ago we saw that Luke and Acts were written to him for two reasons.

The first reason for these two books was to further ground him in a biblical world-and-life view. And between Luke and Acts you have a pretty comprehensive world-and-life perspective. And these two books were perfectly designed to rid Theophilus of any of his remaining Sadducean doctrines and firmly ground him in the truth.

The second reason for these two books was that they could be introduced into the Jewish courts as a defense of Christianity. Even though they get the audience wrong, several scholars have shown that the sophisticated Greek of Luke and Acts is a legal defense of Christianity. And from the very first verses of Luke to the last verses of Acts, these books would have formed a perfect defense for an individual Christian who was being tried

within a Jewish court. Both books presuppose a sophisticated Jewish legal audience. When I get to heaven I will be interested to find out how many lawyers, judges, and perhaps even jurors were converted to Christianity simply because they were forced to read the evidence that the kingdom had indeed come. They could not declare a Christian guilty without reading that Christian's defense, and these two books formed that defense. It was a brilliant move. And of course, you would expect such brilliance since God Himself gave these two books.

Well, Acts begins by referring back to that previous book:

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach,

The former account was the Gospel of Luke. If that account was of what Jesus *began* to do and teach, then it implies that this book will document what Christ *continued* to do and teach through His apostles. As apostles they represented Jesus. What they said, Jesus said. What they did, Jesus was considered to have done. They were His spokesmen. They were His mouthpieces.

And the next two verses give the introduction to a book that is absolutely packed with carefully documented courtroom evidence that the kingdom has indeed come. Verse 2 says, "Until the day in which He was taken up..." His throne would be at the right hand of the Father, just as Daniel had promised concerning the Son of Man in Daniel 7. This is a daring and in-your-face contradiction of the leaders' false views of an earthly Messianic and political kingdom - a belief (by the way) that led to absolute disaster for Israel when they followed Messianic political figures within three years that led to the destruction of the temple. And the same views led to disaster in AD 135 when they followed another political leader who claimed to be the Messiah, Bar Kochba, and were permanently crushed. In a bit Luke will make the connection with Daniel 7 by saying that Christ was caught up in the clouds of heaven, but here he is just introducing it.

Verse 2 goes on to show that He left His kingdom representatives behind to follow His orders. They were apostles who spoke in His name and everything they did represented what Jesus did. So though this is the Acts of the Apostles, it is also the Acts of Jesus through the Apostles.

And as courtroom proof that this did indeed happen, he says in verse 3, "to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God." Luke is using courtroom language to show that Jesus had prepared them for the kingdom that he would soon entrust into their hands.

Verses 4-5 connect Pentecost with John the Baptist's promise. There were many Jews who were sympathetic to John and thought he was a prophet, so there is an apologetic purpose to writing as he did. Verse 4:

Acts 1:4 And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me; 5 for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

And I will comment in a bit on that command to wait. But let me finish off these initial ideas on the kingdom. The kingdom growth would begin in Jerusalem, but it could only come in power when the prophesied Holy Spirit was poured out.

But in verse 6, the question that would be on everyone's mind in the courtroom is voiced by the apostles themselves: "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" It was a legitimate question, since John the Baptist had preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). Jesus too had preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). They were not false prophets. The kingdom wouldn't be postponed for two thousand years (as Dispensationalists have claimed). It was at hand. The words "at hand" are a way of saying that it is almost here. So they were expectant. And rightly so.

And Luke will go on to prove that just as the remnant in the Babylonian exile constituted the new Israel back then, the remnant of Jews in the upper room would constitute a New Israel in the first century to whom God would restore the kingdom - but a kingdom unlike that of the Jewish leaders. It will be the growing kingdom that the Gospel of Luke spoke about. Verse 1 points back to Luke so that you get the full picture.

But one corrective Jesus gives is that kingdom victory will not happen overnight. It will take place over a long period of time. The restoration would happen over times and seasons rather than right now. Verses 7-8:

"It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. 8 But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

This is not a kingdom that would be established quickly. It would be established over times and seasons. The word "times" is *kronous* and refers to the long intervals (plural) of time, and the word "seasons" refers to the critical events between those times, or epoch making transitions. And there are dozens of Old Testament prophecies that clearly indicated that it would not be established overnight. The kingdom would not be established by armies or politics but by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

And then comes the narrative that would draw every Jewish reader's memory to Daniel 7 - that famous passage that predicted that the Messiah would ascend on the clouds of heaven to His throne in heaven during the period of the fourth empire, Rome. Let me read that background passage and I think you can see the connection. This is from Daniel 7:13-14.

"I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, [And you may remember that the phrase "the Son of Man" was key to Luke. He presents Jesus as the Son of Man. "And behold, One like the Son of Man"] Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed.

Theophilus, a former Jewish high priest, would immediately catch the implications. Jesus was ascending on the clouds to receive His promised Kingdom at the right hand of the Father. But he would also catch the scary implications of the rest of Daniel 7 - that though the kingdom would grow like crazy in the first generation, it would also be persecuted throughout that time and would almost be exterminated toward the end of that generation

shortly before the heavenly court would be seated to make a judgment in favor of the saints and cause the kingdom to continue to grow non-stop through the rest of history and over the whole world. This will help Theophilus to understand that the persecutions in the rest of this book were not unanticipated in connection with the kingdom. This was such an important apologetic point for the Jews of that day.

So after seeing Jesus ascend in a cloud to heaven, an angel says in verse 11:

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

And the rest of the book shows Jesus, the greater Joshua, leading the conquest and advancing His kingdom from a few to an innumerable company. Quickly follow the numbers with me. Look at the last clause of 1:15. It speaks of “a hundred and twenty” in that upper room of the temple. This is indeed a small number, but the absolute minimum number needed to constitute a new Israel - 120 men. There were women and children as well, but there needed to be 120 leaders - ten to represent each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now look at 2:41. “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” In one day an additional 3000 people were saved. But it is addition, not multiplication. Multiplication only happens when individuals who are converted also convert others.

Turn to 4:4. “However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.” Now look at verse 32. “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul...” It has become a multitude. Even by addition the church was growing like crazy. Once people begin to be trained to do their own evangelism, multiplication will happen.

Now look at 5:14. “And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” It’s gone from a multitude to multitudes. Same chapter, verse 28. “saying, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!”” It’s gone from multitudes to *filling* Jerusalem.

But so far it is addition. In chapter 6 we begin to see multiplication because of the leadership training the people. “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying...” Look at verse 7. “Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” It’s gone from multiplying to multiplying greatly. And you see similar encouraging notes of the increase of the church throughout the book in each new region of the world. I’ve written down 21 additional references to the word multiplying and spreading like crazy wherever it goes (8:7; 9:31,42; 10:27; 11:24; 12:24; 13:43,44; 15:12,30,35; 16:5; 17:4,12; 18:8,10; 19:18-20,26; 21:20).

All of this was prophesied to happen when the kingdom started. Throughout the book there are two things that are happening side by side as prophesied in Daniel - the growth of the church and the growth of persecution. Both are signs that the kingdom has come. If there

was no persecution, then Daniel would say that the kingdom had not come. Enemies and persecution is not a sign that the kingdom has failed to come. It is simply an indication that there is more work to be done before *every* enemy falls under Christ's feet. And sprinkled throughout the book of Acts are the same warnings that we find in Luke - that if Israel does not repent as a nation, it will be destroyed very very soon.

Anyway, the book of Acts is divided up into seven parts with seven summary statements that show the geographical spread of the Gospel from the temple all the way to Rome. Each section ends with a note of the victorious advance of the Gospel. According to Daniel, this was supposed to happen prior to the great tribulation of the saints and prior to the great falling away or apostasy of the church in the last days of the Old Covenant. The last days of the Old Covenant were the days leading up to the destruction of temple, sacrifices, priesthood, and all the Old Covenant ceremonies in AD 70. And I will cover the book using those seven sections. And we will see that prayer is foundational to each of these sections.

The advance of the kingdom

It starts in the temple (Acts 1:12-2:47 with Luke 24:53)

First, just as prophesied, the kingdom starts in the temple - God's throne-room. That's a very logical place to begin. In my sermon series on Acts I demonstrate that the upper room where the Spirit falls was a certain section of the temple's outer court that could be rented out. It is represented in the top two pictures of your outline. And from that upper story balcony the apostles could speak to everyone gathered in the temple courtyard, and all would be able to hear them. They would have been able to speak to tens of thousands of people. It was the perfect spot for Pentecost. And of course, Ezekiel speaks of the Spirit flowing from the temple at Pentecost.

A new Israel is formed (1:12-26)

And in verses 12-26 a new Israel was formed. It required a minimum of 120 men to constitute a new Israel. Twelve of those men were apostles and 70 were prophets that Jesus had earlier commissioned. And that too parallels the setting up of Israel under Moses. I won't go into all the details that I did in my Acts series, but a new Israel was clearly being formed. The kingdom was indeed being restored to Israel, but not to apostate Israel; to the remnant of Israel.

A new Pentecost establishes the kingdom (2:1-4)

I won't get into all the parallels between the first Pentecost under Moses and this Pentecost in Christ's kingdom, but Theophilus would have immediately picked up on those kinds of details.

Every nation is added to Israel (2:5ff)

Interestingly, Jewish proselytes from every nation under heaven are added to this new Israel in anticipation of the time that Christ's kingdom will embrace the entire world. Note that chapter 2:4 says, "And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven." What an incredible symbol of a worldwide kingdom.

Now, since these devout men were proselytes (or Gentiles who had previously converted to become Jews) they were already circumcised before becoming Christians so that there was no controversy yet about circumcision. But the universal nature of this new kingdom is symbolized by these converts from every nation under heaven and by the fact that the apostles spoke in tongues. The tongues symbolized not only judgment upon apostate Israel (according to Isaiah and 1 Corinthians 14:21-22) but also God's kingdom going to the nations. It was the reversal of the tower of Babel; the reversal of the curse upon the nations.

Old Israel is given promises and warnings (2:14-21)

Then Joel is quoted as both promising the Spirit to those who submit to Jesus and promising the destruction of Israel in verses 19-20 if Israel did not repent. These are kingdom themes tightly packed together.

Jesus is declared to be the fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecies (2:22-39)

But all through verses 22-39 sample Old Testament Messianic prophecies are said to be fulfilled in Jesus. This would be very hard for a Jewish court to refute.

The success of Jesus's kingdom in the temple (2:40-47)

And verses 40-47 finish the first section by showing the success of Jesus' kingdom within the temple grounds. It's astonishing that they were able to get away with continuing to meet in the temple. There had to have been a very prominent Levite with connections who had rented the place - perhaps Barnabas, Mark, or Luke. Anyway, verse 46 says, "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house..." Since the temple was the place where crowds came every day, it was a logical first step for the advancement of the Gospel. And verse 47 gives a summary statement of the success of Christ's kingdom: "praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." What a marvelous picture of the establishing of Christ's kingdom and its powerful advance.

But what was the key to this success? It was prayer. Earlier I had read Christ's command to wait in prayer until they were endued from on high by the Holy Spirit. The men, women, and children were all committed to prayer. Their first duty was not to go. The Great Commission is a mandate to go. But before they could go they needed power from the Holy Spirit, and before they could receive the Spirit's power they had to wait for the Spirit; they had to wait upon the Lord.

If you are not waiting on the Lord in prayer, you have no reason to be involved in any ministry. Much of our zealous work is produced by the efforts of our own arm of strength and does not shake this world. All it does is it shakes and wears us out. And I speak from personal testimony. I have been guilty of going before waiting numerous times - and that amounts to ministry in the flesh that does not accomplish anything. But the Scripture says that those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. We must wait if we are to have the power to run. Those who wait upon the Lord avoid a hurried ministry filled with burnout and anxiety. But those who can't waste time waiting on the Lord (they've got to get going) find that they waste time running fast on a treadmill going nowhere. J. Sidlow Baxter, in his commentary on Nehemiah said,

Again and again, as we watch Nehemiah, we are reminded of Cromwell's famous words, 'Trust in God, and keep your powder dry.' Speaking generally of today, there is a brilliant but frustrating over-emphasis on the human, the energetic, in religious service. More than ever before we wrestle with social problems in committees and conferences, but less than ever do we wrestle on our knees against evil spirit-powers which lie behind the social evils of our day. Nearly everybody in committee has a fine programme, but few indeed seem to have a real spiritual burden. The practical has overridden the spiritual; and when that happens, the practical becomes utterly unpractical. (p. 238)

The church in the 20th century is busy. But the proof that our emphasis on the practical has become utterly unpractical is in the results. We do not see the church of America shaking America or shaking the world. Waiting has got to be the hardest thing for prideful, self-sufficient people to do. It's certainly the hardest thing for me to do, which does not speak well of me. We want to get on with it. But Christ told them to wait.

And I think that is the first lesson that we need to learn. There are all kinds of people asking us to be involved in various activities. But we need to find out if this ministry is the one God wants us to do, and to find that out we need to wait upon Him in prayer. The greatest missionary movement in history, began with waiting on the Lord. If you are distracted from prayer with all of the things that need to get done, then check your spirit with those words of Christ (in chapter 1:4 and repeated in Luke 24:49) - "Wait." "Wait." "Wait upon the Lord."

It advances throughout Jerusalem (Acts 3:1-6:7)

In the next section, the kingdom advances all throughout Jerusalem. Persecution heats up, but so does missions. And so does prayer. Look at chapter 4:31 says, "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." When they had prayed. And notice that filling with the Spirit doesn't just happen once. The same people who were filled with the Holy Spirit in chapter 2 had to be filled with the Spirit again in chapter 4. Every day we must be filled with the Spirit. And how does that happen? Through prayer. The Spirit fell upon them when they had prayed.

Evangelism is a critical task of the church, and we must engage in it. But effective evangelism flows out of prayer. "When they had prayed." The filling of the Holy Spirit is essential to success in anything. But the filling of the Holy Spirit came upon all of them when all of them were in prayer. Many have said that if we are to shake the world as the

early church did, then we must be shaken ourselves. Let's look at the prayer itself, beginning to read at the middle of verse 24. Chapter 4:24.

The first words out of their mouth are, "Lord, You are God..." I am afraid that the church of today is not entirely convinced of that. At least our actions seem to demonstrate otherwise. We act as if it is all up to us, and if we are not up to it, we grow fainthearted. The Lord is God. He is the Creator God, the sustainer God.

They continue: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them." To pray from the perspective of victory we have got to be convinced that the Creator God upholds all things by the Word of His power and is not defeated; that He has not lost control; that He is God indeed. And if we really believed the Lord was God we would spend more time in prayer to Him rather than trusting ourselves.

But we would also stake our lives and our reputations on the truth of His Word. They appealed to Psalm 2 and God's promise that in Christ's resurrection He inherited the kingdom and was reigning in power even then. It may not have looked like he was reigning, but Psalm 2 prophesied the resistance and *showed how futile and vain such resistance would be*. Hallelujah! They pray,

who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: "Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the LORD and against His Christ.

They were not just praying *for* victory, but *from* the victory that was anchored in God Himself - in His promises and in the resurrection of Christ. "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done." Wow! They knew that even the persecution was ordained by God. It too was an evidence that God's kingdom had come. Christ's crucifixion was not a tragic event out of God's control. God brought every detail to pass - down to the casting of lots for His garment. And the God who controlled that event is not out of control now. We are not praying that victory can be brought out of a cosmic mess, as if we are hoping God can salvage a tiny bit. No, He is in control.

The one leading the prayer goes on in verse 29: "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word..." He is not denying the reality of the evil and persecution that has come against them. But they are praying for boldness which Christ purchased for them.

Verse 30 says, "by stretching our Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." All of these requests were based on the belief that Christ had won the victory and was now in the business of spoiling Satan's kingdom. They were not praying from a sense of helplessness but from a confidence in God's kingdom victory. You don't need more resources to win. Ephesians 1 promises that every one of us has been blessed with all the resources we need in Christ Jesus. Prayer lays claim to what is already ours in Christ Jesus. We need more prayer that prays from heaven; more prayer that claims the eschatology of victory that the Scripture lays forth.

Another thing that I see is that sin must be dealt with if the church is to have power. Chapter 5 shows the pride and lies of Ananias and Sapphira. When sin grieves the Spirit, we lose His power. When that sin was dealt with, great fear fell upon the church, and the church was powerfully used to advance the kingdom in the remaining verses of chapter 5. Of course, persecution also increases. Satan always desperately lashes out when his kingdom is being invaded.

Turn to chapter 6:3-4. We have already seen that the church membership was given over to daily prayer. But I want you to notice in these verses that the leadership of the church was involved in even more prayer. “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business: but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” If we saw the leadership of America’s churches praying like the apostles prayed; if we saw them praying like Christ prayed, there would be a huge difference in our churches. If you are a leader or if you aspire to be a leader in this church, how important is prayer to you? You can tell how important it is to you by how much you pray. If you trace the prayer life of the apostles, elders and Christ and compare it to 21st century American leadership, you will have the answer for why our churches do not shake America. *We are not shaken by the Holy Spirit.* I am not regularly shaken by the Holy Spirit. And one of the characteristics that you should look for in any leaders you nominate to the office of deacon or elder is if they are already committed to prayer and involved in prayer. A praying leadership was a key reason for the early church’s success in missions. Verse 7 ends this section of the book with a summary statement: “And the word of God spread, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” Luke ends every section with similar statements of Christ’s victory.

It advances throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 6:8-9:31)

Chapter 6:8-9:31 is the next section. It shows the kingdom blossoming outside of Jerusalem. It goes to Judea and Samaria in a powerful way. And the three things that it flows from are 1) first, a willingness to deal with sin quickly in chapter 6 (in this case, the sin of prejudice), 2) second, a commitment to the diaconal work of mercy ministries, and 3) third, prayer.

We find Stephen in 7:60 who has such a burden for the souls of those around him, that even while they are throwing stones at him with blood gushing from his wounds, he prays for them. Nothing deviates a man of prayer from his prayer burdens. That is why they are called prayer burdens. They are *supernaturally* given urges to pray that you cannot get away from. The last verse of chapter 7 says, “Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Acts is not just a book on missions. It is also a book that describes the what kinds of things flow from individuals and churches who have been stirred up by the Holy Spirit to pray. May the Holy Spirit do such in our midst. Chapter 8 shows the remarkable miracles that flowed from prayer. Chapter 9 shows Ananias praying for Saul, who was identified as a man who would be praying himself. Chapter 10 gives the remarkable story of Cornelius. Verse 2 says that “he prayed to God always.” What a remarkable testimony - he prayed to God

always. Peter, the other figure in the story was caught up in prayer when God spoke to him. If we lose the prayer of these passages we lose the missions of these passages and we lose the power.

But what happens when we are successful in plundering Satan's kingdom? He lashes back. You will see this consistent pattern throughout the book. Theophilus needed to understand that the two things go hand in hand in the first stages of Christ's kingdom. So we see persecution of the saints in these verses and the martyrdom of deacon Stephen. His testimony in chapter 7 is an astounding defense using a survey of the whole Old Testament and it vindicates him and condemns the leaders of Israel. Well, they just get mad and kill him anyway. Some people are not convinced by evidence. Their demonic rage is exposed. Saul (who later became Paul) was one of those who was involved in the stoning of Stephen, and his persecution in chapter 8 results in the church being scattered everywhere. Let's read chapter 8:1-8.

Acts 8:1 Now Saul was consenting to his death.

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.

Acts 8:3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

Acts 8:4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

That is not the normal word for preaching, which would only be done by officers. This is *εὐαγγελίζω* - evangelizing. Notice that it wasn't just the pastors who evangelized. In fact, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, but the rest of the saints who were scattered went everywhere evangelizing with the word. Every member should have a burden to share the Gospel. Missions is an every member ministry. And the persecution that was designed to stamp out the fire of the kingdom ended up spreading sparks everywhere and the kingdom brushfires grew out of Satan's control. Philip the deacon had by this time become an evangelist, and verses 5 and following describe his work:

5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. 6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 And there was great joy in that city.

Philip was the first one to get the church to cross racial boundaries. The Samaritans were a mixture of Jew and Gentile and had a syncretistic religion. Though they were circumcised, and therefore the circumcision question still did not arise with Samaritans who were converted, it was the first challenge for cross-cultural missions. And it opens the door to Paul's conversion (which will occur in chapter 9) since Paul would be the greatest evangelist to the Gentiles out there. But all of this is crafted in a way as to prove that Jesus is indeed fulfilling the Son of Man passage in Daniel. He is indeed inheriting the nations. The apostles were somewhat reluctant to reach the Gentiles, but Philip is like a Green Beret jumping into the toughest jobs.

And of course, Saul's conversion has a huge apologetic purpose in this legal defense because Saul was one of the chief persecutors of the faith. His imprisonment of Christians had been authorized by the high priest. This book would have been a painful reminder to Theophilus. But Paul had studied under the famous Gamaliel, and if even he could be convinced of the truth of Christ's claims, that says a lot. But he too is persecuted in chapter 9 as he takes the Gospel to the Gentiles. But how does this section end? Chapter 9:31 says, "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied." There is no stopping Christ's kingdom.

But if you read through those chapters, you will see that prayer once again plays a big role. For the sake of time, I won't go over those passages.

It advances to the Gentiles in the Kingdom of Herod and Syria (9:32-12:24)

But one of the most radical changes that happened to the church occurs in chapter 10 when the Roman centurion, Cornelius, and his household are admitted to the church *without getting circumcised*. This is a first. Keep in mind that the early church saw itself as the true Israel. So how could Gentiles join the church without becoming Jews through circumcision? Though God settles this question in a sense in chapters 10-11 through Peter's vision, it is not until chapter 15 that this huge issue of Jew and Gentile being in one body is finally settled. They had a hard time figuring out how Gentiles could become part of Israel (which, by the way, was a religious concept, not an ethnic concept) without getting circumcised and becoming Jews. It was like moving mountains to get the church to reach the Gentiles in Herod's Kingdom and in Syria, the subject matter of chapter 9:32-12:4.

So it is no wonder that God did so many signs and wonders to convince people of the reality of God's mission to the Gentiles. God had to move heaven and earth to get the church to change and to convince them. And so this section is strewn with signs and wonders vindicating Christ's plan as truly being from God. I won't go through each of those signs and wonders, but they are listed for you in your bulletin.

Confirming signs of healing and resurrection (9:32-43)**Confirming sign of Vision (10:1-43)****Confirming Sign of Tongues (10:44-48)****Defense of Gentiles by Peter (11:1-18)****Confirming sign of Conversions (11:19-30)****Confirming sign of Peter's Deliverance (12:1-19)****Confirming sign of miraculous judgment of Herod (12:20-24)****Summary statement (12:24)**

But the church did change, and it changed in part because God moved the people to prayer, and through prayer they gained God's heart. Let me give examples: Chapter 12 gives the story of Peter's imprisonment. Verse 5 says, "Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church." All the power of Herod could not stand against those prayers. Stone walls and metal chains could not keep him captive. But who offered up these prayers? It was groups meeting in homes. Verse 12 says that "many gathered together praying." In verse 17 they sent messengers to other homes where there were apparently similar prayer meetings. Look at the far reaching results of such prayers in verses 20-24:

Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God grew and multiplied.

That last verse summarizes the success of the Gospel throughout all of Herod's Kingdom and Syria. God knows how to take out the opposition. He knows how to advance the church. But will we humble ourselves before God by joining in prayer? The contrast between Herod's pride and the church's humble prayer is remarkable.

Brothers and sisters, we have opportunities for prayer every week - prayer meetings that few take advantage of. And if those prayer meetings are not convenient, you can form your own prayer meetings with other saints. But prayer is key. That is one lesson that brought me to tears this week as I was reading through Acts. We must become a praying people if we are to have the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit.

It advances to Asia (12:25-16:5)

The next section (chapter 12:25-16:5) advances the kingdom to Asia. Barnabas accompanied Paul on this journey through Cyprus, Pisidia, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe,

and back to Jerusalem where a huge controversy threatened to divide the church. God had already settled that controversy, but Judaizers were still pushing the circumcision issue. Why? *That controversy makes no sense whatsoever unless the church is indeed the true Israel.* God made baptism replace circumcision, but that baptism did indeed admit Gentiles into the church; into the Israel of God; into the one Olive Tree. If the church is Israel (as it is) then these Judaizers insisted that people had to get circumcised - because that was the way it had always been. But Peter, James, and a Paul prove otherwise.

The church recognized that this would destroy God's worldwide purpose of the Gospel, and the Jerusalem decree settles the issue and is sent with Paul to the churches of Asia. That prayerfully-entered-decision resulted in God's blessing being stated in the final verse of that section, chapter 16:5 - "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily." God brought them through a Satanic division that could have destroyed the church. But how did they navigate those tough waters? It was by prayer throughout. Let's back up.

Look at 13:2-3. This deals with the sending out of missionaries to the Gentiles with fasting and prayer. But notice how verse 2 is worded: "As they *ministered to the Lord* and fasted..." Prayer that has power in it is not just petition. It is worship, adoration, and glorying in God - "they ministered to the Lord." To me that is an absolutely amazing concept, that anyone can minister to the Lord. He needs nothing. But God loves it when we are caught up in Him and He has our hearts. When we worship God in prayer we minister to Him. Our concerns should not be so much all the things that we need, but what God wants for His kingdom to advance. If we have an attitude of ministering to the Lord in prayer, we will be God-centered in our prayer life. It will give us new faith when we come to making requests.

But the second thing that they did was to fast. Notice that this is not fasting over persecution. This is fasting over the ordination and commissioning of officers. They took that task seriously. And I would urge the church to take seriously our desire to train and raise up leaders to replace us and to bathe this process in prayer. If we are to be led by the Lord, we need to fast. Getting the wrong leadership can be disastrous to a church, and thus the need for fasting. Verse 3 says, "Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away." Bathing that event in prayer ensured that the next words were true: "So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit..." So many people who enter ministry or offices of the church are not sent out of the Spirit of God. Prayer and fasting would raise up leaders who are sent by the Holy Spirit.

Paul and Barnabus followed the same pattern in every church they established. Let me give you an example: chapter 14:23 says, "And when they had appointed elders *in every church*, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." That fasting accompanied every leadership commission in every church. Fasting is a component of prayer that is almost non-existent in some churches. If we would have the power of the early church, it might not hurt to pay attention to why it was that they fasted. The results of prayer in Asia are given in 16:5: "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily."

It advances to Europe (16:6-19:20)

Then the Gospel advances to Europe in chapter 16:6-19:20. There were enormous spiritual battles that were won in Europe and the last verse summarizes the victory of Christ's kingdom by saying, "So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed." But how did it prevail? Again, by prayer.

The first place they went to was where Lydia and a group of women were praying (Acts 16:13). The next confrontation with demons happened right while they were going to prayer in chapter 16:16. The earthquake that shook the jail and freed Paul and Silas was after a night of praying, and worship, and singing psalms. And prayer can continue to shake open closed doors today.

It determines to conquer Rome (19:21-28:31)

But in 19:21 we come to the last section of the book. It says, "When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.'" From here to the end of the book, he is heading toward Rome via Jerusalem, where he will be arrested. He may not initially have anticipated going to Rome as a prisoner, but God used that means in order to make the Gospel penetrate even Caesar's household (via the soldiers). And increasingly the closer he gets to Jerusalem, the more prophetic warnings there are that this is exactly what will happen. Paul embraces Rome as part of his calling. He longs to see Daniel 2's image being ground to powder. That statue represents the humanistic kingdoms of the world. And the stone cut without hands is the kingdom of Christ that comes out of heaven, smashes the feet of the image (that would be Rome) and begins to grind them and all other governments to dust, with the eventual goal of the wind blowing every trace of humanism away so that only Christ's kingdom remains standing. That's part of the imagery of Daniel that stands behind Acts. And Paul will begin that process of invading Rome with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I don't have the time to go over all the accusations and defenses that Paul makes, but they would have been incredibly powerful evidence to present in a Jewish court in order to defend Christians. It's packed with legal language. If I were ever to preach through Acts again, there are so many new insights that I now have that I failed to see before. But that's the way it is through our whole lives, isn't it? We keep growing in our understanding of Scripture. Anyway, the whole section is a remarkable defense of Christianity within a Jewish court. But I will end by pointing out that the victories of the kingdom in these chapters also flowed from prayer. Not surprising.

In chapter 20, Paul meets with the elders of the church from Ephesus and warns them of the false teachers that will savage the church and gives other important instructions. But in chapter 20:36 it says, "And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all." That's another aspect of prayer that we don't often see today - kneeling. But you see this posture of prayer throughout the book. Kneeling shows humility and submission before God. In chapter 21:5 the whole church kneels in public. It says,

When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed.

There was no sense of shame or embarrassment kneeling before the sailors or other dock hands. Muslims have no sense of shame kneeling in public. Why do Christians? Some of you do kneel during certain songs or during certain sections of prayers. It is perfectly appropriate and though it is not mandated, it is something I would encourage. I would encourage us to make our bodies line up with our spirit's attitudes and to not worry what other people think. Worry about what God thinks. Christ certainly prayed kneeling. Luke 22:41 says, "He knelt down and prayed." I think it is a posture that needs to be resurrected. There probably needs to be more kneeling in our family devotions, and kneeling by our bedside for the last prayers of the day. Though we have a stated time for kneeling during confession, please feel free to kneel at any other time that the Spirit of God prompts you to do so. I've been convicted that our family devotions need to restore this.

There are three more references to prayer in the next chapters. Those prayers took Paul through trials, dangerous voyages, attempted murders, shipwreck, being stranded on an island, and Paul's amazing ministry in Rome in the last chapter. In terms of the central purpose of Acts being a defense of Christianity, once again verses 17-29 of the last chapter are a marvelous defense of the kingdom. And the last two verses of the book give the result:

Acts 28:30 Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, 31 preaching [there it is again] the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

Again, we see that the word of God cannot be bound. Christ's kingdom advances invincibly, and the book of Acts stands as a pattern of what should happen through the rest of history.

Now, I have highlighted prayer because that is not as exciting as talking about the kingdom. Lloyd Jones once said, "Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer." But there is nothing that is more important than prayer. This Thursday morning the men will be gathering at the office for coffee, donuts, and prayer. It won't be fasting and prayer this time; it will be rejoicing and prayer. We hope you come. A.C. Dixon, the pastor of Moody Church, once said,

When we rely upon organization, we get what organization can do; when we rely upon education, we get what education can do; when we rely upon eloquence, we get what eloquence can do, and so on. Nor am I disposed to undervalue any of these things in their proper place, but when we rely upon prayer, we get what God can do.

Acts is a book that shows what Christ can do through a praying church. He started the book by telling them to wait in Jerusalem till they were endued from on high by the power of the Spirit. And they waited in prayer. The rest of the book shows them continuing to rely on God through prayer. May we be about the kingdom business that Acts describes (absolutely yes - I'm all about being busy in the kingdom), but may we also always be mindful to do it through prayer. Amen.