

September 6, 2020 by Steve Brandon



Volume 2

Acts 1:1-3

1. The First Book (verses 1-2)

2. Forty Days (verse 3)

I remember when my oldest daughter, Carissa, was 9 years old. It was 2003 and the 3rd and final movie of the Lord of the Rings series just came out. She was really wanting to see the movie. She asked me if I would take her to the theater to watch it. Because she had seen the first two movies on DVD and wanted to see the final one in person. And so, being the good dad that I am, I said that I would take her.

Now, I hadn't seen the first two Lord of the Rings movies. Which means that our viewing experiences of the movie were vastly different. She understood the history and significance of the ring. I did not. She was familiar with middle earth. I was not. She knew about the hobbits, elves, dwarfs, goblins, orcs, and wizards. I did not. She knew that main storyline with the key characters, like Frodo and Sam and Gandalf and Merry and Pipen. I did not know anything about these characters. So, our viewing experiences were very different from each other. Dare I say, that she understood (and enjoyed) the movie far better than I did, all three hours of the movie. In fact, I still don't understand much about that movie, as I still haven't seen the first two movies either.

Now, I say all of that to underscore the importance of seeing the first movie before you see the sequel. Same is true of books as well. It is important to read volume 1 before you read volume 2. Otherwise, there will be some things that just won't make sense to you.

Well, this morning, we will begin diving into a sequel, the book of Acts. As we do, it will do us all some good to understand the prequel, the gospel of Luke.

My message this morning is entitled, "Volume 2," because that's what the book of Acts is. It is volume 2 to the gospel of Luke, which is volume 1. To show you what I mean, I invite you to open in your Bibles to the book of Acts. I want to begin by reading our text this morning. These verses set forth the context of the writing of the book of Acts.

Acts 1:1-3

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

In the very first few words of Acts, we are presented with the fact that Acts is a sequel. We read in verse 1, "In the first book." This is my first point, ...

1. The First Book (verses 1-2)

"In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ..." (Acts 1:1). That is, there was a book that was written before Acts was written. Some questions come to mind: "What book is this?" "Who is Theophilus?" "Who is writing this?"

A few of these questions are answered in the beginning of the gospel of Luke. So, keep your finger here in Acts, and turn back to Luke, chapter 1. In the first four verses of Luke, we read some similar words that we read here in Acts, chapter 1, because, the same writer is writing to the same person, with much the same purpose.

Luke 1:1-4

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

This is Luke's introduction to his first book that he wrote to this man named, "Theophilus." We call it, "The gospel of Luke." Luke essentially says this: "There have been many people who have made efforts to write down and preserve all that happened during the days of Jesus. And I have investigated the life of Jesus, myself. And so, I thought that I would write it down for you as well. The following document is the result of my careful research."

That's what the gospel of Luke is. It is Luke's research paper into the life of Jesus. And his paper is outstanding! Because Luke is an excellent historian. He is very bright. If you compare the Greek of Luke and Acts to the Greek of John or Paul or Peter, without question, Luke's writing is the most complex and difficult to read. It is because Luke was a highly educated man, who wrote excellent Greek. Luke was a very capable historian. But that wasn't his main occupation. Luke was a doctor by trade. In Colossians 4:14, Paul calls him "the beloved physician." I trust that this means he was a particularly caring man, who dealt with those were sick with compassion and grace.

I think that Paul experienced his loving concern near the end of his life. When writing 2 Timothy, Paul was in a Roman prison cell. He was

soon to die. He wrote to Timothy, "The time of my departure has come" (2 Timothy 4:6). He also wrote, "Luke alone is with me" (2 Timothy 4:11). So picture the scene, Paul is there in prison, suffering, and soon to die. He had one man by his side, Luke, the beloved physician. My guess is that Luke would never leave Paul alone, especially in his hour of greatest need.

Luke was often with Paul. In fact, when you read the book of Acts, most of it is in the third person. But, there are several chapters, which are written in the first person. In other words, most of Acts is written using pronouns like, "he" and "they." But, there are a handful of chapters that are written using pronouns like, "we" and "us" (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–37; 28:1–16). That is, Luke, the author of Acts, was with Paul at these times! If you calculate all of the time that Luke was with Paul, it was upwards of 12 years that they spent together.^[1]

This is what gives Luke the credibility to write Luke, because he learned so much about Jesus through Paul. And this is what gives Luke the credibility to write Acts, because he lived the experience of much of the history of Acts himself! In this way, the book of Acts, is a bit of an autobiography! Luke's friendship and familiarity with Paul was certainly a big reason why Luke wrote, "It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3).

So, Luke wrote this "orderly account" for Theophilus. We hardly know anything about Theophilus, except that Luke here calls him "most excellent Theophilus." This phrase, "most excellent" is used in the New Testament (other than this instance) only of Paul addressing men of high standing. He addresses Felix (Acts 23:26; 24:3) and Festus (Acts 26:25) using this same title. Both of these men were Roman governors. Most conclude by this that Theophilus was some sort of official in the Roman government. Some have thought that Theophilus, perhaps, was the one who funded Luke's writing efforts. It takes time and effort to write. It takes some funding. This dedication at the beginning of Luke and Acts could be a tribute to that funding.

Trivia question: what author wrote the most of the New Testament? You might first be inclined to say, "Paul." But it wasn't Paul. It was Luke. The gospel of Luke is 24 long chapters. Acts is 28 long chapters. The number of words and pages surpasses that of Paul (and his 13 epistles). Luke wrote about 25% of the New Testament! I digress.

Anyways, both Luke and Acts were written to Theophilus. Luke's gospel was "an orderly account" of the life of Jesus. Indeed, this is the case. Luke begins with the birth of Jesus, continuing with his life and ministry, including all the he did and taught. Luke contains many of his miracles. Luke includes his conversations with his disciples. In Luke we see the mercy that Jesus had toward sinners, including his conflicts with the Pharisees and Sadducees. All of these thoughts are woven together into a simple narrative. Luke continues right on through to his trial before Pilate and Herod, and eventually his death and resurrection. This is what the gospel of Luke is all about. It's about the life and ministry of Jesus. This is the prequel to the book of Acts. Or, if you will, Luke is volume 1 of Luke's writings. Acts is volume 2. And you can't understand volume 2 until you have understood volume 1.

Now the good news today is that most (if not all) of us have a fairly good grasp of volume 1. Luke contains much of the same material as the gospel of Matthew and the gospel Mark, both of which I have preached through at Rock Valley Bible Church. So, we are familiar with the life of Jesus. We know that he was born of a virgin in Bethlehem. We know that John the Baptist prepared the way for his ministry, which Jesus began around the age of 30. We know that Jesus loved the sinners, as he gave them hope. We know that he was hated by the religious establishment, as Jesus was a threat to their security. We know that Jesus went about proclaiming good news to the poor and liberty to captives (Luke 4:18). We know that he gave sight to the blind, and set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18). We know of many of the things he taught, like the parables of the sower and the seed, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Persistent Widow. We know of the principles that he taught, like the special place of children in his kingdom, and like the importance of heart religion, rather than mere externals. We understand the requirements of being his disciples: self-denial and taking up your cross. We know how he wept for Jerusalem, how he suffered on the cross for our sins, how he rose from the dead.

We know of his great commission where he gave orders to his disciples that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:46). This has come to us! This is the message that we proclaim. Repent and turn from your sins. Trust in Christ. And you will receive forgiveness before God. This is the gospel we preach. This is "1. The First Book."

It may be of great familiarity with us. But to Theophilus, it was all new. It was all important for him to understand. I can only imagine the anticipation that he felt, as he received his copy of the book of Acts. When he read for the first time the first words from the book of Acts. He read ...

Acts 1:1-2

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

The first thing that I notice is that Theophilus is no longer, "most excellent Theophilus" as he was identified in Luke 1:3. Perhaps this is because Theophilus came to faith and he and Luke became friends. If so, there is no need for the official title any longer. And I understand this. To those who are new in church, I'm often called, "Pastor Steve" or just "pastor." But, as I get to know people, and as they get to know me, not merely as their pastor, but as their friend, the "pastor" drops. I become Steve, which is what I prefer. It's a sign of friendship and intimacy.

At any rate, Theophilus receives his book and reads how Luke begins by summarizing volume 1, with the phrase, "all that Jesus began to do and teach." That's a great summary of Luke: "all that Jesus began to do and teach." And now the stage is set for Luke to continue the story. Because the story of Jesus doesn't simply end with him raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. No, it continues on, with the building of his church. You remember that he told his disciples, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). And the book of Acts records how Jesus builds his church.

Yet, we need to be careful here, of how we think about the book of Acts. Because, it is easy for us to think of Luke as the story of Jesus, and Acts as the story of the church. But this isn't quite right. Notice again in verse 1 what Luke writes, ...

Acts 1:1

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus **began** to do and teach, ...

In other words, Luke is merely the beginning of the workings of Jesus. The book of Acts, is the continuation of his work. Listen to what John Stott says about this.

Luke tells us how he thinks of his two-volume work on the origins of Christianity, which constitutes approximately one quarter of the New Testament. He does not regard volume one as the story of Jesus Christ from his birth through his sufferings and death to his triumphant resurrection and ascension, and volume two as the story of the church of Jesus Christ from its birth in Jerusalem through its sufferings by persecution to its triumphant conquests of Rome some thirty years later. For the contrasting parallel he draws between his two volumes was not between Christ and his church, but between two stages of ministry of the same Christ. In his former book he has written about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, since he was 'powerful in word and deed before God and all the people' [Luke 24:19]; in this is second book (he implies) he will write about what Jesus continued to do and to teach after his ascension, especially through the apostles whose sermons and authenticating 'signs and wonders' Luke will faithfully record. Thus Jesus' ministry on earth, exercised personally and publicly, was followed by his ministry from heaven, exercised through his Holy Spirit by his apostles. Moreover, the watershed between the two was the ascension [which we will look at tonight and next Sunday morning]. Not only did [the ascension] conclude Luke's first book [Luke 24:51] and introduce his second (Acts 1:9), but it terminated Jesus' earthly ministry and inaugurated his heavenly ministry.^[2]

And if you grasp what Stott is saying, it has implications upon the best title for Luke's second volume. Remember last week how I talked about this? In our Bibles, this book is entitled, "The Acts of the Apostles." Yet, the book mentions most of the apostles by name, only. And really, the book only follows two apostles. Peter in the first half of the book. Paul in the second half of the book. Further (as I mentioned last week), "The Acts of the Apostles," fails to give mention or credit to the divine power that worked mightily to bless the work of the apostles to the conversion of many. So, a better title I gave last week was, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit."

And yet, today, we see in verse 1, the role that Jesus plays in the book. Acts is all about what Jesus continued to do and teach through his apostles. And so, John Stott concludes, ...

The most accurate (though cumbersome) title, then, which does justice to Luke's own statement in verses 1 and 2 would be something like "The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles."^[3]

For us, "Acts" will do just fine. But it's important to understand that this book is indeed, "The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles" Let's move on to my second point.

2. Forty Days (verse 3)

We find this in verse 3, ...

Acts 1:3

He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Forty days is how long Jesus was with them after his resurrection. After the forty days, Jesus ascended into heaven. (Again, we will look at this next week). These forty days were a continuation of the education of the disciples. They had gone through seminary with Jesus for three years during his ministry. And now, they were taking their final class before graduation.

Did you notice the title of the class they took? It was called, "The Kingdom of God." You just might look at this phrase and go over it quickly. Yet, this phrase plays a crucial role in the book of Acts. Because, Acts is all about the kingdom of God here upon the earth, what it looks like in this time.

The book of Acts begins with Jesus teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God. The book of Acts ends with Paul talking about the kingdom of God. He was in Rome, under house arrest. He "welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:30-31).

Sprinkled throughout the book of Acts, the "kingdom of God" is mentioned, often as a summary of what was being proclaimed. When Luke summarizes the ministry of Philip, he writes, "But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the **kingdom of God** and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). When Luke summarizes Paul's ministry in Ephesus, he writes, "And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8). When Paul summarized his own ministry to the Ephesian elders, he said, "And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again" (Acts 20:25).

The Jews were in need of understanding the nature of the kingdom of Jesus. Because, it was different than in other ages. During the days of the Old Testament, the kingdom of God upon the earth looked much like ordinary earthly kingdoms. Israel and Judah were countries, under the reign of a king, with laws and military and customs of the kingdom. Taxes supported the religious activities of the temple. Laws were in place that compelled people to worship.

Even this week, I was reading in 2 Chronicles 15 in my devotions, which records how king Asa brought reforms to Judah. He "put away the detestable idols from all the land of Judah" (2 Chronicles 15:8). He then gathered all Judah together in Jerusalem, where they sacrificed 700 oxen and 7,000 sheep. "And they entered into a covenant to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their

soul" (2 Chronicles 15:12). And they also covenanted "that whoever would not seek the LORD, the God of Israel, should be put to death, whether young or old, man or woman" (2 Chronicles 15:13). And all Israel rejoiced over the oath with shouting and with trumpets and horns (2 Chronicles 15:14-15). In other words, they promised before God to seek him as a nation, and whoever failed to do so was to be put to death. This was the kingdom of God in the Old Testament. It was a physical kingdom. With kings and laws and requirements to obey the LORD. But this all changed, when Israel was conquered, and brought into exile. During the days of Jesus, the Jews were under the rule of Rome. There was no king. There was no binding law upon the people. There was no real authority in the Jewish people. They couldn't punish people with death. (That's why Jesus was brought to Pilate to be executed. They had not authority to execute anyone).

Jesus, as the Messiah, wasn't coming back to re-establish the old days of the monarch in Israel. His kingdom was different. When standing before Pilate at his trial, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36). Jesus spend 40 days teaching the nature of the kingdom with his disciples. His kingdom was not a physical kingdom. It was a spiritual kingdom. Jesus would rule and reign over his kingdom from heaven. In this spiritual kingdom, people would love their king. People would serve the king willingly with renewed hearts and minds.

The sad thing is that after 40 days, the disciples learned only a little. In verse 6, they asked Jesus, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" After taking the "kingdom of God" class, they still didn't understand the nature of the kingdom. Just like the disciples on the way to Emmaus, who longed for the Messiah to come and redeem Israel from Roman oppression (Luke 24:21), so these disciples didn't understand the nature of God's kingdom as a spiritual kingdom.

Now, the good news is this, while the disciples may have not have done so well in the "Kingdom of God" class, They all got straight A's in the resurrection class. Look again at verse 3, ...

Acts 1:3

He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

The ESV tells us that Jesus appeared to them by many "proofs." Other translations enlarge upon this word (which appears only here in the New Testament). The NASB and NIV says, "many convincing proofs." The KJV and NKJV says, "many infallible proofs." The idea is that Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection. He talked with them. He ate with them. He lived with them for forty days. He gave proof of his resurrection over and over and over again.

If you survey the gospel accounts, you can see the many times that Jesus appeared to the disciples.

- He appeared to the women at the tomb (Matt. 28:9-10)
- He appeared later to Mary Magdalene alone (Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-18)
- He appeared to the two men on the road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12; Luke 24:13-32)
- He appeared to Peter in Jerusalem (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5)
- He appeared later to ten of the disciples (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-23). Remember, Thomas wasn't with them.
- Later, he appeared to the eleven disciples in Jerusalem (John 20:24-29; 1 Cor. 15:5)
- There was another time in Galilee when Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18)
- Jesus appeared to seven disciples who were fishing in Galilee (John 21:1-23)

These are all accounts from the gospels. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, how Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at once!

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

These proofs were totally sufficient to convince the disciples that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead! All you need to do is trace the resurrection in their preaching! It seems as if all of their preaching is about the resurrection!

Peter preached the resurrection in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. Peter preached the resurrection in Acts 3 after the healing of the lame man. Peter preached the resurrection in Acts 4 and Acts 5 to the religious leaders who commanded him not to preach. Peter preached the resurrection in Acts 10 to Cornelius and his house in Caesarea. Paul preached the resurrection to Acts 13 to the church in Antioch in Pisidia. Paul preached the resurrection in Acts 17 to Thessalonica and to Athens. Paul testified to the resurrection in Acts 22 and Acts 26 when he gave his testimony before the Roman officials. Paul proclaimed the resurrection in Acts 23 when standing before the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The clear lesson for us is this. We may not understand the kingdom in all of its fullness. It's a complex topic. But, we need to understand and embrace the resurrection. This is central to our faith. Yes the cross of Christ is significant, because it is there that Jesus paid for our sins. And it is to the cross that we look, as our only ground for our justification before God. But the cross is only valid because of the resurrection. The resurrection vindicates all that Jesus did upon the cross. That's what Volume 1 teaches us! That's what Volume 2 will show us!

The disciples were convinced of the resurrection. Let us take this message to the world.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 6, 2020 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, volume 1, p. 728.

[2] John Stott, The Message of Acts, p. 32.

[3] Ibid., p. 34.