

Why Are We Here?

Lesson 1

To Help All People Experience a New Life in Jesus Christ

The Church's Mission Begins

Acts 1:1-8

*"The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. ³ To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, **"Which,"** He said, **"you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."** So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, **"It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."** (Acts 1:1-8)*

Who Was Theophilus?

We know very little about Theophilus, yet the Holy Spirit saw fit to deliver almost 28% of the New Testament to his personal mailbox in the form of two letters from Luke. The entire New Testament contains 184,159 words. Luke's two letters to Theophilus (Luke and Acts) contain 51,087 words, more words than Paul wrote even if we give him the book of Hebrews. His name means "lover of God" and it is a Roman name. "Theo" is Greek for God; "philus" is Greek for love. It was Theophilus who allowed these two private letters from Luke to be circulated from Church to Church for evangelistic and educational purposes.

When Was This Letter to Theophilus Written?

To answer that question, we must turn to the end of the Book of Acts and discover the last events recorded before the close of the book to determine the time. As Acts ends, Paul, with his Roman guard, along with Luke, his private doctor, had just finished living in Rome for two years with Paul under house arrest. The last verse of chapter 28 says, *"And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered."* (Acts 28:30-31)

Starting with Paul's appearance at the Jerusalem Council in AD 50, recorded in Acts 15, the time markers in Acts will place the end of his two-year house arrest in Rome no earlier than AD 61 and no later than AD 63. He was there to stand before Caesar Nero for a verdict. Nero was emperor from October 13, AD 54 through June 9, AD 68. Born on December 15, AD 37, Nero was seventeen years old when he became emperor. By AD 61, he was just twenty-four years old. Nero committed suicide at the age of thirty-one in AD 68. Paul was released from his house arrest and spent time evangelizing the people of the surrounding area before he was arrested again and beheaded by Nero. Therefore, this account by Luke was written in that small window of time between Paul's release and arrest. We can be fairly sure Luke did not write it after AD 70 because Titus destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem on Av 9th of AD 70 and carried much of the furniture and fixtures of the Temple back to Rome as spoils. Luke mentions none of that in this letter. Had it occurred, Luke would have surely mentioned it.

Who Was Luke?

Luke was a doctor. The great medical school of that time was located in Ephesus - the School of Tyrannus. The school met in an outside amphitheater in the cool of the mornings and the cool of the evenings. Luke tells us that Paul taught the disciples during the day in the amphitheater for two years (Acts 19:9-10). More than likely, Luke was a graduate of the school and his presence opened the doors for Paul to use the amphitheater daily.

Luke, born in Antioch in Syria, was not a Jew for he was not circumcised (Colossians 4:11 and 14). He joined Paul in Troas. Luke's name is not written in the Troas account, but he includes pronouns to let us know he was with Paul. *"A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."* (Acts 16:9-10) Therefore, Luke identifies himself when he says, *"we sought to go into Macedonia"* and *"God had called us to preach...."* The *"we"* and *"us"* pronouns include Luke as being in the group headed to Macedonia. Luke traveled with Paul to Philippi in Macedonia where Paul left him behind (Acts 17:1). Luke stayed there until Paul returned and Luke was able to join the team again (Acts 20:5). He remained with Paul until Paul's death.

What is the Book of Acts About?

In Acts, Luke picks up where he ended his gospel with the intent of recording the Acts of the Apostles, specifically to prove the apostleship of Paul compared to the apostleship of Peter. In Acts, we find the end of the storyline of Jesus' earthly ministry followed by the storylines of Peter, Paul, and the Church.

How Do We Help All People Experience a New Life in Jesus Christ?

Verse 3, sums up the days of Jesus between His resurrection and ascension. *"To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God."*

Luke is telling us that we are to help all people experience a new life in Jesus Christ just like Jesus did with *"convincing proof."* We must tell all people the story of the life and ministry of Jesus. Here is a summary of Jesus' appearances during His last forty days on earth.

- Matthew 28:1-4, Mark 16:1-11, and John 20:11-18 tell us about Jesus' encounter with Mary Magdalene at the tomb.
- Matthew 28:9-10, Jesus tells the women to tell the brothers to meet Him in Galilee.
- Mark 16:12-13 and Luke 24:13-43, tell us about the two people Jesus met on the road to Emmaus.
- John 20:19-31 tells us how Jesus came through locked doors to meet with the disciples on Sunday evening without Thomas. A week later, Jesus met with them again, but this time, Thomas was there.
- John 21 tells us that Jesus cooked fish for the Apostle's breakfast in Galilee.
- Mark 16:15-18 tells us that Jesus charged the disciples to go to all the world and preach the Good News.
- Matthew 28:16-20, in Galilee, Jesus tells the eleven disciples to make disciples, baptize, and teach them.
- Luke 24:44-49, Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit to live inside each of them.
- 1st Corinthians 15 tells us that Jesus appeared to Peter, more than five hundred in Jerusalem, and to James and all the remaining Apostles.

We have the “*convincing proofs*.” We must use it to share with all people the Gospel message.

The Lord’s first instruction commanded them to stay in Jerusalem until the promise arrived – the Holy Spirit, the “Helper,” or “Comforter.” (John 14:16, 26; John 15:26; John 16:7; 1 John 2:1) During his ministry, John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would bring about the baptism of the Holy Spirit as seen in Matthew 3:11. “*As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*” (Matthew 3:11) Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus promised the fulfillment of that prophecy in the coming days.

For forty days after the resurrection, the Lord explained the Scripture to the Apostles in detail. As He stood on the Mount of Olives and prepared to rise into the heavens, the Apostles and disciples still failed to understand the Lord’s plan. Once again, they showed their ignorance by asking, in verse 6, “*Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?*”

Jesus answered them, “*It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority....*” (Acts 1:7)

Before the crucifixion, the Apostles had argued over who would be the greatest in the kingdom. They had asked the Lord for a place at His throne's right or left hand. Just as the Lord could not grant them that request in those days, He could not grant them that request that day because it was not His story to tell or His gift to give. That story and gift belonged to only God the Father. Yes, Jesus knew the answer and so did the Holy Spirit. All three knew the timing. But the Apostles were asking the Son for an answer only the Father was designated to give. The finite and earthly minds of the Apostles and disciples could not grasp the infinite and heavenly plan of God. They still needed insight from the Holy Spirit - their Teacher, their Comforter, their Helper - and He (the Holy Spirit) had not been given to them yet. It would be ten days before the Holy Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost. He would guide them to understand God’s heavenly plans.

Where Do We Help All People Experience a New Life in Jesus Christ?

We are to help the people experience a new life in Jesus Christ in the same order as Jesus instructed the Apostles and disciples standing before Him. “...⁸ *but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8)

Jesus started with His instruction that they should share the Gospel message where they are – in Jerusalem. What a novel idea! Share Jesus with those who live around and about us! We need to start in Pasadena or the city where you live. Have you ever shared your faith of the story of Jesus with your neighbors? Then Jesus told them to share the Gospel message in Judea. For all practical purposes, Judea was the land mass of the old tribal areas of Judah and Simeon. But remember, the Roman Empire owned the land at that time, not Israel. They were living on borrowed land. In fact, according to Roman Law, it was all owned by Caesar Augustus personally. Augustus owned the entire Roman Empire - personally. When you look up “the richest man to ever live,” it will be Caesar Augustus in the history books. Get this, he even owned the people – every man, woman, boy, and girl. For us, some need to go and share our faith in our tribal county, our Judea.

Jesus told them to share the Gospel message in Samaria. Some background is needed to understand the dire gravity of this statement. Samaria was not part of Judea. It sat north of Judea and encompassed the old tribal areas of Benjamin, Ephraim, and West Manasseh. But when Israel lost the land to the Assyrian Empire, the Assyrians moved the poor of poor in Assyria and planted them on the land. “*The king of Assyria brought men from Babylon and from Cuthab and from Avva and from Hamath and Sephar-vaim, and settled them in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel ... and served their own gods*

according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile.” (2 Ki 17:24–33) Over time, these Assyrians intermarried with the Jews and half-bloods were born - half Jew, half Assyrian. They were unclean and Jews never went into their land, even the dirt of the land was unclean. The name of the area came from the name of the capital of the Northern Kingdom – Samaria.

We first hear the name Samaria in 1 Kings 13:32. *“For the thing shall surely come to pass which he cried by the word of the LORD against the altar in Bethel and against all the houses of the high places which are in the cities of Samaria.” (1 Kings 13:32)* But this mention in verse 32 is simply an identification marker placed in the text when the book was compiled from the chronicles of the kings recorded by the prophets. The record of 1st and 2nd Kings was once one book compiled after the last event found in 2nd Kings. In order to identify for all future generations of Jews the place where these high places were located, the compiler identifies them as being “cities of Samaria.” But at the time of verse 32, Samaria was not its name.

After the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was divided. Jerusalem remained the capital of the south under Rehoboam - Solomon’s son. Shechem became the initial capital of the north with Jeroboam as its king. Sometime during Jeroboam’s reign, he moved the capital to Tizrah. Seven kings of the north would rule from Tizrah for about sixty-six years. The seventh king, Omri, would buy a hill in the tribal area of Benjamin where Jacob dug a well as found in 1 Kings 16:24.

“He bought the hill Samaria from Shemer ... and named the city which he built Samaria, after the name of Shemer, the owner of the hill.” (1 Kings 16:24)

Omri coined the name “Samaria” from the name “Shemer” who was the owner of the hill. Neither the hill nor the area would be known as Samaria until Omri built the city and gave it the new name. In an interesting note, Tizrah had become a disgusting city and Omri wanted to start over as king in a new city with new people. The only problem was that all the people of Tizrah packed up and moved to Omri’s new city of Samaria and continued to be disgusting in his new capital. Samaria sat about 36 miles from Jerusalem. After becoming the capital, the Northern Kingdom of Israel became known as Samaria. Once again, when it fell to Assyria in 722 BC, the Assyrians moved their outcasts to the area where they intermarried with the Jewish outcasts who were not good enough to take into exile.

In 536 BC, when Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return to their old Promised Land from the combined Assyrian/Babylonian/Persian Empires, the Jews moved into the old tribal areas of Judah and Simeon as well as in the area surrounding the Sea of Galilee. They did not dare inhabit the area called Samaria because the half-bloods were disgusting and unclean. To them, even the land was unclean and Jews could not touch anything unclean. In order for Jews in Judea to visit family members in Galilee, the Jews had two roads. They would hug the coast by the Mediterranean Sea and go through Dan’s tribal land, or they would cross the Jordan and hug the shoreline to walk around the Samaritan area. They would go miles and miles out of the way to go around the disgusting unclean Samaritans. Joseph and Mary did the same thing when they traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. They would have taken the road through Dan’s land to get to Judea.

But for Jesus, He came to earth to minister to the clean and the unclean as the Savior of all humans of all races of all nations. He bravely walked right through the unclean land and took His message to the Samaritan woman who need Him as her Messiah. What does this mean? It means we need to take the Gospel message to the place where no one wants to go, the disgusting places, the unclean places, right next door to where we live.

Finally, Jesus told them to share the Gospel message in the remotest part of the earth. What does that mean? It means that wherever we find people, we should go to help all people experience a new life in Jesus Christ. Now we know why we are here!