



PRAYER

PRESENCE OF PRAYER

ACTS 1:1-11

MAIN IDEA

Jesus's final words to His followers instructed them to wait for the Father's promise that they would receive power through the Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

Every year as a new year begins, many people begin to think about their New Year's resolutions. Think about the most common resolutions you make or hear about people making. One of the more popular goals is to grow stronger or more physically fit. While wanting to be fit or even physically strong isn't wrong, believing we only need our own strength and power is wrong. The world encourages us to find power within ourselves, but today we are studying what Jesus said about this subject. This will help us be clear about where to find power and how to position ourselves to be used by the Lord.

- **Where are you prone to rely on your own strength over God's strength?**
- **What happens when we don't trust God's strength over our own?**

SUMMARY

The early church was on the edge of a new era. Just before Jesus's ascension to heaven, He gave final instructions and made a promise to send power for His followers. As they waited in Jerusalem, the disciples spent time together in prayer. This positioned them to receive the Father's promise of the Holy Spirit.

For us to fulfill the call of God in our lives, we must commit to prayer and seeking to live our lives surrendered to the power of the Holy Spirit, just as we see those first Christians doing. When we call out to the Lord and rely on the Holy Spirit's power, we will be used in the work of the kingdom of God here on earth.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> Have someone in your group read Acts 1:1-3.

Luke wrote Acts as a follow up to his account of Jesus's ministry in the gospel of Luke. This ministry continued into the early church and continues in the church today. While Acts doesn't cover all the events of the early church, it does give much detail about how the gospel grew from Jerusalem to Rome. One of the main themes of this book is the power the church received through the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 ushered in a new era for the early believers. We are just as needy for this power today, and we can look to this account of the early church as we call on the Lord to use us as He used the church in Acts.

Knowing His time with His followers was short, Jesus intentionally sowed valuable teaching into His last moments with them. Jesus also lived out His teaching as an example. He demonstrated what it means to trust and rely on the Holy Spirit for power every day. Key to Jesus's perfect life on earth was His perfect dependence on the Spirit. If this was how Jesus lived, how much more should we rely on the power of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives?

- **What are some ways Jesus showed His reliance on the Holy Spirit throughout His life?**

Through the Scriptures, we learn of God's Spirit moving and acting among His people. Yet, in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit did not dwell among God's people to the same degree as Jesus promised these early followers. Following Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension, He would send the Spirit to be with His people forever. This reality began at Pentecost and will continue with the church throughout history.

- **Look back at Jesus's words in John 14:15-26; 16:1-15 regarding the Holy Spirit. How would the ministry of the Spirit change the lives of Jesus's followers?**

Jesus knew the magnitude of the mission He gave His followers. If they were going to obey His commands, they were going to need power and help from outside themselves. This power comes from the Holy Spirit. To carry out the mission of God in our lives and in our church, we must follow the example of Jesus and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit.

This concept is countercultural in a time when we are bombarded with messages that tell us the opposite. Self-reliance is celebrated with false ideas that assure people they can do anything, be anything, and achieve anything—if they just tap into the power already inside them. This way of living and thinking goes against the way of Jesus.

- **Application: Where do you need to trust the Holy Spirit's power instead of your own strength right now?**

> Have someone in your group read Acts 1:4.

Jesus concluded His final instructions with the reminder to wait for the Father's promise. Following this instruction may have been more difficult than we perceive. These Christ followers were in the place where Jesus had been killed, and they were supposed to stay there and wait.

Whatever emotions they felt, being told to wait was likely not what they were hoping for. When you realize you are on the edge of something new, you typically want to get going, so being told to wait can feel impossible. But when the Lord directs us to wait, it is the best thing we can do. Obeying the Lord is always worth it. Even when waiting is hard, it is best to obey Him.

- **What are some ways waiting often feels like a “waste”? How can we be sure that our moments of waiting are never a waste?**

We will accomplish nothing for the kingdom of God if we are not willing to wait for the Holy Spirit to empower and guide us. Despite the many things they had seen and even done alongside Jesus, these early followers were reminded that the power they needed had to come from Him. The same is true for us. We must resist being caught up in our own plans or agendas and look to Christ for direction and power daily, even when it means waiting for an unknown period.

- **Where is it hardest for you to wait on God right now? How can you seek to trust Him as you do?**

Waiting can stir up anxiety, but it also can bring about excitement and anticipation. Think about things that you eagerly wait for: Christmas, a baby to arrive, an exciting game, a concert, or even a package delivery. You happily wait for things that are valuable to you because you know it is worth it in the end. Nothing will fulfill our longing like the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. He is worth waiting on because He won't ever let you down.

God knows what you need and often uses waiting as an opportunity to grow your faith. You learn to trust what God wants to do in you as much as what He wants to do through you. He may call you to wait as a preparation for something coming in your life. Instead of complaining about the wait, like the disciples, we can look to what God is doing to prepare us for the next part of His plan. God always keeps His promises, and we can count on that. Every promise of God is good and trustworthy.

- **Application: How might God be using your current waiting to prepare you for something to come?**

> Have someone in your group read 1:5-11.

Jesus told His followers they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Consider what you know about baptism. It is the immersion of a person in water symbolizing new life in Christ. To be baptized in the Spirit means we need to be completely immersed in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not to be an add on in our lives but our guide for all of life.

- **What threatens to take your focus off seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit?**

In these final moments, the disciples asked Jesus a common question they had asked throughout His ministry. Was now the time He would restore the kingdom to Israel? Yet again, Jesus did not answer as the disciples expected and likely hoped. He encouraged them to keep trusting and not worry about knowing all the answers.

God the Father has established a timeline for the world that is His to know and control. Although we get caught up trying to figure things out or know all the details of the future, it is better to trust that God holds it all together, no matter what we know or don't. Relying on Him completely as you continue living in the power of the Spirit brings freedom and security. Our call is the same as it was for these first followers: to seek that same filling and anointing so we also can be used in mighty ways for the Kingdom.

- **How might knowing lies ahead actually hinder our reliance on God and His timing?**

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would bring power. What is this power for? This is not power meant to bring glory to any of Jesus's followers but to continually point back to the truth about Him. All Christians have been given the task of being Jesus's witnesses in all the world. The power for this mission comes from the Holy Spirit. By His power, we live as witnesses and others see the difference He makes in our lives.

- **Application: How might you seek to point others to Jesus through the Holy Spirit's work in your life?**

APPLICATION

At the end of Jesus's time on earth following the resurrection, He was with His disciples. In those final moments, Jesus gave some last instructions and a powerful promise. He told them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come. Only through the power of the Spirit can we do what God commands.

Instead of trying to live on our own strength, we surrender to the Spirit. When we do, we will be empowered to live in such a way that we are effective witnesses for the Lord. We are all witnesses for something. The question is who or what will you be a witness for?

In response, the early believers waited and prayed together. Through the posture of prayer, they positioned themselves to receive what God had for them. Likewise, if we want to be used by the Lord in meaningful ways, then we also need to position ourselves through prayer as we seek to surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

- **What are some ways you can wait with intention this week?**
- **How can we encourage one another to rely on the Holy Spirit and not ourselves each day?**
- **Who is the Spirit leading you to pursue in gospel conversation? How will you move toward this?**

PRAY

Thank the Lord for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ask for wisdom to see how you need to wait on the Spirit as you willingly surrender to Him. Commit to purposeful prayer so you are positioned to hear from God and be used by Him.

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

ACTS 1:1-8

1:1 The preface links the book of Acts explicitly with the first narrative, the Gospel of Luke (Lk 1:1–4). Though the books are separate in the NT canonical order, both were probably written by Luke, the traveling companion of Paul. The books are both large enough to fill a complete scroll, and so it is unlikely that they were ever joined as a single book.

Notes:

The book of Acts was written after the Gospel of Luke, as is indicated by the preface (1:1; cp. Lk 1:1–4). Luke builds these companion narratives on a broad chronology that begins with the birth of Jesus, then extends through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. He next shows the expansion of the church from Jerusalem to Rome. Acts closes with Paul awaiting trial in Rome. Like the first volume, the second is addressed to a person named Theophilus. Some speculate that Theophilus (Gk, “lover of God”) was a literary figure representing Christians generally, but more likely he was an actual historical person.

Some think on the basis of Lk 1:1–4 that Theophilus was a seeker after God and Luke aimed to explain Christianity to him. Others think Theophilus was a recent convert who required instruction in his newfound faith. Still others suggest he was an early church leader for whom Luke provided a summary of events surrounding the rise of Christianity. In any of the above scenarios, it is possible that Theophilus was Luke’s patron, financing the publication of Luke and Acts. Though only a maximum of twenty percent of urban men were literate, there was a distinct book culture in the ancient world. Publication involved hand copying an original document to make it available for others. The cost of materials for the initial document plus all subsequent drafts could be expensive, with each copy costing up to four days’ wages. As a result, the patronage system was an important factor in making book publication possible in the ancient world.

1:2–3 Luke opened Acts by mentioning the Gospel of Luke, the narrative of Jesus’s life and ministry up until his ascension. Before his ascension, Jesus suffered the agony of death and then presented himself alive to his disciples (Lk 24). Jesus presented himself by many convincing proofs, including appearing to the disciples during the forty days between his resurrection

and ascension. During this time Jesus instructed them about the kingdom of God.

Notes:

1:4 The Father's promise refers to the gift of the Holy Spirit, which would soon come (chap. 2).

1:5 John's baptism was a symbolic washing to purify and to indicate repentance of sin. Jesus's baptism of believers would be of greater impact and involved the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

1:6–7 Restoration of the kingdom of Israel was something for which all first-century Jews longed. It was commonly believed that Messiah, son of David and heir to his throne, would accomplish this restoration. Jesus deflected the disciples' misguided question and repeated his command that they were to be his witnesses near and far (cp. Mt 28:19).

1:8 The major focus of the book of Acts is stated in this verse. Jesus said believers would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, empowering them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem first and then spreading to the end of the earth. Note three things about how this unfolds. First, the empowering presence is to be the Holy Spirit, not Jesus himself. Jesus prepared his disciples for the transition when the Holy Spirit would come to be a constant presence in his bodily absence (see Jn 14:16–17). Second, the growth of the church would come about through the witness of the disciples. From the beginning, the church is depicted as a community that actively witnesses to their faith in Jesus Christ. Third, the result of this witness will be measurable, geographical growth. This growth will begin in Jerusalem and then spread through ever-widening concentric circles to other Jewish areas (e.g., Judea), to areas on the edges of Judaism (e.g., Samaria), and eventually to "the end of the earth," which may refer to the known world of that time, likely coextensive with the reach of the Roman Empire. As new lands and peoples were discovered in coming centuries, the church understood that it must keep expanding its witness to reach the newfound "end of the earth."¹

References

1. Stanley E. Porter, "Acts," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1716.