

# Preparation

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How did the disciples prepare to become Jesus's witnesses?

Read Acts 1.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand how Jesus calls and prepares His disciples for His mission in the world.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised to send His Holy Spirit to empower His disciples to become His witnesses in the world so they could carry on His mission and ministry.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

This chapter is a good place for biblically situating the doctrine of the ascension. In Acts 1 Luke depicted Jesus's ascension as a homecoming and the finishing of a course. However, the ascension is itself a transitory period, during which Jesus reigns as king of creation and prepares to return in glory to restore and judge the whole earth.

### ✦ MEDITATE

He [Jesus] said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'" (Acts 1:7–8).

## [GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

**QUESTION** *Why do you think Jesus spent forty days with His disciples after His resurrection before ascending to heaven?*

**QUESTION** *What does it mean to be a witness for Jesus in the world today?*

Now what? Jesus had risen from the dead. They'd seen Him, talked with Him, eaten with Him, learned new ways of reading the Scriptures from Him. But what would it all be *for*? After all, not all His promises had yet come true. He said He was going to the Father, and He said He would send the Holy Spirit. And then ... they had each other, their collective memory of their time with Jesus, the Scriptures, and some general direction (e.g., "Make disciples!").

But many questions remained unanswered. What would become of Israel in general, and Jerusalem in particular? What was the greater meaning of the Old Testament promises of restoration and renewal? To whom would they turn when they faced a severe threat from a local authority, an interpretive issue about the Scriptures, or an unexpected manifestation of spiritual power? Who would be "in charge," and what would it even mean to be "in charge" anyway?

## ✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 1:1–8 tells the story of Jesus at the end of His forty days of resurrected ministry, promising the disciples He would give them the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:9–11 narrates Jesus's ascension and includes symbolic and conversational details that help readers understand its significance. Acts 1:12–26 tells the story of Peter answering Jesus's challenge to strengthen his brothers by initiating a process to replace Judas. Taken together, these passages show the ways Jesus prepared His disciples to become His witnesses.

1. *The promise of the Holy Spirit*
2. *The ascension*
3. *The selection of Matthias*

+This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 1.

## *1. The promise of the Holy Spirit*

### **✚ READ ACTS 1:1–8**

**QUESTION** *Luke mentioned the Holy Spirit three times in these first eight verses. What did he say he wanted his readers to notice about the Holy Spirit at the beginning of this book?*

**QUESTION** *Luke pointed out that Jesus “presented himself alive” to His disciples for forty days (v. 3). What other things in the Bible happened for periods of forty days (or years)?*

In the first eight verses of his second book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke gave his readers the context needed to understand the beginning of the history of the church.

In verses 1–2, he made an explicit link between *The Acts of the Apostles* and *The Gospel According to Luke*. Luke referred here to his Gospel as “the first book” and characterized its contents as all that Jesus began to do and teach until His ascension. (Luke concluded his Gospel with his account of the ascension in 24:50–53). One of the subtle points made in this introduction is that what Jesus did before He ascended to heaven was just the beginning. The things His disciples would do and teach, particularly the things recounted in this book, are called the acts of the apostles, but Luke made the point that they could also be called, in a manner of speaking, the continued acts of the ascended Jesus.

In verse 3, Luke described the resurrection as a period of transition between the events at the climax of his Gospel and those at the beginning of this book. Instead of describing the resurrection as an event—which it certainly was—he described it as a period. Specifically, he pointed out that it was a period of forty days. When we read “forty days,” Luke wanted us to recall other forty-day periods, such as Noah’s forty days and nights of the flood, Israel’s forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and Jesus’s forty days of temptation in the wilderness. In each of those instances, forty days was a time of waiting and transition after a significant experience of God’s salvation—protection from the flood, deliverance from Egypt, baptism in the Jordan. Even here, Jesus spent the forty days following His resurrection simply waiting and preparing His disciples for the kingdom of God.

In verses 4–5, Luke pointed out one of the things Jesus said during this forty-day period: that the disciples should wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. Most recently, this repeated Jesus’s promise in Luke 24:49

nearly verbatim: “Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” But this promise of the Holy Spirit recalls two other significant prophecies about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. In Joel 2:28–32, God said, “It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” In Ezekiel 36:26–27, God said, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit ... I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” These passages, which you may want to read in full, help us understand what Jesus wanted His disciples to wait for. This would happen, Jesus said, “not many days from now” (Acts 1:5).

In verses 6–7, the disciples responded to Jesus, and they showed their fundamental misunderstanding about the kingdom of God. They asked Him whether at this time, the time of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in “not many days,” He would also restore the kingdom of Israel (v. 6). Jesus corrected their misunderstanding by outlining the scope of the beginning of their mission. In short, the answer was no. But when He pointed out that it was not for them to know the “times or seasons” (*chronous e kairous*), He was reminding them of a verse in Daniel: “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes time and seasons (*chronous e kairous*); he moves kings and sets up kings” (Daniel 2:20–21). In other words, issues of timing within the kingdoms of the earth is up to God.

In verse 8, Jesus reoriented their expectations about the kingdom of God. He characterized them in two keywords: “power” and “witnesses” (*marturios*). As we pay attention to the acts of these apostles, we will look for their demonstrations of power and the way they bore witness to, and were literally martyred for, the kingdom of God. Luke used Jesus’s answer about the scope of their witness to organize the rest of his book. The Acts of the Apostles begins with their works of power and witness in Jerusalem (Acts 1–7), zooms out to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12), and then expands to “the end of the earth” (Acts 13–28). Just as Jesus identified Himself as the anointed servant of God (Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isaiah 61:1), He identified His disciples as anointed to be “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6; cf. Acts 1:8).

**QUESTION** *Why did Jesus want the disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit?*

**QUESTION** *Based on His answer to their questions and these allusions to the Old Testament, what did Jesus want the disciples to know about the kingdom of God?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / First, we should follow Jesus's advice to wait before we jump into ministry. While Jesus didn't tell the disciples to wait indefinitely, there is certainly wisdom in respecting the biblical tradition of wandering, slowly assimilating all the lessons you've learned from God's expressions of favor and allowing Him both to expose your misunderstanding about His mission and clarify what He actually wants to do in your life. When we jump in headfirst without waiting on God to work in our lives, we're prone to misunderstanding His mission and taking bold steps we might later have to walk back.

Second, we should expect God to challenge and reorient our nationalist assumptions. The disciples misunderstood the nature of God's kingdom, expecting an imminent restoration of their own nation. And who doesn't, in some way, want that? But part of God's sanctification of our hearts is His sanctification of our political imaginations. After forty days—or forty years—of waiting with God, imagine how different our understanding of His vision for the kingdoms of the world might be.

**QUESTION** *What areas of your life or ministry might require more patience and dependence on God's Spirit before moving forward?*

**QUESTION** *How might your expectations about what God is doing need to shift to align with His kingdom purposes?*

## 2. The ascension

### ✚ READ ACTS 1:9–11

**QUESTION** *How did Luke describe Jesus's ascension? Pay attention to the physical aspects.*

**QUESTION** *What do you think was the purpose of the ascension?*

Acts 1:9–11 tells the very important story of the ascension in a very brief passage. We'll take this passage in three parts.

First, Luke narrated the ascension itself (v. 9). The phrase "he was lifted up" has both a physical meaning and a symbolic one. When we think of Jesus being lifted up, we should think about other passages in the

New Testament that describe His exaltation, like Philippians 2:9–11. The cloud should remind us of several significant clouds in the Old Testament. The cloud associated with the presence of God in Exodus 13:21–22 led the Israelites through the wilderness on their long journey out of Egypt and into their new land. The cloud associated with God’s glory that filled the temple in 1 Kings 8:10–11 signified God’s approval of Solomon’s building project and showed Israel that since they had left Egypt in Exodus, consecrating their temple meant they had *finally* settled into their new home. Or there is the cloud associated with the authority of a son of man in Daniel 7:13–14. In this passage, the son of man rides the clouds of heaven to receive authority and dominion in the presence of the Ancient of Days. Of all the verses about clouds, the ones from Daniel give us the fullest explanation of the meaning of the ascension. But by ascending on a cloud, Jesus showed His forty days of wandering were over, and He had finally settled into the “new land” of heaven to rest and reign.

Second, Luke narrated the disciples’ response (v. 10). They were left gazing into heaven. The moment is characterized by awe but also, perhaps, by confusion. They wouldn’t understand the meaning of Jesus going up into heaven until the Spirit was sent down from heaven to give them understanding. The disciples’ gaze could also be one of the scenes Paul had in mind when he exhorted the believers to “set your minds on things that are above, not things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1–4). The two men in white in the scene likely were angels, and their appearance at this moment can be interpreted as a divine confirmation of the significance of the ascension. Just as two men in white flanked the empty tomb, saying “He is not here,” so two men flanked the ascended Christ.

Third, the men in white spoke (v. 11). The first part of their message prompted the disciples to shift their attention from the cloud that carried Jesus to the mission He had given them. This passage could be read either as a gentle rebuke, urging them to stop lingering and start actively waiting to receive the Holy Spirit, or as an acknowledgment that there is a time to look up and a time to look out (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:1). Several monastic communities, for example, take Acts 1:10 as a theme verse, identifying their special place in the diverse community of the church as those who stay put, ever looking up in prayer. The second part of their message adds a second promise to Jesus’s promise to send the Holy Spirit: the promise of Jesus’s return, or *parousia*. Jesus’s ascension was not Him leaving the world for good; it was His enthronement at God’s right hand, where He rules the affairs of the kingdom of God on earth and in heaven even more fully than before. The ascension was Jesus’s promise that He would fulfill “all that [he] began to do and teach” until He returns the same way He left.

All told, the ascension is not an ending but a transition. Having ascended, He rules all creation and intercedes for His people (see Romans 8:34; Hebrews 1:3). Having ascended, Jesus would now send the Holy Spirit, just as He had promised (John 16:7). Having ascended, Jesus will one day come again to judge and restore the whole world (see Acts 3:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

**QUESTION** *What is the significance of the cloud?*

**QUESTION** *Why does it mean that the ascension is a transition, not an ending?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / First, we should live with purpose in anticipation of Jesus's return. The angels asked the disciples, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" A lot of things we would like to know about—what heaven is like, God's plan for the kingdoms of the world, Jesus's return—aren't for us to know. Let's commit ourselves to discerning and participating in Jesus's mission to see more truly into the kingdom of God.

Second, we should reflect on the significance of Jesus's ascension. When we affirm the basics of our faith, we say Jesus rose from the dead, is ascended, and *will* come again. "Ascended" is Jesus's current state of being. Over the course of the next week, read and reflect on Scriptures like Daniel 7:13–14; Mark 16:19; Hebrews 1:3; and Romans 8:34 that give us insight into the significance of the ascension.

**QUESTION** *The angels asked the disciples, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" How does this question challenge us to live with purpose as we wait for Jesus's return?*

**QUESTION** *How does better understanding Jesus's ascension affect your life personally? How does it affect your prayers?*

### 3. *The selection of Matthias*

#### **✚ READ ACTS 1:12–26**

**QUESTION** *Why do you think the apostles decided to replace Judas?*

**QUESTION** *How do you see Peter showing leadership in this passage?*

The disciples weren't ready yet. There was one thing left to do: replace Judas. In verses 12–26, Luke chose to tell the somewhat administrative story of how Matthias replaced Judas.

The disciples descended the Mount of Olives and returned to their life of waiting and prayer in Jerusalem. In these verses, Luke named the eleven remaining disciples (v. 13) and described the activities they conducted—namely, prayer—and the company they kept—namely, the women, Mary, and Jesus’s brothers. This was an “opt-in” community of whoever still believed in Jesus and attached themselves to the company of the apostles. While there may have been followers of Jesus under other roofs, this was the particular group to whom Jesus had promised the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In verses 15–20, Peter brought up the need to replace Judas. In Luke 22:32 Jesus had charged Peter with the words, “Strengthen your brothers.” In this moment, Peter stepped up to meet that charge. He made his case by appealing to Psalms 69:25 and 109:8, interpreting them through the lens of Jesus’s betrayal and death. Psalm 109:8 in particular voices the lament of a righteous person regarding his accuser. Peter read this as Judas’s betrayal of Jesus, saying of Judas, “Let another take his office!” This is an example of the emerging practice of spiritual interpretation of Scripture. Peter brought to mind what he called the Scriptures, and we call the Old Testament, and found new meaning in them based on his understanding of Jesus’s life and passion. This became a paradigm for interpreting Scripture in the first several centuries of the church.

In verses 21–22 Peter finished his speech by laying out the criteria for replacing Judas as an apostle. He established Jesus’s baptism by John in the Jordan as the start of His ministry and decided that a new apostle must be a “witness” to Jesus’s entire ministry career, starting then. While this was not a criterion for following Jesus, it was a criterion for becoming one of His chief witnesses. How else could this person, in the words of John, testify to “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands” (1 John 1:1)? After all, Jesus had specifically commissioned these people to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8).

Based on the story of Matthias’s selection in verses 23–26, all that mattered to Peter was that whoever was chosen met the qualifications. The apostles prayed to God, who “know[s] the hearts of all” (v. 24). The word Luke used is a compound word, *kardio-gnostes*; literally, “heart-knower.” The final decision was made by casting lots, an old practice with roots in Leviticus 16:8 and Proverbs 16:33. From the Proverbs passage, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” The effect was that Matthias wasn’t chosen by a loudmouth, by a persuasive faction, or by some unique qualification. Matthias was no one’s candidate; he was simply a witness to the life of Jesus, and that was enough.

**QUESTION** *Why did the apostles need to replace Judas?*

**QUESTION** *How would you describe Peter’s interpretation of Psalm 109:8, and how would you describe his leadership decisions?*



**APPLICATION POINT** / First, we should actually rely on prayer for guidance. The disciples devoted themselves to prayer in verse 14 and again in verse 24. In the end, they were content to let Peter's decision and the throwing of lots determine their next steps. Sometimes, we overthink important decisions, imagining we have the power to determine the outcomes of our own ventures. At other times, we don't give our decisions enough thought, leaving them to chance or to the powers that be. Like Peter, we should trust our ability to identify good criteria and then ask God to help us make faithful decisions.

Second, we should appreciate the importance of a faithful witness. Justus and Matthias were put forward because they had been faithful *witnesses* to Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Notice that Luke made no mention of their gifts and abilities, resources and networks, families or schooling. The apostles put forward witnesses. In our lives, we should appreciate the value of faithful witnesses—those who have faithfully stood by their church, their workplace, their family, watching them go through high and low seasons. Ultimately, if we believe God is at work in the world, what more important work is there for us than paying attention to our own lives and the lives of others and bear witness to the ways we see God working? We have no witness to bear if we haven't witnessed—that is, *seen*—God at work.

**QUESTION** *What role does prayer play in your decision-making? What role does identifying good criteria play?*

**QUESTION** *In what ways can you grow as a more faithful and consistent witness to Jesus's work in your life?*

## INEXT STEPS

Now, the apostles were prepared. Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit to empower them to be witnesses (Acts 1:1–8; cf. John 16:7); He had ascended bodily into heaven, finishing His course and taking His position as sovereign king of creation (vv. 9–11); and Peter had strengthened his brothers by restoring the twelve-strong team of apostolic witnesses. The overarching lesson from this week, perhaps, is that Jesus addresses our faulty imaginings about earthly power and sends us out as His *witnesses*. Each of us carries in our hearts an ideal for how the world should work, how leaders should conduct themselves and direct our affairs, and how people should behave. Many of us hope Jesus will help us realize our dream for how the world should work. This week let's bring our hopes to Jesus and ask Him to clarify for us what it means to be sent out into the world to be His witnesses.

## [PRAY]

+Use this prayer as a guide to pray through these passages this week.

*Almighty God, who exalted your Son Jesus Christ to reign at your right hand and poured out the promise of the Holy Spirit upon His people: Grant us patience to wait upon your Spirit, that we may be empowered to bear witness to your kingdom in every place. Reorient our hearts to seek your purposes above our own and fill us with hope in the return of our ascended Lord. Strengthen us for the work you have given, that we may proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*