

Jesus Prepares Witnesses
Acts 1

In Acts 1:8 we read that Jesus says, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes, and you will be my *witnesses*.” Near the end of Acts 1, Peter tells the 120, “we need to choose one more man to be a *witness* with us.” One more to be a witness? Only one more? And then there are enough witnesses? So, what does it mean to be a “witness,” and who qualifies? What kind of witness does Peter have in mind? We will find out.

What we learn from Acts 1 is that Jesus was particular about how his followers would first speak about him. Jesus was determined that right from the start, the church would be aimed the right way. Jesus left no room for the gospel to have a sloppy beginning and then correct it later. How would the disciples talk about him, how would they explain him, what would they tell others about him? The gospel must have the right foundation, so we don’t lose our way.

Luke Reminds us in Acts of the End of his Gospel – Acts 1:1-3

Here’s how Acts begins: *In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*

“In my former book.” Luke begins Acts by taking us to the end of his Gospel, the things Jesus did with the apostles after his suffering and resurrection. So we are now going back to Luke 24, and we are going to see three ways in which Jesus prepared his witnesses back there.

Preparation 1: Make Sure Witnesses are Convinced of his Resurrection - Luke 24:36-42

When Jesus first appeared to his followers after his death, they were startled and scared, and they thought they were seeing some kind of spirit or ghost. Jesus said, “why are you troubled and uncertain? Look at my hands and my feet. It’s me! Poke me and see – a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” Jesus showed them his hands and feet so they could see marks from the nails of crucifixion. He invited them to prod his body.

Then Jesus asked them for food. He did not bring his own food, he wanted them to know this was real ordinary food. He ate it in front of them. Acts 1 tells us that Jesus did this kind of thing repeatedly, for forty days.

It was not enough for his witnesses just to see him once or twice, they had to see him and experience his real flesh and bones and eat with him for forty days. No one could convince any of those eleven men that Jesus had not actually risen from the dead.

Jesus does this with the chosen apostles, the eleven. There are other followers in Jerusalem, and he appears to them once in a while, but he concentrates completely on the eleven. Luke names them in vv13-14 so we know who exactly this is. In Acts 1, we don't read a word about any other believers until the middle of v14. First preparation: Jesus makes sure the eleven are certain about his resurrection.

Preparation 2: Learn what the Old Testament said about Jesus – Luke 24:25-27; 44-48

Witnesses needed to know how the Lord understood the Scriptures, the OT, to be speaking about him. Jesus spoke to the two men walking to Emmaus. It says there that beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus explained to them, from all the Scriptures, about himself.

Later in Luke 24, when he appeared to them all, Jesus said, “I told you all this before, that everything in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms about me had to be fulfilled. And then he says he “opened their minds” so they could understand the Scripture.

Jesus did not tell them to go read all the messianic prophecies in the OT. Jesus did not say that to them because Jesus had his own set of Scriptures that he knew to be speaking about the Christ, and that's what he taught.

For example, all Jews knew that Psalm 2 was messianic, that's where God said, “you are my Son.” They knew Psalm 110 was messianic, where God said, “sit at my right hand.”

But Psalm 16, “you will not let my flesh see decay,” was also about the messiah. Psalm 118, about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone, was also a messianic psalm. Jews did not know that, but Jesus took all these to be about himself, and that's the kind of thing he taught them for forty days.

The sermons and speeches of Acts, from Peter at the end of Acts 1 to Paul in at end of Acts, are full of OT quotes. That's because of what happened for forty days between the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension. Jesus, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, had his own understanding of what the OT was saying about him, and there was a lot of OT teaching during the forty days.

At the end of Acts 1, when Peter and the 120 chose another apostle to replace Judas, Peter quoted two different psalms in his speech. Did Peter pick those two psalms? No, Jesus taught them that. Jesus had told them that they need to replace Judas, and Jesus used those psalms.

Jesus did not want his resurrection announced by witnesses who had not learned his understanding of when the OT spoke of him. His witnesses must have that. In Luke 24, right after we get the second summary of the Jesus' OT teaching, Jesus said to them, “you are witnesses of these things.” Of what things? Of what they just learned from him about Moses and the prophets and the Psalms, all the places the OT spoke about Jesus. Witnesses had to have that.

Preparation 3: Wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit

Witness could not happen until the Holy Spirit had come, and that would only happen in Jerusalem. It had to begin in Jerusalem, and it had to be energized and carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Even Jesus, after his resurrection, was still taught and carried along by the Holy Spirit, dependent on the Holy Spirit. We read in Acts 1:2: “For forty days, Jesus was giving instructions *through the Holy Spirit* to the apostles he had chosen.” Jesus taught the eleven chosen apostles, and the Spirit was guiding and teaching Jesus and giving him words to say.

I hope you have seen by now that we are not witnesses in the way Acts 1 describes witnesses. There were only twelve of those. We have the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit was not given to us to be that kind of witness. In Acts, even after the Spirit came on the church, there were still only twelve witnesses. We have the Spirit so we will be together like the 3,000 at the end of Acts 2.

Paul writes 1 Corinthians to a church that was so excited to have the Holy Spirit, but who also misunderstood the Holy Spirit. Paul first wants to clear up who does and does not have the Holy Spirit. “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” If a person can say, “Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and he has full rights to my life,” that person unquestionably has the Holy Spirit. The Spirit must do a great renewing in our minds for us to say that and mean it.

But how the Spirit shows himself will vary. The Spirit made the twelve into bold and powerful witnesses, and the same Spirit made the three thousand new believers into huge joyful instant family. Same Spirit. The twelve have to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit, then they will be witnesses.

Preparation 4: Be with Jesus from John the Baptist to the Resurrection

The 120 came together, and Peter led them to find a replacement for Judas. It had to be one of those there who had listened to John preach, and been baptized by John, and then have followed Jesus around up to and including his resurrection appearances. Jesus had a crowd of Galileans that followed him around from the start. There were not just twelve followers, there was also a larger crowd, perhaps 200, and there were many women in that group.

So Peter and the 120 narrowed it down to two men who they thought could replace Judas and join the eleven. And then they prayed that Jesus would make the final choice, and they drew lots, they used some random way so that the Lord could make his preference known.

We learn two things here. (1) The Lord himself chose all the witnesses. Back in v2, we read that Jesus was teaching *the apostles that he had chosen*. That’s how one got to be a witness. The Lord chose.

(2) Those preachers must all know the whole story of Jesus first hand. They did not know the Jesus story if they themselves had not listened to John the Baptist and been baptized by John, and they had to have been in that crowd that followed Jesus around from then on, including seeing the resurrected Jesus. The first preachers, these witnesses, had to be there for all that.

Jesus is crafting the beginning of the church. The gospel shall not have a sloppy beginning. It will not be preached any old way. Jesus formed a group of twelve men that knew all about his life on earth, they knew what the OT said about him, they knew for sure he was alive, and they had the Holy Spirit.

And there was a group of them so the twelve could correct one another and remind one another about these things. In the early chapters of Acts, these apostles were a tight group, they were together all the time, and they were the only ones evangelizing (that we read about) until the second half of Acts 6.

So: the witnesses had to be sure of the resurrection, they had to attend the Lord's "Messiah in the OT" school, they had to be familiar with his whole life, and they had to have the Holy Spirit. There's one more thing:

Preparation 5: There had to be Twelve

Why did there have to be twelve apostles, twelve witnesses? I once thought Jesus picked 12 because this was a number he found convenient, as many as he thought he could be close to and teach. But then it does not make sense that Jesus needed to pick a twelfth after he left. Matthias, the twelfth, did not have the kind of preparation that the eleven had, that's for sure.

For some reason, there had to be twelve. For some reason, the message itself, the gospel itself, would be weakened and compromised if it did not come from a group of twelve. What kind of message, what kind of gospel, is Jesus sending, that the message has to come from twelve or the message is not complete?

Almost half of Acts 1 tells us about replacing Judas so there could be twelve. I sort of took that as a waste of space. Who cares if there are twelve? But the Spirit was guiding Luke in writing this, this matters to him. So the question is, "what am I not seeing?"

Twelve means the people of God, "Israel." In Mt 19 and in Lk 22 Jesus tells the twelve that they will rule the twelve tribes of Israel. "Twelve" means the people of God. Jesus is not just starting the church. Jesus is somehow re-constituting Israel, reforming Israel, revising Israel. The twelve disciples are all Israelites, and the tribes still exist, but something big and new is happening.

As the first people of God, the first nation of God, was built on the twelve sons of Jacob, so the revised and re-formed people are built on the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Jesus picked twelve as an echo of the twelve sons of Jacob and of the twelve tribes of Israel.

And it has to begin in Jerusalem, the capital city of unified Israel. That's where the Spirit will come, and that's where the twelve will witness.

People, the good news is much bigger than individuals coming to Jesus to have their sins forgiven. Jesus began a new nation, and he could not send that message unless there were twelve. And that's why the summary of the life together of the 3000 converts, after Peter's Pentecost sermon, is so important. After the Spirit and the gospel, those people from all over are an incredibly unified group.

We read at the start of this sermon that Jesus spoke to them for forty days about the kingdom of God. Remember that "kingdom" in those days often meant the same as "nation." Jesus was teaching them about the new people of God, the new nation of God. That's why he needed to have twelve apostles.

Jesus did not say "you will be my witnesses" *to us*. He said it to the eleven. Even after there are more preachers in Acts, those preachers are not called "witnesses." Luke 24 and Acts 1 are not calling us to be witnesses, they tell us the gospel that Jesus insisted we hear. What gospel did Jesus make sure that we hear?

- (1) Complete certainty that Jesus rose from the dead.
- (2) Solid foundation in Old Testament Scripture.
- (3) The Holy Spirit is essential to all of this.
- (4) Thorough familiarity with the whole earthly ministry of Jesus.
- (5) The gospel re-creates and revises the people of God, God's nation renewed around the Christ.

Our faith rests to a considerable degree on the faith of those twelve. How shall we respond? *We will repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus, and then we will act like the new people of God, as we see at the end of Acts 2.* We will guard this gospel and treasure it, and make sure it gets passed on like this. Amen.

PRAYER: Christ our Lord, you were more careful about this than we thought. Thank you for the gospel, thank you for being so thorough with those men. Thank you that you opened our hearts to receive this very gospel, so that we would be brought into your kingdom. And now, have mercy on us, and help us together to live worthy of our calling. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct our hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give us peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.