

Jesus Prepares Twelve Witnesses: What Gospel Shall We Hear?

Luke 24, Acts 1

Turn to Acts 1. In Acts 1:8 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? What does it mean to be a “witness”? Who qualifies? What kind of witness does Peter have in mind? We will find out that what a *witness* is has a lot to do with what the *gospel* is.

Jesus was careful about how his followers would speak about him. Jesus was determined that the church would begin with a solid foundation. What gospel shall we hear? Jesus did not just say, “go be my witnesses.” We will look at what Jesus did in Luke 24 and Acts 1 to prepare his witnesses. We are not witnesses in the way Jesus used “witness.” Now to Acts 1.

In My Former Book: Acts 1 takes us to Luke 24 – 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 resurrection. So now we are going back to Luke 24, and we are going to see the ways in which Jesus prepared his witnesses back there. We will see more preparations in Acts. All told his witnesses will need seven preparations.

Preparation 1: The Jesus Messianic Prophecy School – Luke 24:25-27; 32, 44-48

Now turn to Luke 24. In Luke 24 we learn how closely Jesus tied his own life and death and resurrection to particular Old Testament prophecies. His witnesses had to know how his life was a fulfillment of the Scripture, and he taught them. In the afternoon of that first resurrection Sunday, Jesus met two of his followers. They did not recognize him. They were terribly discouraged that Jesus had been crucified and buried. Jesus scolded them!

Luke 24:25–27 *He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

“How foolish you are and slow to believe what the prophets said.” Jesus had been teaching them what the prophets said, but they had not been getting it. What troubled Jesus was how slow they were to understand and believe what he had told them about the prophets. So he gave them a whole long lesson again, the Jesus Messianic Prophecy School.

Jesus had his own set of Scriptures that he knew to be speaking about the Christ, and that’s what he taught. The Jews had lots of prophecies that they thought were about the Christ. Jesus ignored some of those, and he had many others. They needed the Jesus Messianic Prophecy School.

When they started to eat together, these two followers and Jesus, then they recognized him, and then he disappeared. After he disappeared (Luke 24:32), *They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”*

They are scolding themselves for not recognizing him sooner. Before he died, as Jesus walked with his followers, he often opened the Scriptures to them, and their hearts would burn as they listened. That was common for them. They should have known it was Jesus, because he did that day what he always did.

So they got up and went to where the others were gathered in Jerusalem, and told them that they’d seen Jesus. Then Jesus appeared to the gathering. Let’s read beginning in verse 44:

(Luke 24:44–48) He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

“This is what I told you while I was still with you.” Jesus had been saying these things to them all along, that the Scriptures had spelled it all out ahead of time. And then he gave the whole lesson again, from Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.

Jesus did not want his resurrection announced by witnesses who had not learned his understanding of Messianic prophecies. His witnesses must have that. Our text ended with, “you are witnesses of these things.” Of what things? Of what they just learned from him, where Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms spoke about Jesus. His witnesses had to have that.

Preparation 2: Witnesses Must Be Convinced of his Resurrection - Luke 24:36–43

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

“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 their food 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 again and again, for forty days. No one could ever convince any of those eleven men that Jesus had not actually risen from the dead. Jesus did not just say “believe it,” he proved it to them, again and again and again.

Jesus does this, we just read in Acts 1:1–3, 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 Acts 1:13–14 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. Second preparation: Jesus makes sure the eleven are entirely sure about his resurrection. Not from faith, but from sight and sound and touch.

Preparation 3: Witnesses Must Have the Holy Spirit – Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5; 8

Even Jesus, even 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 Jesus words to say.

Witness could not happen until the Holy Spirit had come. The gospel had to be energized and carried along by the Holy Spirit. Jesus at the end of Luke: *“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”*

Acts 1 says, *Wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit... But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

Jesus did not want them telling others about him until they had received the Holy Spirit.

Preparation 4: Be with Jesus from John the Baptist to the Resurrection – Acts 1:21–22

At the end of Acts 1, Peter led the 120 believers to find a replacement for Judas. The man who replaced Judas had to meet certain standards. Peter said, *“It is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”*

It had to be one of those there who had listened to John preach, and been baptized by John, and then had 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.

They did not all stay in the Jerusalem, but 120 did. 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.

Those preachers had to know Jesus first hand. They did not know the Jesus story if they themselves had not listened to John the Baptist, and they had to have been in that crowd that followed Jesus from then on, watching him and listening to him in all kinds of situations: including seeing the resurrected Jesus. The first preachers, these witnesses, needed all that.

Jesus was crafting the beginning of the church. The gospel 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.

We also have the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit, but by now it’s clear that we are not at all witnesses in the way that Luke 24 and Acts 1 speak of witnesses. We have the Spirit so we can live like the church at the end of Acts 2 and in Acts 4.

Preparation 5: Chosen by Jesus – Acts 1:2, 24

Witnesses had to be chosen by Jesus for this task. We read in Acts 1:2 that Jesus gave instructions through the Holy Spirit specifically to *the apostles he had chosen*. In case there’s any doubt, we have the eleven named in Acts 1:13.

And when they pick a twelfth, they pray together: *“Lord, **you** know everyone’s heart. **You** show us which of these two **you** have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.”* Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

Jesus did not ask for volunteers, and he did not ask people to pray if he should witness. He picked the witnesses he wanted, and he prepared them for what they were to do. This is how he sends harvest workers into his fields.

Preparation 6: There had to be Twelve – Acts 1:15–26

Why did there have to be twelve apostles, twelve witnesses? For some reason, there had to be twelve. What kind of message, what kind of gospel, was Jesus sending, that the message had to come from twelve or the message itself was incomplete?

Almost half of Acts 1 tells us about replacing Judas so there could be twelve. I used to ignore that; it was a waste of space. Who cares if there are twelve? But the Spirit was guiding Luke in writing this, so this matters. It mattered to Peter, I'm sure because the Lord had told Peter and the eleven to pick a twelfth, and which prophecies that fulfilled.

But why twelve? Twelve means the people of God, "Israel." Jesus told the twelve in Matthew 19 and in Luke 22 that they would rule the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus was not just starting the church. Jesus was re-constituting Israel, reforming Israel, revising Israel. The twelve disciples were all Israelites, and the twelve tribes still existed, but something big and new was happening.

As the first people of God, the first nation of God, Israel, was built on the twelve sons of Jacob, so the revised and reformed nation of God is built on the twelve apostles of Jesus. Jesus picked twelve as an echo of the twelve sons of Jacob and of the twelve tribes of Israel.

This is why John's Revelation likes the number "24." "24" means faithful Israel and faithful church, all together as the bride of Christ. In the New Jerusalem, the twelve gates are named after the twelve tribes of Israel, and the twelve foundations are named after the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

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 "new Israel, new nation" message unless there were twelve apostles and witnesses. In Galatians, Paul tells those Gentile believers that they are true children of Abraham, they are "the Israel of God."

And that's why 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. That's the start of the new people, the new nation of God.

Jesus spoke to them for forty days about the kingdom of God. Remember that "kingdom" in those days usually meant the same as "nation." Jesus was teaching them about the new people of God, the new nation of God. That's why Jesus needed to have twelve witnesses of his resurrection; it was an echo of Israel.

Preparation 7: It had to Begin in Jerusalem –Acts 1:4, 8

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised.” Jesus said at the end of Luke and also in Acts 1 that the preaching must begin in Jerusalem.

Jesus was a Galilean, his apostles were all Galileans, his crowd of followers were all Galileans. They did not like Jerusalem. Jerusalem crucified Jesus. His apostles and followers would much rather have gone back to Galilee. But Jesus commanded them, “do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for what my Father promised.”

God’s temple was in Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was the capital city of Judea and it was the center of Jewish life and worship. The Spirit would be given in Jerusalem and preaching would begin in Jerusalem for more or less the same reasons as there needed to be twelve witnesses.

Jesus was sending a message to the Jews: “Israel is changing, a new Israel is being built, and you need to get on board.” By the end of Acts, the Jews are often hostile, and Gentiles are coming into the new people of God. Reconstituted Israel has lots of room for Gentiles, and that’s how we get in. God’s plan is bigger than bringing individuals into his kingdom. Our gospel had to begin in Jerusalem.

Summary

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

- (1) Built on Old Testament messianic prophecy, as taught by Jesus.
- (2) Built on complete certainty that Jesus rose from the dead.
- (3) The Holy Spirit energized and carried the Lord’s teaching and the apostles’ witness.
- (4) Witnesses know Jesus first hand through his whole earthly ministry.
- (5) Witnesses had to be chosen by Jesus for this task.
- (6) There had to be twelve.
- (7) It had to begin in Jerusalem

Jesus worked hard to make sure that the church began this way. He wanted us to get this gospel, he wanted us to have this kind of foundation. Our faith rests on what those twelve received from Jesus. This tells us what we’ve come into when we believed in Christ. There’s more to the gospel than we thought, isn’t there.

This message is really just a set up for what happens in Acts 2. Luke 24 and Acts 1 are all preparation for Acts 2. Acts 2 tells the whole gospel and world mission story in one chapter.

How shall we respond when we hear the gospel Jesus wanted preached? *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.