

Acts 1–4: Jesus establishes his kingdom

Welcome to *The Acts of the Apostles*. We're glad you're here, desiring to learn from Scripture about how the Holy Spirit continues Jesus' ministry in the world.

There are 28 chapters in Acts, so we plan to cover 4 chapters each night for 7 weeks. It'd love to take the time to explore with the same depth Craig Kenner did with his commentary¹ where he devoted more than 1000 pages to Acts 1–2. Unfortunately, we need to cover Acts 1–2 before the break tonight. Realistically, we won't be able to address many of the important questions this text raises.

If you want something beyond the course notes, you might buy:

- Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone* (2 volumes) SPCK, 2008.

Please do ask questions and share your insights as time permits. If there are things you didn't get to raise in our time together, you're very welcome to email me directly: allen.browne@riverview.church

Any questions before we begin?

Acts 1: The king promises Holy Spirit power for his kingdom

This book begins with 120 people in Jerusalem who've seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion. It ends 30 years later, with tens of thousands of Christ-followers across Judea, Samaria, Ethiopia, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Rome. In the centuries that follow, the good news of Jesus liberating the world spreads to the rest of the globe.

Acts is volume two of Luke's Gospel. Luke dedicated his Gospel to someone named *Theophilus*, a name meaning "one who loves God" (Luke 1:4). Acts is the sequel:

Acts 1:1-2 (NIV)

¹ In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

All that Jesus began to do and teach is now becoming reality in the community under his leadership. His people implement his leadership because he gave the Holy Spirit anointing that he had (as the Christ) to the ambassadors he appointed, ambassadors who continue what he started.

The Gospels describe who Jesus was and what he did. Acts answers the follow-up question: Who are we and what are we doing? Acts gives us our identity and mission.

We are the community that comes to life in Christ, the kingdom raised up in the king. Epistles are instructions for God's community. Acts is the living reality. For all of us who learn best by following a practical example, Acts is our book.

Six weeks with Jesus (1:3-8)

Between his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus had forty days to finish training his apostles. What should he focus on? Which class would you go to?

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 volumes), Baker Academic, 2014-2015.

- a) How to plant a church
- b) How to convince people to believe
- c) The life hereafter in light of Jesus' death and resurrection
- d) How the atonement provides justification
- e) The believer's identity and purpose
- f) Other?

What topic did Jesus chose?

Acts 1:3 (NIV)

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.

What on earth is that? Why is that important? Is it crucial to Acts? To our mission? Is this still important at the end? (Check the final verse of Acts.)

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As we make our way through Acts, listen for the **gospel** as the apostles present it. The good news is Jesus. He is *the Christ* (the anointed ruler), the one whom God *raised up* (resurrected) as *Lord of all* (our global leader). The kingdom of God is the gospel they proclaimed: it's the relationship between king and kingdom.

The king issued this command:

Acts 1:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ 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, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Why is Holy Spirit so crucial after Jesus had gone? What does *baptized with the Spirit* mean? What does it have to do with John the Baptist?² When had Jesus told them about this? When were they immersed in the Spirit? What difference did he make?

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Jesus is the opposite of earthly rulers. Earthly rulers do whatever it takes to keep their power, as Israel's history showed. The Christ pours out his anointing on his people, empowering us all to function as his kingdom.

Flooding the whole community with Holy Spirit empowerment radically reshapes the world under God's authority. The Spirit who breathed life into Jesus' dead body breathes life into a world that died when it disconnected from God, raising us up as the community that comes to life in him.

Holy Spirit brings such a racial reshaping of the world under Jesus' kingship that it's pointless to try to change the world without him. But right now, without the Spirit's help, the disciples can't imagine how Jesus will serve as their king, overturning the oppression Israel had suffered for centuries:

² The phrase comes from John: Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16; (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Acts 1:6–8 (paraphrased)

Disciples: “Now you’re alive, is this the time when you will take a throne in Jerusalem, restoring Israel as a kingdom like it was in David’s day?”

Jesus: “You’re asking, ‘*When?*’ That’s the wrong question. The kingdom is my Father’s authority. The kingdom arrives with the Holy Spirit in you [plural]. With the Spirit in you, just like my Father promised, you will be the living evidence of my kingship. The kingdom arrives progressively: starting in the capital, incorporating both parts of the fallen kingdom (Judah and Samaria), and extending to the extremities of the earth.”

What the king promised is exactly how the kingdom grows in Acts:

- Beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1–5)
- Encompassing the divided fallen kingdoms of Judea and Samaria (Acts 6–9)
- Including gentiles and the rest of the world in his reign (Acts 10–28).

By the end of Acts, the kingdom of the Christ is being announced in Rome, under the Emperor’s nose. As dangerous as that sounds, Paul is *announcing the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ [ruler Jesus the Anointed] with all boldness, unhindered* (Acts 28:31).

Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:9–11)

Acts 1:9–11 (Tom Wright’s translation)³

⁹As Jesus said this, he was lifted up while they were watching, and a **cloud** took him out of their sight. ¹⁰They were gazing into heaven as he disappeared. Then, lo and behold, two men appeared, dressed in white, standing beside them.

¹¹‘Galileans,’ they said, ‘why are you standing here staring into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.’

Can you think of any other accounts of God’s presence in a cloud? (Exodus 13:21–22; Luke 9:34–35) Where has Jesus gone? (Acts 7:56)

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We call this his *ascension*. He’s not an irrelevant character, written out of the book. He has ascended the throne, sharing in heaven’s reign over the earth. The Son of Man has regained the dominion God gave humans in the beginning (Genesis 1:26–28). God has taken power from the beasts that claim to run his world, giving it all to the human heir—not with earthly armies but with the clouds of heaven’s hosts. Heaven’s reign now extends to all the nations of the earth. It can never be destroyed (Daniel 7:9–14).

But the disciples feared they’d lost Jesus. They needed heavenly messengers to explain that one day Jesus’ kingship would be fully and visibly here on earth. That will be the full expression of heaven’s reign over the earth in God’s anointed.

³ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1–12* (London: SPCK, 2008), 10.

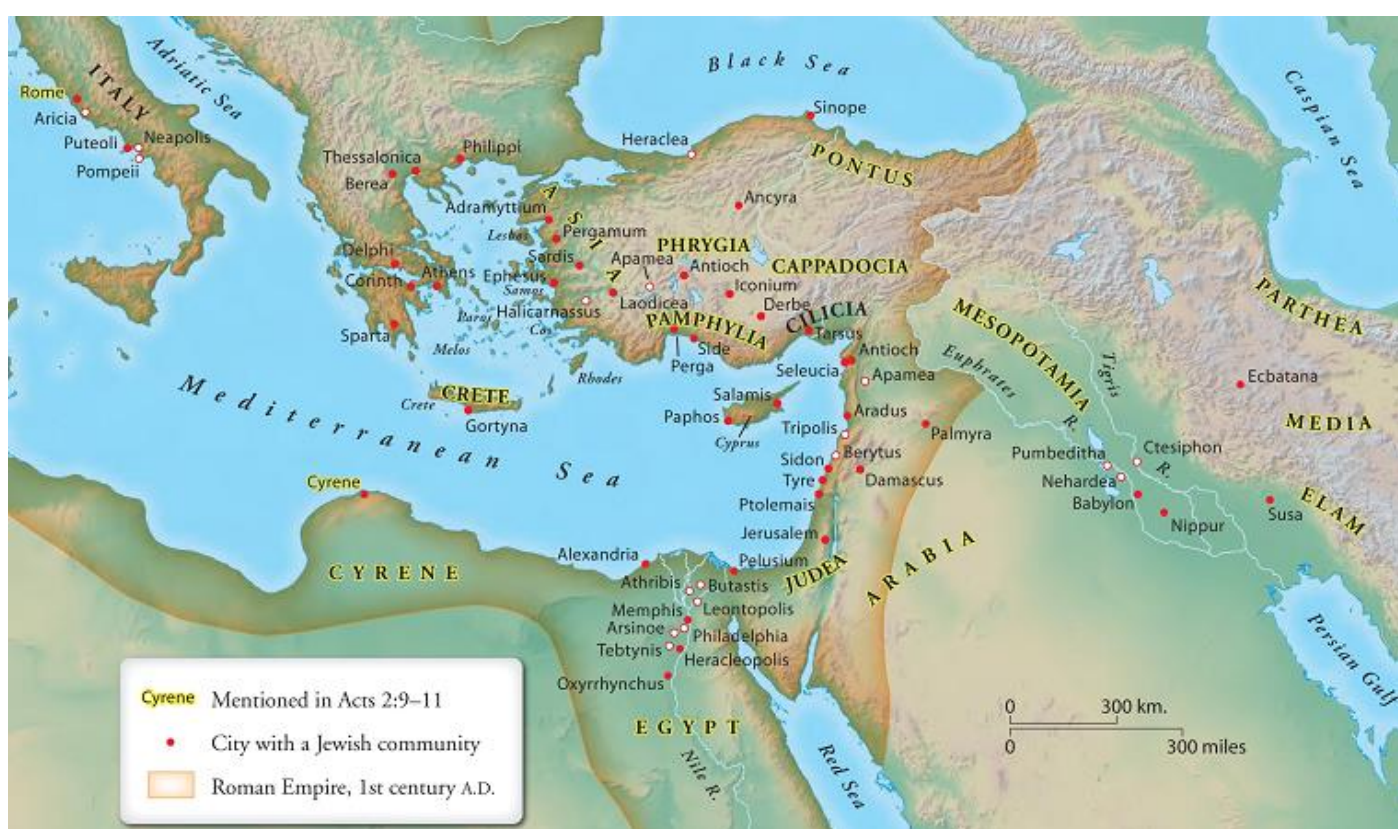
Without Jesus or the Spirit (1:12-26)

For ten days they're in limbo, with neither Jesus nor the Spirit. Jesus told them to wait (verse 4). They spend much of the time waiting on God in prayer (verses 12-14).

While Jesus is back, Judas is not. As Peter reads the Psalms, he concludes they need to replace Judas. They choose two candidates, pray, and cast lots. *The lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles (1:26).*

What do you make of that? Did God want them to choose a replacement, or was Jesus planning to appoint another apostle later? Why include this story about casting lots immediately before the Holy Spirit's coming?

Acts 2: The Holy Spirit empowers the community of the Christ



Carl G. Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, (Zondervan, 2010), 218

Holy Spirit empowerment (2:1-13)

Seven weeks after Passover comes *the Festival of Weeks* (Deuteronomy 16:9-16). It's called *Pentecost* in Greek, meaning 50 (days). The Jews were spread across the whole Mediterranean area, so people came from everywhere for the festival:

Acts 2:1–4 (NIV)

¹ When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

What does *tongues* mean? (Compare verse 11.) Why did the Holy Spirit empower them to speak languages they'd never learnt?

Acts 2:6–12 (NIV)

⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ... ¹⁰ We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

According to Genesis 11, God divided the world into language groups. At Babel, people were building a city to rule the world, with a tower that claimed to have brought the power of the gods into their hands. God stopped them: *the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth* (Genesis 11:9).

Now people came to Jerusalem from all over the world. What *confused* them was they could understand each other!⁴ "*What does this mean?*" It means God was reversing Babel! Instead of uniting in rebellion against God's authority, the world was being united under God's reign in Christ. The king raised up by God has ascended the throne, and he is drawing all people back under heaven's governance.

So what is the Holy Spirit saying to all these people in their own tongues? *The wonders of God* (verse 11) refers to the astounding way God reinstated his reign: not through force, but through raising up his son when the rebels killed him, installing his Christ as Lord of all, and extending an amnesty to all who give him allegiance.

That's the message as Peter goes on to deliver in the power of the Spirit.

The gospel of the Christ (2:14-36)

Peter's message draws this conclusion:

Acts 2:36 (NIV)

³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

How did God make Jesus *both Lord and Anointed Ruler*? What does this mean for those who shouted, "Crucify him!" just six weeks ago? (Luke 23:21) What is the evidence that God overruled them and installed his king?

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Peter presents Jesus as fulfilling the Scriptures:

- **Joel 2:28-32** (in Acts 2:17-21): The enthroned Christ has poured out the Spirit on the whole community, so everyone is declaring how God has shaken the powers and brought *the day of the Lord* (i.e. God's reign). So now, *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*.

⁴ *Bewildered* (NIV) is συγχέω, the same Greek word used in the Septuagint of Genesis 11:7, 9.

- **Psalm 16:8-11** (in Acts 2:25-28): The Psalm is David's voice, but since then David has died and the Davidic kingship died. That kingship has come back to life because the king has come back to life.
- **Psalm 110:1** (in Acts 2: 34-35): God has restored the throne to David's Lord. He is now reigning, while God is bringing all his enemies under his feet.

So what is the gospel as the Holy Spirit presented it through Peter?

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The kingdom of the Christ (2:37-47)

Those who believed Peter's gospel asked how to respond (verse 37). Why these two responses? Why are they significant? (verses 38)

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To those who responded to the gospel, Peter promised *the gift of the Holy Spirit* (verses 38-39). Is the Holy Spirit the gift? Or does Peter mean a particular gift (such as tongues or salvation). What do you think?

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3000 people now recognize God's *Anointed* as earth's *Lord* (Peter's words, verse 36).

This is often described as the day the **church** was born. That's right, but the church isn't the goal. The church is the present expression of the kingdom, recognizing and embodying his kingship over the earth. His kingship is what rescues the world. Pentecost was the first-fruits festival of the harvest to come. That's what the church is in the present.

So how did this early church embody Christ's reign in his world? What did they do that embodied his kingship?

- What held them together? How did they stay focused on what the king wants? (verse 42)
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- What did they do that's unlike the way people live who don't recognize Christ as king? How did embodying the message enhance credibility? (verses 43-45)
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- In what settings did they gather to communicate their message? Why the emphasis on unity and togetherness rather than personal piety? (verses 46-47)
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Do these emphases apply to us? How can we credibly embody Jesus' reign today in Australia when our culture is quite cynical about the church?

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Hopefully you understand that Jesus' kingship is not imposed. No one was asked to sell their houses. This is a voluntary response to the king who said that those who'd been missing out (the poor) would receive the kingdom under his reign (Matthew 5:3).

Acts 3: Jesus' authority will heal the world

Restoring a crippled person (3:1-10)

Jerusalem had no Centrelink or NDIS. Those who could not work were reliant on people's generosity. The temple was a good spot to ask for daily help.

To the guy who'd been lame from birth, Peter said, "By the authority of King Jesus from Nazareth, walk!" The walking man becomes living evidence of Jesus' authority in Jerusalem to set right what's wrong.

What about healing today? Have you experienced healing, or seen friends healed?

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When God' heals, it's life-changing. But people in our culture don't respond the same way. We're aware of germs and viruses and genetic mutations. We have MRI machines and nuclear medicine. Many in our culture think healing is superstition.

In 2017, several Christian groups engaged McCrindle Research to learn about community attitudes to faith and belief in Australia. Among many questions, they asked Australians what attracted them to faith and what repelled them. They found:

The greatest attraction to investigating spirituality and religion is seeing people who live out genuine faith. Second is experiencing personal trauma or significant life change.

The top repellents (which somewhat or strongly repel) are:

1. Hearing from public figures and celebrities who are examples of that faith (75%)
2. Miraculous stories of people being healed or supernatural occurrences (65%)⁵

What do you make of that? Does it match your experience of how people respond?

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The other interesting thing about this case is that there's nothing to suggest the lame man had faith to be healed. Afterwards he was walking and leaping and praising God. Do you think we should use spiritual gifts for people who don't know God yet?

⁵ Mark McCrindle, *Faith and Belief in Australia* (Baulkham Hills, NSW: McCrindle Research, 2017), 26.

The good news of Jesus' authority (3:11-26)

Peter addresses the crowd that gathers in Solomon's Colonnade to see this man walking:

Acts 3:13-15 (my translation)

¹³ “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers has honoured his servant Jesus—the one you betrayed and disowned into Pilate's presence, when he'd judged Jesus be set free. ¹⁴ The one who was holy and right you disowned. You asked for a man who was a murderer to be given to you. ¹⁵ The source of life you killed, the one God raised from the dead as we are witnesses.”



Model of Solomon's Colonnade (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

Peter contrasts God's reigns with how the rebellion controls people:

- The rebellion against God *dishonoured, betrayed, and disowned* the one who—even by the standard of human empires—did not deserve death. The rebellion prefers Barabbas over a leader who does right. Rejecting the source of life holds us in the death's grip.
- The heavenly sovereign *honoured* his servant Jesus. God's authority is not established by giving death to his enemies, but by giving life to his Servant when the rebels tried to do away with him.

Peter's comments put his audience on the wrong side: identified with the rebellion against God. What now?

Acts 3:17-21 (NIV)

¹⁷ “Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰ and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. ²¹ Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.

Peter does not say, “God is angry with you, and someone has to pay. But it's okay: God took out his anger on Jesus at the cross. He's feeling much better now, so you're off the hook.” That's actually an ancient pagan view of God.⁶

Peter says, *you acted in ignorance*, i.e. you and your temple leaders did not know that Jesus was God's anointed ruler when you betrayed him and organized his crucifixion (verse 17). But God was not caught unaware: he had already told you his Anointed ruler would enter into Israel's suffering and death for his people (verse 18).

So your response must be to quit the rebellion and turn back to God (*repent*). God will then *wipe out your sins*, i.e. the way you dishonoured his Son, betrayed him to his

⁶ See: Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*. (London: SPCK, 2016) 125–142.

enemies, and arranged his crucifixion. By receiving (instead of rejecting) the ruler God has appointed for you, you now invite his reign, so God can *send the Messiah who has been anointed for you, namely Jesus*.

Jesus is already reigning, seated at the right hand of God in heaven, while earth is still in the process of accepting his reign. That's not complete yet, even after 2000 years. But the time will come when God restores everything in his earthly realm, just as he always promised (verse 21).

Is that how you understand Peter's good news?

Acts 4: Jesus' authority is threatening for people in power

The outlawed name (4:1-21)

Peter's message was controversial. If Jesus was God's anointed ruler for his people, what did that say about the temple leaders who arranged his crucifixion? If God overturned their judgement and raised him up after they killed him, and gave him the kingship, what happens to their authority? Their group (Sadducees) didn't even believe resurrection was possible.

Peter and John are undermining their power, turning public opinion against them:

Acts 4:1-4 (NIV)

¹ The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people.

² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴ But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

Peter doesn't back down from proclaiming Jesus' authority:

Acts 4:9-12 (NIV)

⁹ "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed,

¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

¹¹ Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the corner-stone.' [Psalm 118:22] ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

What does Peter mean by *salvation* in verse 12? Is this God's rescue of the world from the powers of evil and death, into the leadership of God's anointed? Is this how you understand salvation?

Peter's on trial. This is not a good defence if he wants to get off. Something else is happening. Holy Spirit was empowering Peter to present evidence of Jesus' authority, just like Jesus said: *The Spirit of truth ... will testify about me. And you also must testify about me* (John 15:26-27).

No one else can rescue humanity. Not the high priest. Not Caesar. There is no other name to be recognized as the God-appointed ruler and rescuer of all people (v. 12).

The Sanhedrin is shocked, but *they could not decide how to punish them because all the people were praising God for what had happened* (verse 21).

Talking to the real authority (4:22-31)

After being held by these hostile authorities, Peter, John, and their community speak to the real authority that runs the world.

Acts 4:23-31 (NIV)

²³ On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.’ [Psalm 2:1-2]

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

What can we learn about prayer here?

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They address God as the sovereign authority over the whole creation (verse 24). They recall how the rebellion against God's authority has always caused suffering for God's people. Psalm 2 asked why the nations rage and plot to take God's power into their own hands, why earth's rulers join forces against *the Lord and his anointed*, i.e. the Davidic king anointed to represent the LORD's reign on earth.

The reign of God's anointed lasted only about 400 years before Babylon invaded. They'd waited another 600 years for the LORD's anointed. When he came, the rulers conspired together to put him to death: Herod (ruler of Galilee) and Pilate (ruler of Judea). But it wasn't just the foreign powers: the Jewish leaders and high priests colluded with the rulers of the nations to get rid of God's anointed (verse 27).

The rebellion comes as no surprise to God: he'd been dealing with this for centuries (verse 28). It's no surprise to the disciples either when they are arrested by the rebels at the temple and commanded *to speak no longer to anyone in this name* (verse 17).

They'd gone to the temple to pray (3:1). Now they bypass the temple and go directly to God through the Spirit. The temple rejected God's authority, but God is enthroned over all creation.

The bottom line of their prayer is for God to:

- a) deal with those who threaten his authority in his people
- b) empower them to boldly declare what God has decreed (verse 29)
- c) affirm them as agents of the authority of his devoted servant Jesus (verse 30).

God responds. The building shakes as a sign that God is shaking things up. The prophets spoke of God shaking the powers (e.g. Haggai 2:6-7, 21), with the ultimate goal of placing his anointed in power. That's the authority they've asked to represent.

Living as the community of the king (4:32-37)

So how do they live as the kingdom of King Jesus? This is how:

Acts 4:32-37 (NIV)

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

What do you make of this view of communal ownership where *no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own?* (verse 32) Our culture says, "Possession is nine tenths of the law." Maybe possession is nine tenths of the problem?

In the Law God gave Israel, he said:

Deuteronomy 15:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ There need be no poor people among you ... ⁵ if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands.

In Christ's reign, *there were no needy people among them* (verse 34). What heaven intended for the earth (God's will) was being done on earth as it is in heaven.

How do you envision the world operating when it's implementing God's reign?

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How practical is it to live like this now, while selfish people are still accumulating wealth? Won't we be at a disadvantage if we live unselfishly? What should we do?

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Reflection

Think back over Acts 1-4. What stands out as significant for you?

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What is still unclear?

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What was their message, the gospel they proclaimed?

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What do we need to prioritize differently?

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If Jesus as our God-anointed resurrected king, how do we engage with the political rulers of our day? Is this approach (from Michael Bird and Tom Wright) helpful?

The early church inherited the anti-pagan and anti-imperial perspective of its Jewish heritage. The kingship of God, and his Messiah, was set up against the empires of the world. Jesus was crucified by a second-tier Roman official in a backwater province, killed like a lowly slave, brutally executed like a murderous brigand. But God had raised Jesus from the dead, undoing what Pilate and Herod had done to him, robbing death of its finality, and testifying to the goodness of God's power and the power of God's goodness. Death was the tyrant's ultimate weapon to terrify and enslave, yet God's power and promise of resurrection meant that the tyrant's weapon had been disarmed. Beyond that, God the Father had appointed Jesus as the Son of God in power, Messiah and Lord, and Jesus would return to judge the world with true justice. One day, empires as the world has known them will be no more.⁷

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In preparation for next week, please read Acts 5-8. Watch for what characterizes the gospel community as it spreads beyond Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria.

⁷ Michael F. Bird and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2024), 22-23.