

Living Toward a Vision: Reflections From Luke-Acts

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Fresh out of college and ninety days into my first official ministry, Sunday dinner was finished and my host confessed, “I have been walking through a dark and difficult valley, the valley of dry bones. I believe what is missing in my life is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. I read the book of Acts and see the Spirit as living and active. But I hear sermons telling me the active presence and indwelling was for the disciples then, but not for us today. What I feel most is not God’s presence but his absence. What’s wrong with me?” His question and confession was unsettling to me. The Bible book I thought I knew the most was Acts, but he knew as much or more than I did. What he hoped for and needed was beyond me. I did not know how to help. What I did know is his confession touched a nerve ending in my soul and I did not know why. Nor did I have the courage to face the something missing in me.

When individuals and churches are at a crossroad in life with God, what do they do? Where do they turn? As far back as I can remember I always had a thirst and hunger for God. I wanted to know him, but I wasn’t clear on how that happens. Somewhere on my journey toward a vision of God I moved from the question, “Where does God fit into the story of my life?” to “Where do I fit into the story of God?”¹ I met Luke the historian, traveler, and doctor, chosen and fitted by the Spirit of YHWH to tell the true story of the one and only God. He enlarged my vision of Jesus and opened my eyes to the pivotal role of the spirit of God producing the life of Jesus in his people.

Opening eyes and minds to the truth about the spirit of God does not happen overnight. It is a long and sometimes painful journey, but I discovered that the people of God need to know and have confidence in the story of God, of which they are a part. We need to see the spirit of God in the larger story of creation and salvation history. With Luke’s end in mind, I began to practice in ministry what I learned from him. How do we unlock minds and open our eyes to the grand narrative of scripture? What role does the Holy Spirit play in that process? Luke’s grand vision of the truth about God turns us upside down. Our most cherished assumptions about salvation, including the radical call to follow Jesus and the renewing power of the Spirit in Jesus and his people, are challenged.

My story with Luke-Acts begins when I was baptized at twelve in the name of Jesus, for the remission of sins, in the hope that someday, somehow, I would have a chance to go to heaven. I was raised in a Christian home and grew up in a loving but very traditional Church of Christ family. We almost never missed church—for any reason. Almost always someone in the closing prayer said the words *guide, guard and direct*—but never a word about the Holy Spirit. The flagship book that shaped many of the sermons and classes was Acts. The verse raised over the waters of my baptism, and others, was always Acts 2.38. I recall these words being said over me, “I now baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins.” Omitted was the *rest* of Acts 2.38: “and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

How can a person or church’s story end well if we are oblivious to the Spirit and his work in our salvation? How could I ever be healthy spiritually if what really matters is the right person baptizing me in the right way

1. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 533.

for the right reason? What counted is that I had obeyed the gospel—and the gospel to me was to hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized. Later I learned I had confused how one responds to the gospel with what the gospel really is. Big difference! Peter’s gospel sermon at Pentecost begins with Joel’s prophecy of the outpouring of the spirit of God. It is an announcement of good news. The Old Testament story is coming to fulfillment in the God’s messiah. Peter’s audience needed to know that the decisive moment they had been waiting for in salvation history was happening at that moment and they were living it at Pentecost.

In my junior year of college, I discovered all is not well if you leave out the third person of the Trinity and do not have healthy conversations about the spirit of God. My soul was troubled. My thirst for God was still real, but I had no joy in going to church so I found reasons to miss. The more I missed, the greater my guilt. I began to live with great fear in light of the questions of Acts 19.2–3: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? What baptism did you receive?” I questioned my baptism and salvation. I caught wind of a growing tension among the churches and my Bible professors about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

One day in chapel, two of my teachers made their case for their differences. The one thing I noticed was the difference in their tone and demeanor. One professor was testy and demeaning; the other was gentle, kind, and gracious. When the conversation was over, I had more questions than answers about my baptism, salvation, the gospel, and the Holy Spirit. With some trepidation, I asked the professor whom I perceived as gentle and kind to help me. (At that time I did not know God was showing me what the fruit of the Spirit looked like in a preacher.) He agreed and what he demonstrated in that debate he demonstrated in his life with me for the next year and a half. He walked with me, placed his story alongside mine, and challenged me to be more than I could ever imagine. As he taught me, he gave me opportunities to practice what I was learning by teaching and preaching. Surely this is the way of the Spirit in the kingdom of God. Truly it was a season of new things springing up and shaping my life. But what I learned would be tested.

Five years later, at a monthly preachers’ meeting, we each drew from a hat our subject for preaching in the round-robin gospel meeting. What I did not realize was some of the topics were chosen because of a growing dispute among us about grace and the Holy Spirit. I reached into the hat and drew the topic grace. I preached on the “incomparable riches of his grace” from Ephesians and illustrated the theme in Luke-Acts. I lived Acts 18.26, when one of the other preachers took me aside and pointed out the doctrinal errors in my sermon. The most troubling thing in my message for many of them was that we are saved through the grace of our LORD Jesus. (Obviously, I must have misread Acts 15.11.)

In the next drawing, I got the hot subject, the Holy Spirit. I thought to myself, “How can this be? Is the devil after me or is God mad at me?” So, with fear and trembling, I preached how to “be filled with the Spirit” using Ephesians and Acts. I didn’t know I was about to live the scary part of the prophecy of Joel in Acts 2.17–21 at the next preachers’ meeting. It was as if the “sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood” when one of the preachers rose up and poured out his spirit upon me that day: it wasn’t the Holy Spirit. In my anguish, I called on the name of the LORD to save me. A godly and wise man, respected by everyone in the room, rose up and spoke in my defense: “Consider very carefully what just happened. Shall we find ourselves fighting against God about the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him? If what James said is of God, and I believe it is, we will find ourselves fighting against God.” His tone and demeanor were soft-spoken and gentle but bold. His message was convincing and convicting. I saw the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in a godly man. The motion that had been made to disfellowship me died and disappeared in thin air. We all left, somewhat bruised, but still in fellowship with each other.

In reflection, I ask myself, “What did God have to do with the drawing, if anything?” I learned firsthand that preaching from Luke-Acts can be dangerous but life-changing, if you know the story you are living. I was being challenged to live what my professor and teacher, Dr. Raymond Kelcy, taught me from 2 Timothy 2.24–25a: “Remember, James, the LORD’s servant must not quarrel; instead, be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct.”

I walked away that day inspired by Luke to teach a Sunday night series called “The Spirit of God.” We lifted our sails and caught the wind of the Spirit moving us across the ages—breaking into human history, inspiring visions and dreams, and creating quite a stirring wherever the Spirit went. From the first page of our

Bibles in Genesis to the last page in Revelation, we caught a glimpse of the story we were living. We discovered there never had been a time when the spirit of YHWH had not been living and actively at work. Where the spirit of the LORD is, there is life and freedom to become the people God intended us to be. Last year I stood in that same pulpit again and, together with the congregation, we reflected upon our life together. Afterwards, a woman who was in that “Spirit of God” study 40 years ago handed me her notes and my outlines, saying, “This was life-changing for me and for us. We knew almost nothing of the Holy Spirit.” Helping people know the story they are part of is one of the great joys of ministry.

Sometimes, however, it is painful. Eight years pass. I’m at another church, in another Bible class studying Acts, and as he grew more agitated by the minute, so did I. He rose up breathing and spitting tongues of fire, waving his Bible in my face and yelling, “We do not need the Holy Spirit! What Jesus said about the Holy Spirit applied only to the apostles not us! The gift of the Holy Spirit is the Bible and it is his sword! You got the Bible—you got the Holy Ghost!” Before I could spit back tongues of fire at him, the bell rang.

Round 1 was over. Did the Spirit move in that moment to save us all from ourselves? I thought for sure that my cantankerous brother needed saving. But what I was about to learn was: so did I. There is a huge difference in teaching and preaching the Holy Spirit as a subject rather than actually being a person living and active in the story of God. I had grown to be condescending, cynical, and arrogant, rather than gracious and spirit-filled with my faith tribe. Looking back in time, I see that God in Christ was working through his Spirit to heal the brokenness in each of us and restore wholeness to all of us.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we developed a reverent but joyful intimacy with the Person who has existed in eternal holy and loving communion with the Father and the Son?² How would it not be of incalculable benefit?” Three or four more years passed as the healing, restoring work of God was at work in my life. A church that I had previously served called and asked if I would be their preacher again—but with this condition: “Do not preach on the Holy Spirit. We don’t need him now because we have the Bible, the word of God, and that is all we need.”

I think, in my years of youthful arrogance, I would have said, “That is absurd. No way will I come back and be your preacher.” But something was different. I knew more about the story I was in and living. So I asked, “What is it about the Holy Spirit that makes you fearful?” They shared their reasons and fears and said, “If we don’t talk about it [note the *it* rather than *him*], everything will be okay.” Rather than be angry, I felt compassion and a calling from God to say yes. Why? Because I knew the story they were in and living, and I knew everything would not be okay. I had been there, done that, and lived that growing up. I know this was their way of trying to ensure peace, but at what cost? What are the consequences of making the Holy Spirit a spectator in the story of God? It is true:

“Strip the Spirit of deity and you’ve just stripped Christianity of its central power. Demote the Spirit to any status other than God and ideas like indwelling, transformation, revelation, and eternal-life-here-and-now lose their meaning.”³

In Luke 12.49–50 there is a series of provocative questions. One of them is the challenge of Jesus to every generation—put two and two together, and perceive what God is doing. So I called back and said, “When I come back, what if I start by preaching from the book of Acts or maybe the gospel of Luke?” When I said the book of Acts, somehow in their minds they thought they would be safe from the Holy Spirit. Should I tell them or keep the secret to myself?

“Brothers, the word *spirit* occurs about seventy times in Luke-Acts. When I read and preach from Luke or Acts, do you want me to leave out the word *spirit*?” There was a long silence. So then I asked, “How about I read the text as is on Sunday morning, and if the sermon bothers you, what if we gather together on Wednesday evening and discuss why it was so important to God to have Luke include the words

2. Jim McGuigan, *Where the Spirit of the Lord Is . . .* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Co., 1999), xii.

3. Tim Woodroof, *A Spirit for the Rest of Us* (Abilene: Leafwood Publishers, 2009), 180.

Holy Spirit in that story?” They said yes and I said yes—and it was of incalculable benefit to their lives and mine. Luke’s story of being filled with the Spirit gave new meaning to Paul’s admonition to be filled with the Spirit. Jesus opened their eyes to the larger story they were in and they began to see where they fit, and where the Spirit fits, in God’s story.

So does the story Luke writes describe for us what life would be like without the spirit of God or with an evil spirit inside? Do we know what life could be like with the spirit of God? In the Old Testament, no one gave more thought to these questions than King David when he cried, “Do not cast me away from your presence and do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.” (Ps 51.11–12) No one lived the story more than those who were possessed with an evil spirit. No matter how hard folks tried to help, no one but Jesus could command and cast out the destructive power of demons that rule.

Do we know what happens when God pours out his spirit upon all flesh? Yes! The prophetic vision of Ezekiel 37 inspires and defies human imagination. Dry bones cannot resurrect themselves, yet they are recipients of a future they cannot create without the breath (spirit) of God. Do we see what life was like for Jesus with the spirit of God? At the river Jordan, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit meet and share a moment of joyful intimacy and loving communion. Does something like that happen when we are baptized? From that moment on in the power of the Spirit, Jesus preaches, teaches, and touches people. And they touch him because great power is coming from him. He moves across the wasteland and wilderness of human misery and corruption, confronting the powers of sin and death, bringing healing, freedom, hope, renewal, and life wherever he goes. We learn that one can be filled with the Spirit, but still struggle in Gethsemane with his destiny. Disappointment and troubling questions can still unsettle and frighten. And we learn that telling people to get their act together was precisely what they could not do without Jesus. And when we move from the gospel of Luke to the book of Acts something amazing happens. The people of God become recipients of a future, promised by God long ago, that they could not create or make happen without the Spirit.

What a masterpiece Luke has written unlocking for us the grand narrative of Scripture! From the very first chapter of the gospel of Luke to the last chapter in Acts, Luke gives special emphasis to the Holy Spirit. His powerful presence is necessary to the story we live as God’s people. When Jesus’ enemies question who he is and the Spirit that is in him, he says, “If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” (Luke 11.20) Is the finger of God his spirit? Putting the two volumes together, Luke references the Spirit seventy-one times. The phrase filled with the Spirit appears only ten times in the New Testament: three times in Luke, six times in Acts, and one time in Ephesians. Luke does not make the Holy Spirit the centerpiece, but he does open our eyes to the revealing work of God the Father, the redeeming work of God the Son, and the transforming work of God the Spirit.

Here’s what I am suggesting: Enlarge people’s view of God and they will see the spirit of God intervening, interacting, and empowering his people. They will know the story of the Spirit they are living. As in the beginning of creation, he is hovering over, sustaining, and bringing renewal to our broken worlds. When individuals and churches are at a crossroad in life with God, no one does better than Luke in interpreting the mystery, the message, the ministry, and mission of God in our salvation story. Encourage them to read Luke-Acts as a single story. It was almost twelve years after my baptism, while reading Acts, that God opened my eyes to these words, “In my former book.” Carl R. Holladay taught me to read the gospel of Luke as the story of God continued in Jesus and to read the book of Acts as the story of Jesus continued in the church. It was life-changing to sit and read in one sitting the two volumes together.

Even now my present church family is in the beginnings of hearing and reading the great themes of Luke that shape our lives and destinies. At the same time the spirit of God is not only pointing us to Jesus, but he is leading us more fully into what God has said and done for us in King Jesus. Three years ago I laid out a path for my church family to read the gospel of Luke in one month and the book of Acts in the next month. For those who did, I created a forum for them to reflect with me upon how Luke’s writing shaped their sense of knowing, being, doing, and becoming. It was of incalculable benefit. How important is it to the mission of God for the people of God to know and believe the story they are a part of? For some, it was the

first time they saw the central themes and events in the life of Jesus—his identity and mission; his ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension; his gifts to us, the Holy Spirit and a new community called the church—as the life pillars upon which all human hope stands, and all human needs are met. This is the good news of the kingdom of God.

I now know that what Luke set out to accomplish is true: People who know and believe the story they are living in will grow a great faith and love for God as well as a passion to make him known. I am also grateful to Christopher J. H. Wright for helping me think more about the mission of God and what it means to be a “people who know the story they are a part of.”⁴ I have lived Luke’s story with students as a campus minister, with churches as a preacher and an elder in search of a vision, and with inmates and their families in search of redemption and restoration. Rather than minimize or dismiss the Holy Spirit, let us see how his presence and power shapes the life of Jesus, and later the life of God’s people. So what’s the next step in our journey?

My story is still being written. The human cry for the something that is missing lives on. This cry also lives in my past memories with others who lived the cry with me. “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” (Ps 63.1) Disciples of Jesus today still ask, “LORD, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Their kingdom vision is a promised land and restored Israel; Jesus’ kingdom vision is a new creation and restored humanity. Jesus appears in the first nine verses of Acts then ascends, disappearing out of human sight. But the rest of the story announces him as king and lord over all, ruling our world and living in our hearts. In the words of N. T. Wright, “the mysterious presence of Jesus haunts the whole story.”⁵ It’s all about Jesus, but he is now living in his body, the church, as a light to the nations, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. (Acts 13.47–48) Where Jesus is, there the Spirit lives empowering and leading God’s people into the kingdom vision of God. The poor become rich, the oppressed are set free, the blind see and the broken are healed. Luke’s narrative is a stunning and staggering vision—interpreting the past, giving guidance for the present, and inspiring hope for the future.

In the center of the book of Isaiah is an amazing word from God and a penetrating question, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isa 43.19). Looking through the lens of Luke, what do we perceive the new thing to be? I see dimly, but what I do see, I want to live toward that vision. I see our God and King restoring his kingdom and gathering his sons and daughters from every tribe and nation, fulfilling a promise he made long ago to Abraham. I see God centering our lives in the person of Jesus and energizing us with his Holy Spirit. I see and hear from the four corners of the earth, the wind of the Spirit—the very breath of God—calling us to come and live his story. I see him coming to us and making us his dwelling. I see him sending us and placing in our hearts the transforming message God sent for everyone, “Good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is LORD of all.” Now we journey toward our destiny as the body of Christ filled with the Holy Spirit, demonstrating to the world the power of God’s *shalom*, at one with him and each other forever. What I do see brings great joy and hope.

“The call to faith is a call to pray. Those who believe in God’s power are given the privilege of calling that power into their lives through prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Let’s call him up and pray: “Sovereign LORD, open our eyes to perceive what you are doing in the present, and help us become a people who know the story we are a part of. Empower us with your spirit to live always toward a vision—not just any vision, but your vision of life with you. Amen! Come, LORD Jesus!”

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4. Wright, 35–47.

5. N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 2.

6. Tony Ash, *Directions for Disciples* (Abilene, TX: Hillcrest Publishing 2002), 77.