

Commissions

Jesus commissioned His followers to proclaim the gospel.

Growing up in a rural area in the South, I was never far from large, open fields of cotton, corn, soybeans, or other commercial crops. I learned early on that farming is hard work. Farmers often have to toil from sunrise to sunset. The land has to be made ready. Then comes planting, followed by cultivating the fields to protect the young plants from weeds, bugs, and other dangers. Even with all of that work, however, farmers know that other factors beyond their control can spell the difference between a disaster and a bountiful harvest. So they hope for—many pray for—favorable temperatures and the right amounts of rain. If all of those factors are optimum, then the work of the harvest commences. Crops have to be gathered and stored or transported to market and sold. Shortly thereafter, the cycle of hard work begins again.

Jesus grew up in the similarly work-intensive setting of the carpentry business. Yet, He too was never far from scenes of agriculture. He knew what was required to cultivate and harvest fields of grain. One of the most memorable parables He taught was about sowing and reaping (see Luke 8:4-15). The point Jesus made with the parable was to reveal the way God's kingdom on earth would work when the gospel message was proclaimed.

This truth was never more important for the disciples to grasp than after Jesus' death and resurrection. They would be commissioned as witnesses to take the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to all the nations of the world—a monumental mission they could never accomplish without empowerment by the Holy Spirit. As the risen Lord met with His disciples just prior to His ascension, He promised them that very empowerment was on the way. And as they had learned in the parable of the sower, when they went about broadcasting the seed of the gospel message, the Spirit of God would give the harvest of growth—sometimes steady, at other times overwhelmingly bountiful.

Until Jesus returns, the church continues to operate under Jesus' gospel commission. This session thus focuses on Luke's account of Jesus' final resurrection appearance to His disciples before the ascension. We will be challenged as believers to take up the vital (and hard) work of being witnesses at home, in our communities, and to the ends of the earth.

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

LUKE 24:36-53

In Luke 24:36-43, Luke reported that the resurrected Jesus appeared to His gathered disciples following the encounter with the two followers going to Emmaus. Jesus greeted the disciples; but they became frightened, thinking that He was a ghost. He calmed their fears and showed them the scars of His crucifixion, inviting them to touch Him to confirm His flesh-and-blood presence. To further confirm His bodily resurrection, Jesus asked for some food, eating a piece of broiled fish in their presence.

Jesus then reminded the group of disciples about what He had taught them prior to the crucifixion and had emphasized to the two followers at Emmaus (24:44-49). That is, He had fulfilled all that the Old Testament Scriptures prophesied concerning the Messiah. His mission as the Messiah had been to suffer, die, and rise from the dead on the third day. Consequently, the powerful message of repentance for forgiveness of sins could now be proclaimed to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. The disciples were to wait in Jerusalem until the promised Holy Spirit empowered them as witnesses of these things.

Luke concluded his Gospel account with a description of Jesus' ascension into heaven (24:50-53). After the event, the joyful disciples returned to Jerusalem to await their empowerment. They gathered daily in the temple precincts to praise God.

ASSURES (Luke 24:36-43)

Luke concluded his Gospel with a resurrection appearance of Jesus to His disciples that included a version of the Great Commission. Jesus was preparing His disciples for their great task of declaring the gospel to the nations. Before they could begin, they needed assurance of Jesus' resurrection, understanding of His completed mission, and power to proclaim it to a lost world.

VERSE 36

As they were saying these things, he himself stood in their midst. He said to them, "Peace to you!"

The phrase **as they were saying these things** refers to the conversation between the two followers from Emmaus and the group of disciples (including the apostles) still gathered in Jerusalem. The two followers

presumably told about their recent encounter with the risen Lord. The group excitedly spoke of their own confirmation of the resurrection, telling of the Lord's appearance to Simon Peter (see 24:33-34). Neither Luke nor any of the other Gospel writers included all of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. (Compare Paul's list of appearances in 1 Cor. 15:5-8.) However, with the note that Jesus had appeared to Peter, Luke acknowledged there were in fact other appearances he did not fully describe in his Gospel. That said, the appearance of the risen Lord to His disciples described in Luke 24:36-49 probably has a briefer parallel version in John 20:19-23. In that passage, John noted that the disciples were inside a room with the doors locked for fear of the Jews (see 20:19). The locked door was no hindrance to the resurrected Lord.

The description that Jesus simply **stood in their midst** suggests a supernatural entrance. Although Jesus' resurrection body could be seen and touched like any human body—as was later demonstrated—it also had new and extraordinary capabilities. That Jesus simply appeared in the locked room emphasizes that the resurrection overcomes all physical limitations and hindrances. Jesus' resurrection was not simply a resuscitation of the physical body but a radical transformation into a new body.

Jesus immediately spoke a word of greeting designed to give assurance: **Peace to you!** Luke's Gospel emphasizes a noticeable connection between salvation and God-given peace (see 1:79; 2:14; 7:50; 8:48; 19:38,42). God's peace is far more than the absence of conflict. It is right standing with God brought about by forgiveness and reconciliation through Jesus Christ (see Rom. 5:1). Moreover, it gives assurance that God will take care of His children in all circumstances (see John 14:27).

VERSE 37

But they were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.

Despite Jesus' calm word of greeting, the disciples **were startled and terrified**. This reaction might seem odd, given that they had just been confirming to one another the fact of His resurrection. Peter had already seen the risen Lord, as had the two followers from Emmaus. But before we judge the disciples too harshly for their reaction, we should remember that we might have had the same response. How often have a group of believers in our churches prayed intently for the Lord to "show up" in a certain way, then reacted with surprise and fear when He did?

The Gospels all agree that the early disciples struggled initially with the reality of the resurrection—despite the growing evidence. Moreover, the disciples already were anxious enough about the Jewish leaders' possible

backlash against them that they locked the door to the room. When Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst, the disciples **thought they were seeing a ghost**. The word translated *ghost* is the Greek term (*pneuma* [NYOO mah]) that can also mean “wind” or “spirit.” The reality of Jesus’ bodily resurrection was difficult for them to grasp, especially in that they were aware of the abuse His physical body endured before and during His crucifixion. Yet, the resurrection body of Jesus assured them—as it assures believers today—that no matter how physically crushed the human body may be at death, the Father can and does give us a perfect resurrection body after death.

VERSE 38

“Why are you troubled?” he asked them. “And why do doubts arise in your hearts?”

Jesus asked the disciples two questions related to their terrified reaction. He first asked **why** they were **troubled**. The Greek verb rendered *troubled* was used often to describe a human response to supernatural phenomena (see Matt. 14:26; Luke 1:12). The disciples were terrified because the supernatural event was difficult to explain, and their natural response was fear of the unknown. However, John used this verb in a different sense to describe Jesus’ state of mind in anticipation of the cross (see John 12:27; 13:21). Jesus’ death on the cross and the promise of salvation for those who believe in Him removes the need to ever feel troubled about the prospect of death (see John 14:1).

In His second question to the disciples, Jesus asked, **“Why do doubts arise in your hearts?”** The *doubts* He referred to had to do with the resurrection. The disciples were still struggling with the reality of whether Jesus was raised from the dead. They thought His appearance was a ghost or apparition. Jesus had provided more than sufficient preparation for their understanding of His resurrection, but they still doubted. As long as the disciples had doubts about the resurrection, they would be unable to fulfill their mission of declaring the gospel to the nations. Jesus was assuring them of His resurrection to prepare them for carrying on His mission.

VERSES 39-40

Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself! Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” Having said this, he showed them his hands and feet.

To assure them His body was real, Jesus urged His followers to **look at** (“behold,” KJV; “see,” ESV) His hands and feet. The Greek word rendered *look*

at literally means “to stare at”—that is, to observe something closely until it is clearly understood. In John 20:20, that Scripture specifies that Jesus “showed [the disciples] his hands and his side.” Luke specified that **he showed them his hands and his feet**. In this way Jesus assured His disciples that He was the same Jesus Christ who three days earlier had been crucified on the cross and buried in the tomb. He answered their doubts by pointing out that **a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have**.

VERSES 41-43

But while they still were amazed and in disbelief because of their joy, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” So they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Despite overwhelming proof from hearing Jesus’ voice as well as observing and touching Him, the disciples **were amazed and in disbelief**. Interestingly, this was not unbelief but *disbelief* attributed to **their joy**. In other words, this was a case of being overjoyed because something seemed almost too good to be real. As we might say today, the disciples could hardly believe their eyes!

Ever patient with His followers, Jesus continued to offer additional proof that He was truly alive again after being dead and in His actual flesh-and-bones body, albeit a supernaturally unconstrained, resurrection body. He asked the disciples if they had **anything ... to eat**. When they presented Him with **a piece of broiled fish**, Jesus **took it and ate it in their presence**. No ghost or hallucination would (or could) actually partake of food the disciples had prepared and had on hand in the room.

Jesus’ patient efforts to demonstrate the reality of His resurrection to the disciples were crucial. The resurrection is the basis of Christian hope and the indispensable foundation of the gospel (see 1 Cor. 15:16-17). We can be forever grateful that the Lord patiently convinces skeptics—then and now—of the truth of the resurrection.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Resurrection” on pages 1348–1349 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How was Jesus’ resurrection body different from His body before death? How was it the same? How does the promise of a resurrection body in the future impact your life now?

OPENS (Luke 24:44-46)

Jesus opened the minds of His followers so they could understand the Scriptures about Him that He had taught. He particularly emphasized that He, as the Messiah, would suffer death and yet be raised on the third day.

VERSE 44

He told them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

When Jesus referenced the **words that I spoke to you while I was still with you**, He was specifically pointing to the predictions He had made concerning His suffering, death, and resurrection (see Luke 9:22,44; 17:25; 18:31-33; 22:37). Jesus knew what was going to happen to Him, not only as a matter of His divine omniscience but also because the Scriptures (specifically the Old Testament at this time) revealed these truths. Here Jesus referred to the Scriptures in terms of **the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms**. While the disciples would have been familiar with the twofold description of the Scriptures as the Law and the Prophets, Jesus likely added the specific reference to *the Psalms* because they contained numerous prophecies related to the Messiah in them.

The phrase **must be fulfilled** is significant. This phrase demonstrated Jesus’ teaching that the Old Testament was (and is) true and authoritative Scripture for His followers. Prophecies are promises made by God concerning future events. God sovereignly controls history, and He will fulfill every promise that He has made in the Scriptures.

VERSE 45

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

Jesus next **opened** the disciples’ **minds to understand the Scriptures**. This is similar to what Jesus did for the two followers on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:27). The experience would again be amazing as the Living Word explained the meaning of the written Word of God for His people. Jesus revealed truth to them on both an intellectual and spiritual level. Belief in Jesus was (and is) essential to understanding the truth of God because it must be spiritually discerned. As mentioned in the previous session, the same opportunity for spiritual instruction is available today to believers through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Jesus had told His disciples that they would receive additional instruction in the truth after His departure; that instruction would come through the Holy Spirit (see John 16:13).

VERSE 46

He also said to them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead the third day,

Jesus explained how the Old Testament prophecies revealed that **the Messiah** would **suffer and rise from the dead the third day**. Old Testament passages that predict the suffering of the Messiah include Psalm 22:1 and Isaiah 53:1-12. The resurrection of the Messiah is prophesied in passages such as Psalm 16:10.

The failure of first-century Jewish leaders to recognize these passages and their implications speaks to their lack of understanding concerning the role of the Messiah as God’s provision as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. The failure to understand the coming resurrection demonstrated a lack of comprehension that the Messiah would be both fully human and fully divine. On the other hand, some Jewish leaders properly understood at least one Old Testament prophecy—the place (Bethlehem) where the messianic king would be born (see Matt. 2:5-6).

The ignorance of the Scriptures’ prophecies concerning the Messiah’s suffering, death, and resurrection probably related to the Jewish hope for a political messiah who would restore the nation of Israel to its former independence and prosperity. They failed to understand that the need for spiritual deliverance was more important than physical deliverance from foreign enemies.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Revelation of God” on pages 1351–1353 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What were the purposes of Old Testament prophecies that revealed the character and mission of the Messiah? How did Jesus revolutionize an understanding of Old Testament messianic prophecies?

SENDS (Luke 24:47-49)

In this section, we see Luke’s account of the Great Commission. The proof of Jesus’ resurrection was necessary for the disciples to have the boldness and understanding to proclaim the gospel without fear of opposition, attempts to distort the message, and even persecution. The command by Jesus to preach the gospel to the nations was a fitting conclusion to Luke’s Gospel and pointed to the story of the birth and growth of the church in the Book of Acts.

VERSE 47

and repentance for forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

The central message of the gospel that Jesus commanded His disciples to proclaim was **repentance for forgiveness of sins**. Luke used the language of repentance and forgiveness in describing the preaching of John the Baptist (see Luke 3:3). At the start of His ministry, Jesus described His own mission as one of calling “sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). The Greek term translated *repentance* literally refers to a change of mind. It is sometimes described as a wholesale change of direction in one’s life—from a change of attitude and thinking to a new behavior or lifestyle. Theologically, repentance refers to turning away from sin and turning to God in faith, resulting in obedience to His will and ways. Repentance is thus an act of the will and never simply an emotional feeling. Salvation involves a transformation of one’s heart and devotion to God. Those who are saved demonstrate the fruit of repentance and forgiveness through obedience to God’s will (see Luke 3:8).

Jesus then challenged His disciples to proclaim the gospel message of forgiveness **in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem** (compare Matt. 28:19-20). The inclusion of Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation was a radical idea to Jews who believed only Israel would benefit from the Messiah’s coming. Despite the clarity of Jesus’ statement to His disciples at this moment, Peter would later need a dramatic vision to convince him that God accepted Gentiles through faith in Christ (see Acts 10:9-16,34-35).

VERSE 48

You are witnesses of these things.

Jesus authorized His disciples to share the meaning of the cross and the fact of the resurrection as **witnesses of these things**. Those who first proclaimed the gospel were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. The Greek word translated *witnesses* is the basis for the English word *martyr*. This is a testament to the tragic fact that throughout the centuries far too many believers have been killed for their devotion to Christ.

On the other hand, the reality of Christian martyrdom is also a testament to the bold nature of saving faith. Jesus warned that following Him was costly; it requires denying self and taking up one’s cross (see Luke 9:23). Thankfully, the apostle John saw in his vision of the end times that Christian martyrs will never be disappointed that they remained faithful unto death. John saw the souls of Christian martyrs resting beneath the altar and given a white robe of purity and victory (see Rev. 6:9-11). May the Lord grant all of us as believers the boldness to be His faithful witnesses whatever the cost!

VERSE 49

And look, I am sending you what my Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high.”

One more event was necessary before the disciples could begin fulfilling the commission to carry the gospel to the nations. The disciples needed the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus confirmed that He would soon send to the disciples the One whom the **Father** had **promised**. The phrase **I am sending** is in a tense that emphasizes future certainty. The disciples need not fret or doubt the promise even though some time would pass between the Lord’s ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Delay must not give rise to doubt or distrust.

Jesus instructed the disciples to **stay in the city** (Jerusalem) **until** they were **empowered from on high**. The disciples were eyewitnesses of the risen Christ. They understood the spiritual truths associated with His substitutionary death on the cross. Yet, they would not be effective in fulfilling the mission of taking the gospel to the nations without the Holy Spirit’s presence and empowerment. The necessity of the Holy Spirit in witnessing to others demonstrates that evangelism can only succeed with divine power. Salvation is not merely the presentation of information that leads to a purely intellectual decision. Salvation involves the conviction of sin and acceptance of Jesus as God’s only provision for sin. It is the regeneration from spiritual death to spiritual life. Only God can accomplish such a miracle!

The power that Jesus promised from the Holy Spirit affects the witness as well as the person who hears the gospel. The witness is equipped and emboldened to reveal the truth of the gospel. Such was the case in Acts 2:13-37 when Simon Peter—the same disciple who out of fear denied knowing Jesus three times—stood up and proclaimed the gospel to the citizens of Jerusalem with such clarity and power that the hearers were cut to the heart and cried out to know how to be saved. And how did Peter answer the crowd? He said, “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). May we carry on the gospel mission today with equal boldness!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Mission(s)” on pages 1114–1116 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is the mission that Jesus gave to His disciples? How are you fulfilling the Great Commission as a disciple of Jesus Christ?