

ACTS
for
EVERYONE

PART 1

CHAPTERS 1-12

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

Romans for Everyone, Part 2

1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

To
John Pritchard and Mark Bryant
Fellow workers for the kingdom of God

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*’, he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

The book of Acts, which I quoted a moment ago, is full of the energy and excitement of the early Christians as they found God doing new things all over the place and learned to take the **good news** of Jesus around the world. It's also full of the puzzles and problems that churches faced then and face today – crises over leadership, money, ethnic divisions, theology and ethics, not to mention serious clashes with political and religious authorities. It's comforting to know that 'normal church life', even in the time of the first apostles, was neither trouble-free nor plain sailing, just as it's encouraging to know that even in the midst of all their difficulties the early church was able to take the gospel forward in such dynamic ways. Actually, 'plain sailing' reminds us that this is the book where more journeys take place, including several across the sea, than anywhere else in the Bible – with the last journey, in particular, including a terrific storm and a dramatic shipwreck. There isn't a dull page in Acts. But, equally importantly, the whole book reminds us that whatever 'journey' we are making, in our own lives, our spirituality, our following of Jesus and our work for his kingdom, his spirit will guide us too, and make us fruitful in his service. So here it is: Acts for everyone!

MAPS

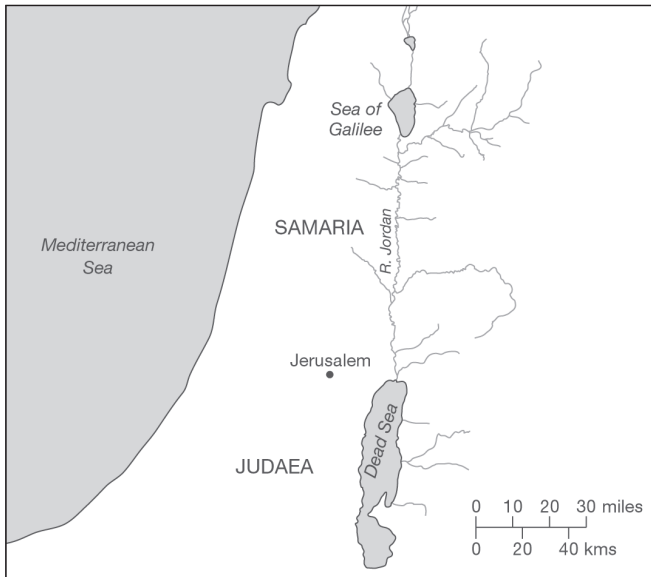
Map 1



The Eastern Mediterranean in the First Century AD



Map 2



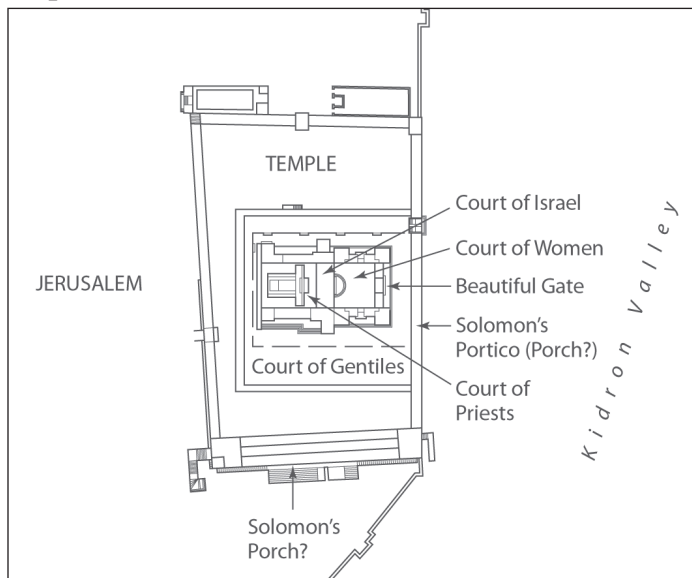
Acts 1.6-8

Map 3



Acts 2.5-13

Map 4



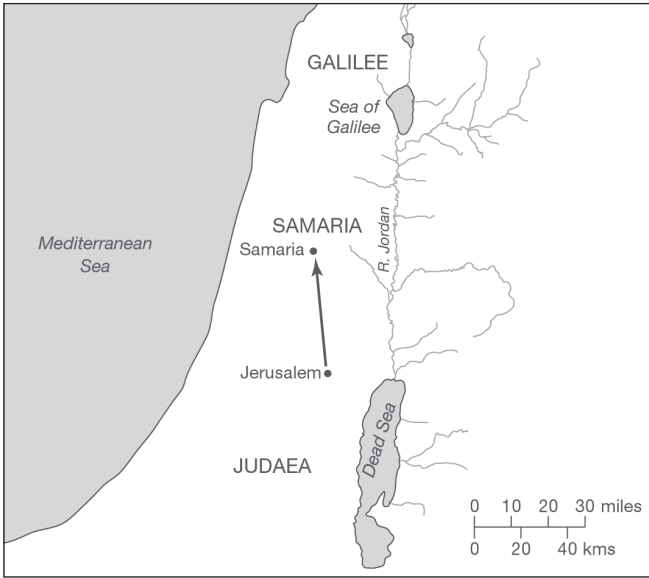
Acts 3.1-10, 11-16

Map 5



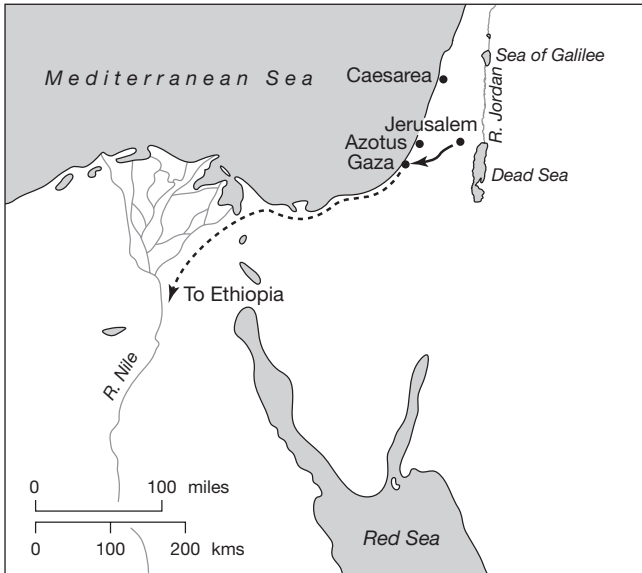
Acts 6.9

Map 6



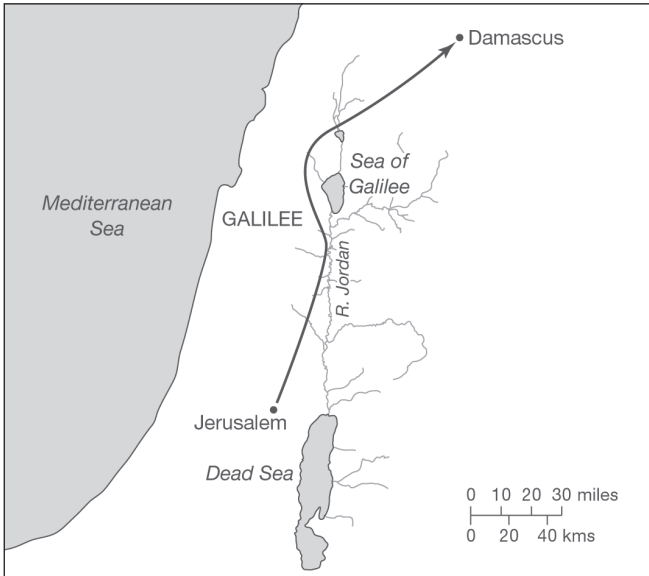
Acts 8.4–25

Map 7



Acts 8.26–40

Map 8



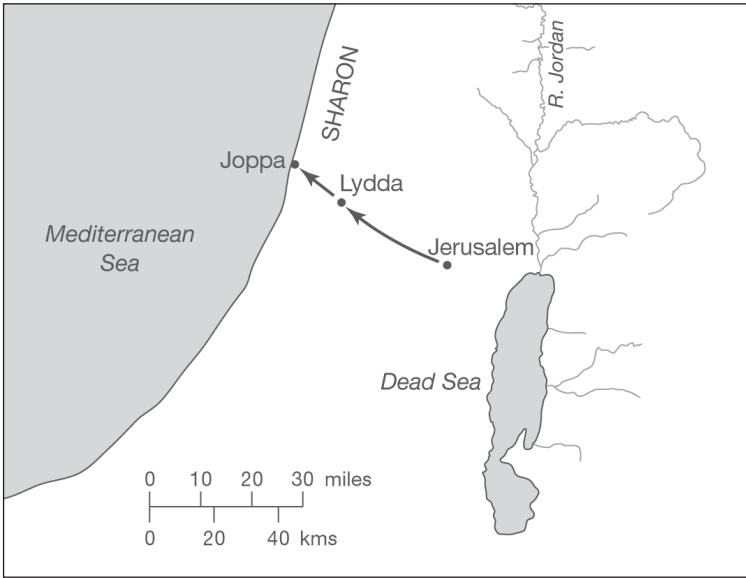
Acts 9.1-9

Map 9



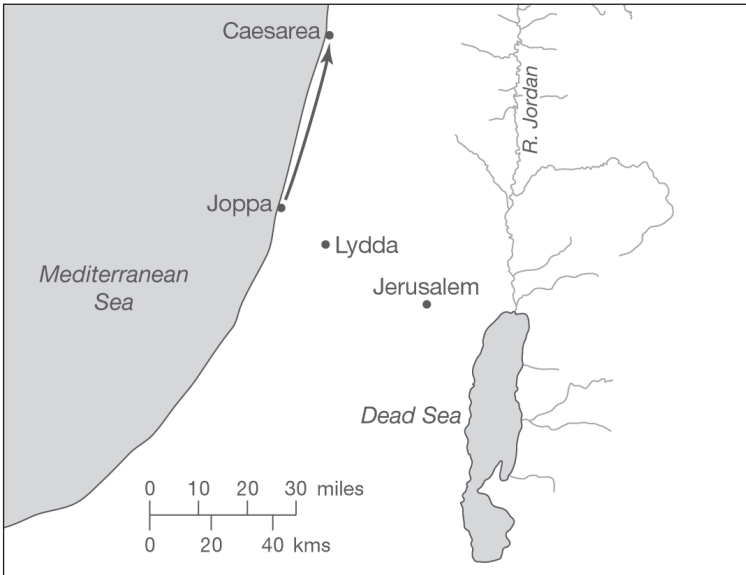
Acts 9.19b-26, 30

Map 10



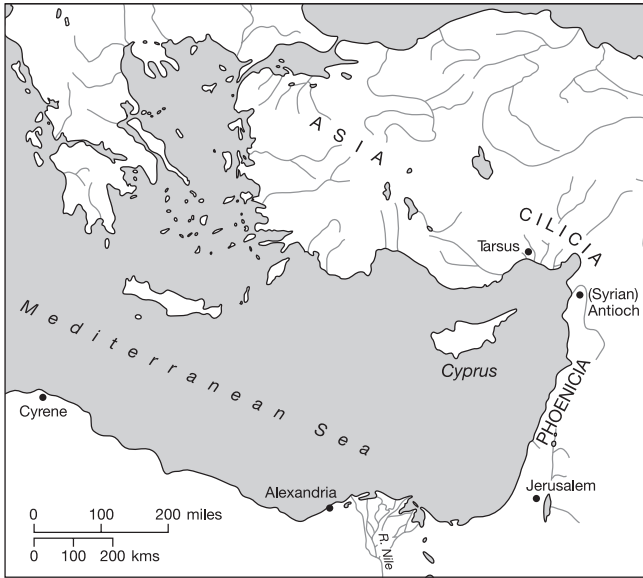
Acts 9.32, 35, 36

Map 11



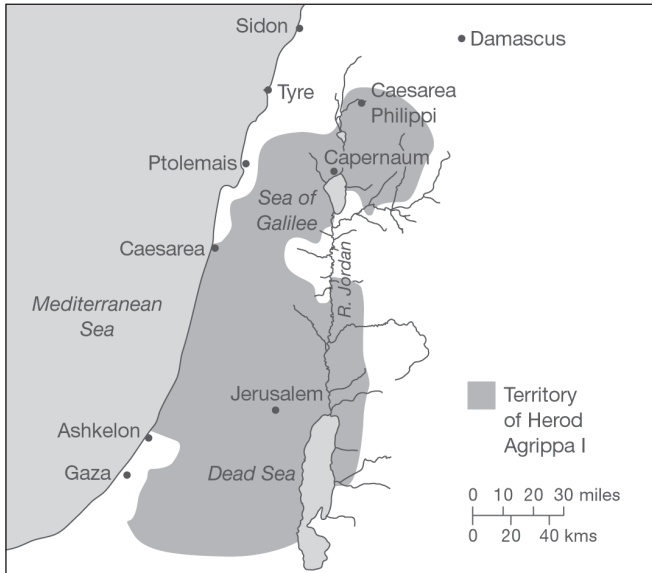
Acts 10.1-16

Map 12



Acts 11.19–30

Map 13



Acts 12.20–25

ACTS 1.1-5

Here Comes the Sequel!

¹Dear Theophilus,

The previous book which I wrote was about everything Jesus began to do and teach. ²I took the story as far as the day when he was taken up, once he had given instructions through the holy spirit to his chosen apostles.

³He showed himself to them alive, after his suffering, by many proofs. He was seen by them for forty days, during which he spoke about God's kingdom. ⁴As they were having a meal together, he told them not to go away from Jerusalem, but to wait, as he put it, 'for the father's promise, which I was telling you about earlier. ⁵John baptized with water, you see; but in a few days from now you will be baptized with the holy spirit.'

The English playwright Alan Bennett wrote a famous play about the equally famous madness of a well-known king. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, England had four kings in succession all called 'George', and the third of them – George III, in other words – suffered for a fair amount of his reign from some kind of mental illness, probably porphyria. So Bennett called his play *The Madness of George III*.

But when they came to make a movie of the play, the movie-makers faced a problem. Moviegoers were used to sequels: *Spiderman II*, *Superman III*, and so on. A title like that meant that there had been an earlier film of the same name. So they were worried that if people saw a title like *The Madness of George III* they would assume they had missed the first two films in the sequence – and perhaps they wouldn't go to see what they took to be the third. So the filmmakers just called the movie *The Madness of King George*.

The opening paragraph of the book we are now going to read declares, clearly and solidly, that, unlike Bennett's play and film, it is indeed a sequel. There has been a previous book, and this one continues the story. In fact, it even suggests a kind of title: *The Deeds and Teaching of King Jesus II* – not *Jesus the Second*, of course, because there is only one King Jesus, but the second book about what the one and only Jesus did and taught.

At first sight, this is a strange title, since Jesus himself only appears on stage, as it were, during the first nine verses of this first chapter. But Luke, whose first volume we know as the **gospel** which bears his name, is telling us with his opening sentence one of the most important things about the whole book which is now beginning. *It is all about what Jesus is continuing to do and to teach.* The mysterious

presence of Jesus haunts the whole story. He is announced as King and Lord, not as an increasingly distant memory but as a living and powerful reality, a person who can be known and loved, obeyed and followed, a person who continues to act within the real world. That, Luke is telling us, is what this book is going to be all about. We call it ‘The Acts of the Apostles’, but in truth we should really think of it as ‘The Acts of Jesus (II)’.

Luke is already warning us, then, that this is an unusual type of book. At one level, it shares a good deal with some of the literature of the day. It has quite a lot in common, for instance, with the work of the great first-century Jewish historian Josephus. Some of the New Testament writers are cheerfully innocent of any pretensions to literary style, but Luke knows what he’s doing with his language, with the structure of the book, and with his entire presentation in his pair of volumes. He is not, like Mark, aiming for the first-century equivalent of the airport bookstall. He is aiming for what today we call ‘the intelligent reader’. One would expect to see a review of this book, not necessarily in the tabloid newspapers, but in *The Times Literary Supplement* or *The New York Review of Books*. Not that Luke is snooty or highfalutin. He doesn’t talk down to his readers; his book is such a page-turner that anyone who enjoys a good story will be drawn along with excitement the whole way – even if he then leaves them with something of a puzzle at the end, which corresponds as we shall see to the puzzle we’ve just encountered at the beginning . . .

But the unusual nature of the book is that we are supposed (so Luke is telling us) to read it on at least two levels. At one level, it is of course the story of the early church – told very selectively, of course, like all history (if you wrote down every single thing that happened in a single day you would already fill a library), and told with an eye, as we shall see, to particular concerns and interests. But Luke wants us to read it, all the way through, as a book about Jesus, a book indeed with Jesus as the principal actor, rather like some of the plays by another great playwright of recent years, Samuel Beckett, where the action on stage sometimes crucially depends on a person whom the audience never actually sees.

If this is so, one of the results is that there is a third level as well on which Luke wants us to read his work. *This is a play in which we are invited to become actors ourselves*. The stage opens up and we discover we’re in the middle of the action. That is part of the point of the ‘ending’ which isn’t really an ending: the story continues, and we are part of it! What we are reading, from this moment on, is the opening scene, or set of scenes, in a play whose action we ourselves are called to continue. As they say, it ain’t over yet. We need to refresh our minds as to

how the opening scenes worked so that we can play our parts properly, ‘in character’, in line with the inner nature of the unfolding drama.

As we do so, Luke is keen that we latch on to two things which are fundamental to his whole book and indeed his whole view of the world. First, it is all based on the resurrection of Jesus. In the last chapter of his gospel, Luke described some of the scenes in which Jesus met his followers after being raised from the dead: it really was him, he really was alive, richly alive, in a transformed body that could eat and drink as well as walk and talk, but which seemed to have . . . some different properties. His body could, for instance, appear and disappear, and come and go through locked doors.

To us, that sounds as if he was a ghost, someone less than properly embodied. What Luke and the other writers who describe the risen body of Jesus are saying, rather, is that Jesus is *more* than ordinarily embodied, not less. His transformed body is now the beginning of God’s new creation; and in God’s new creation, as we know from passages like Revelation 21 and Ephesians 1, **heaven** and earth will come together in a new way. Jesus’ risen body is the beginning of that, the beginning of a heavenly reality which is fully at home on, and in, this physical world (‘earth’), and the beginning of a transformed physical world which is fully at home in God’s sphere (‘heaven’). This, indeed, will help us in the next scene. But the point of the resurrection itself is that without it there is no gospel, no *Deeds and Teachings of King Jesus II*. There would only be the sad and glorious memory of a great, but failed, teacher and would-be **Messiah**. The resurrection of the Jesus who died under the weight of the world’s evil is the foundation of the new world, God’s new world, whose opening scenes Luke is describing.

The second thing he wants us to latch onto, indeed is so eager to get to that he puts it here, right up front, is the presence and power of the **holy spirit**. He will have much more to say about this in due course, but already here he insists that the spirit is present when Jesus is teaching his followers about what is to come and, above all, that they are about to discover the spirit as a new and powerful reality in their own lives. Jesus, Luke says, pointed them back to the beginning of his own **kingdom**-work, the time when **John the Baptist** summoned all Israel to a **baptism of repentance** and renewal. It’s going to be like that, he said, only much more so. Instead of being plunged into water, you’ll be plunged into the holy spirit. Instead of a renewal which would form them as the restored Israel, waiting for God to become their king as so many Jews of the day had hoped, they would experience a renewal which would form them as the restored humanity, celebrating the fact that God was becoming king of the whole world, *and knowing that as a reality inside their own selves*. That is the very heart of the spirituality,

and indeed the theology, of ‘The Acts of the Apostles.’ God is at work to do a new thing in the whole world. And it catches up, within its powerful movement, every child, woman and man who comes within its orbit.

Jesus told his followers to wait for this to happen before they tried to do anything too much. That is important advice. Far too often, to this day, people blunder ahead, assuming that if they know a little about Jesus, and about God’s kingdom, they can just go off and put things into action in whatever way occurs to them. Luke would tell us to wait: to pray for the presence and power of the holy spirit, and to find our calling and our energy from that source. If this is a play in which we are all called to take different parts, it is a play in which the only true acting is what happens when the spirit of the playwright himself takes charge.

ACTS 1.6–8

When, What and How? (See map 2, page xvi.)

‘So when the apostles came together, they put this question to Jesus. ‘Master,’ they said, ‘is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’

⁷‘It’s not your business to know about times and dates,’ he replied. ‘The father has placed all that under his own direct authority.’⁸‘What will happen, though, is that you will receive power when the holy spirit comes upon you. Then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth.’

‘Are we nearly there yet?’

Any parent who has been on a car journey with small children will know the question – and the tone of voice in which it’s usually asked. Sometimes the child is so eager (or so bored), so quickly, that the question gets asked before you have even left your own street.

And of course it all depends what you mean by ‘nearly’. If I drive from my home in the north of England all the way to London, I could reasonably say that I was ‘nearly’ there when we had got to within an hour of the capital. But if I am driving from my home to the town where my parents live, which takes about an hour, I would only say I was ‘nearly’ there when I was a few minutes away. It’s all relative.

Jesus must have had similar reflections when faced with the question the **apostles** were eager to ask him. ‘Apostle’, by the way, is one of the words Luke regularly uses to describe the **Twelve** – or, as they now were, the Eleven, following Judas’ death – whom Jesus had chosen as special witnesses. The reason why there were twelve of them is obvious

to anyone who understands Jewish culture and history. There had been twelve tribes of Israel, and Jesus was signalling, in his choice of twelve close followers to be around him, that God had called him to renew and restore the people of Israel. So it isn't surprising that they of all people were keen to ask the question, 'Are we nearly there yet? Is this the time? Is it going to happen at last?'

They must, after all, have been very puzzled. Nothing that had happened in the previous few weeks had corresponded at all to their game plan. As far as they were concerned, when Jesus called them and taught them in Galilee during the previous three years or so, they were signing on for some kind of Jewish renewal movement. They believed that God had appointed Jesus to be the true King of Israel, even though most of their contemporaries were still (to say the least) suspicious of him. They had seen Jesus rather like King David in the Old Testament, who for several years was a kind of king-in-waiting, standing in the wings with a ragtag group of followers wondering when their turn would come. Jesus' motley band of followers had imagined that he would be king in some quite ordinary sense, which was why some of them had asked if they could have the top jobs in his government. Jesus, with his extraordinary healing power and visionary teaching, would rule in Jerusalem, and would restore God's people Israel.

The result of this, as many Jews of the time believed, was that, when God restored Israel, the whole world would be turned around at last. Israel would be the top nation, ruling over the rest of the world. That's what had been promised, more or less, in the Psalms (look at Psalm 72, or Psalm 89) and the prophets (read Isaiah 40–55). Of course, the nations of the world would then be judged for their wickedness. But there might also be the possibility that the blessing God gave to Israel would come at last upon the whole creation.

All of this could be summed up in the phrase: 'restore the kingdom to Israel'. That's what they were hoping for, and the question was natural: 'Are we nearly there yet?' They hadn't been expecting that Jesus would die a violent death. His crucifixion made it look as though they were wrong: he wasn't the **Messiah**, they weren't heading for the top jobs, Israel wasn't being renewed, and the world was carrying on in its wicked way, with the rich and powerful oppressing the poor and needy. Business as usual. And then he had risen from the dead, again confounding their own and everyone else's expectations. What did it mean? Did it mean that their dreams of 'restoring the kingdom to Israel' were now back on track?

Well, it did and it didn't. Like everything else, the dream of the **kingdom** had been transformed through Jesus' death and **resurrection**. Just as Jesus had told them they would have to lose their lives to save

them, so now he had to explain that they had to lose their kingdom-dreams – of an earthly kingdom with ordinary administrative and governmental power, in charge of subject states – in order to gain them. But at this point many people, reading Acts, have gone badly wrong.

It would be easy to imagine that what Jesus (and Luke) meant at this point was something like this: ‘No, no, you’re dreaming of an earthly kingdom, but I’m telling you about a heavenly one. You think what matters is reorganizing this world, but I’m preparing you for the next one. What counts is not what happens in this world of space and time, but where you’re going to spend eternity. I’m going off to heaven, and you must tell people how they can follow me there.’ From that point of view, the answer to ‘Are we nearly there yet?’ is ‘No, we’re not going there at all, actually.’

That certainly isn’t what Luke means. But, like the children in the car, we ourselves are going to have to wait, as his book unfolds, to see just what he does mean. We know enough from his first volume, though, to see where it’s all going. God’s kingdom is coming in and through the work of Jesus, not by taking people away from this world but by transforming things within this world, bringing the sphere of earth into the presence, and under the rule, of heaven itself. So when is this all happening? Again, many people, reading this passage, have assumed that Jesus’ basic answer is ‘No’: No, this isn’t the time, all of those things will happen a long way off in the future. No, we’re not nearly there yet; you have a lot of things to do, tasks to perform, and only when you’re finished all of them will I ‘restore the kingdom to Israel’. And, actually, there is a sense in which all that is indeed true. There is a ‘still-future’ dimension to everything that happens in this book, as we shall see. But wait a minute. Is that really what Jesus’ answer means?

I don’t think it is. Jesus does indeed warn them that they won’t be given a timetable. In terms of the children in the car, he is telling them that they simply aren’t going to have a sense of where they are on the calendar of God’s unfolding purposes. But what he goes on to say hints at something different. ‘You will receive power. . . . Then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem . . . and to the very ends of the earth.’

‘My witnesses’? What does that mean? Quite simply this: in the resurrection (and the **ascension**, which is about to happen), Jesus is indeed being enthroned as Israel’s Messiah and therefore king of the whole world. He is the one at whose name every knee shall bow, as Paul puts it in Philippians 2.10. In the world of the first century, when someone was enthroned as king, that new authority would take effect through heralds going off throughout the territory in question with the news, ‘We have a king!’ That was always proclaimed as good news,

because everyone in the ancient world (unlike many in the modern world) knew that anarchy is always worse than authorized government. Governments may be bad, but chaos is worse. So the heralds, the messengers, would go off to the far reaches of the kingdom (imagine, for instance, a new Roman emperor coming to the throne, and heralds going off as far as Spain to the west, Britain to the north, and Egypt to the south-east), to announce that Claudius, or Nero, or whoever, was now the rightful king, and to demand glad allegiance from supposedly grateful subjects.

And that is what Jesus is telling them they must now do. You're asking about the kingdom? You're asking when it will come about, when Israel will be exalted as the top nation, with the nations of the world being subject to God through his vindicated people? Well, in one sense it has already happened, Jesus is saying, because in my own death and resurrection I have already been exalted as Israel's representative. In another sense it is yet to happen, because we still await the time when the whole world is visibly and clearly living under God's just and healing rule. But we are now living in between those two points, *and you must be my witnesses from here to the ends of the world.* The apostles are to go out as heralds, not of someone who may become king at some point in the future, but of the one who has *already* been appointed and enthroned.

Notice the subtle difference, in verses 7 and 8, between the words 'authority' and 'power'. God has all authority, and it is through him and from him that all 'authorized' rule in the world must flow. We don't have that ultimate authority; no human, in whatever task or role, ever does. It all comes from God. But what God's people are promised is *power*; the word used here is *dynamis*, from which we get 'dynamite'. We need that power, just as Jesus' first followers did, if we or they are to be his witnesses, to find ways of announcing to the world that he is already its rightful king and lord. And in the next chapters of Acts we see what that witness, and that power, are going to mean.

But for the moment we notice one thing in particular, which will help us as we read into the rest of the book. Jesus gives the apostles an agenda: Jerusalem first, then Judaea (the surrounding countryside), then Samaria (the hated semi-foreigners living right next door) and to the ends of the earth. Sit back and watch, Luke says. That's exactly the journey we're about to take. And, like the child who stops asking the question because suddenly the journey itself has become so interesting, we find there's so much to see that we won't worry so much about the 'when'. Jesus is already appointed and enthroned as the world's true king. One day that kingdom will come, fully and finally. In the meantime, we have a job to do.

ACTS 1.9–14

Ascension!

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.’

¹²Then they went back to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, which is close to Jerusalem, about the distance you could travel on a sabbath. ¹³They then entered the city (‘they’ here means Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the zealot, and Judas the son of James) and went to the upstairs room where they were staying. ¹⁴They all gave themselves single-heartedly to prayer, with the women, including Mary, Jesus’ mother, and his brothers.

We were having supper with some friends who had recently moved to western Canada.

‘So,’ my wife began, ‘does Vancouver feel like home?’

‘It’s not home,’ replied the wife energetically. ‘It’s **heaven!**’

‘Well, my dear,’ commented her husband, a theologian, reproachfully and perhaps over-piously, ‘if you knew your business, you would know that heaven is your true home.’

‘No,’ she replied. ‘Home is where there’s hard work, and hassle, and all kinds of difficulties. Here I’m free from all that. This is heaven!’

I have often pondered that conversation, and I want to take issue with the theologian-husband. Though many hymns and prayers (mostly from the nineteenth and early twentieth century) speak of heaven as our home, that isn’t how the Bible normally puts it. In the Bible, heaven and earth are the two halves of God’s created world. They aren’t so much like the two halves of an orange, more or less identical but occupying different space. They are more like the weight of an object and the stuff it’s made of, or perhaps the meaning of a flag and the cloth or paper it’s made of: two (related) ways of looking at the same thing, two different and interlocking dimensions, the one perhaps explaining the other. Talking about ‘heaven and earth’ is a way, in the Bible, of talking about the fact, as many people and many cultures have perceived it to be, that everything in our world (call it ‘earth’ for the sake of argument, though that can be confusing because that is also the name we give to our particular planet within our particular solar system, whereas ‘earth’ in the Bible really means the entire cosmos of

space, time and matter) has another dimension, another sort of reality, that goes with it as well.

You could call this other reality, this other dimension, the ‘inner’ reality, if you like, thinking perhaps of a golf ball which has an outer reality (the hard, mottled surface) and an inner reality (the tightly packed, springy interior). But you could just as easily think of earth as the ‘inner’ reality, the dense material of the world where we live at the moment, and ‘heaven’ as the outer reality, the ‘side’ of our reality that is open to all kinds of other things, to meanings and possibilities which our ‘inner’ reality, our busy little world of space, time and matter sometimes seems to exclude.

If these illustrations don’t help, leave them to one side and concentrate on the reality. The reality is this: ‘heaven’ in the Bible is God’s space, and ‘earth’ is our space. ‘Heaven’ isn’t just ‘the happy place where God’s people go when they die’, and it certainly isn’t our ‘home’ if by that you mean (as some Christians, sadly, have meant) that our eventual destiny is to leave ‘earth’ altogether and go to ‘heaven’ instead. God’s plan, as we see again and again in the Bible, is for ‘new heavens and new earth’, and for them to be joined together in that renewal once and for all. ‘Heaven’ may well be our *temporary* home, after this present life; but the whole new world, united and transformed, is our eventual destination.

Part of the point about Jesus’ **resurrection** is that it was the beginning of precisely that astonishing and world-shattering renewal. It wasn’t just that he happened to be alive again, as though by some quirk of previously unsuspected ‘nature’, or by some extraordinary ‘**miracle**’ in which God did the impossible just to show how powerful he was, death suddenly worked backwards in his particular case. It was, rather, that because on the cross he had indeed dealt with the main force of evil, decay and death itself, the creative power of God, no longer thwarted as it had been by human rebellion, could at last burst forth and produce the beginning, the pilot project, of that joined-up heaven-and-earth reality which is God’s plan for the whole world. This is part at least of the explanation of the sheer strangeness of Jesus’ risen body, which hits us in all the Easter stories. At the very point where they’re explaining that it really is him, that he isn’t a ghost, that he can eat and drink, just at that moment he appears and disappears at will. It seems as though the first disciples really didn’t know what to make of it either, and were simply doing their best to tell it like they had seen it.

But once we grasp that ‘heaven and earth’ mean what they mean in the Bible, and that ‘heaven’ is not, repeat *not*, a location within our own cosmos of space, time and matter, situated somewhere up in the sky (‘up’ from whose point of view? Europe? Brazil? Australia?), then

we are ready, or as ready as we are likely to be, to understand the **ascension**, described here quite simply and briefly by Luke. Neither Luke nor the other early Christians thought Jesus had suddenly become a primitive spaceman, heading off into orbit or beyond, so that if you searched throughout the far reaches of what we call 'space' you would eventually find him. They believed that 'heaven' and 'earth' are the two interlocking spheres of God's reality, and that the risen body of Jesus is the first (and so far the only) object which is fully at home in both and hence in either, anticipating the time when everything will be renewed and joined together. And so, since as T. S. Eliot said, 'humankind cannot bear very much reality', the new, overwhelming reality of a heaven-and-earth creature will not just yet live in both dimensions together, but will make itself – himself – at home within the 'heavenly' dimension for the moment, until the time comes for heaven and earth to be finally renewed and united. At that point, of course, this renewed Jesus himself will be the central figure.

That is the point of the event, and its explanation, as we find them in verses 9–11. Jesus is 'lifted up', indicating to the disciples not that he was heading out somewhere beyond the moon, beyond Mars, or wherever, but that he was going into 'God's space', God's dimension. The cloud, as so often in the Bible, is the sign of God's presence (think of the pillar of cloud and fire as the children of Israel wandered through the desert, or the cloud and smoke that filled the **Temple** when God became suddenly present in a new way). Jesus has gone into God's dimension of reality; but he'll be back on the day when that dimension and our present one are brought together once and for all. That promise hangs in the air over the whole of Christian history from that day to this. That is what we mean by the '**second coming**'.

There are two other things which are, as we say, 'going on' in this passage. Some first-century readers would have picked up one of these, some the other, some perhaps both. First, one of the central Old Testament promises for the early Christians was in Daniel 7, where 'one like a **son of man**' is brought up, on the clouds of heaven, to the 'Ancient of Days', and is presented before him and given kingly power over the nations, and particularly over the 'beasts', the monsters representing the forces of evil and chaos. For someone who had long pondered that passage – and there are plenty of signs that the early Christians did just that – the story of Jesus' ascension would indicate that Daniel 7 had been fulfilled in a dramatic and unexpected way, with the human figure who had suffered at the hands of the evil powers of the world now being exalted into the very presence of God himself, there to receive kingly power. This fits so well with the previous passage (verses 6–8) that it is hard to suppose that Luke did not intend it.

Second, many of Luke's readers would know that when a Roman emperor died, it had become customary to declare that someone had seen his soul escaping from his body and going up to heaven. If you go to the top end of the Forum in Rome, stand under the Arch of Titus, and look up, you will see a carving of the soul of Titus, who was emperor in the 80s of the first century, ascending to heaven. The message of this was clear: the emperor was becoming a god (thus enabling his son and heir to style himself 'son of god', which is a useful title if you want to run the world). The parallel is not so close this time, since Luke is clear that it was not Jesus' soul that ascended into heaven, leaving his body behind somewhere, but his whole, renewed, bodily, complete self. But there is then a sense that Jesus is *upstaging* anything the Roman emperors might imagine for themselves. He is the reality, and they are the parody – a theme we will notice more than once as Luke's story unfolds. And when, at the end of Luke's book, the good news of Jesus is being preached in Rome itself, openly and unhindered, we have a sense of 'Of course! That's how it had to be.' He is the world's true and rightful king, sharing the very throne, and somehow even, so it seems, the identity, of the one true God.

The first and most important response to this extraordinary, unprecedented and still hard-to-describe event is of course worship. Luke often tells us about the early Christians devoting themselves to prayer. As we go back with them on this occasion from the Mount of Olives to the house where they were staying, and look round the room and see these puzzled but excited men and women – including Jesus' own mother – giving themselves to prayer, we ought to feel a strong identification with them. All those who name the name of Jesus, who worship him, who study his **word**, are called to be people of worship and prayer. Why?

Well, it's obvious, isn't it? It is precisely in worship and prayer that we, while still on 'earth' in the sense I've explored already, find ourselves sharing in the life of 'heaven', which is where Jesus is. The constant references to prayer in Acts are a sign that this is how these very ordinary, frequently muddled, deeply human beings, the **apostles** and the others with them, found that their story was being bound up with the story of 'what Jesus was continuing to do and to teach'. From the ascension onwards, the story of Jesus' followers takes place in both dimensions. That, by the way, is why there was an inevitable head-on clash with the Temple, because the Temple was thought to be the key spot where heaven and earth overlapped. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus are launching a claim to the contrary, and Jesus' followers had to work out what that would mean. As we in our own day not only read Acts but try to follow Jesus and witness to his lordship over the

world, it is through prayer and worship that we, too, can know, enjoy and be energized by the life of heaven, right here on earth, and work out what that will mean in terms of other claims, other lords, other ways of **life**.

ACTS 1.15–26

Restoring the Twelve

¹⁵Around that time Peter stood up in the middle of the gathering, which by this stage numbered about a hundred and twenty.

¹⁶‘My dear family,’ he said, ‘the holy spirit spoke long ago, through the mouth of David, about Judas, who became a guide to the people who arrested Jesus. There it is in the Bible, and it had to come true.

¹⁷He was counted along with us, and he had his own share in the work we’ve been given.’

(¹⁸Judas, you see, had bought a field with the money his wickedness had brought him, where he fell headlong and burst open, with all his innards gushing out. ¹⁹This became known to everyone who lived in Jerusalem, so that the field was called, in their local language, ‘Akeldamach,’ which means ‘Blood-place’.)

²⁰For this is what it says in the book of Psalms:

Let his home become desolate
and let nobody live in it;

and again,

Let someone else receive his overseeing task.

²¹‘So this is what has to be done. There are plenty of people who have gone about with us all the time that our master Jesus was coming and going among us, ²²starting from John’s baptism until the day he was taken from us. Let one of them be chosen to be alongside us as a special witness of his resurrection.’

²³So they chose two: Joseph who was called Barsabbas, with the surname Justus, and Matthias.

²⁴‘Lord,’ they prayed, ‘you know the hearts of all people. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to receive this particular place of service and apostleship, from which Judas went away to go to his own place.’

²⁶So they cast lots for them. The lot fell on Matthias, and he was enrolled along with the eleven apostles.

The older I get, the more I dislike trying to follow the complicated instructions that come with new technology. I’m not what they call technophobic. On the desk where I am working there is a computer.

It is linked to a cell phone which includes addresses, diary details and so on. Beside me there is an iPod containing hundreds of hours of music. On another desk there is a microphone connecting me to radio stations, and a broadcast-quality pocket-sized voice recorder. I've had to learn how to use all of them, and I get there eventually. But there is always the awful moment when the new toy comes out of its box, and I stare at it in horror, realizing that I have to learn a whole new language, to figure out which complex buttons and switches do what, how to plug different cables into their proper sockets, and so on. At times like that the written instructions had better be good. I'm in uncharted territory and I need someone to hold my hand.

That must have been exactly how the **apostles** felt in the very early days. What are we supposed to *do*? You might suppose that they would want to rush out and tell everyone about Jesus right away, but they didn't do that. (Perhaps, along with their enormous excitement at his **resurrection**, and now his **ascension**, there may have been a realistic awareness that those who brought about Jesus' death would have no compunction about attacking them as well. Perhaps, too, they were careful to remember Jesus' instructions about waiting for God's power to come on them before going off to do what had to be done.) Was there a set of instructions and, if so, how could they get access to it?

They faced a particular problem right at the start, rather like the sort of problem I had the other day when one of the cables I'd been sent for a new piece of equipment simply didn't fit the socket it was supposed to. There they were, the spearhead of Jesus' plan to renew and restore God's people – and there were supposed to be twelve of them. Only eleven were left. How could they model, and symbolize, God's plan for Israel (and therefore for the world) if they were, so to speak, one patriarch short of a true Israel? Did they just have to stay like that, and if not what should they do about it?

As with everything else that happened in the early church – and Luke is probably already hinting at this in the present passage – they went to two sources for instructions: to the **word** of God, and to prayer. By 'the word of God' I mean, as they seemed to have meant, something more than scripture but not less. For them, the Jewish Bible (what we call the Old Testament) was not just a record of what God had said to his people of old. It was a huge and vital story, the story of the earlier part of God's purposes, full of signposts pointing forward to the time when, further forward within the same story, the plans God was nurturing would come to fruition. Prophets and kings had listened to what the **spirit** had been saying to them, and had written things which, like seeds sown in the dark earth and long watered, would eventually emerge as plants and would bear fruit.

So it was that, from within the life of constant prayer to which Jesus' followers had given themselves after his ascension, they pondered the Psalms which spoke, as several Psalms speak, of a time when God's people, and God's true king, would be opposed by a traitor from within their midst, betrayed by one who had been counted a close friend and colleague. Here they found, not indeed a road map for exactly where they were – scripture seldom supplies exactly that – but the hints and clues to enable them to see how to feel their way forward in this new and unprecedented dilemma. The Psalms made it quite clear: it is not only all right for someone else to take the place of the one who has gone, it is the proper thing to do. It doesn't mean, in other words, that God's plan, or their obedience to it, has gone worryingly wrong. The tragedy of Judas is held within the strange, dark, overarching purpose of God.

We had better get used to this theme of God's plan, over-ruling complex and problematic circumstances; because for Luke, as for his near-contemporary Josephus, the idea of God's providence, still at work even though things may seem sad and dark, is extremely important. And the defection of Judas must have seemed like that in a high degree to the apostles. Judas had been their friend. Until a few short weeks before, he had been one of them in every possible sense. They had known him intimately, and he them. The tragic story of his untimely death is told in quite a different form here from what we find in Matthew 27.3–10, and since nobody in the early church attempted to tidy things up we probably shouldn't try either. One way or another – whether it was actual suicide, as Matthew says, or whether it was the sudden and violent onset of a fatal disease, as Luke suggests – Judas was no longer among them. Insofar as they could make any sense of this, it was a scriptural sense. Insofar as they could see what to do as a result, it was a scripturally rooted sense of direction. That is the main point Luke wants us to grasp here.

And so they chose Matthias. Or rather, they would say, God chose Matthias. They used the well-known method of drawing lots (having already chosen a very brief short list of candidates!). Some have seen this as rather arbitrary, and have suggested that, had the choice been delayed until after the **day of Pentecost** and the arrival of the **holy spirit** in power, they might have done it differently. Luke doesn't seem to think so, since part of his point is precisely to show how, from the beginning, the apostles did what they did in the light of the scriptures and in the context of prayer. Part of his point, too, is to insist that what the apostles go on to do really is, in the proper sense, 'the restoration of the kingdom to Israel', even though it didn't look like they, or anyone

else at the time, would have thought such an event would look like. And for that they needed the powerful symbol of **the Twelve** to be restored.

Nor does Luke imagine that the choice of people for particular offices (as in this case) and tasks (as in many others to come) is always plain or straightforward. There is at least one tragic story later in the book where serious disagreement over the choice of someone for a particular job leads to a major row. What concerns Luke most, in the present case, is the fact that God ‘knows the hearts’ (verse 24), and that it is therefore up to God who gets chosen for a role, and a task, in which the particular disposition of the particular heart matters very much indeed. And the role itself, and task itself, are important as well. The person to take Judas’ place must be someone who had gone about with them all since the time of John’s baptism right through, and who was, along with the Eleven, a witness to Jesus’ **resurrection**.

This ‘person specification’ in verses 21 and 22 is extremely interesting. It shows that from the beginning the early Christians saw themselves as being the continuation (just as Luke indicates in the first verse of the book) of the **kingdom**-work of Jesus which had begun with John’s baptism. And it shows that those roots were important for how they understood themselves. Because of that, in fact, one possible candidate who was not considered was James the brother of the Lord, who quickly became a prominent leader even though he wasn’t one of the Twelve. He had not, it seems, been a believer until the Lord appeared to him personally (John 7.5; 1 Corinthians 15.7). And it shows that the primary apostolic task was to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus himself. As we shall see, if you take that away from Acts you are left with nothing. The resurrection defines the church, from that day to this. The church is either the movement which announces God’s new creation, or it is just another irrelevant religious sect.

I always feel both sorry for, and curious about, Joseph called Barsabbas, also known as Justus, who was the candidate not chosen. There is no suggestion that his heart was not right with God, or that he was otherwise unsuited for the task. He was, after all, one of the ‘last two’ in the consideration of the Eleven. They would have trusted him. We have no idea what happened to him after this, just as we have no idea, for that matter, what happened to Matthias himself. Part of Christian obedience, right from the beginning, was the call to play (apparently) great parts without pride and (apparently) small parts without shame. There are, of course, no passengers in the kingdom of God, and actually no ‘great’ and ‘small’ parts either. The different tasks and roles to which God assigns us are his business, not ours.

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