



BIBLE STUDY

ACT BOLDLY FOR MISSION
SESSION 1

With the Message of Jesus

by Kelly Fryer

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Jesus came proclaiming, “The kingdom of God has come near!” Then he spent his entire ministry telling us and showing us what that kingdom is like. In this session we’ll hear about God’s dream for the world by looking together at some of Jesus’ kingdom parables, as told by Luke. We’ll discover that God’s dream is *for* us. And we’ll learn about God’s plan to share this dream with the whole world *through* us.

Introduction

It’s been popular for a few years now to talk about being “purpose-driven.” But for people to wonder about the meaning of life is no fad. There is something about being human that has always made us ask *why*. Why are we here on this earth? What is the point of our lives? What is our unique purpose?

Have you ever asked yourself these questions?

Maybe we find ourselves asking questions like these partly because, at some point, we just can’t resist the temptation to turn to the last page and see how our own stories end. When we do that, we all see the same thing, of course: Our time on this earth comes to an end and . . . well . . . we die!

Realizing that our time here is limited, we wonder: Well, then, what is this time *for*?

I don’t know how people without faith answer that question. But for those of us who know that we have been loved into existence by a living God and who have answered the call

to follow Jesus, the answer to that question is found right here—in our relationship with the One who created us. The purpose of our lives is connected to *God’s* purposes. The point of our lives is to be a part of what *God* is up to.

The key question

So, what *is* God up to? That is the key question, of course. But some people might argue that’s a question to which we can never know the answer. And they’re right, in a sense. God is bigger than we are. Way bigger. And we can get into trouble when we’re so sure that we’re right about what we think God has planned that we become intolerant of different points of view.

> GET TO WORK!

Have you ever known somebody who’s so sure about what God’s plan or God’s will is that they became intolerant of those who disagreed or got into trouble or caused trouble for somebody else? Have you ever done this yourself?

The truth is, we will never be able to fully comprehend what God is thinking or doing. But we can get a glimpse of it, especially when we are working and listening for God together. How? Well, even this is difficult. And it is downright dangerous to try to figure out God’s purposes solely on the basis of our own experience. In fact, throughout the story of God’s people as it’s told in

the Bible, God's people—even when they've worked together—haven't always been very good at figuring out what God's plan is.

> GET TO WORK!

Want proof? Read Mark 8:31–33 right now. Spend some time thinking and talking about how you think you would have responded if you had been one of Jesus' disciples.

Jesus told his friends and followers again and again that his ministry would lead to death—and resurrection!—but they wouldn't believe it. They couldn't believe it. It didn't make any sense to them until it was all over. Peter, the head honcho disciple, even tried to convince Jesus that he was wrong! Of course, after it was all said and done, Peter told the story of what happened to Jesus with such confidence and power that it seemed as if he had understood it all along!

> GET TO WORK!

Don't believe me? Read Acts 2:14–36 right now. Take a couple of minutes and reflect either alone or together with your study mates on this passage. What do you hear? What would you have thought if you had been in the audience that day?

That's Peter again, except this time he's quoting Scripture and wagging his finger and explaining eloquently what he seems to think should be perfectly clear: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses!" he proclaims.

Do you think anyone in the crowd listening thought to herself, "Well, Pete, that's easy for you to say now! Where were you when the whole thing was going down? Hiding, that's where. *Big shot.*"

Okay, maybe nobody was thinking that. But I probably would have been.

The point is that God's plan isn't always easy to see or understand when we're caught up in the middle of it. It's usually a lot easier to answer the question, "What *was* God up to?" than it is to figure out what God *is* up to right now.

> GET TO WORK!

Take a few minutes and see if you can remember a time in your own life when you could only see what God was doing in your life by looking backward.

Done? Okay, see . . . I told you it's true!

Looking backward

It might come as a surprise to you, but even Jesus had to look backward in order to understand and explain what God was up to. As Luke tells the story, Jesus went right from his baptism and God's remarkable announcement (Luke 3:21–22) to the wilderness and a wrestling match with the devil (Luke 4:1–13). Talk about a roller-coaster ride! Breathless, Jesus lurched into his ministry and went to work:

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.
(Luke 4:14–15)

So everyone was talking about him! And probably, everyone had a theory about how this simple, ordinary guy from a little town in the middle of nowhere—Joseph's son—was doing all these extraordinary things. But what did *Jesus* have to say for himself? How did *Jesus* explain his power, his miracles, his ability to teach in a way that no one from Nazareth—or anywhere else for that matter—ever had before? How did *Jesus* explain what God was up to?

Jesus opened up the Bible. Well, actually, he unrolled a parchment scroll. He was sitting in the synagogue at the time, in his hometown, surrounded by curious friends and family. And he began to read the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good
news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Luke 4:18-19)*

Then he rolled the scroll back up and handed it back to the synagogue official. He was already sitting down so maybe he didn't look quite as stunned as he felt. But it was a while before he thought of what to say next. Everyone was looking at him. And they were waiting. "What can this mean?" they must have been thinking to themselves. "What is happening here?!"

Slowly the light dawned for Jesus.

"Today," he said carefully, maybe having a hard time believing the words himself, "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

This was one way of saying, "You're looking at the real deal here, people. God's dream for the world—that all will be loved and blessed and saved—is coming true in front of your very eyes."

The way Matthew and Mark report it, Jesus was even more straightforward when he shot out of the gate in Galilee: "The kingdom of God has come near," he shouted (Mark 1:14-15 and Matthew 4:12-17).

By looking backward, Jesus understood that God's dream for this world was being fulfilled . . . right now, right here . . . in and through him.

You didn't see *that* coming, did you?!

After the people in the synagogue that day picked themselves up off the floor, they chased Jesus out of town. We're not always ready to hear what God has to say, I guess.

Now, we don't know how Jesus felt about this. But we do know what he did. Luke tells us that Jesus got to work teaching and showing people what God's kingdom is all about. He cast out demons (Luke 4:31-37) and healed people (Luke 4:38-39) and traveled all over the place telling people the good news that God was on the loose doing what God had been promising to do all along (Luke 4:42-44).

And then Jesus did something that, at the time, might have seemed really weird. He asked a bunch of the most unlikely, unexpected people to join him on his mission.

> GET TO WORK!

Read Luke 5:1-11 right now. Spend a couple of minutes talking about what Jesus is doing here. If he had made a list of pros and cons before inviting these guys to join him, what would have been on that list? If you had been on the beach that day, would you have gone with Jesus, do you think? Why or why not?

Simon Peter and the Zebedee brothers may not have been able to see it just then but, looking backward, we can see that God's plan to bring in the kingdom in and through Jesus also meant being at work in and through those who follow Jesus. Jesus tapped James and John and Martha and Mary and other ordinary people on the shoulder and said, "Hey, come follow me." And that meant, "Come be a part of this adventure. The kingdom of God *has* come near! And it *is* coming near . . . in and through you."

As followers of Jesus, we are invited to receive this kingdom. We don't have to "bring in" or "build"

the kingdom. God has been—and is—already doing that. But we do have a job to do. Through us, God wants to get this message about the kingdom out to everybody. God’s gift of love and blessing and reconciliation and salvation has come to us. And, *through* us, God wants to give this gift to the whole world.

Probably a lot of people back then looked at Jesus like he was crazy. “What kingdom? What are you talking about? Are you going to start a revolution, Jesus? Are you going to overthrow the Romans? If so, where’s your army?!”

Maybe this is why Jesus spent so much time and so much energy creatively describing God’s kingdom to us. He needed us to understand exactly what we had received so that we could share it with everybody else with confidence.

The message

Jesus came announcing, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” In other words, God’s dream for the world is being fulfilled! This message comes to us as good news. And this is the message that Jesus wants to get out to the world *through* us, in the things that we say and do.

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It’s worth repeating this point because history shows that it’s easy for us to get confused about what *the message* is. Today some Christians seem to think that the message of Jesus is, “Get with the program. Shape up or ship out. Behave yourself or you’re doomed to eternal damnation.” And often the Good News ends

up sounding not very good at all!

For example, there is a street preacher in my neighborhood who has been working the same corner for over a decade. Every single day, all summer long, he stands on that corner with a microphone and a little amplifier at his feet. And he watches the people passing by. He takes his cues from them and whatever vices he thinks they have. And he preaches at them. The message is always the same:

“You can’t smoke cigarettes (or drink alcohol or have premarital sex or whatever else pops into his head) and get into heaven! The devil wants you to smoke cigarettes (or fill in the blank). But, *as it says in the Bible*, you’ve got to stop smoking cigarettes (or fill in the blank) if you want to go to heaven!”

My son does a wickedly funny impersonation of him. And we laugh along. But it’s not really an amusing situation. Many people who live in my neighborhood are being led to think that this is the Good News Christians have to share. I’m sure this street preacher has the best of intentions. But he has the message all wrong.

> GET TO WORK!

Do you know any Christians who can manage to make the Good News sound awful? Think about that for a minute. Remember, people hear our message through both our words and our actions. Do you know anyone whose relationship with God has been hurt because they’ve heard the wrong message from a Christian? Why do you think it’s so easy for us, even when we have the best intentions, to get the message wrong?

The way Luke tells the story, Jesus worked pretty hard at helping us get the message right. Most importantly, of course, he *lived* the message. Even when people tortured him and hanged him on a cross, Jesus did not

condemn! He died with forgiveness on his lips (Luke 23:13–49). Jesus also *spoke* the message, often using stories—parables—to communicate it to us.

> **GET TO WORK!**

Read two or three of Jesus' parables yourself right now. Choose from Luke 10:25–37, Luke 13:18–21, Luke 14:15–24, Luke 15:1–7, Luke 15:8–10, and Luke 15:11–32. Take them one at a time. First, read the story Jesus tells out loud. After each story, spend time talking about these three questions:

1. *What is this story about?*
2. *What do you hear God saying to you in this story?*
3. *What do you hear God saying to us, as a group or as a congregation or the whole church, together?*

Take as much time as you need with these questions. This is the most important part of the whole session.

Jesus tells us that in God's dream for the world the blind can see and the lost are found. Prisoners are set

free! Enemies are reconciled. Miracles happen as a result of the smallest acts of faith. The most unlikely people are instruments of kindness and love and transformation. There are no such things as outcasts. And the poor have a special place at the table. This is the kingdom that Jesus brought in with him when he came. He announced this kingdom. He lived this kingdom. And he invited us to share the good news of this kingdom with everyone, too, in every single thing we say and do.

For Christians, the “meaning of life” could not be any more clear.

Coming next issue:

In the Bible we discover that, as followers of Jesus, we are sent out . . .

Session 2: *Like* the First Evangelists

Session 3: *In* the Power of the Holy Spirit 🌿

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