

Waiting and Witnessing

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[0 : 00] Well, if you could turn back to the Bible, to the book of Acts, chapter 1, that's what we're looking at today.

As well, there's a little handout in your newsletters that you might want to use to follow along. Well, if you've been with us over the last four weeks, we've looked at the start of each of the chapters of the four Gospels, looking at the first coming of Jesus, and this week we're looking at the first chapter of Acts, and looking in particular about the second coming of Jesus.

Well, I'm thinking that some of you would still be nursing your post-Christmas hangovers at the moment, and I'm not just talking about the ones induced by too much alcohol and overheating, eating.

Well, if you've had a really good time, perhaps you might be a bit sad that it all happened and ended so soon. If you're a child, maybe you still might be looking under the Christmas tree, thinking there might still be that one present you forgot to open.

And if you've been hosting Christmas, there's always the added chore of washing up and cleaning up and eating the leftovers. So, cold turkey, anyone? Again, in our family, we've actually been very creative.

[1 : 22] We've had four turkey meals in the last week. Turkey with pasta, turkey with porridge. Anyway, it's all done now.

There's no turkey left. And the Sunday after church, the Sunday after Christmas at church is usually a little subdued as well, isn't it? One year when Christmas was on a Saturday, only the diehards turned up the next day.

We were one of them, our family, and we consoled ourselves that we must be the faithful remnant. Either that or the rapture had occurred and we were left behind. Well, I think the disciples, as we read Acts today, experienced something similar with the resurrection of Jesus.

The most amazing event had just occurred, but over the period when Jesus was with them, the disciples must have wondered what was going on. Wasn't Jesus supposed to make a greater impact with his resurrection?

You know, wow, those people that actually put him to death raise up a whole new group of followers and take on the world. Instead, we find, as we read in the first three chapters, first three verses of chapter one, that Jesus was preoccupied with teaching.

[2 : 37] And so we read, verse one, in my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach, that's the first reference, until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving instructions, that's teach, through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke, that is, teach, about the kingdom of God.

And so what we see here is three, a threefold repetition of the fact that Jesus was teaching. Well, what was he teaching about? He was teaching about the kingdom of God. And if you want to understand what that means, we need to look at, I guess, one place to look at is the end of Luke.

And what I've done is, on the back of your handout, got both the passage in Acts chapter one and the last chapter or the last few paragraphs in Luke side by side.

And what I've tried to do with all the underlining and the italics and the bolding is to show that there's actually a lot of common material between the both. And that what Luke was doing is starting again where he left off in Luke with the book of Acts.

[3 : 48] But I want to draw your attention to the underlined verses, because I think by reading that you'll see what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God. So in Luke, verses 44, we see, first of all, that Jesus was using the Old Testament, that is the law, the prophets, and the Psalms, to show that the scriptures were fulfilled in him.

And what was being fulfilled was the kingdom of God. God's salvation plan had come. And so in verse 46, we see that plan summarized. And so verse 46, it says, the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.

So that's just happened. And now the next stage was going to occur, going on in bold, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem.

So the next stage in God's plan to bringing the kingdom, therefore, was not a physical conquest or rule by Jesus, but the preaching of the good news to all nations. And the way Jesus would do that was not quite what the disciples expected either.

And so what I've got on the outline are two instructions or two commands that Jesus gives to them to show them how they're going to be part of God's salvation. So the first, you'll find that in verse four as well, was to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 07] And then the second in verse eight, to witness in the power of the Spirit. So let's first look at the waiting, verses four and five. And so Jesus said, On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command, Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift of my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.

For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. So there are two important things I want to say about these verses. First, Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem, because Jerusalem was the city of God.

It was the place of God's rule. The temple was the place where his presence had dwelt. And so some of you will recall in the Old Testament that God descended in a cloud on the temple when Solomon dedicated it.

And then you might remember as well again, how in a vision, Ezekiel, in his prophecy, saw God's presence leave the temple when the people kept on sinning. And so now for the Holy Spirit to descend on them in Jerusalem was for God to say that he was doing a similar thing.

Just as he had done with Solomon's temple and in reverse with Ezekiel, God was now returning to Israel, to his people, and to his temple. Which leads me to my second point about these verses, and those are the words of verse 5.

[6 : 39] Now these words were actually spoken by John the Baptist, and it's quite unique that it's actually recorded four times in each of the Gospels. John baptized with water to signify repentance, but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

That is, when God's Spirit comes down from heaven into Jerusalem, he will no longer dwell in a temple in bricks and mortar, but he will dwell in the people themselves.

So that's why the Apostle Peter, when he says in his letter that Christians are living stones, he's making a reference to this very point. God's temple will be the people themselves.

And God's presence in the lives of the disciples will be their means of power for ministry and mission. They had to wait, because without the Spirit, they could do nothing.

So you can sort of sense, as the disciples heard this, they got rather excited, because perhaps after 40 days, at last, they were going to see some real action from Jesus.

[7 : 41] And so in the assignment, they would have gathered around Jesus and asked him in verse 6, Lord, are you still, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel? For you see, all through the Old Testament, God had talked about this time, this time when the tribes of Israel will be restored.

And we find that in the first reading today, and I'm just going to put verse 6 back on the screen. And it says, it is too small a thing for you to be my servant, referring to Jesus, the Messiah, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

So that was the first stage of restoration for Israel. And so the disciples must have thought, perhaps this was it. Now, as we look at Jesus' reply, we say something of a mild rebuke by Jesus.

But I want to say that in his answer, Jesus is not actually denying the basic premise of what the disciples were saying. Yes, the kingdom of Israel was going to be restored.

Jesus wasn't actually disputing that. But what Jesus was saying is that they were not to know the timing of it. Only God knows the timing of it. So I believe that as we move into verse 8, what Jesus now goes on to show is how he was going to restore Israel.

[9 : 04] Verse 8, I think, is actually a description of what was going to happen. So let's read verse 8. And Jesus says, And so we come to our second point, to witness in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I wonder, as you've heard those verses read, whether you could see the fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 49 and verse 6 in this promise. That as the Spirit is poured down in Jerusalem, it will go out to Judea and Samaria.

And that is actually another way of not just talking about the geography of the place, but actually talking about the restoration for all the original tribes of Israel. And then thirdly, to reach the ends of the earth, which corresponds to the second part of Isaiah chapter 49 and verse 6, if Christ could put it back up, which says, I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation is a light for the Gentiles, may reach to the ends of the earth.

Ends of the earth, the same words used in both passages. God's plan, therefore, was to restore Israel through the witness of the disciples by the power of the Holy Spirit. God doesn't have just one plan for Israel and then another for the rest of the world, but the world becomes part of this restored and enlarged Israel as and when they come to believe in Jesus.

And so Acts 1.8 is actually a key verse in this whole book. It helps us to understand what is happening in the rest of the book. So I want to look a bit closer at this verse.

[10 : 46] And I think when you do, one of the things you find is that even though I've called it the second command by Jesus, this verse is more of a promise than a command.

For Jesus is not so much commanding the disciples to be witnesses, but actually telling them that they will be witnesses when the Spirit comes on them. They will become witnesses by virtue of the Spirit's power.

And if you read chapter 2, that's exactly what we see on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured down on the disciples. Now, I've always thought of the outpouring of the Spirit in sort of this way.

And I've got to put up a slide there. You see there are a lot of champagne glasses. And I always thought that the Spirit is poured down one by one on each glass, as you can see there. But actually, I think if you read Acts and you read the rest of the Bible, I think it's better to think of the Spirit's coming a bit more like this.

And I've got a picture here of a champagne tower. At the 8 a.m. service, I had actually physical, and thankfully it didn't topple. But what you can see here is that, and they all do it at weddings, is that you start pouring from the top.

[12 : 06] And then as the top glass overflows, the champagne keeps flowing down, down, and down, and down. And so something similar is happening on the day of Pentecost, because there is an almighty outpouring of the Spirit on that day, and the impact of that is still reverberating throughout time and space.

Like the champagne that keeps overflowing into more and more glasses, the Spirit's power and blessing continues to stream out across time and space towards the end of the earth.

And that outpouring occurs, that overspilling occurs, through the witnesses of Jesus. And so when you believe in Jesus, you are like one of those glasses, standing in that stream, receiving that blessing, and then passing it on with your witness.

So just think for a moment about your own experience. First, we've all come to believe in Jesus because someone's witnessed to us. So for me, it was my parents.

But for the rest of you, it may be your friend or colleague, or even by reading a book from a Christian author. But in each case, the Spirit has used a human witness.

[13 : 22] And that person, in turn, believes because they have been witnessed to by another human. And so actually, all of us, if we start tracing back in time, all of us can trace our spiritual heritage, our ancestry, so to speak, back to the apostles, back to the outpouring on the day of Pentecost.

And so most of us would probably have to go via England, and then to the Reformers, and maybe the Roman Church. But eventually, all of us are Christians because someone has passed it down the chain, and it passed on and passed on all the way to us.

Now, I say this, and I use this illustration because if we understand that that's how the Spirit has done it up to now, then that's how He will keep doing it.

You know, often I hear people say, how do we most clearly experience the power of the Holy Spirit? And invariably, you know, discussion will turn to speaking in tongues or miracle healings.

But if we look at Acts chapter 1 and verse 8, one of the clearest ways of the Spirit's work is through you as a witness of Jesus Christ. It is the irresistible work of the Spirit in the lives of believers to bring the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

[14 : 43] That is how we look at the, that's how we see the Spirit working. And that would be your own experience, wouldn't it? Because when you've been touched by God, when you've been transformed by the witness of someone, there's a natural impulse for you to want to share it with somebody else, to pass it on, as it were, to overflow into other glasses that are empty below you.

And often I think what holds us back is fear, fear of rejection, fear of not knowing what to say, fear of losing respect.

But we need to remember that, as I said at the start, it is the Spirit's power that is the one that's at work in us. It's not so much a command as it is a promise.

And we are merely the conduits of the Spirit's work. We are asked to witness to what we have seen, what we have heard, what we have experienced, not to what we haven't. And I have to say too, that God doesn't expect all of us to be gifted evangelists.

For some of us, it might just be giving someone a book or inviting them, you know, to an evangelistic event. And some of us might not be good with talking. You know, some people write letters as a way of witnessing.

[15 : 59] But wherever we are, and whenever it is, God can use us, and God will use us. I had one lady at a previous church who brought the nurse that was looking after her in the hospital to Christ.

And this was as she was going through her third bout of breast cancer. So God can use us. But we ought to be alert to the opportunities that the Spirit gives us to be a witness.

On the other hand, if we allow fear or whatever other reason to stop us, then we become a bit like, and Australians will understand this, a billabong.

Billabong is where the river used to go like this. The billabong is that bit where the river used to pass, but somehow the river has just gone straight through. And so it is with us that if we stop witnessing, we will miss out on the work of the Spirit through us.

We will miss out on the great blessings that the Spirit gives us when we stand in that stream. Well, now, after Jesus finished saying this, he moves on to verse 9.

[17 : 05] We move on to verse 9. He was taken up to heaven from before their eyes. And the disciples were left looking intently into the sky. I think they were looking and wondering when Jesus will return.

See, we probably don't appreciate it, but if you've just spent three years with Jesus and only just realized who he is and what he has done, I imagine it would be a great loss to see Jesus leaving.

But as they were doing that, two men, angels, dressed in white, appeared and stood beside them and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? Why? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.

So I think the angels were doing two things there. First, they are saying, don't stand here looking into the sky. Instead, go into Jerusalem. Go and wait for the Spirit so that he can come on you and you can become witnesses and part of God's plan of salvation.

But the second thing the angels were saying is, be assured, be confident. Jesus will return. Jesus will come back again. The disciples may not know exactly when, but they can be confident that the promise that was given to them will be fulfilled.

[18 : 23] And so the disciples had to hold both these truths in balance as they lived their lives. On the one hand, waiting for Jesus' return, and on the other, witnessing while they waited.

And the same applies to us. It's been nearly 2,000 years, not quite, but nearly, since this promise was given to the disciples.

And we are still waiting for Jesus' return. And so by any measure, I think 2,000 years is a fairly long time. And I guess, as a church, it can be quite easy to lose hope or to stop believing that this will happen.

We only have to have another doomsday prediction like the Mayan calendar, come and go, with nothing happening, for us to make light of this promise that Jesus will return.

But the Bible urges us to be watchful for Jesus' return. You see, just because we don't know when Jesus might return, doesn't mean that he won't. Now, I'm not making any predictions right now, but what if 2013 is the year of the Lord's return?

[19 : 34] I'm not saying it is, but there's nothing stopping it to be either. How would that change the way we live? How would we prioritize our lives, if that was the truth?

As we look out at the friends and families and people that we care for, what will happen to them if the Lord Jesus did return?

By and large, I think the church, in general, is not very good at reflecting on Jesus' return. But it's important that we do, don't we? And so perhaps once a year at this time, when the rest of the world parties on as if life would keep going on, it might be a good time for us to stop and to reflect on Jesus' coming again.

In a symbolic sense, be like the disciples that look intently up into the sky for his return, to pray for his coming, and then to reorder our lives in light of that.

But then, even as the disciples did, to heed the angels' instructions, not just to stand there, but to come down from the mountain and to be Jesus' witnesses, even as the Spirit is working through us.

[20 : 51] So we come to the end of this year, which has been a year of focus on evangelism. And so next year, we move on to a focus on prayer. But I want to encourage us not to lose sight of the fact that the Spirit continues to work through us as Jesus' witnesses.

It is through us that God is restoring the kingdom of Israel and bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. So will you pray with me now as we commit ourselves again to being Christ's witnesses for next year, even as we wait for his return?

Father, we thank you that you've promised that your son Jesus will come back again. And even as we look out at the world with its suffering and pain, with all sorts of evil being done, we do want you to come back, to bring all that to an end.

We want there to be a time when none of that will happen and that we can rejoice with never-ending joy. And yet, Lord, we know that you have delayed your return so that more people might come into Israel and might share this great blessing with us.

So help us, Lord, to be witnesses for you by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.