

Sermon: Preparing for the Birth of the Church

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

Sunday, May 16, 2021

Today we embark on a new journey through the book of Acts. I have no idea how long this journey will take but we are looking at a journey through 28 chapters. It was written as a second part to the narrative in the Gospel of Luke, a physician and companion to Apostle Paul through most of his journeys. In the opening verse of this book the author refers to his first book that he wrote concerning everything that Jesus Christ did and taught. You will notice other similarities especially in the introductions of both these books. For example both books were dedicated to Theophilus. We don't know who Theophilus is but most likely scholars tell us that he was a patron of Luke, who paid for the expenses of writing these two volumes. Another connection between the two books is seen in this super crisp one line summary of the previous book where he says and I quote, ***"In my first book^[a] I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit."*** End of quote.

With that summary he gets into the meat of this record which gives an overview of Jesus' 40 days post resurrection work. During this period, Jesus was focused on communicating a few important things. He proved to them that he was alive, he talked to them some more about the Kingdom of God and he explained the next steps for them. That they were to wait prayerfully in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then you get to verse 6 to 11 where the focus is on Jesus' ascension. This is good because three of the four Gospels end before the ascension takes place and the Gospel of John only has three indirect references to the event.

So it is only here that we see the details of Christ's ascension into heaven. So we will focus on it for a bit.

It starts in verse 6 where you have this question being put to Jesus by his disciples, ***“Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?”***. You can see in this question that the apostles are still trying to understand Jesus' ministry. From the beginning till the end, Jesus was focused on talking about one thing, the kingdom of God, right? We see this even in the three introductory verses in the opening of Acts, Acts 1:3. Now after the disciples have seen the whole ministry of Jesus, his death, burial and resurrection they still don't get how this “kingdom of God” that Jesus keeps talking about fits in with the kingdoms of this world. They think there is no way the kingdom of God can be established while Rome is still occupying Israel. So, if the kingdom of God is here, then the kingdom of Rome should be out. But because they don't see any signs for something like that taking place they ask Jesus, “Lord has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?” In other words, this is an “are we there yet?” question from the mouths of Jesus' spiritual toddlers.

And to that Jesus gives them an answer they were completely not expecting. He tells them, two things. First, he says, as to the timing of when God's kingdom will be fully established in a way that earthly kingdoms will be no more is not for anybody but God the Father to know.

Before we move on I will say this. If God is thinking that it is not yet time for all these earthly kingdoms to be eliminated and for God's kingdom to be fully established, it is because there is a divine purpose for this in-between time. God does not permit anything to happen without a strong purpose. You can ask the question, why was Christ not born 500 years earlier? Well, because there was a purpose in God's timing of Christ's birth and there will be a purpose in God's timing of his second coming and there is a divine purpose for everything God permits to take place in between. And God

expects us to wait and watch and do what He expects us to do now. This is a big lesson for every Christ follower. Every human being wants what they want now. But the timing is in God's hands and Jesus says, it is not for us to know when **even what God wants to happen** is going to happen. Our job is to wait on God and prepare for what God is going to do.

But along with the waiting, Jesus tells his disciples is that they will receive power when the holy spirit comes. That means even though the earthly kingdoms will remain for a bit longer, something new was going to be added to the mix, the Spirit of God, also referred to as, the Holy Spirit. As a result, they will have a special power to be witnesses to Christ. That means within the earthly kingdoms, Christ's followers will witness to God's kingdom. And God's kingdom is nearby but is not fully hear now. And yet these witnesses will not be limited geographically. They will start in their home towns of Jerusalem, then cover the neighboring towns of Judea and Samaria and go all the way to the ends of the earth.

These three circles also give us an outline for the rest of the book of Acts. Because chapter 1-7 focus on the church in Jerusalem, chapters 8-12 focus on Judea and Samaria and Chapter 13 to the end of the book refer to the Gentile territories finishing in Rome which is considered the symbolic capital of the whole gentile world. So, after Jesus proves his resurrection and tells them to wait in Jerusalem in prayer, Jesus promises His disciples a new power, the power of God's spirit would come upon them, the power to become witnesses to him everywhere from their home town and surrounding neighborhood and all the way to the ends of the earth.

After this instruction, Jesus was going to do a final show and tell for his disciples. You see Jesus had kept repeating to everyone who would listen that he was sent to earth by His Father in Heaven and that He is a king of a heavenly kingdom unlike any other kingdom they knew of. Now you can repeat a claim like that till you are blue in the face,

but people are not really going to get what you mean by it unless they can see it with their eyes. And this is the final act that Jesus does in front of his closest disciples. Because after he finishes preparing his disciples, He literally ascends heavenward and disappears into the clouds. And as the disciples stand there in stunned silence at such an incredible sight, two angels appear next to them and say, ***“Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”*** At this point his disciples can also testify to the fact that Jesus is truly from “out of this world” because they saw Him return to where he came from. Now when they recollect Jesus’ words that He was sent from heaven, they can picture it in their minds. When they remember Jesus and the angels telling them that Jesus will return from heaven in glory, they can picture it in their minds as well. This is out of this world stuff but it is real to Jesus’ disciples now.

So when you look at Jesus’ preparation of his disciples for the birth of the church he does four things. He makes it very real to them that He was raised from the dead, he proves to them that he is from heaven and that he will come back one day from heaven. He makes his teachings about the kingdom of God more real to them, and finally He tells that that they have a task to be his witnesses everywhere and they will fulfill that task when the power of God’s spirit comes upon them.

So what does this mean to us. Let me share three implications for us. The first is a clear understanding of who Jesus is. That is step one in Jesus’ preparation of his disciples. If we were going to be Christ ambassadors, we need to be certain about everything about Christ so that we too can declare it with conviction and authority. So Jesus took the trouble to spend time with the disciples after his resurrection proving his resurrection and also ascending to heaven in front of them. Today, if the larger church is in a mess, it is because people are not willing to testify to the authority of Jesus. There are churches

that are growing by doing what God has called them to do, but they are in the minority in the US. Many churches are growing by giving motivational talks and presenting a message that is focused on what people want to hear rather than what God wants people to hear. This is not right and those churches may prosper for a time but one day they will be empty and forgotten and irrelevant. If we want to serve Christ in the truest sense, we have to know Christ and be able to testify to who He is and what He has done for us and for them and for the world. When we can witness to Christ powerfully, amazing things will happen in the church.

Secondly, we need to be able to tell people everything that we have heard about the kingdom of God. Why? Because Jesus spent most of the time before and after his death and resurrection teaching about the Kingdom of God. The values of the Kingdom of God are opposite that of the world in every area. The church is where the values of the kingdom of God are practiced. It is the only institution that exists for honoring the King of the Kingdom of God. So our job is to live as ambassadors of God's kingdom in the kingdom of this world.

Thirdly, our job is to pray and wait for a special empowerment to come from God to be His witnesses. Now you might say, we are Christ followers and therefore we already have the Holy Spirit. To that I would say this. Every Christ follower has a measure of the Holy Spirit. However, if we were to think about our own spirit, sometimes we are very spirited and the energy level and enthusiasm shows in what we do. Sometimes our spirit is down and we feel low and have no desire to do anything. That variation in our spirit is normal. And we can't be high energy and high spirited all the time. But here is the deal. We will not be able to build many relationships in the low energy state, right? In our low energy state, it is like we have a sign over our heads which says, "keep away". It is the same with God's spirit activity in our lives. We received a small measure of God's spirit like a token down payment when we accepted Christ into our lives. But if that is the only

level of God's spirit operating in us, we don't really present much of God to those we are interacting with. We want people to be able to see more of God than that. That is what happened in Pentecost. We will get to that later. But to get to that level of God's spirit flowing in and through us we have to wait in prayer because that enables our spirit to step aside and make room for God's spirit to flow through us in full measure.

If you want to see a new church burst into life, three things are required from our passage today. Know authoritatively who Christ is, know whom you are called to witness to and prayerfully prepare for God's Spirit to flow in full measure through you in ways that are visible to those around you. That is what we see in happening the book of Acts and what we see everywhere the church is bursting with life. Let us pray and wait for that moment when we God will not whisper through us, but show Himself in a way that is God sized, in power and might and strength. Let us pray.