

Waiting and going

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[0:00] Don't you just hate waiting?

Yes. Your call is important to us. Please hold. You are number 76 in the queue.

I guess we humans are just naturally impatient. We want everything. We want it all. And most of all, we want it now.

And some waiting is just a waste of time. Certainly the waiting on those calls that you put through to the call centres.

There's not much else you can do while you're sitting there listening to some rather boring music.

But not all waiting is a waste of time. Sometimes waiting is useful.

[1:15] So when Queen Esther was called upon to petition the king to save the Jews, she fasted for three days in preparation. Before she put her plan into action.

Perhaps she was, as we say nowadays, needed to get her head in the right place. And I think there's something of that in Acts 1. The apostles needing to get their heads in the right place.

And we'll see that as we think about this chapter. Because in Acts 1 we find a lot about waiting. And there's also a lot about going.

Perhaps that's slightly not quite as obvious. But as we observed a few weeks ago. The resurrection of Jesus was not the end of his history, Luke's history.

It was in fact just the end of the beginning. Luke finished the gospel with talk of witnesses. And he picks up that theme again in volume 2.

[2:20] Luke's gospel finished with the end of the beginning. In Acts 1 we find the beginning of the end. Notice that the apostles have graduated.

They're not disciples anymore. They've graduated from the course. Verse 2 says, Until that day he was taken up into heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

Apostle means one who is sent. A messenger. That's the meaning of the term. And in this chapter we find a long wait and a short wait.

Let's think about the long wait first. In fact the ultimate wait if you want to call that is found in verse 11. Christians are waiting for the return of the Lord.

I don't think angels are normally noted for their irony or even sarcasm. But there seems to be a touch of it here. As the angel says to the apostles, Why are you gawping?

[3:35] There's stuff to be getting on with. You shouldn't just be looking up into heaven. Notice what the angel does say. He doesn't say the apostles themselves would see the Lord's return.

Rather he says that the Lord would return in the same way as they'd seen him go. Too often Christians have taken that to mean there is nothing to be done for the world until Jesus returns.

But this is clearly not Jesus' intention. And certainly not what he says in Acts 1. That wait in verse 11 acts on a divine time scale.

Do you remember in 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 8 and 9? Peter writes, Why are you looking up into the sky?

While we're waiting for the Lord's return, there's a whole lot of history that needs to happen. Look at verses 6 to 8.

[5:06] When they met together, they asked him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, It's not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set in his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be

my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

There was no way that was ever going to take place on a short time scale. In fact, it was actually impossible at the time, if you think about it. There were civilizations that Peter cannot possibly know existed, in South America, for instance, in other parts of the world.

They just didn't have the technology to get there. Some people, some Christians have talked about why polish the brass on a sinking ship.

But there's somewhat irony even in that, isn't there? Because, of course, that's 20th century technology, the great ocean liners. It's those liners that took the, and the 19th century ships that took the missionaries throughout the world.

History is all over one thing. It takes place in a geographical and historical context. Times and dates matter.

[6:41] History matters. But if the wait for the Lord's return operates on a divine schedule, the Book of Acts works on a human time scale.

It covers a period of about 30 years within the history and geography of the Roman Empire.

Spiritual history was accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ.

But it was the preaching of the apostles that would actually change the human world forever. Verse 8 sets the agenda. It's going to be some time before they see the Lord return.

But if there's a long wait in verse 11, there's also a short wait here, isn't there?

They're told, the Lord tells them to wait in Jerusalem. That is interesting to know why, think why that may be.

[8:17] They were told to go, but not immediately. As you read through Acts, you find that each step of the going is accompanied by a work of the Holy Spirit who kind of sets the timing.

But before they can go, they have to wait. It says that in verse 4, doesn't it? On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command.

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my father promised, which you have heard me speak about. Well, it's a good question, I think, to ask, why wait?

Why should this be? Why not go now? Surely the sooner, the better. The quicker you get on with it, the better. Why wait?

But when we wait on those dreadful customer helplines, we know why it is. It's because they're too busy to attend to us yet. So was Jesus saying, well, the Holy Spirit's a bit busy at the moment, but it'll get round to you as soon as you can.

[9:29] I think that's probably not the explanation. Holy Spirit doesn't have a bandwidth problem as far as we know. This wait was for the apostles' benefit, not his.

Why do they need to wait? I think it's worth reflecting on this, for Luke gives us some clues. So first of all, there's a time for history.

We read in verse 7 that the times and dates are set by the Father's authority, humanity. But we can't know that. First, when you first think of that, you think, well, surely we need to know that, don't we?

We need to know what's going on. But actually, whereas ignorance usually is, stops you doing things, actually, when it comes to the future, to history, ignorance is exactly what we need because there's apostles that are going to go on and actually create that history.

It's a bit like Schrodinger's cat, if you know about Schrodinger's cat. You don't know the history until you've observed it. That's something you can look up if you're not familiar with Schrodinger's cat.

But here, it looks, doesn't it, as though Jesus hasn't answered their question, is he going to restore the kingdom?

[11:12] But of course he is. As we dig a little deeper, we find this rather curious description of the waiting time from verse 11 to 26.

They're instructed to wait in Jerusalem.

And two events are recorded for us, both of which are worth a little consideration. One event that had to happen before they can go, it seems, is the death of Judas.

Which is quite interesting in itself because if there had been any other band of rebels hiding away from the Roman or Jewish authorities, somebody would have found opportunity to stick a knife in

the ribs of the traitor, wouldn't they?

That's what they did in those days and probably what they would do today for that matter. But nobody did. They remembered that vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay.

And so they waited for that to happen. then they saw that justice is served and at the same time a vacancy is created, which is why they feel the need to appoint another witness.

[12:25] That all takes time to happen. It doesn't all happen instantly. And another reason for waiting is that they need a time for prayer and indeed for thinking.

As I said, for getting their heads in the right place. After prayer in verse 14, things start to make sense. Peter says in verse 16, Brothers, the scripture has to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas who served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus.

Jesus. Why was there a traitor? Peter is saying well that was actually predicted long ago. Peter goes on, For said Peter, it is written in the book of Psalms, may his place be deserted, let there be no one to dwell in it, may another take his place of leadership.

During this period, Peter is beginning to understand the task they've been given. We know Peter from the Gospels, don't we?

Too often he opens his mouth before he's engaged his brain. But now he's beginning to take time to think and he's making good use of it.

[14:01] The apostles are to be witnesses, then a place for Judas must be found. And it has to be somebody who's been around from the beginning, somebody who has actually witnessed the events.

Of course, the final apostle to be appointed was Paul, but nonetheless, Peter at this time thinks, well there must be a witness. Somebody who actually is a witness, not just somebody who gets the name for the sake of it.

And so he proceeded accordingly. And Luke is, I think, reminding us at the beginning of this book in which there's so much about the work of the Holy Spirit, that the spirit is not a spirit of chaos and instant judgment, but rather a spirit of wisdom.

Luke has made this very point himself in his first book. Luke 1, verse 17 starts with these, says these words, he, of course, referring here to Jesus, the Messiah, he will go on before the Lord, sorry, it's not Jesus' case, it's John the Baptist, I beg your pardon.

He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready of people prepared for the Lord.

[15:32] the spirit there is the spirit and power of Elijah who is a spirit of wisdom to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make people prepared for the Lord.

Of course, Luke himself didn't just invent this idea. It runs throughout the Old Testament. Here's a couple of other examples. Deuteronomy 34 verse 9 says the following, Now Joshua, son of Nun, was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him.

So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses. And Isaiah describes the branch of David this way, the spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and power, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

The spirit comes to bring wisdom. And wisdom doesn't come instantly. We're just not wired that way. when you learn a new topic, you learn a new subject.

Mathematicians, I was a mathematics lecturer as most of you probably know. And it takes time, your brain takes time to organize things. Poincaré wrote a paper called The Role of the Subconscious in Mathematics.

[17:15] And we all find this, don't we, that something that seems confusing on the evening, we talk about going away and sleeping on it. And the next day it seems clearer.

Our brains take time to organize things. Wisdom doesn't happen instantly, not even through the Holy Spirit. And just notice how much change there was in Peter's understanding.

He moves from, is this the time when you're going to restore the kingdom? A little strip of land on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean to Acts 2 which we'll be looking at next week where he says the time has now come when the Lord will pour out his spirit and all flesh.

In those few weeks Peter and the other apostles have begun to get their head around the task that they're being appointed to. They're beginning to understand that this kingdom is going to be restored but not the kingdom just of that little strip of land but a kingdom that encompasses the whole world.

And it took them time to get used to the idea. And this is what they were doing in this waiting time. And there's actually another reason I think for this particular time of waiting.

[18:53] Because they picked the right opportunity or should we say the spirit picked the right opportunity. The spirit provided the opportunity but the spiritual wisdom of Peter was needed to grasp it.

Actually each of the stages with the spread of the gospel which we get in verse 8. Verse 8 kind of sets the agenda. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the utmost parts of the earth.

And as the gospel goes out in Acts we find that there's a special pouring out of the spirit at each of those stages. But it's a spirit that is increasing in wisdom and opportunity as the people began to grasp the task that they have at hand.

And particularly in Acts 2 when the spirit says it's time to go, to get moving, it was a time of particular opportunity and Peter understood that.

At Pentecost, Jerusalem was filled with visitors from all over the empire, the Roman empire. The spirit gave a very broad hint by letting them talk in different languages.

[20:10] But it was Peter's understanding who actually wrote the sermon, who gave the talk, who said this is the spirit being poured out on all flesh.

The spirit no longer only speaks Hebrew. He speaks all the languages of the world. when the spirit says go, it's the perfect opportunity with Jerusalem full of visitors.

Okay, but 2,000 years have gone by and we're still waiting for that expectation of the Lord's return. The task isn't yet finished. How is this passage relevant to us in the 21st century? I think to understand that it's worth unpicking those key verses 6 to 8 in a little more detail.

Is Jesus going to restore the kingdom? Is the question that the disciples ask. And at first sight it looks as though Jesus doesn't answer the question.

[21:35] In a sense it's one of those questions like have you stopped beating your wife that you can't give a simple answer to. He doesn't just answer yes or no because neither of those would really have answered the question in the way it should have been answered.

In order to give a proper answer to that question is Jesus about to restore the kingdom you have to unpick it and think about what is really meant here. And the first issue of course is what is the nature of the kingdom?

Do you remember those words of Jesus to Pilate? Jesus said my kingdom is not of this world. If it is my servants would have fought, would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews.

But now my kingdom is from another place. That as I said is why the apostles didn't take the opportunity to stick a knife into the ribs of Judas.

It wasn't that sort of kingdom that was being established. the apostles didn't fully understand that though clearly or they wouldn't have asked the question.

[22:56] But as I said there's a complete revolution in understanding isn't there? Getting from Acts 1 verse 6 are you going to restore the kingdom now? To Peter's sermon in Acts 2 I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.

The apostles have gone through a complete rethink. Now as again I've said before you cannot know the path of history.

And that's a good thing in fact. Because if you did you wouldn't do anything. The fact that we do not know the path of history is actually empowering.

Why? Jesus says you can't know the times and seasons. Well because you're just about to go out and construct it. The power of the spirit will bring that history into being.

But he's not going to do it through a military revolution. And he's not going to do it himself in person. Most remarkably of all perhaps it's not Jesus but the gospel preachers.

[24:10] who are going to bring that history about. You will receive power says Jesus. Not me. I'm going away as they saw.

Of course he remains with us and within us to give us that power and strength through the Holy Spirit. We sing that song don't we that not yet not I but Christ in me.

And that's true of course. but it is also true that this is human history. They have to go and do it. That's why I think the book is called the book of Acts.

There's a lot about the Holy Spirit in it. I think I actually remember Pastor Les many decades ago saying something like this. There's a lot about the Holy Spirit in Acts but it's not called the book of Acts.

the Acts of the Holy Spirit it's called the Acts of the Apostles. Of course that's exactly what it is. It was the apostles who would put that command into practice.

[25:15] This is human history they were constructing here. That's why the book is written on a human time scale. In a sense it's not Jesus himself who will battle for the kingdom.

It's eleven apostles a few women and some few other disciples a sort of motley crew we find in verses 13 to 15. They made a start but of course the task is not yet finished.

That's still working on the divine time scale until the Lord returns. Now it's time for us to engage the enemy. As we come to a close let's meditate on those well known words of Frank Horton.

Facing a task unfinished that drives us to our knees a need that undiminished rebukes our slothful ease.

We who rejoice to know thee renew before thy throne the solemn pledge we owe thee to go and make thee known. I think this captures the message of Acts 1 exactly.

[26:36] Pray think and then go. Now of course I think we need to be careful here and Frank Horton was a missionary of course and a missionary strategist.

I don't think of course that that means that everyone should sell their house and book a flight. As I've already pointed out if history was about that there wouldn't be any flights to book.

Jesus is claiming authority over not just the preaching of the gospel but of the whole of human history. His word goes to the ends of the earth and it does that as I say by human history by human technology to a large extent.

they didn't all leave Jerusalem. In fact some of those as we read on gathered in that original group stayed in Judea for many years.

After all if we were spending all our time flying about the world how could you establish a church? How could you build churches? How could you teach people properly about the word of God if everybody was always moving on?

[27:52] On the other hand of course some people do need to do that. Sell their house and book a flight. And we need to encourage those who are called by God to do that and give them the support they need to do it.

But all of us have this responsibility whether we go to what they used to call darkest Africa but of course you can't call it that anymore.

We used to go to places where they the gospel has never been preached before or if we stay here in a place where the gospel has been preached and now seems to be no longer regarded. We are all being witnesses to the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some will literally go others will witness in their hometown. And yet the commission of verse 8 isn't completed. so let me finish our sermon with another verse of that hymn which we're going to sing in a minute.

We bear the torch that flaming fell from the hands of those who gave their life proclaiming that Jesus died and rose. Ours is the same commission, the same glad message ours, fired with the same ambition, to thee we yield our powers.

[29:19] So as we study the book of Acts, let's be amazed by the work of the Spirit and the way the gospel spread in those early days, but remember also that we are fired with the same ambition because we have the same commission.

So to him we yield our powers. So let's sing that song as we close. Thank you.