

Acts Ch. 1 and 2

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to have to be more careful about what I say in sermons. Some of you might remember that last Sunday when we looked at the first part of Acts chapter 1, I talked about how the coming of the Holy Spirit, the promise of the Father, implies our great weakness and how God then will send us things which are beyond our power, beyond our financial resources, our physical power, our intellectual power, our numerical power, and that he will invite us into things which cause us to depend upon him.

And I said that on Sunday, and it's very easy to say things like that in a sermon. And then on Monday morning, Monday morning, I came into church and I met one of the brothers.

The brothers own the buildings sort of all over there in the parking lot, and they told me that they're selling the building. And the first thing that I went through my mind is, and I said it to them, I said, well, we might be interested in buying it.

Now, I also told them we had no money. But I said, we might be interested in buying it. And I think, well, you know, I would like to talk to you about it.

And I mentioned it to the wardens on Tuesday night, and their unanimous reaction was that it would be irresponsible for us not to let you folks know and to call out to God in prayer, just to see is it God's will that we purchase that property?

[1 : 3 8] Will God work a miracle of bringing in finances or lowering the price or whatever? Is it God's will? And so I preached this on Sunday, and now I am called to see that, with the warden's permission, to say we should pray as to whether it is God's will for us to be able to take that property and keep it sort of owned by Christians, to be used as a place of prayer and a place of mission and a place of outreach.

And we don't have the money, but we are called to pray. And you know what? We can pray, and maybe God will say yes. That will be a miracle.

To make him say, for him to say yes means it will also happen, and that will be a miracle. Maybe he'll say not yet, and maybe he'll say no. And if he says no, then that's his sovereign choice, his sovereign will.

But I invite you to pray as to whether God is calling us about that property. Please pray. And we'll see what happens.

So if people have any insights or prophecies or very large checks, you can speak to me or the wardens.

[3 : 0 3] But please pray. I'd like you to turn in your Bibles to page 943, Acts 1, verses 12 and following. And we continue along as we look through the first few chapters of Acts 1.

And the text that we're going to read today takes place in this odd 10-day period. Forty days before this, Jesus is risen from the dead.

At the end of verse 11, Jesus is ascended into heaven, bringing an end to his bodily, earthly ministry. And the angels have testified to the apostles what they've just seen, so they'll understand it correctly.

And also promise the apostles that Jesus will return in the same way that they've seen him lead. And they don't know it yet, but in 10 days' time, the Holy Spirit is going to fall upon them, and the church is going to be born.

And these two stories are stories where this little account is an account of that 10-day period. And this is how the text begins. Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem.

[4 : 15] This is Acts 1, verse 12. They returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath-day journey. And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James, the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the zealot.

He was a terrorist. And Judas, the son of James. These all continued with one accord, in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Now, I just want to pause here for a little bit of a second. And some of you might have noticed in my prayers that I asked that my prayer before this sermon that he might increase and we might decrease.

It's one of the famous sayings of John the Baptist, who was the greatest of all the prophets, the last of the prophets and the greatest of all the prophets. And one of the things, after Jesus' ministry had begun, John the Baptist's ministry started to go downhill.

The crowds that came to hear John the Baptist before Jesus' ministry began, the crowds for John the Baptist were huge. And once John the Baptist had baptized Jesus and said, Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world.

[5 : 41] That's why he is the greatest of the prophets. Everybody else pointed to the Messiah in a distance and in a dark type of manner, you know, in terms of seeing through a glass darkly.

And John the Baptist was the one who could literally watch Jesus walking in the dusty road and point to his disciples and say, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And after that declaration, Jesus' ministry took off. John the Baptist's ministry goes downhill. And John the Baptist's remaining disciples, because even some of John the Baptist's disciples have left John the Baptist and go to follow Jesus, and some of John the Baptist's remaining disciples say, John, doesn't it bother you that they're all going to see Jesus now?

And John's response was, He must increase and I must decrease. And, you know, that is to be the prayer of our hearts in ministry, that Jesus might increase and we might decrease.

For me as a minister, could you pray for me that my desire would be not that people want to know me, but that they will want to know Jesus? Can you pray that for Jono and the band, that people don't want to know Jono, they want to know Jesus?

[6 : 59] Can you pray that for the greeters? Can you pray that for Ben and for Dave? And for everybody involved, for the wardens and the treasurer and council members, and all leaders in the church, you know, for Nat, that the Father might pour His Holy Spirit upon us in such a way that the cry of our heart is that people might not desire to know us, but know Jesus.

That they won't want more of us, they want more of Jesus. And one of the things which is so wonderful about this little, these few verses which I've just read for you, is that in a very, very quiet and shy way, Luke shows that this is the heart of the apostles because he mentions the 11 remaining apostles, and after this reference, eight of them are never mentioned again.

They completely and utterly disappear. There's the odd reference to the apostles, et cetera, in general, but the actual name of the individual apostles, they just cease. The rest of the book of Acts as it describes the mission, the witness to Jerusalem, as it describes the witness to Samaria, as it describes the witness to the Gentiles, and the witness and the bringing of the gospel, right to the center of the empire, right to the very center of civilization and all power, right to Rome, and eight of their names completely and utterly are never mentioned again.

Isn't that just spectacular? I mean, could we but have the attitude of these first apostles that it doesn't matter whether our name gets mentioned at all?

What matters is that the witness to Jesus continues. What matters is that people come to faith. What matters is that people be filled with the Holy Spirit, that the church be built up, and whether their names get written up, do not matter at all.

[8 : 59] The other thing which is so wonderful about this little account of these people as they obey Jesus and return to Jerusalem, is that it's not just, you know, you look at it, it's the apostles, it's the apostles, it's the women, it's Mary, and it's Mary, and it's Jesus' brothers, and they all gather, and they're all with one accord in prayer and supplication, and this is something else which is really wonderful.

Remember I said that, you know, if we really have the desire in our hearts that this, that we are, that the people in this church are to have such a servant heart that we learn that he must increase and we must decrease, one of the things that's implied with that is that he's the boss and we are not.

Remember I began by saying I am inviting us as a congregation to begin a season of serious prayer as to whether God is calling us, whether God will make straight the way that that property would become part of the property of St. Albans to the glory of God that he might increase and we might decrease.

And the acknowledgement that he must increase is that he is greater and that we ask and he might say no and he might say not yet and he might say yes and we don't know but he's invited us to ask.

The apostles pray and pray and pray and they also have to wait and wait and wait. This is really, I mean they only have to wait 10 days in this case. But you know, it's not the matter of they pray and it happens.

[10 : 35] They pray and it happens. They pray and it happens. There's many times in our life and in the life of the church where God is just calling us to persevering prayer. One of my favorite saints is St. Monica.

And the thing I love about St. Monica is that St. Monica had a burden to pray for a son and her son was brilliant and immoral and lived a debauched and successful life.

It's possible to be both debauched and successful and brilliant. And she prayed for her son and prayed for her son and prayed for her son and prayed for her son. The years went by, the years went by and finally he came to Christ and we now know him as one of the people who changed the entire course of the Western world because his name is St. Augustine.

And that's a spectacular example of persevering prayer. And so he who was successful and debauched and brilliant turned to Christ and to holiness and the service of his great mind completely and utterly submitted to the person of Jesus Christ to expound the scriptures, to explain the Christian vision and the Christian intellect and to form it for generations to come.

And so sometimes, brothers and sisters, we are called to pray and pray and pray and wait and wait and wait and pray and pray and pray.

[12 : 08] Let's continue on with the story. And in the next, in two verses from now, there's a verse which if it wasn't there and if all of the verses like it weren't there in the Bible, then from the perspective of the world and the flesh, my life would be a lot easier.

From the perspective of the world and the flesh, if verse 16 wasn't in the Bible and if all of the verses like verse 16 weren't in the Bible, my life would be a lot easier.

But that's just from the perspective of the world and the flesh. Here's how it goes. In those days, verse 15, Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples. Altogether, the number of names was about 120 and said, and here verse 16 has been translated poorly.

It should really be brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters, this scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.

Now you're probably wondering, George, how on earth is this passage of scripture causing you lots of trouble? How is it that from the perspective of my flesh and the world, my life would be simpler if this verse in the Bible wasn't here?

[13 : 27] You know, it's very, very subtle but very, very profoundly spoken. There are many people today in the church who say the church wrote the Bible and now the church can rewrite the Bible.

And this passage of scripture says that that idea is completely and utterly wrong. Not slightly wrong, not a little bit mistaken, it's completely wrong.

And because what this verse is saying is, actually here's a bit of an aside. It's been dawning on me lately that sometimes I have these little expressions in my mind that I think are Canadian expressions and because I'm a child of immigrants, I realize that sometimes it's from my home country, they're not Canadian.

But you might have heard the old thing, you know, is it the chicken or the, like which came first, the chicken or the egg? And the answer as to which came first, the chicken or the egg, is that God created both.

That's the solution to it. So it's not a matter that, you know, sort of the church wrote the Bible and now we can rewrite the Bible, but as we're going to, I'll bring out to you in a moment, this passage says that God is responsible for the word of God being written and God is responsible for the church being formed.

[14 : 42] God creates the Bible, God creates the church. It's not a matter of the church writing the Bible or anything like that, but God creates the Bible, God creates the church.

They're both his idea. Listen to the verse more carefully, verse 16. Men and brethren, brothers and sisters, this scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke by the mouth of David.

The Holy Spirit spoke by the mouth of David. This is just, it means, and then in a moment he's going to quote two Psalms and what Peter is saying is that it was, it was ultimately the Holy Spirit that spoke these words through the mouth of David.

Now, it's not saying that David became, like, David wasn't a fax machine, a human fax machine and God drafted a letter up in heaven and it just sort of had to, happened to pop out through his mouth.

The Bible leaves completely and utterly mysterious and anonymous the psychological and emotional processes which went on in the writing of scripture.

[15 : 51] And because God uses human beings, it means that, it means that the scripture comes out in, in Greek or, you know, or in Hebrew. And it means that scholars later on they can date, when you're looking at the Old Testament, whether this looks like it was written earlier or later sometimes because the Hebrew looks like it's an older Hebrew or a newer Hebrew.

And it means that, it means that we don't know about the processes. Like, so in a sense, the scripture, if you heard David, David would have had a royal accent, if you know what I mean.

You know, and if you heard Peter preaching in that which became scriptures, he had a Galilean accent. In fact, one of the problems for the early, the early people in Jerusalem is that Peter sounded like a hick.

Okay? He sounded like an uneducated, working class hick. And they were expecting him to sound, you know, and we maybe expect God to sound sophisticated and urbane and maybe a little bit like a CBC announcer, something mid-Atlantic.

And God can speak like a hick and then he can speak like a poet and then he can speak in very classical, fancy language and then he can speak like he's a bureaucrat because the Bible doesn't say, you know, it isn't saying here that every human being who's been part of the process of scripture being written is like a fax machine and it just sort of pops out of their mouth.

[17 : 14] It's through the mouth of David but it's the Holy Spirit who has the words that the Holy Spirit wants or the words that ultimately come. This is really, really important for us to understand.

If you could go back in a time machine, you might find out that one of those two psalms that David wrote, that he wrote it after he had called all of his family and all of his friends to fast and pray for him because he felt that he had to write something really important and maybe you'll find out that he fasted and he prayed and he studied and he went to the temple and as a result of this long process, he wrote one of those psalms and maybe if you went back in time, you might discover that the other one came after he'd had the most spectacular wedding celebration for one of his kids and he was a little bit tipsy from wine and he sat down and he whipped it off and I'm not being disrespectful to scripture because the Holy Spirit speaks through the mouth of David and the words, it's the words in scripture which are inspired by God and it is completely and utterly up to the sovereign power of God what psychological, emotional, cultural things were going through the human authors as they wrote but the final words were the words that God wanted and that's why this scripture says in verse 16 that the scripture had to be fulfilled because God is the one who spoke it.

If it had just been David speaking, it doesn't have to be fulfilled, you know, it's just like if I say this is what we have to do folks and, you know, 90% of you say that's the dumbest idea in the world, then my word doesn't have to be fulfilled, does it?

And same with David. All sorts of times that people didn't go along with what David said. His own son didn't go along with what he, his own son tried to kill him. There's all sorts of times that it doesn't have to happen the way David spoke but these particular things have to be fulfilled because it's the Holy Spirit speaking by the mouth of David.

Let's just continue on to give the rest of the text. Verse 17, for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry. Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out and it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem so that the field is called in their own language Akel Dama, that is, field of blood.

[19 : 45] For it is written in the book of the Psalms, let his habitation be desolate and let no one live in it and let another take his office. Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.

And they proposed two. Joseph called Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justice, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two you have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.

And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. Now, just a little bit of a cool thing from church history.

From church history, it's reported that Matthias became the apostles to the Ethiopians. Isn't that a cool thing to know? Here's this guy in Jerusalem, and he doesn't realize that when he, I mean, he starts off getting to know Jesus, and little does he know that he's going to probably die in Ethiopia as a witness to Jesus.

Isn't that just the most, anyway, I just think it's really cool. You know, you start to embark on this path of following Jesus, you never know where it's going to end up. You really don't. Because he is to be sovereign.

[21 : 19] He is to be sovereign. Now, the thing about this passage here is it shows that Jesus is building his church. And we are to model in our lives that Jesus is building the church.

Notice in verse 24, and this is one of those just astounding things. Remember, Jesus, like six weeks earlier, Jesus was hanging on the cross, dying.

And now approximately six weeks later, Peter and the others say, You, O Lord. The context shows that they are praying to Jesus.

I mean, that's just astounding. Six weeks later, they are praying to Jesus. You, O Lord. And they're calling out to him. They know that somebody has to replace.

And this call to be a servant, because the word ministry, which is used here, originally was a word used to describe somebody who brings food at a meal.

[22 : 25] You know, I don't know if you've ever been at a fancy meal, but if you've been at a fancy meal, one of the things, one of the goals would be if owners of really fancy establishments, if they could invent invisible ways for the food to get there, that's what they would want.

You see, because the goal is to remember the food and the companionship, not to remember the waiter. You know, unless you only remember the waiter because they've been so fantastic, they've been so humble, gracious, attentive, et cetera, and meeting your needs.

But they're completely self-effacing to get that food out and to make the person who is the guest feel completely just well-received. And the word here used for ministry is the word to describe that.

And so the call to that type of humble service, which will also work in witnessing to the resurrection, and they understand that somebody is called to be a leader in this, which Jesus is called to, so they call out to Jesus that he might make the continuing choice in who that person is going to be.

And so they've been gathered in prayer, they've been gathered in studying the scriptures, they've also used some of their thinking to try to think some things through, but at the end of the day they want to leave the final decision to Christ.

[23 : 48] And in this particular case it's the only time after the Holy Spirit comes on Pentecost, the apostles are never described as using lots again. They use an old Jewish habit which ends with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

But they show forth this fundamental principle, Jesus is building his church. And since Jesus is building his church, what should we do?

We say, Jesus, what would you have us do? Who would you have in this particular role? Jesus, we will acknowledge that we think that these might be the people that you are choosing, but you are the one who has to make that final choice.

And there's no elections in the New Testament. But there is fasting and prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit and studying the scriptures that the one that God has chosen might step into that role.

may such be our heart as well. Let us bow our heads in prayer. Father, we acknowledge and confess before you that we Canadians at this time, that we like to try to reduce things to processes and we like to reduce things to reduce things in such a way that we can be powerful and we can be in control and we can be in mastery.

[25 : 18] And Father, we acknowledge that before you that that's a problem, that that's gotten out of whack in us, that we have to learn, Father, to be open to your leading and your guiding, open to your Holy Spirit, submissive to your word, desirous of knowing your will and bringing you glory, that we must be desirous of humility and humble service and witnessing to the resurrection.

We ask, Father, that those good things in our culture, that they not be taken from us, but in the midst of whatever good lessons we might learn from how to figure things out, that we might, in all things and in all ways, submit to your rule, your guidance, the power of your Holy Spirit, the authority of your word.

Father, teach us humility that we might submit to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.