

Witness to the Ends of the Earth

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[0 : 00] Now imagine if you were one of the 12 disciples and the fact of Jesus' resurrection is slowly starting to sink in.

He's really alive. Really. Can it be true? It must be. He's eating with us. He's walking with us. And not just me, but the others as well. They can see it. I know it's impossible, but it's as Jesus promised. We've done it.

Or perhaps he's done it. But now what? Where do we go from here? Is this it? Or is there a plan? Otherwise, why did Jesus rise from the dead? Now I'm only guessing at the disciples' reactions, but judging by their questions in this passage, it's not unreasonable to think that these may have been on their minds.

[1 : 06] At the same time, they probably didn't know yet that Jesus was about to leave them again. But Jesus knew, and so was preparing them for it. He had 40 days to do so.

A summer intensive, you might think. And so the book of Acts begins with this introduction. Luke writes, In my former book, Theophilus, I, Luke, wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

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

Of course, Luke's former book is the Gospel of Luke. And earlier in the year, when we were finishing up on that in chapter 24, we did see, didn't we, that Jesus rose from the dead and did exactly what Luke writes here.

He appeared to them, gave them proof that he was alive, and then also began teaching from the scripture. So if you looked at chapter 24 of Luke, verses 24 and onwards, it says, this, Jesus says, this is what I told you while I was still with you.

[2 : 24] Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. He told them, this is what is written.

The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem.

Now, this is the gospel in a nutshell, isn't it? The good news about Jesus. And Jesus was referring them to the Old Testament in his teaching to show them that this is the fulfillment of God's promises.

God had promised that he would raise his Messiah and through him offer forgiveness of sins through the preaching of this message to all nations. And of course, this promise, if you want to find passages that say this explicitly, I think it's found the most explicitly in the Old Testament reading that we had in Isaiah chapter 49 and verse 6.

And there, it writes, it is too small a thing for you to be my servant, that's what God says, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. He's talking to the Messiah here.

[3 : 34] I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation will reach to the ends of the earth. This is what Luke now refers to here in Acts 1 as the kingdom of God.

Jesus was speaking about it and it's what's also on the disciples' minds in verse 6. So you see, the what's next in God's plan is this.

God raised Jesus from the dead in order to restore his kingdom. First, through the restoration of Israel and then using Israel to be a light to the nations so that Gentiles, those who are not Jews, can be brought into God's kingdom.

Now the order here is important because God seeks firstly to honor his promises to Israel by installing Jesus as her king before then gathering the Gentiles into this same kingdom. Now Jesus isn't the king of Israel on the one hand and then the king of the rest of the world on the other. No, the savior of the world is a Jewish Messiah. In Christ, God brings both Jew and Gentile together into one kingdom.

[4 : 51] And so in light of that, the disciples' questions in verse 6 actually make sense. They ask about God restoring the kingdom to Israel. Now before we get there, we begin, however, with the first thing that Jesus says in verse 4 and that is to wait for the Holy Spirit, which is the first point on the outline.

On one occasion while he was eating with them, Jesus gave them this command, Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift 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.

You see, restoring God's kingdom isn't something the disciples will be able to accomplish by themselves. And since Jesus was about to leave them shortly, physically, they need another to empower them for this work.

Thus, the gift of the Holy Spirit. And so if you've ever wondered what the purpose of the Spirit is in our lives as Christians, then this is one key reason.

It's to fulfill what God has promised about his kingdom. Namely, for us to be witnesses as we shall see in verse 8. Now it's interesting however to note that Jesus connects the Spirit, the baptism of the Spirit with John's baptism.

[6 : 10] He says, John baptizes with water but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. What's the connection here? Well, baptism by water signifies repentance, doesn't it?

That's what John preached, repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This act by the believer then, of repentance humbly coming before God, is a necessary precondition for baptism by the Spirit. Both occur together in time, but a heart of repentance actually precedes the giving of the Spirit. Without repentance, there is no Holy Spirit.

Why? Because He's the Holy Spirit, isn't He? We need to be made clean before God, before His presence can dwell in us. And this comes only with the blood of Jesus washing away our sins. Now it's at this point that I said before that the disciples asked about the kingdom. After all, with Jesus teaching them and showing them from the Old Testament, it's a natural question to ask. In their minds, the promise of the Spirit doesn't quite gel with their expectations about Israel's kingdom.

[7 : 24] They probably had a physical restoration in mind. You know, back to the good old days of King David or Solomon where they would have a king sitting on the throne in Jerusalem and then ruling the world from there.

Well, listen to Jesus' reply. Verse 7. He said to them, It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. Now He's not saying here that God wouldn't restore the kingdom of Israel or to Israel.

He's merely saying the timing shouldn't be the disciples' concern. Instead, they should focus on their part in this restoration, which He now explains in verse 8.

He says, 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.

And these words echo what Luke has already said in his Gospel in chapter 24. This also is a fulfillment of the Old Testament scripture, in particular Isaiah 49. But what is now revealed as well is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 32] He will empower His disciples for this work. And this promise carries down to all of us, doesn't it? As a church, together, but also individually as members of Christ's body.

We're all, if we're Christians, witnesses of Jesus Christ. I don't know how you feel when you read this, but for me, this promise is meant to comfort and encourage us.

Jesus clearly indicates we're not to do this work on our own strength. In fact, we can't. Hence, why the disciples had to wait for the Spirit to come first before they can go out.

But when He does come, then Jesus says, they will be witnesses for Him. It's interesting, isn't it? Because it's actually not a command, but rather a statement of what will happen.

Just by virtue of God's Spirit and work in them, they will be witnesses, provided they are willing agents. And that's really what we'll start to see in the rest of Acts.

[9 : 43] As the Gospel goes out, the good news of Jesus goes out from Jerusalem to the ends of the world. Not everything is going to be smooth sailing, there'll be hardship and persecution, but the Gospel progresses in spite of it.

it marches ahead, unstoppable, in both time and space. Notice too, however, the concentric way this happens. First in Jerusalem, which is the city of David, from which the king of Israel rules, but then to Judea and Samaria, all Judea and Samaria, it says, signifying the unification of the tribes of Jacob.

Because remember, there was the north and the south kingdom, and then there was Samaria with the Samaritans being hated by the Jews and all that. No, God's going to bring all that together into a restored and united Israel.

And then from there, finally, to the ends of the earth. And again, without preempting our study of Acts, that's again how we see the Gospel progressing in the book.

First to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. Now, if you are here at HDD 10 years ago, anyone? You, maybe, yep.

[10 : 51] you may remember this analogy that I used to describe the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And I reckon if I use the same analogy 10 years apart, it's probably not too bad.

The image I used to have of the outpouring of the Spirit was, you know, an individual pouring. Isn't it? I became a Christian and God pours His Spirit into me. Now, that's true.

I think that's a valid way of thinking about it. But, as we read Acts 1, verse 8, that's not the full story, is it? That doesn't account fully for this connectedness of the Spirit that we have tying us back to this historic outpouring in Jerusalem.

We are united to that event in some way as a single body of Christ across time and space. In fact, those of us who are Gentiles were gathered, aren't we, back into a restored Israel with Jesus as our common King.

Now, it's like for the fact that you think about this, the Queen, she's the Queen of England and she's the Queen of Australia, right? But we're two sovereign nations, aren't we? And so she's actually Queen, you know, separately of England and then separately of Australia.

[12 : 11] But that's not the way it is with Jesus. Jesus is the King of one single united kingdom. Both Jews and Gentiles are in it together.

He's not the King of the Jews and then the King of the Gentiles, no. He's King of all of us. One King. And so I have this other alternate image that I have in my mind and it got printed in the outlines even though I was trying to save it just for the slides but anyway.

Stole my thunder but it doesn't matter. And the image here is the image of a champagne towel and this is the analogy that I did 10 years ago so you might remember this. But what happens, maybe not, a bit optimistic but if you do, that was the analogy.

But what happens when you fill a champagne towel is that you pour the champagne only in the top glass, don't you? Right? But as a result of you pouring and pouring and pouring, all the other glasses get filled along the way, don't they?

And I think that's the same with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. All the subsequent Christians receive the Spirit as a result of the witness of the initial disciples.

[13 : 23] It's as a result of the witness of disciples passing it on that the Spirit's presence then spreads throughout the world. Now as I said, both images apply.

God's Spirit is given to us individually but the means by which this occurs is through the Word which is the witness of Christians that go before us. If you are a Christian today, you're only a Christian because of the witness of another disciple.

Now even though you may, for example, have just read a book by an author you don't know, it's actually by the witness of that author, isn't it, that you've come to faith. Or even if you just read the Bible and you become a Christian, well, the disciples wrote the New Testament, didn't they?

And so they are witnessing to you as you read the Bible. And so it's in that way that there is a chain of witnesses that goes all the way back to that first outpouring in Jerusalem.

You may have your parents to thank for being a Christian or a friend or a relative, but they in turn would have relied on someone else. And so if you go back far enough, you arrive at that 120 disciples in the upper room at Pentecost.

[14 : 43] That's the little connection, that's the connection, that's the chain of connection like those champagne glasses, isn't it, that goes from the very start in Pentecost and then somehow or other

has come down to you.

Now let me finish the rest of the passage before we consider what to make of this image. But in verses 9 to 11, Jesus ascends into heaven. After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their side.

They were looking intently up in the sky as he was going when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand there looking into the sky? 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.

Now as you read this, you can't really blame the disciples for how they react, can you? After all, the sight of Jesus being taken up to heaven isn't something you've been witness every day, if at all. Still, they had to be jolted out of their amazement by the angels. And again, being jolted by angels is not something that happens to you every other day either, is it?

[15:55] although some of them would probably have had the same experience if they had gone to the empty tomb. But the angels rightly remind them of their mission. Jesus will return exactly as how he has gone to heaven.

But in the meantime, they have to go back to Jerusalem and await the outpouring of the Spirit. Now, what's the significance of this little detail here in the story? I think it's to impress on the disciples that yes, Jesus will return.

They may not know when, but he will return. And so as a result, there's urgency to their task. Who knows how long they will have? Stop standing and looking in the sky.

Go back. Get ready. Now, as many of you will know, Acts 1, verse 8 is actually the key verse of the entire book. If you read the rest of the book with this verse in mind, you'll get what the point of any passage is, mostly.

And in terms of narrative, what you see from here on in is exactly this. What happens in verse, what is described in verse 8, the work of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles being witnesses of Jesus, firstly in Jerusalem, and then going out and out to the ends of the earth.

[17:09] And we'll come back to that in the coming weeks. But for now, I just want to pause and consider what we can take away from this initial passage. I think I have three points.

First, we can marvel, can't we, at just how God's plan has unfolded exactly as He's promised. Across time and place.

As a result of the Spirit working in the witnesses of Jesus, the good news of Jesus has spread across the world. no one can deny that, can't we?

Now, we're not fully there yet, but the Gospel, the Gospel has reverberated across history. And so, in light of that, let me not encourage you never to doubt that the Holy Spirit is still at work.

Every time someone becomes a believer, it's evidence of the Holy Spirit at work. it's that champagne filling over and spilling into another person.

[18:21] The Spirit of God is still at work. Believe that. Secondly, if you're a Christian here today, then give thanks that the Gospel has found you in this way.

You're not a champagne glass, are you, that's been sitting out there by yourself. But no, God has put you into that tower. God has arranged for someone, a glass just above you, to witness to you about Jesus.

You did not seek out the Lord Jesus, but He found you through His witness, by His Spirit. So, thank God for that. Thank God for the person or the people in your life that played that role to be a key witness for Jesus.

Jesus. And then third, having given thanks, why don't you be that witness as well? That God has given you that Spirit, His Spirit for.

See, that you're part of this grand plan of God to see His kingdom grow. Isn't that great? To know that you're part of God's plan and this is the plan for you to be a witness by His Spirit so that His kingdom, His gospel, can go to the ends of the world.

[19:40] So many people want to find what their purpose is in life. Well, you've got it here. This is your purpose as a Christian. Wouldn't you like to pass on the good news to someone else in the same way that someone has passed it on to you?

Now, you may think you haven't got what it takes, but you know, just look at the twelve disciples. They weren't that impressive either, were they? Fishermen, tax collector, they're pretty much nobodies, right?

Some had doubt, you know, even when they saw Jesus rise from the dead and all of them were a little slow to understand, weren't they? I mean, even after they had been taught by the very best in the person of Jesus Christ, they did get it fully, did they?

But then, in the next chapter when the Holy Spirit comes, see what power they had after that. It's pretty clear, isn't it, that what they achieved was not down to their smarts or their natural talent, but due to God who empowered them to be Christ's witnesses.

Likewise, if you think of the people that taught you and witnessed to you, by and large, they're just ordinary people, aren't they? And yet, you're still a Christian. You became a Christian because of them, didn't you?

[20 : 59] So I say, don't overestimate the part you play. But also, don't underestimate what the Holy Spirit can do in you.

Instead, if you're a bit lost or a bit fearful, then let me suggest, start by praying. Pray that God will use you. Pray that God will open your eyes as to what you can do next.

Pray for others who are already doing that work. But then, as you pray, expect that God will answer and show you where to start. Perhaps, you can join others who are already doing it.

Because this work of witnessing is a shared work, isn't it, that we do as Christ's body. Some do the talking, but others might just bring people to the people doing the talking.

I'll just use an example that I used this morning. Some of you will know that there's a group of people from St. John's and here too at HTD that have started going along to the Blackburn market, second Saturday each month, setting up a tent, flipping pancakes, doing craft things with kids, and then engaging with people in conversation.

[22 : 20] Now, do you think that it's only those people that are talking and engaging, that they are the only ones that are being witnesses? No, right? They're all doing it together.

Even when you're flipping pancakes or setting up the tent, when we do all this together, we're together witnesses for the Lord Jesus, aren't we? And so I think if you don't want to do it alone, well, just join others who are already doing it and follow their lead.

You might learn something, but if not, you're helping out. You're doing the work of witnessing together, aren't you? And then, of course, let's not forget to support those who do go overseas as missionaries, as we've been praying for the deans, or for people like Jillian and Sandra who are working in university campuses, or even some of you who go and join AFES or Power to Change or whatever.

Pray for them. Encourage them. And if those of them are doing as a paid ministry, support them financially. And generously. As you can see, there's a lot of ways, when we start to think about it, that we can be part of this work, can't we?

That we can be part of being Christ's witnesses to the ends of the world. And we do it not because we're forced to, but because the Spirit is already in us.

[23 : 46] It's already been given to us, spurring us on to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus. God has already given us all we need to do our part.

So really, let's pray, let's go, and let's do it. Why don't I pray? Father, thank you for the wonderful plan that you've revealed to us in the Scriptures, that raising your son from the dead, you have enthroned him as Israel's Messiah, and you are restoring all of us to his kingdom.

thank you for the gift of the Spirit for all who believe in him. Help us to do what we've been empowered to do, to be witnesses of the gospel to the world.

Bring your plan of salvation for the world to fruition, and send your son back to usher this wonderful kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.