

Against All Odds: The Surprising Return - Part 1

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[0:00] When we bought our house, we were not thinking about the school district as we were homeschooling our older boys.

But then when we decided to send them to public school, we realized that God had placed us in our house in our school district for a reason. This is where God has planted us.

So we want to be bright and salty for him here. We are here for such a time as this. So we strive to be faithful to share Christ. I've been able to share the gospel with several parents at soccer games, and I still text with and try and meet with one of the dads from Ethan's football team from back in seventh grade.

My best opportunities to share Christ and continue building relationships come mostly through my kids. I make gifts, write up the cards with a scripture verse, add invitations to events such as our church Christmas services, and my boys deliver the gifts to their teachers and their coaches.

The newest opportunity for me to accompany students on their instrumental solos brings me into direct contact with band students and teachers, but it is only for 10 to 15 minutes of focused practice time.

[1:10] So in order to share Christ and encourage those students, I prepare a small package of chocolate chip cookies to give each one after they've performed. This is a unique connection point for me as I have accompanied some of the same students now for two years.

It's neat to see them in the school hallways or at a concert and have them wave and say, Hi, Ethan's mom. This is also how our ministry to Alejandro began. I have always enjoyed talking about the Bible and everyone I have been friends with has known quickly that I am a Christian.

This has led to many opportunities to talk about spiritual concepts. One time I specifically remember it was when a friend who did not know much about the Bible and who I shared a study hall with asked me to tell her all about it one day. I attempted to tell her about the seven seas of history that answers in Genesis has put together and was quite thankful for that opportunity to make the truth of God's word clear to someone.

I was somewhat known as the preacher of my friend group and would often be, mostly jokingly, asked a spiritual question that I would do my best to answer biblically. I also have consistently put spiritual connections in assignments and have written papers with a focus on biblical topic many times.

I've been able to invite one of my friends from school to church and other events and a few other people along the way. I've also been able to invest in some friends by going to a couple of grad parties and marching band events, which has allowed for deeper and more real relationships.

[2:27] In school, I will often sneak Bible passages, biblical principles, or even the gospel into assignments. And through relationships and a life that strives with the Holy Spirit's help to be like Christ, I've been able to share Jesus and the Bible with my words.

When we play soccer and baseball, we've been able to invite our teammates to Awana. We like to talk to our neighbors about knowing God too. I don't know if any of you feel intimidated about the prospect of sharing the gospel with others.

How do we go about being a witness to the people in our community? How do we go about sharing Christ and communicating the gospel? And it can seem a little overwhelming, maybe a little intimidating.

And perhaps you have, like me at some times, thought, well, I don't have the gift of evangelism, so obviously it's not my job. It's for the people who God's gifted for that, not for me.

But of course, God has called us all to this mighty work, the work of sharing Christ with the people that He has placed us in relationship with. But in order for that to happen, we have to be in relationship.

[3:45] And we have to be available. Well, it begins, we kind of walked through this four-stage process. The Manwellers kind of introduced that to us over the last four weeks or so.

It begins with prayer. Prayer does a couple of things. The first thing that prayer does is it helps to change your heart. The truth is that probably for a lot of us, we just don't care about our neighbors. We're happy to go right into the scene. We drive into our garage, the door goes up, the door goes down, and we don't have any conversations with any of our neighbors.

So we miss opportunities because we're not praying for God to do a work in our life. Now, fortunately, that's not for all of you. A lot of you do engage your neighbors, and I'm encouraged and challenged by that.

The second piece is by building relationship. How do you get to know and build friendship with your neighbors? Just this past week, what a golden and strategic opportunity to get out with a shovel or a snowblower and to meet neighbors.

[4:59] We had the joy as our family for three of our neighbors to all kind of rally around one little house, and that person brought out tea for us all to share, and three different families got to enjoy this relationship of building and serving, and that's the next component.

Serving your neighbors so you can build those transaction moments, those relational opportunities that God uses just through simple things that we can all do like shoveling snowy walkways or even raking leaves, whatever you can do to make connections with the people that God has put you in contact with.

Just yesterday, one of our neighbors came and brought a meal to us. I don't even know if he's a believer, but just through those relational connections, it's neat how God uses those to then give us opportunities.

And that last piece is capitalizing on those relational opportunities to share Christ with them. You're asking questions. You're building friendships. And so there are heart connections that are being made, and then opportunities that God will instrumentally provide for us as we're willing to step in and to do some of those easy things.

And so being an evangelist doesn't have to be very difficult. It just means that we're available a lot of times, and praying that God will change our heart and provide those opportunities so that we can capitalize on them.

[6:39] I trust that God will help us throughout the course of this year, the next several months, as we're working through the book of Acts, learning about the church, learning about how God is awakening hearts and calling people to himself, this church age that we can all be a part of through the power of God working in obedient people.

And I trust that we'll all have the joy of seeing God work instrumentally through us as there's availability in our hearts to do what God has called us to do.

Well, this morning we find ourselves in Acts chapter 1, and we're going to be focusing our attention on verses 12 and 13 this morning. But I'm going to read for us, by way of introduction, verses 12 to 14, just kind of set the context for our study this morning.

Acts chapter 1, beginning in verse 12. Read along with me as I read. You can just follow along. It says, Then they returned to Jerusalem, speaking about the apostles.

They returned from Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the zealot, and Judas the son of James.

[8:12] All these, with one accord, were devoting themselves to prayer together with the women in Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers. I want to begin our time together today.

And really, there's only really one main point to the message today. And that is simply this. To observe and to evaluate, to appreciate this obedient return to Jerusalem.

Their obedient return to Jerusalem. It's really easy to read verses 12 to 14 and think, Well, that's quite unextraordinary. That's exactly what we would expect.

That's kind of normal, don't you think, Andrew? That Jesus told them to go back to Jerusalem. And, well, they go back to Jerusalem. Duh, of course. That's what we expect.

But maybe it's because it's something we expect, because we've read this story so many times. And because we really haven't taken a pause, which I really want to do this morning.

[9:12] Just a pause. I want us to step back, and I want us to appreciate the surprising nature of this return. How essentially it's against all odds that the work of God in bringing the apostles back, these 11 apostles, I want us to see this is a work of God.

Not just obedient apostles. Not just following a command. But it's the work of God in the hearts of these 11 apostles to bring them back to Jerusalem.

It's an astounding, even miraculous work of God. And because we're so familiar with the story, we think, well, this is exactly where they should be.

Of course, they're here in Jerusalem, and they're back in the place where many of the things that we saw in the gospel of Luke have happened. In Acts 1, verse 13, it says they went, they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying.

And again, the upper room, this is where we expect them to be. This is likely the place where they enjoyed together with Christ this last supper. It was somewhere in Jerusalem that they're staying with Jesus before his ascension.

[10:31] We see that in verse 4 of chapter 1. While staying with them, speaking of Jesus, he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem. And so we have a tendency to hear this information and say, well, of course, this is exactly what should happen.

This is exactly what we expect. And since we know this story, we anticipate this return. But when we read these words, then they returned to Jerusalem.

I want us to appreciate the miraculous work of God. The spectacular nature. I want us to marvel at these words. Then they returned. How ordinary they may seem, but how extraordinary they really are.

As we have fresh eyes and understand the work of God in the lives of these men and the lives of the 120 that we're going to see in just a moment.

The lives of this small group of believers. And here they are, right back at the beginning. Marvel at the work of God.

[11:37] I think we're going to be enriched to see the mission with fresh eyes. To see this face of zeal that comes with these believers.

To approach and to understand that as we see God's work in their lives, we can also have confidence as we join ourselves to the building work of a building God.

That Jesus has said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And so what we see here at the very start of this story is what needs to be true of every heart in life as we anchor ourselves in confidence to the work of God and the work of the Spirit to carry out this ministry of church planting that He's called us to.

So briefly, I want to take note of these spectacular words. Then they returned. And I want us to understand the immediate obedience that we see.

Then they returned. This word for then is a word that signifies immediate action. It's directly following this interaction of the disciples with Jesus who then ascends and the angels that come and say, well, what are you guys doing standing around?

[13:00] He's going to come back just as He promised you but He's not here now. And so what do they do? They return. Well, they return because they're following a command.

There's no hesitation. There's no delay. There's no second guessing. They know exactly what they're to do and they do it. Acts chapter 1 verse 4, remember it says, while they were staying with them or while staying with them and He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father which He said, you heard from Me.

Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem. And so He ordered them to do this and that's exactly what they do and they do it without hesitation. Marvel at the immediate obedience of the disciples.

but also marvel at the purposefulness of their obedience. It was purposeful. Verses 12 and 13 say this again, then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying. Now it's difficult to see this if you don't have the Greek but each of those four verbs have a directional component.

[14:22] They all have prepositions which help you understand there's movement, there's purpose, there's direction to the words that Jesus is giving to them. This word returned has the preposition upo which is motion or direction meaning to a place.

They were going somewhere. They were going somewhere specific. They entered and this is the preposition eis which is into, toward, this directional component.

They had purpose in what they were doing. They went up and you can see that even in the translation that's there before us. And that they were staying and the preposition here is the word kata which is the word down or to remain.

They were fixed. They were dwelling. They were put. They were following directions but they were following not randomly, they were following purposefully. There was precision.

There was direction. There was meaning. And the reason is we need to understand that the powerful work of God is he's working in their hearts to move them in this way.

[15:34] Yes, there is obedience but it's immediate obedience and it's purposeful obedience. And it's the same work of God that every one of us can enjoy as we bind ourselves to Christ and as then we carry out the instructions that Christ has given to us.

And we do it immediately. We do it purposefully. We do it with hearts that are ready and expectant, waiting for God to accomplish then his purposes through the obedient commands that he has given to us.

And so the main point this morning is essentially to draw attention to their obedience. And I want to spend the rest of my time this morning helping you realize why that obedience was so extraordinary.

Why do we need to worship our God because of this obedience? Why do we stand back and marvel at this return? It seems so common, so ordinary, so uneventful.

And there's four reasons I want to give you this morning as we work through this passage and we see and fill out the wonder of this return. And just briefly, here are the four main points I want to give to you and then we're going to spend some time just unpacking them together.

[16:54] First, we see the promise that kept them. They were obedient because of a promise of Christ to keep them.

Otherwise, they would have been on their own doing their own thing. But Christ had made a promise that we're going to look at in just a moment. And because of the promise keeping power of God, they returned.

Second, I want to see the power that's set before them. The work of God that was so visible, so active, so present in the life of Christ and this power that was put on display is a power that's offered.

And we're going to see through the course of our time together this morning, we're going to see that the tendency of the disciples was that Jesus had the power and so Jesus was the one that was going to exercise the power.

But, it was a power that Christ was going to make available to them through the Spirit. And so their return is again in demonstration of their confidence in that power that Christ was making available to them through the Spirit.

[18:08] Third, we're going to see the pattern to guide them and especially the significance of prayer that helps to stabilize them in moments of temptation. That this was like us, this was a kind of a fickle group.

this was a flighty group. This was a group that was really not very dependable. And again, the work of God and calling them to the exercise of prayer is going to stabilize this group and make them useful for Him.

And fourth, we're going to see the people who remained. The people who remained. That in spite of the massive crowds, the thousands upon thousands who came to enjoy and to take part in the ministry of Christ, the only ones that remain are 120.

But Jesus, God is going to use this meager group to accomplish world-changing things. And so the return is really a reminder to us of what God wants to accomplish through what we might consider very meager, meager contributions that God wants to turn and essentially distribute like He did with the loaves and the fish to exercise His power and to demonstrate that the work rests in Him and not in us.

So let's begin. I want to see and consider the promise that kept them. The promise that kept them. And what I want to do mostly through this time is kind of tell tell some stories, okay?

[19:50] And I'm going to use some references that you can, you're welcome to turn to, but I'm going to have a slide that just has a picture that's kind of representative of what I'm talking about and there may be some passages sprinkled in, but it's going to be a little different, so just bear with me as we work through this this morning.

The promise that kept them. In order to really appreciate what's going on, we need to kind of rewind to the very beginning of Christ's ministry. What did that look like and what did that entail? And we can kind of trace this work of Christ and this eventual promise that he gives by understanding how it all began.

You remember that after 30 years of obscurity that Jesus finally moves out into the public view and he would come and he would come to a place known as the wilderness of Judea to the region of the Jordan and it was there that John the Baptist would have a ministry, this prophet-like, Elijah-like figure would have this ministry in preparing the way for this future, this future Savior.

He was preaching a message of repentance and baptizing along the Jordan River and in Matthew chapter 3 verse 11 this is what John the Baptist will say. He says, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

These are the same words by the way that Jesus promises his disciples there in Acts chapter 1. He says, John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not so many days from now.

[21:31] Remember that anointing that was present on Jesus is now promised to the disciples. And following Jesus' baptism the Spirit the Spirit then drives him out into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days.

And he's tempted there and when he returns he returns back to this region of Judea. We find that in Matthew chapter 4 verse 12.

That he's healing there and this report is given in Matthew chapter 4 verse 12 it says, when he heard that John had been arrested he withdrew into Galilee.

Now the significance of that may be a little distant for most of us in this room but in reading through the gospel account of Luke it's really easy for us to think that as soon as Jesus was driven into the wilderness to be tempted that immediately following that he would start his ministry his public ministry in Galilee.

When in actuality what we find is that he would spend several months maybe as much as a year ministering to the crowds in Jerusalem and to Judah. And in Matthew chapter 4 verse 12 this is kind of the note or the key for us as we think about the timeline of the events that it wasn't until his arrest that John the Baptist had been arrested that then Jesus will actually make his way into Galilee.

[23:00] So what was he doing in the between time? Well he was actually he and his disciples were baptizing and they were baptizing by the Jordan.

We find that in John chapter 1 verse 20 or 28 it says these things these questions about John the Baptist identity these things took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. This is not the same Bethany by the way that we'll find later near Jerusalem but this is a Bethany on the other side of the Jordan on the eastern side of the Jordan and it was here in that region that John would say of Christ behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and in this sequence of events John and Andrew will go and they'll meet Jesus and you remember Andrew brings Peter to Christ and then Jesus meets Nathaniel and Nathaniel brings Philip and the whole interaction of the disciples meeting Christ takes place there but Jesus Jesus is there he's baptizing we find in John chapter 3 verse 22 that after this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside and he remained there with them and was baptizing he'd already gone to be baptized

by John he'd gone into the wilderness to be tempted now he comes back to the Jordan River he makes a quick exodus to the wedding of Cana he comes back you remember in John chapter 3 and he has this interaction with Nicodemus and here he is in John chapter 3 22 he's baptizing for as much as a year there in the Judean countryside and then in John chapter 4 we find when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John although Jesus himself did not baptize but only his disciples he left Judea and departed again for Galilee and now the ministry of Jesus would really take off and this is where we find Jesus he's teaching in the synagogue there in Luke chapter 4 we find that his ministry that's there and he's teaching all of those who come to gather but in this ministry of Christ there's an opportunity for Jesus and his disciples to get away the ministry had been so overwhelming and the interactions that he had with the people were so difficult and so taxing that Jesus encourages his disciples to get away for a mini vacation

Matthew chapter 14 verses 13 to 14 says this now when Jesus heard this speaking about John the Baptist being imprisoned and then being killed he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself but when the crowds heard it they followed him on foot from the towns when he went ashore he saw a great crowd and he had compassion on them and healed their sick now understand Jesus had sent his disciples on a mini missions trip they were supposed to come back and enjoy some time of rest so they get on a boat and they make their way to the other side of the sea of Galilee and they're supposed to have some time of rest but instead all the crowds come again to press in on Jesus to demand miracles to have him serve them and what does Jesus do Jesus graciously serves them he serves them by healing their sick and then we'll see that Jesus will then turn to his disciples and say hey it's beginning it's getting very late in the day so how are we going to feed these people

Jesus is concerned not just about their physical needs but this is meant to help direct attention to the real spiritual needs that they have these people are obviously hungry they've traveled all day to the other side of the sea of Galilee they've been there as Jesus has healed all their sick and now Jesus will take five loaves and two fish and he'll distribute it to the masses 5,000 men maybe as many as 15,000 if you include women and children Jesus has proven that he can teach with authority he can heal and remove every disease and now here he is not just performing miracles of healing but now he's distributing and meeting very physical needs and feeding their hungry tummies and so they come after this season this feeding of the 5,000 we find in in John chapter 6 that that that Jesus will depart from them and they'll all come kind of try to find where Jesus is and they and they actually see him and meet him on the other side the next day

[28:22] Jesus wants to test their loyalty he wants to to test their faith are do you believe me because of the works or do you believe me because because of the things that I'm saying John chapter 6 verse 41 says the Jews grumbled about him because he said I'm the bread that came down from heaven Jesus turns this into a teaching opportunity he wants them to know it's not just about eating bread but recognizing who he is fundamentally as the bread of life in verse 51 of chapter 6 he says I am the living bread that came down from heaven if anyone eats of this bread he will live forever and the bread that I will give for the is for the life of the world excuse me and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh in verse 52 the Jews then disputing among themselves saying how can this man give us his flesh to eat so Jesus said to them truly truly

I say to you unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day and you can imagine with those very pointed words and confusing to the crowds we find what we read here next when many of his disciples heard it they said this is a hard saying who can listen to it and after this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with Christ it was too difficult it was too hard the words that Jesus was saying were causing conflict and because of this many disciples left and walked with him no more so then we turn to John chapter 6 verse 61 Jesus knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this said to them do you take offense at this but there are some of you who do not believe for

Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe and who it was who would betray him and he said this is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the father so Jesus said to the twelve do you want to go away as well Simon Peter answered him Lord to whom shall we go you have the words of eternal life and we Jesus answered them did I not choose you the twelve and yet one of you is a devil he spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot for he one of the twelve was going to betray him Jesus knew before this all went down before the scene that we find in the crucifixion would ever transpire Jesus identified very early on in his Galilean ministry who would be the loyal disciples and who would desert and he points out Judas Judas I know you're the man and to the rest of the disciples this promise the promise of keeping them the promise of stabilizing them in the very difficult work that was coming Jesus understands and has identified here even at the beginning of his ministry who would be the ones who would go the distance he set his mark on these eleven he knew ahead of time he was going to betray him we find in John chapter 13 this upper room experience again Jesus saying to them the one the one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet but is completely clean and you are clean speaking of Peter but not every one of you for he knew who is to betray him that is why he said not all of you are clean remember Peter Jesus is washing the disciples feet and Peter protests you're not going to wash my feet and Jesus you're not on their way to Gethsemane what Jesus will pray in John chapter 17 verses 9 to 12 we find this this really coming and crystallizing again that Jesus is praying to the father I'm praying for them I'm not praying for the world but for those whom you have given given me for they are yours all is mine excuse me all mine are yours and yours are mine and I'm glorified in them and

[33:41] I am no longer in the world but they are in the world and I'm coming to you holy father keep them in your name which you have given me that they may be one even as we are one while I was with them I kept them in your name which you have given me and I have guarded them and not one of them has been!

So marvel at the keeping promises of God the keeping promises of God that preserved these eleven and so when they return we see the working out of God's promises in preserving his people his men for his mission we marvel at the precision of this promise in the return that we see in Acts chapter one and so again when we read verses 12 and 13 we see that they're all accounted for there in verse 13 Peter John James Andrew Philip Thomas Bartholomew Matthew James the son of Elphius Simon the zealot Judas the son of James everyone is accounted for Jesus has lost none! of them we have a keeping God Jesus keeps his own they're all here they're all accounted for and we're struck with the significance of the return this promise of return and so they do they come back they return in fulfillment of what God had promised very early on in his ministry and we remember and marvel at the preserving power of our Lord we're going to pick the rest of this up next week but I want to just pause for a moment and just recall in this time remembering that we have a God who answers his promise who keeps his promises and we think about this mission that God has called us to Jesus says in Acts 1 8 that you will be my witnesses beginning in Jerusalem and then Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth that's a promise that God will fulfill and we as God's people have the opportunity to couple ourselves with the power of God and to work those faithful promises through that Jesus will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it will we be part of the company that group even a meager group of those who will carry out the promise that God has called us to fulfill will we have the chance the joy of being able to see the work of the spirit in working in our lives to accomplish the purposes that he's called us to praise the Lord that he's given us keeping promises power filled promises will we be faithful to carry out the promises of God in the mission that he's called us to oh may God help us to couple ourselves with this promise keeping God let's pray father we we praise you for your work in the disciples thank you that you are a God who knows the future and thank you that you are a God who keeps your people on mission father I pray that you would help help us to surrender to the promises that you've made to the instructions that you've given may we be obedient immediately and may we be obedient purposefully Lord it's so easy to get lost and distracted in all of the other things the other good things of this life things of family things of work things of leisure whatever good things that are out there and be lost to the actual mission that you've called us to Lord please forgive us forgive me for not taking seriously the commands that you've given and not taking seriously the promises that are coupled with that command you

don't give us instructions that you won't also empower us to fulfill oh

[38:29] Lord please help us help us to walk in obedience to your commands but also to walk with expectancy! to walk in faith to walk knowing that you will accomplish your purposes whether we get to see those purposes play out or not trusting that you are working because you are working God Lord humble us and help us in our desire to follow after you we pray in Jesus name Amen God bless you have a great week see you again next week