

You Shall Be My Witnesses

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Well, tonight, as I said if you're a visitor, we are beginning the book of Acts, a preaching series through this book, and I have never preached through this book so I'm just like Revelation, I'm very excited to do so. So this morning, or tonight, Acts 1. We will consider the first 11 verses.

This is the word of the Lord.

1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

And there ends the reading of God's word tonight.

I think one of the greatest dangers as we have been considering in our study of Revelation, one of the greatest dangers for the church has always been distraction and confusion over the purpose for which Jesus left us here. I hope Revelation has given you some good help in thinking about that, the purpose that we have living here in the midst

of all this hardship and all of this conflict. I think about last time in Revelation 11 that we studied the two witnesses and their single great purpose as they were symbolically representative of the witness that we have in this present age; they were to give themselves to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. When John was on the island of Patmos, why he was banished for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, we've been looking at all that through apocalyptic visions and symbols, we've been studying the mission of the church and the struggle of that with symbols and symbolically, but I think it's really helpful tonight as we study the book of Acts, to think about how it coincides with our study in the book of Revelation for Revelation captures our particular purpose and mission in symbols but Acts is giving us an actual historical record of the progress of the church in this present age and how it all started. This is important because Revelation has been capturing very strongly what we call the antithesis and describing us as a martyr people, but I don't want to walk away from that study and have some kind of pessimistic view of the mission of the church. We really shouldn't, some kind of defeatist attitude as if not much is being accomplished. That's why the historical record of the book of Acts is very helpful for us, it helps us understand the purpose here with a historical record of the progress of the church and Acts, like Revelation, is going to capture that struggle but it has a very powerful message for us.

Through all of the struggle, where has the Gospel been taken by the end of Acts? Well, you know it's already heading to Rome. It's in Rome. It started in a little Upper Room. They faced, of course, nothing but conflict. We'll go through it. They faced nothing but conflict and by after the ascension of Jesus, by the time we're done with the book, the Gospel has reached to the ends of the earth and today that Gospel has come to Escondido, of all places. It's remarkable, isn't it? Something great has happened. Where we only see the conflict going on but look how the word of God in the Gospels prevailed to the ends of the earth. That's a remarkable reign of the word of God and Acts is helping us with that to show the progress of the Gospel and the victory that Jesus has accomplished as that news is taken to the ends of the earth and as he's gathering from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. It's about how the Gospel prospered. It's about how the preaching of the Gospel excelled amidst everything that was against it, and it's all the external pressures of a means and method that nobody thought would work. Here we are, still doing it, it's pretty remarkable, isn't it? Even in our great age of internet and all the social media and all the visuals and all the movies, we're still doing this. That is power. That is real power.

And the message here from Acts is telling us, "Stay focused. Stay focused on the Great Commission that he has given you." Acts will say, "Look at their testimony, look at what they faced and look at what resulted in the progress of the church." In the very first sermon Peter is going to preach, the Lord is going to add 3,000 to the church. You're going to see his power unfold. You're going to see the Holy Spirit come. You're going to see that through the preaching of the Gospel, people added and added and added and it prevailing and it's very motivating, isn't it, and it's very inspiring for us. It should be, for this is the baton that was passed to us from them, the apostolic ministry, and in chapter 1 tonight is all about getting them off to a good start. That's what chapter 1 is about, it's all about getting these guys off to a really good start. Chapter 1 is about clarifying, putting

all the ducks in a row and making clear what this is all about, what the church is to do, what the church is to say, how the church is to function, what is to be most important in light of what Jesus cares a lot about. That's chapter 1.

So I want to look at tonight these first 11 verses and what they're showing to us here is three ways as the book begins here with the continuing mission of Christ, the confusion the apostles experienced over that mission, and the clarification that Jesus gives on what that mission is to be. So it's very important. Chapter 1 is just so integral and germane to the whole book. I've never been one in spending a lot of time on introducing books; I think the whole thing can be cumbersome. I think the books do it themselves in the things they want emphasized and if you follow the introductory inspired statements, they are provided here in these first few verses, you have right at the beginning of this book what you need to know. Acts begins with a purpose of linking together and providing continuity in the ministry of Jesus with his walk on earth and now his ascension. That's the aim upfront, continuity.

You'll notice in verse 1, look at how the book begins, "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen." As was the custom of the day, they dedicated letters and epistles and we have this same name, Theophilus, mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, some kind of high ranking official in Roman society. Unhelpful to speculate about him other than to say what we should notice here is the link to Luke. The link to Luke. Listen how Luke begins, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." So again we have Theophilus mentioned. This is one of the stronger reasons why the tradition has received that Luke, commonly known as Luke the physician, wrote the book, received the book of Acts, and you'll notice here was providing an historical record of Jesus' person and work probably in the early AD 60s, but I want you to notice what he said here. The introductory statement is very important. In the first book, "O Theophilus," Luke's Gospel, "I provided a record of all that Jesus began to do and teach." Began is a very important word there. In other words, Acts is a continuance of what was begun so it's as if the book begins by saying, "I am continuing the record of what Jesus is still doing," and that's really important. This is a book of continuance of what Jesus started so it's not that he ascended and it's no longer his work, that he's gone. He told us in the Great Commission, "Lo, I am with you always to the close of the age," and now these works are now continued, they are Jesus' works, we're going to see this through the power of the Holy Spirit, and he becomes the focal point as they are told to wait for him. This is so important because oftentimes even in the epistles like Galatians, it is specifically said that Jesus came and preached to you in Ephesians. Well, he never physically showed up and preached. Jesus was there. Jesus was preaching through the ministry of the church. So this is a continuance of that.

Now notice what the continuance here, how it's emphasized in verse 3, that, "He presented himself alive to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." Many proofs, appeared to them 40 days, and speaking about the kingdom of God. Luke is saying upfront in Acts that Jesus when he rose from the dead, he had the specific goal of spending some real time with his physical, real time with his disciples. He wanted them to touch the hands and the holes in his side, he appeared to 500 brethren at once, he wanted people to see him. It was a wonderful gift to them, that they would see him, but there was a goal to this. The main reason he wanted to spend time with them was now that fulfillment, the time of fulfillment had come. He wanted to talk to them about the kingdom of God. In other words, before he left, he wanted to take some real time, physical time, sitting with his disciples/apostles to talk about the kingdom. How would his rule come? How would the church be built? How would the kingdom of God come? We're talking about his powerful reign being put on display, how would his kingdom be built? "I want to spend time talking to them," this was Jesus' desire. He would go up. He would be seated at the right hand of God. How would the kingdom come? How would the kingdom come? We would answer that by saying what did Jesus do in those days before his ascension. That's the link here. It's really important. You have to look very carefully at what was on Jesus' heart right after his resurrection and before he ascended. What mattered to him? Was he running around to Caesar's Palace fixing all the world's problems? What was he doing? What was he about? What did he care about?

Well, I think you know that these very common passages, he comes after the resurrection to the two on the road to Emmaus and purposely blinds them so that they couldn't see him, and then he does something very remarkable, he would open their eyes through preaching the kingdom. What about the kingdom? Well, think about it. They're standing there, they're falling apart because they had struggles believing in the resurrection and the Scriptures and look at what he said, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." Huh. So, immediately after the resurrection, the one thing he wants to do is start preaching himself and look at all of Scripture and explaining it.

Think about this, he goes on in Luke, "Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them. Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed,'" listen to this, "should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are my witnesses." There it is. This is speaking about the kingdom of God. "Behold, I am sending the

promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

One of my favorites is John 20 in this period before the ascension and he looks at his disciples and he says, "I'm sending you." He just ordained them, "I'm sending you." And then he explains what was to be the heart of their mission, what was to be the focus, what was to be the primary focus of what they do. This is verse 23 of John 20, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." That is such an important verse. Jesus just laid out the goal of Christian ministry for them, that the goal was, the main purpose was the forgiveness of sins proclaimed to the ends of the earth. So the fulfillment of the promise that day was coming in the new covenant that the Lord would remember their sins no more, and right then and there in John 20, he's handing the ministry to the disciples. He's passing the baton of reconciliation to them and what the Lord is commissioning here, then, by sending them was saying, "I want you guys to go into all the world and preach the kingdom with one great aim: what I've done for you, you do for them. In forgiving you, you go out now and proclaim that forgiveness and announce it. Whoever believes and trusts in Jesus, their sins are forgiven. Whoever does not believe, they stand condemned."

The goal of the ministry, the root and the goal and the heart of this ministry is to preach and bring about through the announcement of Jesus with the goal of forgiving people's sins. It's wonderful, isn't it? I mean, the Lord is telling you tonight, "That's what I wanted to do, this is what I want to do for the world. God so loved the world. This is what I want to announce to the world." So the end of the Gospels, especially Luke, were training sessions, weren't they? They were training sessions in their future of what they were to do and the Great Commission was, "Go into all the earth and teach all that I command and baptize." This is why, I just want to say, this is why we're not making up as Reformed people, because I know that the attitude sometimes to it is, "Oh, here we go again," we're not making it up when we say a word in sacrament ministry. This is what Jesus was passing, word and sacrament, means of grace, ministry, and that's exactly what Acts 1 is linking together.

So in Acts 1 he's explaining to them how the kingdom would be built, it would be built this way. Exactly what he did after the resurrection, he wanted them to go do and he passed it right on to them, that the kingdom would be built upon a message, the kingdom would be built upon a message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as they opened the word of God and showed it from all of Scripture.

Well, you'd think that would be clear for them, right? You'd think they'd get that. Does it seem clear to you? It's not rocket science, is it? I want you to notice how hard it was for them to grasp. He just did everything, spent time with them, proclaimed to them, explained to them, taught them, showed the passion of his own heart, and here's their question, verse 6, "So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'" I'm not sure how you could sit there those days and have your eyes opened and see how the kingdom would be built and explain how the kingdom would come, how the ends of the earth would hear, what the purpose and Great

Commission was, have it all explained to you and then the single and only thing that mattered to them and was on their hearts was the restoration of Israel.

Do you think we have that problem today? Do you think that's on people's minds today? What does that expose? Well, it first exposes that Jesus' kingdom agenda was quite a bit different than theirs, wasn't it? There's a reason that's put there right at the beginning. There is a reason this struggle is captured right at the beginning of Acts. It had long been believed, of course, that when the Messiah would come, he would reestablish Israel's theocratic rule in the earth by sitting on the throne. This was Jesus' entire fight during his ministry, by the way. Remember in John 6 when he had turned and fed the 5,000, everyone saw it and said, "Wow! This guy could take a few loaves of bread and fish and feed 5,000 people? Who's ever seen power like that? That's like Moses!" Remember what happened? They said, "That's the prophet. That's the prophet. That's the prophet promised to Moses right there," and they grabbed him and they took him to the mountain to try to force and to make him king. Well, there's his opportunity to restore Israel, isn't it? Do you know what the next verse says? "But he departed to the mountain alone." He wanted nothing to do with it. Their agenda was all earthly, it was all earthly.

What do you think, why do you think this is provided right at the beginning of Acts? Well, it's capturing for us tonight the struggle to appreciate how the nature of this kingdom comes and how the kingdom is built. We really struggle with this. We really fight against this. We're really not satisfied with this. We're so small-minded. I mean, seriously, pastors today think the kingdom of God is built by framing the ministry to address all the social justice issues of the day. That's our current new, in vogue thing to do and it's not new, we just have a bunch of new pastors who have not known the past and what it's done to churches in ravaging them. There's a reason Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "When you start doing that, this emptied the churches in the UK. Don't do it." It would be similar to us thinking are you going to make America great again? It's time. "Are you now, Jesus, gonna bring in justice to society? Are you now gonna deal with corrupt governments? Are you now gonna fix the problem of a bad President? Are now gonna make society Christian? Are you now gonna stop all the injustices that we see? Are you now gonna end abortion? I'm frustrated. We're frustrated here. We've been waiting for this. We've long waited for Israel's renewal. We're tired of these Gentiles running things. Give it back." I think you see.

I think you see and you know that is exactly the confusion that has overcome the church today and this is such a battle, oh, this is such a battle just to hold on. If the mission of the church was to fix all the world's problems, this was just an opportune time, wasn't it? Opportune time to say, "Yup. Go do it." Isn't Jesus reigning? Isn't his power on display? Why not fix it now? I think we had a whole sermon about the devil running around like a roaring lion this morning, right? He could empty the fishbowl anytime he wants, couldn't he? Yet we go through Acts and I find, I find not one, I can't find one episode of the apostles going into the government with the goal of reestablishing Israel. Show me. Or making the heart of their ministry all social gospel issues.

Isn't it something that before the mission kicks off this mass confusion had to be addressed? "Aren't you now gonna clean this up?" And Jesus says, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put into his own, fixed by his own authority." Jesus was saying something very important in saying that, "I am concerned about bringing in all righteousness. I am concerned about that but you're way too limited in thinking about the kingdom of God and you understand not its spiritual nature. You're really confused about the kingdom of God. You're way too earthly. The kingdom does not come by saying, 'There it is,' in some political force or some political power. 'Here it is,' or, 'There it is.' You're not seeing the kingdom that way. That's not how the kingdom comes. It's an inward reality produced by the Spirit uniting a people together in the earth. When I renew all things, which is coming, the timing of that is not what is to drive you. That's mine. That's the Father's." In other words, "Don't push the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness will indeed dwell, don't think that kingdom is brought in that way now. That's coming." The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, it's of righteousness, of Christ and of peace and of joy of the Holy Spirit.

It's just important to say, pastors are not commissioned by God to run around and fix all the world's problems. I'm not equipped to do that whatsoever. These problems are way too big. In fact, the Bible tells us that the very horrible things that we're seeing unfold, this is why Revelation is so helpful, are actually expressions of judgment on the earth. In Revelation 6, a white horseman is bringing conquest; a red horseman is bringing division among peoples; a black horseman is hitting economies; a pale horseman has death behind him and Hades; all expression of division and war and lawlessness and natural disasters are birth pains leading us to a final judgment. The wrath of God is most certainly being revealed from heaven now and many of the social problems that we are facing are consequences of judgments from the throne. You're not fixing that. The one thing the church offers to this world is an answer to the wrath of God because of sin. That's what we offer. We offer forgiveness. We do that, this is what Jesus commissioned in John 20, we do that by faithfully preaching, as Revelation calls it, the everlasting Gospel, how in the message on which the kingdom is built, his life, his death, his resurrection.

Look at what Peter does in the first sermon in Acts. That does not fit any paradigm of what's going on today. He is proving Jesus is the Messiah from the Scriptures and calling people to faith in him. "We preach Christ in order that we may present everyone mature in Christ." Now you understand tonight why Jesus says, "I don't want you going anywhere, I don't want you moving on this ministry," which should bring some fear to us in doing it, "I don't want you moving until the Spirit comes. The Holy Spirit is coming. You don't do anything until he's here." The Spirit will keep this on track. It's his ministry. It's the ministry of the Spirit. It's his purpose to bear witness of the Son. He's going to accomplish this by convicting the world of sin as the law is preached and righteousness and judgment and bearing witness of the Son so that people can have life and have it abundantly. You'll see how prominent preaching is inept. You're going to be amazed at how prominent they stayed with preaching amidst all the pressures and preaching of Jesus. "You wait until he's filled you otherwise you're gonna mess it all up."

That's why we see absolute difference once the Spirit comes from these disciples to apostles. You have bumbling Peter, the Spirit comes in and you get a man of boldness, don't you? It's really remarkable. The Spirit is preaching. It's a demonstration of the Spirit in power in these men. "You will receive power," says Jesus, "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." That's the clarification they needed. That's the program of Acts. It spans the focus of Acts in two major sections on the ministries of Peter and in the ministry of Paul and notice that in one verse you have the whole purpose, "You are my witnesses. You're going to testify from the Scriptures all the things concerning myself." That's why the first thing in chapter 2 is this presentation of Peter's sermon, doing exactly this.

Notice here you have the purpose, the extent, this mission is not confined to Israel, it goes from this room to the ends of the earth. The power of it is done in the Spirit. He's going to be backing this, driving this, motivating this. And you'll notice how this section ends tonight, that, "when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'" It's his ministry. He's coming back. But don't stand here. You've got a job to do. He's coming again. Until then, you're gonna be about Jesus' Great Commission.

What a wonderful motivation. You are a part of that. You are salt and light. You are his people. You share in this. It's a ministry about Jesus and his good news taken to the ends of the earth and what a privilege that we have to give witness to that. Psalm 2 is being fulfilled before your eyes. He shall take the nations and rule them with a rod of iron. "Kiss the Son. Kiss the Son." That means believe in the Son.

Well, we're gonna come back to this next time and see it's a ministry of the Spirit and in contrast to all the hardship today that we studied in Revelation from Satan, we know why Pentecost was needed, right? How wonderful to end and link together the sermons with this thought, to link together the sermons from this morning and Satan's dirty work in the earth with this thought tonight in the coming of the Spirit, "Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world."

Let's pray.

Father in heaven, thank you for helping us tonight to understand the ministry. Thank you for giving us a good start in opening the book of Acts and reflecting on the purpose. Help us to be faithful to the calling and humble and keep your church in the midst of all the pressures. We're constantly being pulled this way and that way and at times don't even realize it simply, simply answering always the prevailing winds of the culture. The culture should not drive what you call us to do. May we be faithful in this and may your Gospel go out to the ends of the earth. Give us great boldness in it, confidence in it.

Remember this is the ministry of the Spirit, we are privileged to be a part of it. Thank you for this day of worship and receiving your word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.