**YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES**

May 1, 2016

Acts 1:1-11

Key Verse 1:8 “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.”

The gospels, you might say in one sense, tell the story of the finished work of Christ. Jesus said in his high priestly prayer in anticipation of the cross in John 17:4, “I have finished the work you gave me to do.” And then on the cross, according to John 19:30, just before he gave up his life, he said, “It is finished.” So it is true that the first volume, the Gospel of Luke, and for that matter, all the other gospel writers, tell us of the finished work of Christ. The long awaited sacrifice for sin that satisfied God fully, he offered. By the sacrifice and offering of himself, he saved forever those who believed, and of course, he secured their redemption by his resurrection from the dead. Now nothing can be added to the finished work of Christ. It was satisfactory to God, and so God raised him from the dead to validate his satisfaction, and then God gave him the name above every name, exalted him to his right hand.

The work of redemption Jesus finished. The work of doing and teaching he just began. The work of proclaiming the gospel, teaching the kingdom, and living the kingdom he only began. It is what Paul meant in Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions.” He began in his ministry to collect the elect. By the time he ascended into heaven, there were just a few. They were all in one tiny little country Israel. 120 gather in the upper room in Jerusalem, and that’s the beginning. That’s what Jesus began. So Acts, as Luke continues to write, is the story of what Jesus continues to do and teach. This is Volume 2 of the New Testament history of redemption. Acts continues the story, the story and the long process completing God’s redemptive work through his apostles.

Acts covers about 33 years of history. In such a short time, ordinary men and women turned the world upside down. They brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole Roman world. How was it possible? They were not well trained Bible scholars. They did not have money. But when the Holy Spirit came to them, and they obeyed the Holy Spirit’s leading, the great work of God was possible. It was not without pain. As the Holy Spirit brought new sheep into the church, God opened the minds and hearts of church leaders and members to welcome newcomers unconditionally as Jesus welcomed them. This process of assimilation was painful and awkward. It tested the limits of their faith and dependence on God. For example, the problem of clean and unclean foods arose. The apostles who had never eaten pork were suddenly faced sitting with the Gentiles who were eating pork deliciously. Not eating the same food would alienate them. But through these birthpains, the Holy Spirit brings forth an amazing new community the likes of which the world had never before seen. It is a community of genuine unity-in-diversity. A place where Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, truly connect with one another and become one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). Historians have called the early Church “a sociological impossibility.” There was no human way for Jews and Gentiles, who in so many ways were polar opposites, to come together as friends and form a loving community. We will learn in the Book of Acts how it was possible. I pray that through the study of Acts, we may learn how to accept new generation of students and form a loving community through the Holy Spirit so that we may be witnesses of Jesus.

Look at verses 1-2. “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.” The former book is, of course, Luke’s gospel. The recipient of both books is Theophilus. Theophilus means “lover of God.” It may refer to a person, but it definitely refers to all the children of God in the body of Christ. We should all identify with Theophilus and listen to the words of Acts as the very words of God.

Look at verse 3. “After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This is the most significant event in human history. Jesus’ resurrection is God’s victory over the power of sin and death and the devil. Jesus’ resurrection marked a new beginning for mankind to live victoriously in this world. Jesus’ resurrection opened the door to paradise for all who believe in him. Men who suffered from fear and despair under the shadow of death and the power of sin could now have hope in the Risen Christ: as Jesus rose from the dead, so shall we.

When he appeared to his apostles, the Risen Christ spoke about the kingdom of God. This was the content of his message from the beginning. In Mark 1:15 he said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” At the Last Supper he told his disciples, “For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God” (Lk 22:16). Even on the cross, Jesus said to a repentant robber, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” In the final analysis, the kingdom of God is most important. Peter grasped this and said, “For, ‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever’” (1Pe 1:24,25a). Therefore, we must believe and teach the message of the kingdom of God.

Look at verse 6. The apostles expected Jesus to restore the kingdom to Israel according to the Jewish thought of restoring David’s kingdom. Jesus did not rebuke their thought completely. But he taught them that it is not for them to know the times or dates that the Father has set by his own authority. Down through the generations many people have tried to systematize their Bible knowledge and develop timetables and charts to foretell the Second Coming of Christ. They have all been wrong. Only God knows when Jesus will come again. We must respect God’s sovereign rule of his redemptive history. We work as if every day is our last, and we plan as if his coming is far off, and we leave the date to him. I don’t know when I’m going to die. I don’t want to know. I just want to work every day as if it is my last.

Then what should Jesus’ apostles do? Look at verse 8. “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.” Jesus says that his apostles will be his witnesses by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives his people the power to testify about Jesus. Without the Holy Spirit no one can testify about Jesus. A man may be highly talented, intensively trained, and widely experienced, but without spiritual power he is ineffective. On the other hand, a man may be uneducated, unattractive, and unrefined, yet with the power of the Holy Spirit, he can be a powerful witness. The fearful disciples needed power for witnessing, holy boldness for preaching the gospel. They would receive this power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. In John 15:26,27 Jesus said, “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.” When the Holy Spirit works in us, we are compelled to witness to Jesus with burning hearts.

Look at verse 8 again. “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.” Jesus revealed his plan of evangelism. The apostles must begin witnessing in Jerusalem, where Jesus had been crucified. There were hostile forces in Jerusalem. But there were also many people whose hearts were ready to accept the gospel. It is where God chose to start the work of the Holy Spirit. Generally, we should begin witnessing to Jesus where we are, especially with our family members. But some think that the place where they are is not a good place to begin for many reasons. The real problem is that they do not receive the Holy Spirit’s power to be Jesus’ witnesses. When the Holy Spirit works in us, any place can be a fruitful mission field.

The gospel would spread to Judea and Samaria. Here Judea symbolizes our friends, Samaria symbolizes those who we don’t like. Jews and Samaritans had experienced centuries of hostility toward each other based on cultural and racial prejudice. But the gospel of Jesus is universal. It applies to all men. All men are sinners and all men can be saved when they simply repent of their sins and accept Jesus' saving grace by faith. The spread of the gospel to Judea and Samaria foreshadows the destruction of all human barriers and the coming of true peace in the world.

Then the gospel would go to the ends of the earth. This reveals God’s universal love for all people. God loves all people of the whole world. He is not willing that anyone perish, but wants everyone to be saved. For this, he sacrificed his one and only Son Jesus Christ on the cross as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. For this, he raised Jesus from the dead and made him the source of eternal salvation to all who believe in him. For this, he was sending his apostles out into the world to be his witnesses.

The word witness, is a very interesting word. It is martyres, plural. We get the English word martyr. What is the connection? The connection is that the word witness came to be the word martyr because so many witnesses to the gospel died. Word came to mean one who dies for his testimony because so many did. You remember when Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” In order to be a disciple of Jesus, you have to be willing to lose your own life.

Christ is on trial. The Holy Spirit is the lawyer for the defense. The Spirit calls you into the court of the world to give a testimony. You need to decide what kind of witness you will be; good, bad, or indifferent. Think about their message. They were saying that people were sinners, and they were going to perish in their sin. It was alien to the Jews. It was a horrible message to the Gentiles. Persecution was happening everywhere so that witnesses essentially became martyrs because it was so tough. They were going into the Roman world full of slaves, and they were saying there is a necessity if you are going to enter the kingdom of God and escape eternal hell that you become a slave of Jesus. The worst possible invitation imaginable was to say to somebody, “You need to become a slave, a permanent slave of a master who will be your only master,” and this master was a crucified Jew from Israel. This is a very hard sell. Foolishness, stumbling block. Keep in mind that there was no support for that message at all. How nice it would be if joining a church will get you connected with other people, you were socially acceptable. But they were aliens in an anti-Christian culture as it is today. So our witnessing should be credible so that others may believe in spite of horrible messages.

If you are a Christian, you have received the Holy Spirit. If you have received the Holy Spirit, you are a witness. The only question is if you are a faithful one or an unfaithful one. And the kingdom advances not through politics, not through some kind of cultural morality. The kingdom advances one soul at a time through personal testimony, personal witness. And always remember that statement by the German philosopher. “Show me your redeemed life, and I might be inclined to believe in your redeemer.” Pretty hard to make the gospel believable unless it’s believable when somebody looks at you. Not that you have to be perfect, but you have to be clearly committed to the truth you teach. There are lots of people who talk about Christ but don’t live a life that points to his power. Many people make a lame excuse, “I wouldn’t want to be a Christian because there are so many hypocrites.” There is some truth to it. Powerful preaching comes from the overflow of powerful demonstration of the transforming power of the gospel.

Look at verses 9-11. “After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into 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 here 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.’” Jesus’ ascension reveals heaven to us. It also reveals his Second Coming in power and glory. This same Jesus who was a good shepherd for his people will come back as King and Judge to establish the Kingdom of God forever. Sometimes we want to be spectators watching for his return, like the disciples looking intently into the sky. But the angels urge us, “Don’t just stand there! Participate in world mission by being Jesus’ witnesses.”

In this passage we hear the Risen Christ. Let’s read verse 8 again. “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.” May the Holy Spirit empower you to be Jesus’ witnesses where you are and make you a prayer servant for world mission.