

Preparing for Pentecost – Acts 1:1-11

Do you love Jesus? You do? Good, because the passage we will read today is addressed to “lovers of God,” which in Greek is Theophilus. Today we are looking at what happened in the life of the disciples after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Turn with me to Acts 1 and we will read the first 11 verses.

The human author of this passage is Luke, the only Gentile author in the Bible. Of course, he is inspired by the same Holy Spirit who inspired all the other authors of scripture. The Book of Acts is basically part two. Part one is the Gospel of Luke. Both tell the story of the ministry of Jesus: one tells of Jesus among his followers and one tells of Jesus within his followers.

The Book of Acts starts with the last days of Jesus’ earthly ministry. He has already died and rose from the dead. Luke wants everyone to know that Christians serve a living Saviour, not a dead Messiah. He says in verse 3 that Jesus appeared to the disciples for forty days. The word for “appeared,” “*ophthalmia*” in Greek, literally means they “eyeballed” Jesus for forty days. And what did they see? They saw Jesus eat food with them. Ghosts and hallucinations do not eat food. Jesus was very much alive!

And what did Jesus say to his disciples?

He gave them a command, saying, “Do not leave Jerusalem until you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (vss.4-5)

Jesus was preparing the believers for Pentecost. That is the day when the church would receive the Holy Spirit. Why was this so important?

Jesus knew that if the Christians went out in their own strength they would fail. They might build churches and hospitals and schools – and they would – but if they did this in their own strength and not through the power of the Holy Spirit, this would be meaningless. People may be helped but their eternal destinies will not be changed without the work of the Holy Spirit. God’s work must be done through God’s empowering by the Holy Spirit.

So the disciples were to wait in Jerusalem until they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As preacher and author Randal Denny wrote, “Just as Jesus Christ was the promise of the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is the promise of the New Testament. He is the promise of the Father to each person who is His child.”¹

Jesus would go on to say, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” (v. 8)

¹ Randal Earl Denny, **Do It Again Lord** (Kansas City, Beacon Hill Press, 1978) 20.

This morning I ask you, have you been filled with the Holy Spirit, or are you trying to do God's work in your own strength? The Holy Spirit is available to all believers today as we surrender ourselves to His leading and invite Him in. Have you done that?

Now the disciples have not yet been able to shake notions of a political kingdom, despite the fact Jesus was teaching them about the Kingdom of God (cf. v. 3). So they ask, again and again and again, "Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6)

Notice Jesus' response. He says, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you..." (v. 8).

Jesus does not want his church to spend all their time speculating on when Jesus will return. Instead, he wants his followers to be filled with the Spirit and power to be his witnesses. There is a world going to hell unless Christians tell them of the Saviour. That is what Jesus wants his church to occupy their time with – telling others how they too may be saved through faith in him.

Do you believe that there is a heaven and a hell, and that these are the only two destinations for people after they die? Jesus did. Scripture tells us that "Jesus came to seek and to save those who were lost," (Luke 19:10) and "God is not willing that any should perish but all come to repentance" (1 Peter 3:9). Jesus has done all that was necessary to rescue anyone who comes to him for salvation so no one needs to go to hell. And he sends his church out to warn people and point them to Jesus so they too may be saved.

After Jesus tells his disciples that they are being sent in the power of the Spirit to be his witnesses, what happens? It tells us in verse 9 that Jesus was taken up and disappeared into a cloud. This is known as the ascension, a very important part of the story of Jesus.

Ascension is a conclusion.

This marks the end of Jesus' ministry on earth. Salvation's work is completed; it was time to return to the Heavenly Father. As long as Jesus was on earth in his human body – even the resurrected body – he was limited. Though he could heal and multiply bread and even raise the dead, he could only do that in one location at a time.

Once ascended, Jesus can now be in Ukraine comforting believers there even as he heals Christians in Nanaimo. Now ascended He is ministering to a grieving family in Milwaukee even as he reveals himself to a family in Iraq through a vision.

As preacher G. Campbell Morgan said, "The days of limited service were over, the days of unlimited service were about to begin."²

No wonder Jesus said to his disciples, "It is better for you that I go..."(John 16:7).

² Cited in Denny, p. 29.

Ascension is also an introduction.

Even as Jesus' earthly ministry drew to a close his new ministry began, one which sees Jesus seated on his rightful throne once again. Hebrews 1:3 tells us,

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

What is Jesus doing from that exalted position on the throne? He is praying for us, or "interceding for us." See Romans 8:34, Hebrews 7:25, Hebrews 9:24, 1 John 2:1, 1 Timothy 2:1.

As William Barclay said, "The ascension gave the disciples the certainty that they had a Friend, not only on earth, but in heaven ... to die is not to go out into the dark; it is to go to him."³

The ascension is anticipation.

Did you hear what the angels said to the disciples? "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way that you have seen him go into heaven." (v. 11)

Jesus went to prepare a place for us and is coming back again to take us to be where he is. That is his promise to us. (John 14:3) No matter what life is like for us now, we know the best is yet to come. Though we may suffer sickness and pain and loss and sorrow here on earth, there is coming a day when Jesus will return and take us from this fallen world to our true home: our home in heaven with him.

That changes everything. How we live today, how we face the troubles of life, how we treat others is shaped by this one fact: Jesus is coming again. This hope informs how we will live our lives more than anything else.

Years ago a hydro-electric dam was proposed for a certain area, and when it was completed, large tracks of land would be flooded. Part of the flooded area included a town. Since this town would soon be underwater, the people who lived there stopped repairing their homes, stopped caring for their yards, stopped keeping up the streets. With each passing week the town looked worse and worse. When asked why no one seemed to care about their property anymore, a resident said, "Without faith in the future there is no power in the present."⁴

But we are people with faith in a great future! Jesus promised that he would return and we know God has never failed to keep a promise he made. Scholars say there are over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament foretelling the coming of Jesus. Every single one was fulfilled in Jesus. Now we are promised Jesus will come again, physically returning for all to see. We know we can trust God's Word. Jesus will return.

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, DSB, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 314)

⁴ Denny, 33.

The atonement, the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection for our salvation, is the topic of that gets the greatest amount of space in scripture. Can you guess what topic gets the second most amount of space in scripture? It is the return of Jesus. The New Testament speaks of the return of Jesus 318 times, eight times more often than the mention of his first coming.

Knowing Jesus will return to take believers home to be with him in heaven, saved from hell and destruction, we are like the little boy who kept saying, "If only you knew what I know! If only you knew what I know!"

The boy was reading a novel, and he had come to a part in the middle of the story where it looked like the good guy was going to lose. The bad guys seemed to have all the power and the situation looked hopeless. The little boy couldn't stand the suspense so he took a peek at the last chapter of the book, and there he discovered the good guy did win, and the bad guys were punished. So now instead of getting upset when the bad guys seemed to be winning, he would say, "If you only knew what I know!"

I have read the end of the story of this old earth. I see the troubles today, the wars, the pestilence, the famines, the violence all around. It looks like evil is winning. But I know how the story really ends, and so I gladly say, "If you only knew what I know!"

I also know that the story of Pentecost is that Christians are to be equipped by the Holy Spirit to tell people the true ending of the story. We will receive power...

But before there could be Pentecost there had to be an ascension. Jesus had to return to heaven. He will come again, but as we wait that glorious day we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that we will be his witnesses.

The question this morning is, have we bowed before the ascended Jesus and made him Lord of our lives? And do we desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit so we too may receive power from on high? Do we live every day in anticipation of the return of Jesus?

This is the challenge we are left with as we read Acts 1:1-11. How will you respond?