

“YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES.”

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Scripture Texts: Acts 1:6-11

Introduction.

Being a teacher is one of the most rewarding professions as well as one of the most exasperating.

There is this rule out there that says there are no dumb questions so with a straight face they have to answer questions like:

What keeps islands from floating away?

Is Shakespeare still writing plays?

If there's a speed of light ... what's the speed of dark?

Why do meteorites always land in craters?

What are those pyramid shaped things in Egypt called?

Acts 1:6, an ignorance revealing question.

“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Of all the things the disciples said to Jesus I wonder if this is one of the saddest. Jesus has poured His heart and soul into these men day and night for three years and this is what they ask of Him.

Any of you who are teachers have felt this pain. Actually any of you who are parents have felt this pain. You explain and explain and explain until you are blue in the face and they still don't get it. Jesus' heart must have just sank. You wonder if Jesus ever did a facepalm?

Not only had He taught and preached about the kingdom of God for three years, but for the past 40 days since the resurrection Jesus talked about the kingdom of God.

They are supposed to be ready to graduate but they ask a first grade question.

Calvin famously commented there are as many errors in this question as there are words. The verb, the noun and the adverb are all off base.

They ask about restoring (verb) the kingdom, but to them the kingdom is still earthly, territorial and political, with the trappings of wealth, luxury, power, position, and peace.

At this time (adverbial clause). They are expecting immediate results, no more waiting. They wanted the victory without the battle, they wanted the paycheck before they start work.

Israel (noun). They are still stuck in their small box thinking. To them the kingdom is national, racial, ethnic. Now that Israel's long awaited Messiah is alive, this must be Israel's moment.

But before we get too hard on the disciples I found myself wondering how often Jesus did a facepalm this week over something I did or said or asked?

How often do we show that we still don't get it, that we don't get the Gospel or we don't get grace, or the seriousness of our sin, or that all people are made in the image of God? We still think our works and our efforts somehow earn us the favor of God. We think outward appearances are more important than the condition of our heart.

Oh how patient Jesus has to be with us.

Acts 1:7-8, a perspective changing answer.

Jesus' answer is amazing. It's a patient soft rebuke with three clear teaching points.

First, His kingdom is going to be different from all other earthly kingdoms because the power is going to be different, not a political power but a spiritual power. His kingdom will not conquer by warriors but by witnesses. It will

radically impact the political and social and ethical world, but it won't be political. It will change hearts and that's what will change the world.

We don't have to be anxious about our changing political world. God's kingdom can survive and even thrive in any political context, no matter who is Pharaoh or Caesar or President or dictator.

Second, His kingdom will not be bounded by geo-political borders or lines on a map. It will be truly international. The Holy Spirit will not be confined to one place. Jesus' kingdom is the entire world, it will penetrate every last corner of Satan's stronghold. Jesus' kingdom is way bigger and better than the apostles could even imagine.

Acts 1:8 is a key verse to understanding all of Acts: "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."

Remember last week I said God is up to something. Well here is it, this is God's working outline. He is going to start in Jerusalem and then move out in concentric circles. Notice God is already up to point three of His outline. He is working on the last part of His plan. This outline is the outline for the book of Acts, it follows this exact path.

God is always up to something and He still is, He is moving toward the very ends of the earth. He is still fulfilling the promise He made to Abraham, that God would use Abraham to bless all the nations, indeed all the families of the earth.

I hate it when I hear people suggest Christianity is an American religion or a Western religion. It is nothing of the sort. It defies being labeled or fixed to one area. The Gospel will conquer the world. Jesus has all authority and He gives His disciples authority to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).

God breaks down all the barriers to being part of Christ's kingdom, age, race, ethnic origin, sex, rank or position. No one is beyond the scope of God's

saving power, no one is exempt from the need for God's redeeming grace. Heaven will be a glorious display of the supremacy of Christ's kingdom over all other kingdoms. He will be worshiped as king by people from every nation, tribe, people and language.

God's grace is wider than they ever dreamed or imagined, even to cursed enemies like Samaritans. The walls that separate us must and will be broken down (Ephesians 2:14).

Finally, His kingdom will not come suddenly but gradually. It won't be a coup. This will not be the work of a day or week or year or even two thousand years.

Jesus reigns in their impatience by saying it isn't for them to know the times and dates. And it isn't for us to know either. Christians in every single generation have thought it would be soon.

We are in this in-between time, the time between the Spirit's coming and the Son's coming and the reason the Son has not returned is because the harvest is not all in. The kingdom is still spreading. There is still work to be done, prayers to be prayed, salvation to be proclaimed, lives to be transformed.

Acts 1:9-11, a visible ascension with an angelic promise.

But before this great kingdom-spreading work can begin, Jesus must leave, and it must be clear that He has left.

Five times in this short description of the ascension it is emphasized that Jesus ascended visibly, right before their very eyes, in front of many eyewitnesses.

Jesus intended to make it clear this was the end of His resurrection appearances. He would not be walking through walls and doors or showing up for breakfast on the seashore any more. He could have disappeared secretly, but He wanted them to know He was gone for good.

Now they were to wait for Someone else to come, but not Him.

So what? Does the ascension matter to us? Should we care or be interested?

There is a clue in what the angels said. Their presence should tell us that the ascension of Jesus ranks right up there in importance with the incarnation and the resurrection where angels also showed up.

“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.”

Earlier Jesus rebuked them for being too earthly minded about the kingdom, and now the angels rebuke them for being too heavenly minded. The implication is you need to stop starrng up at heaven and start moving out toward the ends of the earth.

And this is still true today. Too many Christians have too much of a preoccupation with the times and seasons of when Jesus is returning and an unhealthy obsession with all the prophecy surrounding the end times.

We have been given a great commission, we are a people sent on a mission. Until Jesus comes, look for what God is doing through the power and wisdom of His Spirit and join Him in that work.

Implications and application.

God is up to something and we are part of it. I know that, because He has given His Holy Spirit to us.

By telling the disciples to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to come He was saying they were weak, they didn't have what they will needed for the mission ahead. That's true of all of us. Apart from Christ and the power of His Spirit in us, we have nothing and we can't in our own wisdom and strength face the challenges of life.

We need the power of God and the wisdom of God in real, practical, daily ways. Don't leave home without, don't go home without it. Don't try to live without it.

The spreading and expansion of His kingdom begins in our hearts as we increasingly give over more and more of our heart and our will to His control and rule and reign. From there it expands into our homes and relationships. From there into our schools, work place, church and community and world. We have a part to play in all those spheres of influence.

“Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God!” (William Carey).

How can we not when a sovereign, powerful, loving God has called us and commissioned us and given us His Holy Spirit and Jesus' authority and has promised us success. The Gospel will be the transforming power of God and wisdom of God to the ends of the earth.

Let these last words of Jesus on earth and His glorious ascension to the right hand of God, from where He sends us His Spirit and where He ever lives to pray for us, give you the strength and motivation to live for Christ, to be a witness, to endure hardship, to challenge old ways of thinking, to step out in faith and risk something for God, to begin to put to use a gift He has given you, to begin some new spiritual discipline for yourself or your family.

God is up to something, don't let anything quench what His Spirit is doing in your life. Stir yourself up to love and to attempt some good work.

This seems to me like a good time to invite members of the India/Nepal mission team to share some of their experience in going to the ends of the earth and being witnesses for Jesus.