

“Power For What?”

Acts 1:1-14

[Scripture Intro]

The last few weeks we've been looking at Luke's gospel, and this morning we turn to Acts, which should be seen as the sequel to Luke's first book. It answers the question, “How does God's work of redemption continue in the world after Jesus leaves?” I've always thought it so intriguing that the people Jesus chose to be his disciples were not very special at all, from a worldly point of view. These twelve men that he spent a majority of his time with, teaching and training them, none of them were CEOs, none of them were politicians or great influencers. They were normal people, fisherman, the kind of people who live paycheck to paycheck, ordinary folks without much interest in leaving their hometown.

And yet, after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, this group went on to change the entire world. What did Jesus do in the hearts of these men that empowered them so dramatically to renew the world. Nearly all of them were gruesomely killed; they were beaten and oppressed. But still, they were known as a people full of joy, peace, and kindness. How did Jesus work such a dramatic change in them?

[Acts 1:1-14]

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.” Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 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. 14 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

[Introduction]

The disciples ask Jesus a question that exposes their hearts in verse six. I think it is a lot like a question you'll often hear from the kids if you've ever taken a long road trip in America, “Are we there yet?” Without fail, an hour into the trip, we hear this chorus begin to chirp from the back seat. It can drive me crazy because sometimes it's never-ending, but there is another element of the question that always makes me a little sad. I want to tell the kids, “You're focusing on the wrong thing. We're doing this as a family, the trip is half the fun, let's enjoy being together right now.”

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The disciples ask in verse six, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Notice, Jesus never really answers their question. In verse three, and in the last chapter of Luke, we read that he was teaching them about the kingdom of God. But all the disciples are interested in is the kingdom of Israel. Naturally, they wanted freedom from their Roman oppressors. They're thinking about the end of the age, and Jesus wants them to focus on right now. They're thinking about themselves, and Jesus is moving their attention to the nations. Jesus answers them in such a way as if they had really asked the question he wanted them to ask. The question he is answering is, "Lord, how will we have power to continue the mission after you're gone?" In verse one, Luke explains that he wrote in his gospel about "all that Jesus began to do," insinuating that Jesus' work in the world still continues. This is Jesus' final moment of discipleship with them. And we get a lot of clues here too for our own discipleship, renewal and role in the continuing work of Christ.

Much like the disciples, we are often distracted and consumed by our own kingdoms. We often worry much more about reputation, success, and entertainment than we do about the mission of the church. And Jesus' remedy to our distraction is to refocus our attention on his kingdom, he wants to renew our hearts so we can continue his work. I think he does this primarily in three ways in our passage today, by showing us three things: (1) Jesus is the ascended King, (2) we have power in the Holy Spirit, and (3) that Jesus blesses praying communities.

[Main Point I - Jesus is the Ascended King]

Did you know that centuries ago in the churches in Europe there used to be a holiday that was as big, if not bigger than Christmas. Any guesses as to what it was? It wasn't Easter. It was Ascension Day. Jesus' ascension is listed in the Apostles Creed as a crucial element of orthodox faith. Luke ends his gospel with the ascension, and here at the beginning of Acts he also begins with it. Clearly it is important, but it is not something that often comes to mind when we think about the work of Christ.

Here we see two important elements about the ascension, namely that it marks Jesus definitely as king, and that it opens the door for the Spirit to indwell his people. After his humiliation, Jesus showed in his exaltation that he was truly God, more powerful than Satan, sin, and even death. He returns to heaven and sits down. His work is done, and now he rules over heaven and earth at the right hand of the Father.¹ Jesus spoke a great deal about the kingdom of God (v.3), and naturally every kingdom must have a king. Christ makes it very clear that he is our victorious king.

Luke writes this very carefully, in language meant to help the disciples, and us, those living in his kingdom. In verse two, Luke highlights that these are the apostles that Jesus chose. And those of us who are Christians today can have the same surety, he chose us as his people. No one has the right to simply enter a kingdom, but if the king chooses them specifically, their place in the kingdom is unshakable. In verse three, he showed himself to them again. He is not aloof, he is a real person who ate and drank with them. He is a king who delights in being with his people. He also gives them a purpose and a mission in verse eight. We don't have to be confused about our mission in this life, our purpose or meaning. The king gives us a clear identity.

We also see that he gives them a promise from the Father, that they will receive the Holy Spirit (v.5). Jesus said in John 16:7, "If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you." In verse nine the disciples are looking up, they want him back. Of course they don't want their king to leave. But what they don't understand in this moment that Jesus will continue to be with them through the Spirit. After the Spirit comes, he will be closer to them than he ever was when he

¹ Eph 1:20; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22, cf also Psalms 110:1; Acts 2:34

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was physically on the earth. Then they learn that one day he will come back, the angels have to explain in verse eleven. Just as our king left in a real body, that is how he will also return.

I imagine many of you enjoyed watching the Olympics last summer. I especially love watching soccer. When we root for Japan, and they win, it's not wrong to celebrate and scream, "We won!" You had nothing to do with it watching the game on your couch, but the victory is still yours as people of Japan. It is the same with King Jesus. He won the victory, and although we contributed nothing, we still get all the benefits of the victory.

This puts our daily problems into perspective. This lifts our eyes from our own kingdoms, stresses, concerns and worries. Jesus is awesome, so we don't have to be awesome. He rules and reigns for you, over all your problems and issues. Your sins have been taken care of. He is near, with you in your struggles, closer than we can imagine. You have been justified by his blood, he suffered for you. This is the basis and foundation of any renewal. There is no problem in your life that he is not in control of. Just because he doesn't bring resolution immediately, doesn't mean he doesn't care, and it doesn't mean that he is powerless. If your kingdom seems like a mess, he is inviting you to reflect on the unchanging truth that King Jesus is still in control, and he is near. I know you have been hurt. I know you have messed up, but none of this changes the reality that you are a beloved child of the king. That is a sure truth that is meant to put our problems into perspective and renew our hearts.

[Main Point II - Jesus Gives us Power by his Spirit]

The second thing I think Luke emphasizes here for us is the power that will come from the Holy Spirit. In verse five, the Lord says, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now," and later in verse eight, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." There is a lot of confusion today about the Holy Spirit. In some churches there is too much emphasis on it, it gets wacky, unintelligible, and unbiblical. And in some churches it is ignored all together. Some operate as if they have a different trinity - The Father, the Son, and the Holy Bible. In order to avoid these two extremes, I want to try to answer simply two questions. What is the baptism of the Spirit? And, why do we need the baptism of the Holy Spirit?

Some maintain that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a kind of second experience after we initially receive salvation. While that was the experience of the apostles, this occurred in a unique time in the history of the church. God's history of redemption is entering a new age in Acts 1, the church age, and unique things occur during this transition. It is important to remember this passage is more descriptive than prescriptive. The command to wait for the Spirit is no more applicable to us today than the command to go to Jerusalem. As the book of Acts plays out, it is clear that the apostles' expectation is that every Christian receives the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation.² We can be confident that every believer has the Spirit!

² In Peter's sermon in the next chapter, he promises people in vv.38-39 that they will receive two gifts: (1) forgiveness of their sins, and (2) the gift of the Holy Spirit. It had not entered their mind that this gift would be for the apostles alone, and their understanding was that God had placed no such limitation on his offer of this gift. In Peter's case he made it clear that this gift was for his listeners in Jerusalem at the time (both native Jews, and foreign Jews from the diaspora), their children, and those far off (both Jews abroad and Gentiles of every nation). John Stott offers some clarity on this point, "The gifts of God are coextensive with the call of God." This baptism of the Spirit is something that took place once and for all on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 19, Paul meets those whom he assumes are believers and he begins to question them. Again Stott explains, "His [Paul's] questions expressed his assumptions that those who have believed have received the Spirit, and that those who have been baptized have received the Spirit, for he cannot separate the sign (water) from the thing signified (the Spirit)." This is not to say that the moment of water baptism is one in the same as the moment of baptism in the spirit, but it is an error to completely separate them. The Gospel of John offers definite clarity in 7:38-39 about the expectation of receiving the Spirit at the time of belief in Christ as Savior, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

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In fact, we cannot have faith unless the Spirit gives it. Faith in Christ is a work of the Spirit, and every Christian has the Spirit living in side of them. That is what is meant when Jesus speaks of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost (Acts 2) is the moment Jesus is referring to when he said "not many days from now." Since that point, every believer in Christ is indwelt by his Spirit.

But why? The Spirit has many roles in the life of the church, but Jesus gives one clear reason here in verse eight. Namely, the apostles need this power if they are to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Fourteen times in the book of Acts it speaks of someone being full of the Spirit. And in ten of those fourteen times that person is immediately led to be a witness for Christ.

Today, here in Tokyo, from the perspective of the apostles we are living in the "end of the earth." Our worship here this morning is evidence that the Spirit has faithfully filled the people of God with the power to be effective witnesses. But the task is not complete. Did you know there are over two billion people in the world today who still have no access to the gospel? Millions of people here in Japan still have never had a friend explain to them what Jesus has done.

The disciples are focused on Israel, and Jesus corrects them, because his heart is for the whole world. If we are so focused on ourselves, on our own kingdoms on our own problems, we'll be horrible witnesses. We won't need the power of the Holy Spirit, because we wouldn't be using the power for it's intended purpose. But when we begin to look around, when we begin to pray that the Lord would make our hearts sensitive to the fact that most of the people we pass every day in Tokyo have never heard the gospel, then we start to see our need for power. By ourselves, we can't do anything. It drives us to the Lord. We see our inadequacy, and see our need for him. That is when we will begin to know this power. That is when we're renewed, through the communion with Christ as we beg him to move in the lives of non-believers that we love. We'll see in the next section just what a crucial role prayer plays in the process of renewal and witness.

[Main Point III - Jesus Blesses Praying Communities]

We see this exact process happen in the life of the apostles. They see their great weakness in face of such a huge, daunting task, and it drives them together to the Lord in prayer. This is the third way the Lord renews us. Even in these few short verses, we see a lot of progression in the disciples. They're no longer looking up, waiting for Jesus to come back. They believe his words, and they trust his promises. So instead of looking up, their are heads bowed down in prayer. They are immediately obedient in verse twelve, following Jesus' command to take the one-kilometer journey back to Jerusalem. They're back in the same upper room where they had been with the Lord and they pray. Luke is careful to list them, every one of the disciples is there except for Judas, and the Lord blesses them with great unity as they devote themselves to prayer.

What are they praying for? The text doesn't tell us exactly, but from their obedience we can tell that they had listened very closely to Jesus. They're supposed to wait (v.4) and not leave Jerusalem until they are baptized by the Spirit. So, it is reasonable to assume that they're praying for the Spirit. They're praying that somehow the Lord would help them to be witnesses at a time when to promote Jesus likely meant being killed. We can imagine they were both scared and excited, praying that the Lord would do the work he has just promised to do. After all, Jesus had promised it would all begin "not many days from now" (v.5).

The Lord is blessing their union, their church, their community as they turn to him in distress. The desperate nature of their situation results in incredible unity; they were together with one accord (v.14). We can imagine there was not a lot of bickering about petty things. They were all in the same boat and they knew they need each other. Jesus has a purpose for their

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desperation and need. He is renewing them together as they pray for help. Because the simple truth is that we can't experience renewal alone.

When we're too distracted by our own kingdoms, consumed by our own ambitions instead of the Lord, it doesn't make much sense to pray, let alone pray with others. If we're more worried about our reputations than God's mission, it will keep us from praying out of fear that we might sound weird, or we might say the wrong words. If we're more worried about building up our own name rather than the name of Christ, praying with others simply becomes another distraction that we just don't have time for.

But the Bible has no category for a Lone Ranger Christian. Notice the disciples didn't each go to their own place and say, "OK, well, Jesus promised this, so let's all get back together when this Spirit thing happens." They didn't say, "I'll be praying for you," and then leave. No! Have you been trying to do this alone? Have you been avoiding community? I think more than half of leadership is simply showing up. The church doesn't need amazing people to be leaders, all the church needs normal people who will simply be faithful to show up and pray. Grace City has had some rough times, but we can be confident the Lord is using it. One of those reasons, I imagine, is to bring the church together and to bring the church to a posture of dependent prayer. If the culture is going to listen to what we have to say as a church, it is not going to happen because we don't have any problems. What will really make this city lean in to listen is when they see real hurt and pain in the church - and then they see how we forgive each other, love each other, and joyfully trust God in the midst of trials. That is a powerful witness!

[Conclusion]

I heard a renewal story from a member of a friend's church in America last week that I want to close with. This church member, named Jess, was so full of joy and passion as she spoke about how God has been working in their church. Jess' parents are former missionaries to Japan, and for years and years Jess has been praying for revival in Japan, she would beg King Jesus to have compassion on the nation of Japan. The more she grew in her awareness of what Jesus has done for her, the greater her desire was to share it with others. She is very involved in her church and with her community group they had also been praying that the Lord would use them to be witnesses. They didn't know how, and they didn't feel adequate, but they prayed. Out of the blue Jess received a message last month that there was a new couple moving in next door. This couple was moving from Japan.

Jess was understandably very excited, and she decided that she would bake some bread and take it over to them to welcome them to the neighborhood. Nanako and Toshi loved the bread and had a great conversation with Jess and her family. Nanako enjoyed the bread so much that she asked Jess if she would teach her how to make it. The next day Jess invited her over. Bread takes a long time to make, and Jess was praying the extended time would give them a chance to talk about the gospel. But that morning Nanako confided to Jess the real reason why she had come to America. Nanako shared that most of the wives don't come over with their husbands to the States. But Nanako really wanted to come, the reason being was that she really wanted to learn about Christianity. She asked Jess, "Do you know anyone who can teach me about Jesus?" Jess was shocked and said, "Sure, I can! I am a Christian. Do you want to set up a time later to talk about the Bible?" Nanako said, "No! I want to hear right now." So that very morning Jess got to explain the story of God to Nanako. She and her husband Toshi have faithfully been attending their church and community group.

Confident in her position as a child of the King, Jess and her church prayed in community for the power of the Spirit to be witnesses. This is a prayer the Lord loves to answer. This is how he lifts our eyes to focus on his kingdom instead of ours. This is a crucial part of the process that brings us to renewal.