

The Promise

Acts 1:6-8

Introduction

The chief executive officer (CEO) of a major corporation left town on short notice. In fact, only a few people knew that he had even left. He was to be gone for several weeks and knew that his senior vice presidents and their staffs would not be able to operate for that long without guidance. So, as he flew to his destination, this CEO wrote a lengthy and specific letter. In it, he described several key projects that he wanted to be accomplished, several important clients that he wanted to be contacted, the normal business that he wanted to be handled as usual while he was away, etc. As soon as he arrived at his distant destination, he mailed the letter back to his company.

The CEO was away for a long time. In fact, several months went by before he returned. As he pulled into the corporate parking lot, he immediately sensed that something was wrong. The corporate campus had not been cared for – the grass had not even been mowed. As he entered the lobby, the receptionist was painting her nails while the phones rang. He quickly got on the elevator to the executive suite. When the doors opened he was absolutely amazed at the scene before him. His senior vice presidents had turned the large workroom into a modified gym. Everything from weights to pool tables were included. The staff were wearing casual clothes and were laughing and playing. As they began to take note of the fact that he was standing there, they quieted down and came to where he stood. He simply asked, “Did you receive my letter?”

Their response shocked him, “Your letter? Oh yea, we got it. In fact, we photocopied it so that every employee could have their own copy.”

He asked, “Well, did you read it?”

“Read it? We’ve got the entire company divided into smaller groups to study it! Some of our more aggressive people have actually memorized large portions of it. One man even memorized the entire thing – we call him ‘The Walking Letter’. Others have even written songs about your letter. We’ve got everything from T-shirts to coffee mugs with quotes from your letter written on them. What an incredible, encouraging, challenging, uplifting letter you wrote. In fact, we were just talking about taking a couple hours out once a week to get all of the employees together for a special discussion on your letter.”

By this time, the CEO felt weak. However, he still asked the question, “Did anyone do what I asked in the letter?”

“Do?”

“Yes, you know, the clients that I wanted to be reached, the projects that I wanted to be accomplished – did anyone do what I asked in the letter?”

“Uh, no sir. You see, we’re still in the process of developing new and creative ways to study your letter.”

If there ever was a fable that described the modern day church of Jesus Christ, it is that fable.

The difference between the church in the book of Acts and the church in America today, is the church in America makes a lot of motion, while the church in Acts created a movement. The typical evangelical church has a lot of programs, but little power.

It is a shock for most to discover that the power of the Holy Spirit was never intended to be the end in itself, it was intended to create a worldwide spiritual

awakening. Yet, the opposite is true. As one of my seminary professors was fond of saying, “The church is the most revolutionary force on earth, stuck in cement.”

God knew that the seductive, intellectual, pietistic trap for His followers would be the lie that receiving the letter was enough; that reading and studying the letter was enough; that memorizing the letter was enough. In order to help His followers to get past that trap, He included in His letter a portion called, “The Book of ‘Action,’ or Acts”. When you open His letter to the “Book of Action,” you are immediately confronted by believers who dared to do what they knew; who behaved according to what they believed.

In the very first chapter of the book of Acts, we discover the directive from our CEO, the Chief Shepherd. It is a directive that the early church obeyed – they did it! Look at verse 8.

but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; . . .

(that is the promise, now this is the command),

. . . and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

According to this verse, the measure of a church is not the size of its membership, but its complete surrender to its mission.

Furthermore, the mark of maturity for every disciple of Jesus Christ is not how much of the Bible has been learned, but how much of the Bible has been lived.

Now let us set the stage for this timeless promise and challenge.

The Preface!

In the first five verses of Acts, chapter 1, the disciples are in numerous places and are being taught by the Lord, who would appear randomly, it seemed. In verse 4a, we read,

Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised . . .

Now, in Luke’s first letter to Theophilus, we learn that this was spoken to the disciples in a room where they had gathered to eat. That is important to understand. Turn to Luke, chapter 24, verses 42 and 43. The disciples are eating together in a room and Jesus suddenly appears.

They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; and He took it and ate it before them.

Skip to verses 45 through 47.

Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ [Messiah] would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Now continue to verses 48 through 49.

“You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

Does that sound familiar?!

In the book of Acts, Luke picks up the story where he left off. In fact, the first five verses of Acts, chapter 1, are merely a reminder of this last section in the gospel.

A not-so-bad question

Now turn ahead to the sequel and look at Acts, chapter 1, verse 6.

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?”

We immediately think, “What a dumb question!”

This sounds like Simon Peter again, when he asked, “Lord, is it now?”

It is a dumb question, unless you know where the apostles had come together. In verse 4, they were gathered together in a room, but in verse 6, they were gathered together . . . on the Mount of Olives.

How do we know where the apostles had gathered? First of all, the Lord has yet to ascend to the Father. He does not ascend through the ceiling of a room; He ascends from the Mount of Olives. In fact, look ahead to verse 9.

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

Now look at verses 12 and 13a.

Then [after the ascension] they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s

journey away. When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying . . .

This presents an altogether different picture of the apostles' question, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"

Why did they ask that? Because they put together the teaching of Jesus related to the literal kingdom of God on earth (which will happen one day), with their limited understanding of Old Testament prophecy about the coming kingdom. For example, Zechariah, chapter 14, verse 4a, declares,

In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east . . .

So, in Acts, chapter 1, verse 6, the feet of the resurrected Christ, the sovereign King of Kings, are now on the mount of Olives. And the apostles ask, "Lord, is it now? Is it now?"

It was a great question. And Jesus did not rebuke them for asking about the kingdom. They were right about the truth of a literal kingdom on earth; they were simply wrong about the timing of the kingdom.

There was something the prophets did not know and had not seen. Between the first and second coming of the Lord, there would be the creation and duration of something brand new; that is, the church age. In this age or dispensation of grace, the message of redemption would go out not only to the twelve tribes of Israel, but to the Gentile nations of the world.

A not-so-mild caution

Now, while you will not read one word of rebuke related to the Kingdom of God being established, Jesus did rebuke the apostles, and everyone since then, for trying to establish a set date related to a future event. Frankly, I believe that rebuke was intended for the church as much as it was for them.

Jesus' rebuke is one that seems to go unheeded. For example:

- A few decades after this, about 1900 years ago, many of the Thessalonians were so convinced that Christ was returning for the church that they quit their jobs and eventually, depended on others to sustain them. Paul had to challenge them, in II Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 10b, with the words, ". . . if anyone is not willing to work

[implying that they could work], then he is not to eat, either."

- In our own American history, in the 1800's, the Millerites (the forerunners of the Seventh Day Adventists), set date after date, only to be disappointed again and again.
- I read in a magazine some time ago, about a woman who, along with her following, was camped out on a high mountain somewhere in the west, wearing a white robe and waiting for the fulfillment of her vision that had given her knowledge of the exact date for the end of the world.
- I heard one evangelist announce to his television audience a few years ago, that the return of Christ for the church will occur between 2001 and 2012. At least he is clever enough to give it a twelve year span. That will give his TV program more time as well.
- Before 1988, many Korean believers fell for the powerful arguments of a man who wrote a booklet giving many reasons why Christ would return in 1988. They sold their property, had their pets put to sleep, and so on. The confusion among the people was traumatic; the loss of credibility by church leaders was enormous. January 1, 1989, brought an incredible backwash of anger, disillusionment, and despair. I remember that January, when we as a church, took time in the morning service to pray for the Korean believers who had, in effect, overlooked the timeless principle of Acts, chapter 1, verse 7.

The only thing you can safely say about the timing of the rapture of the church is, "Jesus Christ did not rapture the church yesterday, but He might today."

While you and I can determine the truth about prophetic events, we cannot determine the time. That is up to the Father to know and determine.

The exciting thing is, He already knows when the rapture will occur. He already knows who the anti-christ is. He also knows if the mark of the beast is an invisible tattoo, or a debit card, or a credit card number, or a cattle brand burned into the forehead. He already knows when the literal Kingdom of Christ on earth will begin. He already knows the date when He will destroy planet earth with fire, as we are told in the Book of Revelation, and create a new heaven and a

new earth, that you and I, as believers, will enjoy forever and ever.

The Power!

It is also encouraging that, according to verse 7 of Acts, chapter 1, the Father has complete control and authority over these world-wide, incredible, magnificent events. Could it be possible, dear Christian, that the Father has a little “itsy bitsy” bit of control over the events in your life? Is that too much of a stretch?!

I like the story of a woman who came to G. Campbell Morgan, who is one of my favorite expositors of the past generation. She came up to him after one of his meetings and asked him with trembling hands, “Dr. Morgan, do you think God is interested in my little problems?”

He responded, “Dear lady, do you think any of your problems are big to God?”

What a great assurance it was to these disciples, who would soon face incredible persecution, to hear that the Father had determined the epochs of history and of the future and that He alone, rode the winds of time with sovereign power and authority.

But you will receive power . . .

Now, the really exciting part is in verse 7 through the first word of verse 8a. Look at these verses.

It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but . . .

The word, “but” is “alla,” which can be translated, “on the contrary”. In other words, you are not to know about the time when future events will be fulfilled, but you are to know something else. “On the contrary,” there is something to fill your mind with; there is something for you to anticipate. Jesus says, “Let me tell you about the promise,” verse 8a,

but you will receive power . . .

This promise is in the future tense. And I have no doubt that not one of the disciples, including Simon Peter, said, “What do we need that for? We’re ready to go.”

No, the truth of the matter was and still is, that apart from the power of the Spirit operating in your life, you cannot fulfill the rest of the verse – you will never impact your generation with the gospel of Jesus

Christ. If the Spirit does not come to the disciples, they are powerless.

Part of our problem as believers, into whose life the Spirit of power resides, is the fact that we are not totally convinced we need Him.

Martin Luther, the reformer, once quipped, “God created the world out of nothing – when we realize we are nothing, He can make something out of us too.”

I happen to believe that every disciple on that windy mountaintop knew he was nothing! They knew they were totally needy and dependant on something other than willpower, intellect, and commitment.

In a recent power outage, we were reminded of the value of an invisible power called electricity. I do not understand electricity; I cannot see electricity, but I certainly need it. In fact, I think we ought to have a national holiday in honor of Thomas Edison – I love that man.

We also discovered that no matter how much we paid for our appliances; no matter how good they look or how state of the art they are, without that invisible source of power, they were worth no more than a cardboard box to us.

Tony Evans makes an excellent point in his book on the Holy Spirit. He writes that we are like electrical appliances – we have been given all the components for effective living and ministry, but have no intrinsic source of power. We have not been designed to work on our own, there must be a dynamic operating in your life that is both beyond understanding and seeing.

The Person!

The power promised in verse 8, by the way, is the word “dynamic,” which comes from the Greek word “dunamis”. It gives us the word “dynamic,” and even “dynamite”. Now continue in verse 8.

When the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . .

but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . .

This is the Lord’s promise to the apostles, “Gentlemen, you’re about to take on dynamite; you’re about to receive a life revolutionizing dynamic; a source of power that will make you work. *But, it isn’t an impersonal force, it is a person.*”

Now remember, the apostles were waiting for the Holy Spirit to come. The descension of the Holy

Spirit was dependant upon the Lord's ascension, as the Lord had already taught. The Lord's ascension will occur in the next verse. The Spirit's descension will be reported in the next chapter.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit that the apostles waited for is something we now experience upon conversion. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, in I Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 13a,

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . .

This was not the result of spirituality, as many in that fellowship were divisive and carnal. In fact, if you put these disciples to the test, you discover they received the Holy Spirit in spite of their track record; in spite of their understanding; in spite of their education; in spite of their failure. The God of grace would provide these ordinary men of clay with the Spirit of God so that they, and we, could carry out His command.

Now, listen carefully to this. The power is a person – the empowering person of the Holy Spirit, who is the source of power. That means, Christian friend, you do not need to pray for the power, you just need to submit to the Person. You do not need to cry for the Holy Spirit to come; you do not need to plead and weep and fast for the Spirit to descend, you just need to surrender to the Spirit who has come.

The Priority!

There is another errant pattern of thinking prevalent today. It is the thinking that the power of the Spirit is an end in itself.

You might hear someone say, "I want to feel the power of the Spirit!"

"Why?"

"So I can experience certain gifts," or "So I can be victorious," or "So I can be healed . . ."

In fact, verse 8 does not have a period after the word "you," although that is exactly who those movements seem to focus on. Look again at that verse,

. . . when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . .

That marks the end of the believer's pursuit.

The Holy Spirit, in fact, has not descended for the purpose of announcing Himself. Jesus Christ said, in John, chapter 16, paraphrased, "I'm going to ascend

to the Father and He (the Spirit) will descend and, when He does, He shall magnify Me."

That does not mean the Spirit of God is less important than the Son of God. They are equally God. It has nothing to do with essence, it has everything to do with function. And the function of the Holy Spirit will be, primarily, to magnify the Lord. In other words, the Holy Spirit will become the advertising agency for the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ.

The thought struck me that in the advertising world today, the point is not to magnify the advertising agency, but to exalt the product. In fact, if the advertisement is really good, you walk away with the name of the product on your mind, and certainly not the name of the agency who came up with the ad.

Movements today that are focused on the Holy Spirit, enamored by the Holy Spirit, bent on experiencing the Holy Spirit, pleading for the Holy Spirit, claiming a special relationship with the Holy Spirit have missed the point.

The point, or better yet, the priority is in the middle of verse 8, which declares,

. . . and you shall be My witnesses . . .

The Spirit of God has come so that you will be empowered, so that you can testify on behalf of the Son.

Look at all of verse 8.

but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and . . .

(an expanded translation could read, "and as a result"),

. . . you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

In our next discussion, we will take a look at the priority and the plan for this global advertising. Luke's record will take us into a courtroom scene and we will discover why Jesus did not call us His lawyers, or the jury, or the judge. In the courtroom drama of human history, we have been called to take the stand as witnesses.

Conclusion

Let me close by reading a quote from the writings of a Greek statesman named Aristides. He was not a Christian, but he wrote about Christians in his work entitled, *The Apology of Aristides*. He wrote,

The Christians persuade others to become Christians by the love they have for them; and when they have become so, they call them without distinction, brothers. They do not worship strange gods; and they walk in all humility and kindness. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with necessary food. They observe scrupulously the commandment of their Messiah; they live honestly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. They praise and laud God and over their food and their drink, they render Him thanks. And if any righteous person of their number passes away from this world, they rejoice and give

thanks to God and they speak of his body as though he were moving from one place to another. Such is the law of the Christians and such is their conduct.

And so, from the first century to the twentieth century, the challenge remains, dear Christian, that having been born again into the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ; having received the person and power of the Holy Spirit at that very moment of conversion; having received from our CEO, the leader of our lives and faith, a letter – the letter – the question remains, “Are we simply studying it, memorizing it, and enjoying it, or are we living it, walking it, and doing what the letter from our Leader said to do?”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/22/1996 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1996 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.