“YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES”

Acts 1:1-26
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 book of Acts is the historian Luke’s account of the early church after the ascension of Jesus Christ. Primarily, it focuses on two people, St. Peter in Jerusalem, and St. Paul on the mission journeys. In fact, the real focus is the work of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Holy Spirit, ordinary men were transformed into spiritual generals for the sake of the world mission imperative. In this first chapter, the Risen Jesus gives his disciples the world mission command. Today, we want to learn how we can be Jesus’ witnesses for the sake of the world salvation purpose of God.

I. You will be my witnesses (1-8)

Look at verses 1 and 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 into heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.” The author of Luke’s gospel also wrote the book of Acts. As he states here, in Luke’s gospel the author presented the story of Jesus’ life: his birth, ministry, arrest, trial, death and resurrection. Jesus’ divine compassion for the sick and brokenhearted especially fascinated the gentle doctor Luke. According to Luke’s conception, Jesus was the Savior King who welcomed anyone, Jew or Gentile, into his sheltering arms. Ultimately, the Savior King offered up his very life for the sake of those he came to rescue. Luke wrote his gospel to present a more comprehensive picture of Jesus’ life. What is more important, Luke wanted to help his friend Theophilus (Lover of God) believe that Jesus really is the Christ, and by believing have life in his name.
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.” ‘After his suffering’ refers to the time following Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus suffered terribly to complete his messianic work. His death on the cross opened the way for all men to receive the forgiveness of sins. His resurrection promised all men who believed in him eternal life in his kingdom. However, there was still something left for the Risen Jesus to do. The Risen Jesus spent forty days with his chosen apostles, giving them many convincing proofs that he was alive, and speaking to them about the kingdom of God. Jesus ate and drank with his disciples, and talked to them till late at night, until they could confess, “The Lord Jesus was killed at the hands of wicked men, but death could not keep our Lord in the grave. ‘Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o’er his foes. He arose a victor from the dark domain, And he lives forever with his saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah, Christ arose!”

Look at verse 3b again. “He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” When Jesus appeared to the apostles, he only wanted to speak to them about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the main point of Jesus’ earthly ministry. When Jesus first began preaching publicly, he declared in Mark 1:15, “The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.’” And at the last supper he blessed his disciples, saying, “And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me.” (Lk 22:29). However, in all the time that Jesus spoke publicly and privately with his disciples, they stubbornly refused to believe. One young man heard an older man preaching about the kingdom of God again and again. He said to himself, “We don’t need the kingdom of God — We need revolution!” Another young man had a dream that he was in the kingdom of God with Jesus. However, when Jesus asked him if he believed, he answered, ‘NO’.” He thought he wanted to live in this world forever. It is very hard for a young man to believe in the kingdom of God. Still, the Risen Jesus continued to teach his apostles for forty days after his resurrection, so that they might finally
believe in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God there are no
more tears. In the kingdom of God they can celebrate forever with
their Savior Jesus at the wedding of the Lamb.

Look at verses 4 and 5. “On one occasion, while he was eating
with them, he gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but
wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak
about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be
baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” The Risen Christ urged his people to
wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The people of Jesus’ time did
not know what to do about their sin problem. John’s baptism with
water did not change them. They needed the baptism of the Holy
Spirit. Most people live by their willpower or smart minds. But soon
they experience that they cannot control their emotional feelings and
sinful nature with their willpower or smart minds. Whether they will
admit it or not, they must admit that they are not ruled by their
willpower but by the spirit in them. Those who are controlled by evil
spirits can not do what they really want to do; they do only what they
really don’t want to do. Evil spirits make man say all the time, ”I didn’t
mean it!” On the other hand, those who are ruled by the Holy Spirit are
freed from the grip of sinful desires and can long for the holiness of
God and experience the unutterable joy of heaven. The fruit of the
Holy Spirit is love, joy, peace, and so on (Gal 5:22). We really want
peace and joy, living in this troubled world. Therefore, the first thing
we must seek is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In the book of Acts,
the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God; at the same time he is the Spirit of
the Risen Christ. When we have faith in the Risen Christ, we receive
the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

How did the apostles respond to Jesus’ promise and command?
Verse 6 says, “So when they met together, they asked him, ‘Lord, are
you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’” Their
question revealed their hidden problem. The disciples were still
Judaistic. In history, the Jews had their day of independence, but
subsequently they had become subject to many nations. So they
began to look forward to the earthly messianic kingdom they thought
God would establish through his promised Messiah, breaking directly
into human history. This was the Judaistic concept of the kingdom of God in general. The disciples were still bound by this Judaistic utopian dream and they did not have the slightest idea about the kingdom of God.

Jesus knew that their concept of "the kingdom of Israel" was earthly. But he did not squash their human dream. Rather, Jesus turned their concept into "the kingdom of God." At the same time, he commanded them to be his witnesses. 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." This is the world mission command of the Risen Christ. Here we learn several things.

First, the world mission command restores our creation purpose. When God created man, he gave man the image of God, so that man might grow up to be like God, and fulfill God's purpose for man to be the steward of all of God's creation. But man lost God's purpose for his life when he was reduced to working for the sake of eating three meals a day. Because of sin, man could no longer co-work with God, and became useless to God. God wanted to raise up Israel, the nation he had promised to Abraham, as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, to bring the knowledge of God to all nations of the earth. But they only rebelled against him and killed his one and only Son. Still, God did not lose his dream for mankind. He raised up his Son from the dead, opening the way for all who believed in him to receive the forgiveness of sins and a living hope in his kingdom. And to all who believed, he restored their creation purpose by giving them the world mission command. Man cannot be happy just by satisfying his petty desires. Man must have God's mission and purpose in his life. We must have the world mission command in our hearts.

Second, the world mission command is the secret of success. In the Bible, we can find two kinds of people. The first are those who have a vision to conquer the whole world. The second are those who just want to survive. The best example of this is Joseph of the old testament, and his brothers. Joseph had a dream from the age of 17
that all his brothers and his father and mother would bow down before him. His brothers never had dreams, but were only irritated all the time by their brother’s vision. They plotted to kill him, and finally sold him into slavery. But even in slavery, Joseph held on to his vision and labored until his master prospered greatly and the master’s wife tried to seduce him. Joseph was put into prison, but later he was released and put into the service of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and made second in command. When he met his brothers again, they were destitute because of a famine, and they bowed down low to the ground before him. Joseph bore up under all kinds of suffering in order to fulfill the vision God had given him and become a shepherd of the world in his generation. His brothers became miserable beggars, because they only had a dream to enjoy an easy life without their pushy brother, Joseph. The world mission command is the spiritual secret for success for God’s people, at the same time that it is the promise of God’s peace and love for all men.

Third, the faith of the Risen Christ. At that time, the disciples were weary and tired. They were fearful of everything after the crucifixion of Jesus. In spite of themselves, the Risen Jesus gave them the world mission command to evangelize the whole world. To them, it was an impossible task. But the Risen Christ had faith in them, that they would be witnesses of his death and resurrection to the whole world. They were only a handful of very ordinary Galilean fishermen. At that time, they were nobodies in the world. But the Risen Jesus believed that they would be his witnesses — beginning in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and finally, to the ends of the earth. The Risen Jesus saw them as commanding officers who would conquer the whole world. The Risen Jesus has faith in us, too.

Fourth, the world mission command reveals God’s broken shepherd heart for the perishing world. God had decided to accomplish world salvation work. At that time, the world was in the darkest darkness. Men treated women like slaves. When the Savior of the world came and healed the sick and preached the good news of the kingdom of God, evil men arrested him and nailed him to a cross. But the Risen Jesus wanted to spread the good news of the kingdom of God to the
whole world through his witnesses, in order to save all men from their sins and bring them back to his kingdom. The world mission command is the best expression of God's broken shepherd heart.

When the Risen Christ gave his disciples the world mission command, he wanted them to be his witnesses. A witness is a person who saw a certain thing and says nothing but the truth about it. When the Risen Christ told his disciples, "You will be my witnesses," he hoped that they would be witnesses of his death and resurrection before the eyes of the people of the world. At that time it was not easy for anyone to be a witness of Jesus, for it was an act of martyrdom. This is the reason the word "witness" has in it the meaning of "martyrdom." At that time, it seemed that the world mission command would not work. But it worked mightily. The Apostle John looked too lovely to be Jesus' witness. But he became a witness of Jesus who was slain for the sin of the world. Revelation 1:9 says, "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

How could they be his witnesses? It was possible for them when they received the Holy Spirit. In John 14:16 Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "another Counselor." The King James Version puts this as "another Comforter." The Holy Spirit is the one who fills men with courage and strength; evil spirits make men utterly powerless. When the disciples received the Holy Spirit, they could be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Here we learn that the Christian church is a fellowship of witnesses to the power of Jesus' death and resurrection.

II. Jesus' glorious ascension (9-11)

After the Risen Jesus gave his disciples the world mission command, he was taken up before their very eyes into heaven. As he was going, a cloud hid him from their sight. All of a sudden, the disciples were left alone, without Jesus. They strained their eyes and looked intently into the sky for any sign that Jesus was coming back.
But Jesus kept going higher and higher, leaving them behind. Why did Jesus leave his disciples behind, just when they needed him most? Jesus was ascending into heaven to take his rightful place at the right hand of God. From there, Jesus reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords. From there, he hears the prayers of his people all over the world, and answers them according to our faith. Most importantly for his apostles, God empowered Jesus to send us from his throne in heaven the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 4:7 says, “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” Jesus ascended into heaven victorious over the power of sin and death. He opened the way for all men to follow him into “the home of righteousness” (2 Pe 3:14b). As our heavenly King, he pours out the gift of his Spirit on all of his people.

As the disciples were standing and looking up into the sky, two men dressed in white suddenly appeared beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand there 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.” The angels gave the apostles the promise of Jesus’ glorious second coming. Jesus was now exalted in heaven and crowned the King of kings. But he would come back as King to gather his people from the four corners of the world, and to destroy all the wicked people. 2 Peter 3:11 says, “Since everything is going to be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.” All lazy people imagine that Jesus will not come again. However, those whose hope is in the kingdom of God always have something to do in preparation for Jesus’ coming again. According to the Bible, the whole creation is moving toward the consummation of history—the second coming of Jesus Christ. As he promised, Jesus will indeed come in his Father’s glory with his holy angels as the Judge, King of kings and Lord of lords. When we have faith in the second coming of Jesus, we can be his witnesses. When we have faith in the second coming of Jesus, we can truly be holy pilgrims on earth. May God give each of us wholesome thinking and faith that Jesus comes again in power.
III. Preparing the spiritual vessel (12-26)

The two angels had rebuked the disciples for standing around after Jesus’ ascension. What was there for the disciples to do? According to Jesus’ command, they should wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came. In their loneliness and uncertainty, they had to fall into despair. But after despair, they joined together in prayer. They prayed alone, two by two, four by four and 120 by 120. The men prayed, the women prayed, they all prayed together. Their prayer topic was simple. “Lord, please send us the Holy Spirit you promised. Lord, help us to obey your world mission command.” When they prayed, Peter realized that there was something that needed doing. After Judas’ betrayal, the spiritual vessel among the disciples had been broken. When Peter meditated on Scripture, he realized that it had to happen, and that now they needed to put Judas behind them by electing another witness in his place. They all prayed about it, and then chose Matthias to be the twelfth apostle.

Through this event we can see the importance of prayer in forming a spiritual vessel. The apostles had no idea how to do the work of God. But when they prayed, God gave them wisdom, how to prepare for doing the work of God. More than that, when they prayed all of their problems seemed trivial to them, and they could be united in heart and mind to carry out God’s will for world salvation. Those who turn from God’s calling and apostolic mission are very discouraging and a bad influence. But through prayer we can find healing and strength to remain faithful to live as servants of God in this generation.

In today’s passage we learn that the world mission command of Jesus is the best expression of God’s broken shepherd heart. God wants to save all people of the world from their sins, with no one missing. We also learn that the Christian church is a fellowship of witnesses to Jesus’ death and resurrection. May God help us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.