

Sermon 4, How to Handle Jesus' Departure – and Return, Acts 1:6-11

Proposition: The reality that Jesus will return the way He left prompts us to stop date-setting and Heaven-gazing and focus instead on power, the Spirit, and witness.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to the event that was already anticipated in v. 2 of this chapter. I'm talking about the Ascension. We know that Jesus sits at God's right hand, and that He left this world in a dramatically supernatural fashion to drive that point home to His disciples. But I want us to focus on what Jesus focused on with His ascension. The focus is on power, the Spirit, and witness, not only in Jerusalem (the hometown of the church!) but beyond it, in Samaria (a region where a sect of Judaism flourished) and all the way to the end of the earth. Acts 1:8 is well known as being the outline of the book, and so it is. But more important and relevant to us than where the gospel was preached in those early days is how it was preached. The final instructions our Lord left were appropriate not just for that moment in church history, but for every moment right up to His return. So let's examine this story and listen to those instructions in more detail. What we'll see is that the reality that Jesus will return the way He left prompts us to stop date-setting and Heaven-gazing and focus instead on power, the Spirit, and witness.

I. Coming Together to Say Goodbye, v. 6a

Our text begins with the disciples coming together — as we can see from v. 12, this is a coming together to say goodbye. It's a farewell gathering on the Mount of Olives. You have probably been to a number of farewell gatherings like this. They are formalized at the end of weddings, of

course. We gather to see the new couple into the getaway car. We have also been to parties at which we say goodbye to friends who are moving. In the same way, the disciples gathered because this was the end. Jesus was leaving.

II. A Final Question: Is the Kingdom Coming to Israel Now?, v. 6b

But before He went, they had a final question: Is the Kingdom coming back to Israel now?

What kind of a question is this? It is something that they really want to know! Is Israel going to be freed from Roman rule and made once again the geo-political Kingdom of God?

Why would they wonder such a thing? Because like the Dispensationalists and Zionists of our day, they read the Hebrew Bible and saw that God had promised to give Israel a land, presumably a land they controlled in a political sense, with a Davidic king on the throne. Folks, that conclusion is not hard to draw from the pages of what Jews call the Bible and what we call the first 39 books of the Bible. We cannot judge the disciples harshly here, for not only they but many Christians of today would pose this very same question to Jesus. Calvin says “There are almost as many errors as words in this question.” But it is better exegesis to attempt to see what Luke thought of the question, or rather what Jesus thought of it.

III. The Question Reframed, vv. 7-8

And thankfully, we have His answer right here in the text before us. Brothers and sisters, this answer is incredibly important. It is the answer, not to the question of when Israel will once again become a geo-political religious state, but to the question of how the disciples ought to live after Jesus’ departure. Jesus’ answer to this question gives two sides of the issue — what isn’t for us, and what is. Obviously, as we read further, we will see that Acts is not some NT version of Joshua and 1 & 2 Samuel, all about establishing Israel as a nation-state. This book simply does not cover that question. Rather, it covers the question of how we can be certain of the Kingdom and act as the Kingdom’s subjects in this era where the King is in Heaven and not on earth.

A. What’s Not For Us: Knowing the Father’s Times and Dates, v. 7

What is not for us in this age is to know times and dates. God has determined that those things are not for us. It’s easy to see why. When you know when and where something is, it’s easy to attend, or to give it a miss. If I happen to know that the International Society of Coal Mining Engineers is meeting at the Cam-Plex in July of 2021, I can purchase a ticket and plan to be there — or not. The human world works on planning, schedules, and calendars, for those things enable the coordinated action that allows us to be powerful and make stuff happen in this world. We all believe in making stuff happen and getting things done. In this very passage, and in many others in Acts, the disciples “came together,” implying that they knew when and where to meet and that they went to the right location at the right time. They knew the date and time of the ascension of Jesus Christ. Wow! And it was helpful for them to know that. But if we knew the date and time of His return, we would plan on it in the most literal sense. “I don’t have to worry about the Second Coming until 3 days before it’s going to happen.” Can you imagine how many generations of Christians would have been able to conclude that they need not know or think anything about the Second Coming? I daresay none of you has given serious consideration to how your family will celebrate the 300th anniversary of the USA. Some of you were around for

the bicentennial celebrations in 1976. I'm sure they were spectacular. But most of us who are old enough to think about how our families will handle holidays aren't planning to be living in the USA in 2076. In other words, as Christians who knew the time and date fixed by the Father's authority for the second coming, we would be as interested in the second coming as Americans presently are in their nation's 300th anniversary. It's just not even a factor in anyone's planning, not a blip on the radar screen of bureaucrats and museum curators. Would you like the second coming to be functionally irrelevant in your life? Then try to figure out the time set by the Father for it.

How about the time when China will become a Christian nation? The time when there will be more faithful pastors than hypocritical ones? The time when Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox will settle their differences and become a truly unified church that is more faithful to Christ than any of the communions can presently imagine? How we wish we knew the times when these events would occur! And yet, to know their time is to render them functionally irrelevant to all but a few generations in the scope of church history. So we pray for ecumenical rapprochement now. We pray for the church in China now. We pray for hypocrites to be expelled from the church and true pastors to flourish now!

Jesus and the Father reveal to us what we need to know to be faithful to them in our generation. Knowing that the "biggies" of Christian history aren't for our generation isn't going to help us.

B. What Is For Us, v. 8

So what is going to help us? What did Jesus offer instead of a timeline of major events in church history?

1. Power

The first thing He offered was power. We know that kingdoms and power are intimately associated. Kings have power, which is what allows them to establish and maintain their kingdoms. Whether or not Israel is going to become a religious geopolitical entity endorsed by God Himself is not something you and I need to know. But we desperately need power, because a powerless kingdom is pretty soon going to be a non-existent kingdom. You will receive power! What kind of power is Jesus talking about here? Well, obviously it is the kind of power appropriate to the kind of kingdom in which they were going to need to live. And thus, it is not geopolitical power. It is not power over the weather, or power over plants and animals. It is not electrical power. It is power relevant to the goals of the kingdom, which are to bring people out from under Satan's power into the glorious liberty of the children of God. In other words, it is power for evangelism, conversion, and sanctification.

2. The Spirit

The source of that power, as Jesus makes clear, is the presence of the Holy Spirit. The third Person of the Trinity, who proceeds from the Father in the Son [that "in" is not a typo], the Spirit is truly and fully God. He is breathed forth by the Father, and His ministry cannot be separated from that of the Word. The Word and Spirit are two Persons who travel and work together.

We will see much more about the Holy Spirit in Acts. Without Him, there is no power for ministry. Without power for ministry, there is no church.

Times and dates aren't for us. The Spirit is. The rest of the New Testament gives much information on how He comes to us, how we ought to worship Him, and what we can do to maintain His presence in our lives. We won't go into all that here. But let me just say that if your Christianity is more interested in speculating on times and dates than in the Holy Spirit, you have not understood the message of the book of Acts!

3. Unrestricted Witness

The final thing that is for now, for the apostles, and by extension all Christians, is unrestricted witness. Jesus names the region they are in — Judea. Then He names the neighboring region, the homeland of the half- or almost-Jews: Samaria. Then He names “the end of the earth.” The progression is clear. It is like the progression “in Gillete, and in Campbell County, and in Wyoming, and to the end of the earth.” The witness would move outward from Jerusalem just as the prophets said it would. The book ends with Paul in Rome, at the “end of the earth” (as the Psalms of Solomon called Rome), and we today, meeting here in Gillette, are certainly in a location that Luke, Paul, and Peter would consider to be the absolute end of the earth as well.

But the broader point is not that we need to go to Jerusalem in order to learn what we need for now. The point is that power, the Spirit, and unrestricted witness in every region of the earth are what we need for now. We don't need to know times. We need Spiritual power and unrestricted witness. That's how the church lives.

Not everyone in the church is an evangelist. Acts does mention ordinary believers talking about the word, but obviously its main focus is on just a few extraordinarily gifted people set apart for the work of evangelism. Still, if you think that power is for every citizen of the kingdom (it is — “the saints of the Most High will possess the Kingdom) and the Spirit is for every citizen of the Kingdom (He is), then you must also admit that witness is for every citizen of the Kingdom.

What does “witness” mean? It means someone who saw something. That's what a witness is. To be a witness for Jesus you may indeed have to testify. If subpoenaed, you will certainly have to testify. But the point is not primarily the act of evangelizing; the point is primarily the firsthand experience of Jesus' reality. If you have read about Jesus in a book but not experienced Him, you are not a witness. If you have heard me talk about Jesus but have not seen Him do anything, you're not a witness. If you have told other people about secondhand information about Jesus and seen them believe it, you're not a witness — at least, not unless you saw Jesus saving people through your non-eyewitness words.

You have power. You have the Spirit. And if you have Spiritual power, then you have experienced Jesus' work in your life. That's what is needed for now. I'm not talking about ecstatic feelings. I'm not talking about the burning in the bosom. I'm not talking about a subjective feeling of assurance. I'm talking about witnessing growth in love, joy, peace, and the freedom from guilt that comes through having your sins forgiven by Christ. If you have those fruits of the Spirit and a knowledge that God no longer holds your sins against you, you are a

witness to the power of Jesus. You are a witness of His saving grace. And if you have seen the church love on you, you are a witness to His love expressed through His people.

Jesus didn't say "You will be my evangelists." You're something better than an evangelist. You are a witness. Your memory holds firsthand evidence pointing to the reality of Jesus Christ and the sufficiency of His work. That's a big deal. That's a huge deal. And you heard it from the lips of Jesus, right here in Acts 1:8.

You're a Spirit-empowered witness. That's better than being a citizen of an Israel restored to Solomonic glory.

IV. Going on the Clouds, Coming on the Clouds, vv. 9-11

The final scene in this narrative of the ascension tells how, after redirecting the disciples' question, Jesus went up.

A. He Went Up and the Cloud Took Him, v. 9

He soared into the air and a cloud took Him. This was it. This was the final ascent, going up to God's right hand where He will stay until the second coming. The cloud is associated with the glorious manifestation of God throughout the Bible. Clouds and darkness swirl around Him; the Son of Man is coming on the clouds of Heaven, just as the apostles saw Him leave on a cloud. C.S. Lewis has a passage somewhere on the language here and how we often feel that it lacks sublimity. But what better symbolic way to signal going out of the world than floating off the ground and being whisked away by a cloud? If you can think of one that triggers more symbolic associations, I would be glad to hear it.

B. The Two Men Explain, v. 10

Suddenly, they realized that two men were standing there. Like attending a going-away party, this too is an experience we've all had — and it's not an entirely pleasant one. If you are standing somewhere looking at something, and suddenly realize that another person is standing there too, it can be a bit of a shock. "Where did you come from?"

1. Heaven-Gazing Is Not the Way to Look for Jesus' Return, v. 11a

But the two men in white have a point to make: This isn't the Transfiguration. As one commentator pointed out, it's easy to imagine Peter and John saying "Don't worry; we've seen this before. He'll be back in a minute." But of course, He wasn't. And looking hard at the place where He disappeared won't change that. Just as getting a timetable of church history is not what's needed for Christians right now, so Heaven-gazing, where we stand there and literally watch the sky looking for the second coming is not the way to do it. Jesus has a different calling for us. What is that calling? Well, it is to do our daily work in obedience to Him. It is to live as the people of His Kingdom until He returns and claims the throne.

2. Jesus Will Return as He Went, v. 11b

The two men in white point this out. The way to look for Jesus' return is not to examine every last cloud that floats by.

a) It's Not About Knowing the Time and Date

Nor — and this is tougher one to wrap our minds around — is it about getting the time and date onto our calendars so we can be ready. Lots of Christians have predicted particular times and

dates. Some have even blasphemously said “No man knows the day or the hour, but we can know the year and the month”. That’s rubbish. Precisely because Jesus will return just like He went, our business is not to stand around looking at the sky.

b) It’s About Power, the Spirit, and Unrestricted Witness

Instead, our business is to honor His closing instructions. The way He left was saying “Don’t worry about times and dates. Worry about power, the Spirit, and unrestricted witness.” We are witnesses everywhere. We have power everywhere. We have the Spirit everywhere. Jesus will come back just like He went up — and when He returns, He wants to see us doing what He told us to do when He went up. He wants to see us full of the Spirit, powerful for the Kingdom, getting (and yes, sharing) firsthand knowledge of Jesus’ work in our lives and in our communities.

That’s how to handle His departure. That’s also how to handle His return. Get ready. He’s coming back. You and I don’t know when. But we do know how, and we know how we’re supposed to get ready for it.

Seek the Spirit. Walk in power, not weakness. And watch what Christ is doing so that you can tell about it. Amen.