

Acts 1:1-11, No. 2**“The Ascension”****August 23, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We’ve begun a new series of morning sermons on the Book of Acts and we come to the second paragraph; we are going to read from verse 1 to verse 11.

Text Comment

- v.3 In the language of the Gospels and Acts “kingdom of God” refers to the sovereign rule over and plan of God for the world and for mankind. The ministry of Jesus was a manifestation of that kingdom but it will be finally and decisively revealed at the Second Coming. Much remained to be done before that, however. The Jews of Jesus’ day were also waiting for the manifestation of the kingdom of God but refused to accept that Jesus was, in fact, the king of that kingdom, and his ministry in the world the way in which it would come to pass. [cf. Peterson, 105] They wanted military conquests and he gave them death on a cross!
- v.4 That the coming of the Spirit was the “promise of God the Father,” indicates that it had been promised by the OT prophets, such as Joel, whose prophecy will be quoted in chapter 2. The disciples, of course, had heard Jesus speak of the coming of the Spirit a number of times, notably in the great address in the Upper Room the night of his betrayal, the address we are given a summary of in John 14-16. But he no doubt spoke in greater detail in his conversations with them after his resurrection. He had to order them to remain in Jerusalem because many of these men were Galileans and would naturally have returned home. The Spirit would descend in Jerusalem for reasons that will become clear later.
- v.5 What this baptism with the Holy Spirit will amount to the Lord will explain in v. 8. It will be the empowerment of their witness. In Charles Williams’s memorable words, the Lord Jesus departed “scattering promises of power.” [In Stott, 42]
- v.7 After the resurrection of the Lord, and in the prospect of the descent of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were hopeful that the consummation of history was upon them. The Lord’s reply, however, ended the discussion. Events could clarify the rest. It was not only that they didn’t know when the end would come, or couldn’t know it; *they weren’t supposed to know it*. It wouldn’t be good for them to know it. Florence and I were sitting in a restaurant a few days ago when a fellow came up to us and said that he had felt an impression from the Lord that he should tell us that the rapture would happen soon and that we should be ready. Well, he’s right. We should always be ready for the Lord’s return. But he no more knows that the Second Coming will happen soon than did the multitudes through the ages who thought the same but were proved to have been wrong by the passage of time. “Times” seems to refer to the years, even ages that will pass before the Second Coming and “seasons” to the crises and great events, the revolutions

and political cataclysms that will mark those times and separate them one from the other. The terms together suggest a more gradual and lengthy “coming” of the Lord’s kingdom.

- v.8 Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth can be taken to be a rough outline of Acts, which begins in Jerusalem (chapters 1-7), moves outward to Judea and Samaria (8-11) and moves further outward to the rest of the world (12-28).
- v.9 No pomp, no ceremony, as would certainly have been the case in a legendary account. Even the skeptical German commentator, Ernst Haenchen admitted, “all the features...so dear to legend, are entirely lacking: the story is unsentimental, almost uncannily austere.” [151] Notice the passive: Jesus was lifted up. It was the Father’s work to bring his Son back to heaven. As Chrysostom put it in a lovely turn of phrase, “the royal chariot was sent for him.”

Once again, as we said last time, Luke is interested in proof, in the demonstration of the factuality and historicity of the events he narrates. *Five times in vv. 9-11 he makes reference to what the disciples saw! They were eyewitnesses of the ascension too! They were there when it happened; they saw everything, heard everything!*

- v.10 The two were obviously angels, but they appeared to be men. In Luke 24:4 and Acts 10:30 an angel is also called a man.
- v.11 The mild reproach seems to suggest that they needed to grasp the lesson. They were not going to bring him back by staring up at the sky! [Stott, 50] And they had work to do meantime. In any case, Jesus could have simply disappeared, never to be seen again. He ascended to heaven visibly, both to demonstrate the permanence of his departure – he would not appear to them again as he had over the forty days – and the nature of his eventual return to earth. It too would be personal and physical.

We said, last Lord’s Day morning, that there is an account of the ascension at the conclusion of the Gospel of Luke and a more detailed account of the same event here at the beginning of Luke’s second volume. In the Gospel the account of the ascension *concludes* the Lord’s earthly ministry. In Acts the account of the ascension *begins* the Lord’s ministry exercised from heaven through the Holy Spirit. And so it makes perfect sense that, as an introduction to his account of the ascension of the Lord, Luke gives us in the Lord’s own words an explanation of how it fits into the larger plan of the kingdom of God.

What we are given here in the paragraph we have read, from v. 4 to v. 11, is nothing short of a *philosophy of history*. What is history all about? What does the seemingly endless succession of events mean? Is history going anywhere? Does it have a purpose, a point, an end, a destination? It often seems that it does is not. People are born, they live for a time, and they die and are soon forgotten. In the same way, nations and whole civilizations come and go. Some last longer than others, but none survives for very long, historically speaking. Western civilization has had its run, but there are few thoughtful people who don’t now admit that its vital signs are growing weak and that it must die, perhaps sooner rather than later. Its governments are feckless and no longer able to govern for the future welfare of their people. Birthrates are falling, catastrophically

in the countries of Europe, and North American birthrates are dropping quickly as well. All measures of internal strife, of social and spiritual lassitude, and of people's disinterest in sacrifice for the greater good are predictors of increasing instability and political and social incompetence.

It is striking to me as someone whose life has bridged the last two generations of American history, how profoundly discouraged and pessimistic we have become as a people, especially in regard to our institutions. When I was a boy, Americans generally – this is certainly what I was taught in a public elementary school – believed that our political institutions were the hope of the world. Nobody thinks that any longer! People, no matter where they are found on the political spectrum, no longer trust our institutions to solve even the simpler problems of our common life as Americans, much less the intractable problems of the world. We are living on borrowed money, can't seem to break our addiction to it; the American family – the foundation of society – is in disarray and no one seems to have any idea what to do about that; and our popular culture is so toxic it continues to erode what is left of our character as a people. But, what is happening to us, has happened before to every previous civilization and culture.

What is this that we call human life and human history? Is it really, as the honest atheists will tell us, "A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"? No, it is no such thing. And human beings in the bottom of their hearts know very well it's no such thing. They protest. They object most strenuously to any suggestion that it means nothing at all, even if they cannot themselves explain where such meaning would come from. True enough, if we think of history as man's search for meaning, for personal perfection, for happiness, and for something that lasts forever, then it has been, it is today and will continue to be, a dismal failure, an endless round of frustration, with death – the death of each person and the death of every human project – the only absolutely predictable and reliable feature of the story.

But that is not what human history is actually about at all. There is a lot of human striving to be sure, a great deal of human evil, pride, selfishness, and violence constantly gumming up the works and bringing down every effort to rise above the failures of the past. *But, in, under, around, and through that dismal routine of effort and failure there is something else!* There has always been something else. Something wonderful, something timeless, something that lives and never dies.

Through it all, rising above it all, is the kingdom of God, the reign of Jesus Christ, the king of kings and lord of lords. The Lord Jesus returned to heaven, but sent his Spirit upon his disciples to empower them. They then took the message of his rule and his salvation to the world. At some point in the future, he will return to the world, vindicate the trust that his people had placed in him, punish the wicked and consummate his kingdom. *That* is what history is all about. The Lord rules over it all, of course, the rise and fall of people, of companies, of nations, of entire civilizations. But he rules over those things *for the sake of his church and his kingdom*. It is the calling of the world to faith in him that is the true story of human history. It is the opportunity in midst of this dying life to find eternal life that is the true meaning of the human story. The refusal of so many to submit to the beneficent reign of the Lord Christ is the true tragedy of that story and the vast multitudes who have trusted Jesus, loved him, served him in the world, and found here eternal life are its triumph.

What Luke tells us here is that we are living – you and I – in that time that stretches between the Lord’s ascension and his return, between the calling of the church to be the Lord’s witnesses and the completion of that work of taking the gospel to the far corners of the world. It is, the Lord said, a time of unknown length and will be brought to an end suddenly, catastrophically by his return. As the angels said in effect to the disciples:

“You have seen him go. You will see him come. But between that going and coming there must be another. The Spirit must come, and you must go – into the world for Christ.” [Stott, 51]

And what are the disciples of Jesus to do and be? Are they to lead an army in conquest of the Lord’s enemies? Are they to spread out over the world to teach mankind a new way of governing itself? Provide instruction in democratic structures and social justice? Perhaps to some degree. But first and foremost they are to be the Lord’s witnesses. Now we know what a witness is. The term means the same thing in the Bible that it means in our common usage today. A witness is someone who has seen something or heard something and can tell others what he or she saw or heard. They can, we say, *testify* to what they saw or heard. We rightly value the testimony of an eyewitness, someone who was there, someone who saw what happened, someone who heard what was said. The apostles were, to a man, *eyewitnesses* of the public ministry of Jesus, almost from its beginning to its very end. They knew him well, they were his intimate companions for upwards of three years, they saw the extraordinary things he did, and listened to him deliver his unprecedented teaching. They probably heard him say pretty much the same thing many times over; similar things many times, that’s what good teachers do, just as they saw him heal the sick many times, and on several occasions raise the dead. What is more, they saw him arrested and they saw him crucified. And, devastated by what they had seen, broken-hearted as they had been by the blasting of all their hopes that had been raised so high by the public ministry of the Lord Jesus, they were dumbfounded to see him alive again on the third day, and not just alive, but brim full of a new and wonderful measure of life that they had never encountered before. And then they saw and heard the Lord a number of times in the forty days that separated his resurrection from his ascension. He taught them from the Bible, what we call the Old Testament, about himself and about the kingdom of God and he taught them about their future life and calling. He explained to them that he was to leave the world but that he would send the Holy Spirit in his place and what that would mean. And now, Luke assures us, they were eyewitnesses as well of his ascension to heaven. In chapter 2 we will see them as eyewitnesses of the descent of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, they had seen and heard a great deal and it was now their responsibility to tell the world what they had seen and heard and to explain to the world what it all meant: that Jesus is Lord and that salvation and eternal life can be found in no other name but his. And *that* will be the story of Acts. *But more than the story of Acts*, it will be the story, it *is* the story of the world ever since. When the story of this world is finally written from the vantage point of its consummation and end, it will be *this* story, the story of the salvation of sinners, the story of the growth of the kingdom of God that will be told, not the story of human achievement, of technological advancement, of wars and revolutions and all the men and of all the events that seemed so significant at the time but left the human race in precisely the same condition it had always been in before. No, the story will be how eternal life sprang up in a world of sin and

death, how God's love and power redeemed a fallen humanity, and how that deliverance came to be known and embraced by untold multitudes of men and women, boys and girls.

True enough, Christians later and Christians today are not witnesses in the same sense in which the apostles were. In Acts the term "witness" almost exclusively applies to the apostles. [Peterson, 111] We must never forget that the Christian faith rests on events in history that were witnessed by many, whose eyewitness testimony bears its conviction, its reliability, its believability, its historicity across the ages. The New Testament is the record of the utterly remarkable things that honest men and women saw and heard. We were not there, *but they were*. We did not see the risen Lord or watch him ascend to heaven. *But they did!* Again and again in the New Testament we are reminded that the history of Jesus, from his birth to his ascension to heaven *was confirmed every step of the way by people who saw what happened, who knew him, and who accompanied him through the times of his life*. These people *had witnessed his power over sickness and death, his resurrection and ascension*. And, if these things really happened as these good people said they did – you read the New Testament you realize this is not a legend, this is not a story somebody has concocted out of his head – if these things really happened then obviously Jesus Christ must be the most important person to every single human being on the face of the earth.

But can we be witnesses too? The apostles were unique in their experience and their role. They laid the foundation of the Christian church and its witness. But they also serve in the NT as the prototypical Christians. What they were, necessary changes being made, we must be. That is why there were twelve of them. They serve as the church in microcosm, the new Israel. When the Lord said that they would be his witnesses to the end of the earth, he clearly did not mean that they and they alone would tell the world about Jesus Christ and summon the world to believe in him. The work would not be done by the time these men had died. Indeed, it would only have been begun.

When Peter, in his first letter, tells his Christian readers to be ever ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you, he is urging them to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus. We can not only repeat the message that the eyewitnesses themselves had given, we can not only repeat the teaching of the Bible, as the Apostles so often did, but we can tell others *what the Lord has done for us! Luke is our example*. He was an eyewitness of some later things that happened in his presence, and he carefully recorded those for others to read – what use would those events be to us had Luke not told us about them? – but though he was not himself a witness of the Lord's ministry or of his ascension, he wrote an account of what happened based on a great deal of eyewitness testimony that he accumulated, that he sifted, and then recorded in his scintillating history. Luke was in both ways a witness for the Lord Jesus and we can be the same sort of witnesses he was.

And we, like the apostles, do not have to worry that our words and our explanations when we speak to others about Jesus Christ will be thin gruel, as if the outcome depended on how well-spoken *we are*, how effective controversialists *we are*, or how persuasive *we are* at mounting arguments. No, the promise is for us as well. "You shall receive power..." No mere human being can make a Christian witness convincing to an unbeliever. But God can open any heart and that will be a theme of Acts as well. People utterly unprepared to believe in Jesus, didn't like Jews

and had never heard of this man who had then been crucified as a criminal by the Roman state, nevertheless believed the first time they heard. People who should have been hostile to the message, received it with joy. People who should have had great difficulty even understanding what the apostles were talking about got it the first time they heard it. That was the Holy Spirit, not the Christian witness. We'll see this everywhere in Acts the Lord Jesus, from heaven, by the power of his Holy Spirit, opening a heart to receive him.

Many of you have seen the movie *Amazing Grace*, the story of William Wilberforce's lifelong battle to see slavery outlawed in the British Empire. And you remember how Wilberforce's friendship with the young Prime Minister, William Pitt, figured in that story. William Wilberforce was a young man on the rise. Just 24 years of age he had just won one of the most coveted seats in Parliament. That same autumn after the political season had concluded Wilberforce planned a vacation trip to the Riviera. He would travel slowly by coach or carriage in those days and so he asked a friend to accompany him, actually his former schoolmaster, now a teacher at Queen's College, Cambridge, and a giant of a man by the name of Isaac Milner. Milner wasn't simply intelligent. He was a genius. He was typically the smartest man that any of his friends and acquaintances had ever met. He held a university chair in both mathematics and chemistry. He was elected to the Royal Society, the prestigious company of scholars, when he was still a college student. His university examinations were so impressive that they were not given a grade so as not to be compared with those of other students! Good grief. But the man was also a delightful personality and had a wonderful wit and was an engaging conversationalist, so he made a natural partner for Wilberforce on his vacation. There really are people like that. I've just never met one. Well Wilberforce invited Milner to accompany him on his tour of southern France.

What do two men do who ride together in a carriage at the pace of a walking or trotting horse for hundreds of miles? Well, if they are Wilberforce and Milner, two talkers, they talk. Wilberforce had an aunt and uncle, with whom he had stayed with for some years as a boy, who were both Methodists, by which term in those days was meant "serious Christians." Wilberforce was by no means a serious Christian. Indeed, by this time, he was more a skeptic than a believer. He was a devotee of a well-known Unitarian preacher in London who rejected the doctrine of Christ's deity and his saving death on the cross. A Christian, if at all, in name only, but certainly not in fact or conviction or life, what was taken then to be morality in late 18th and early 19th century Britain was enough for William Wilberforce at 24 years of age. He was a man on the move, a man of his time, a man with all the confidence of the age of reason in which he lived. But, to Wilberforce's amazement, Milner turned out to be a convinced Christian who ably defended both the Christian faith and the Methodists. Coming from a man of Milner's intellectual gifts, this was a shock. During the travels, Wilberforce happened on a book belonging to his cousin who was accompanying the group in another coach. It was Philip Doddridge's classic *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. He asked Milner what he thought of the book and Milner replied, "It is one of the best books ever written" and suggested that they study it together. So they began to read it together on the journey. And as they read, they talked it over. By the time they returned to London, Wilberforce was thinking a host of new thoughts he had never thought before and had never imagined he ever would think.

With Milner again in tow, the two men months later traveled back to France, this time not reading Doddridge's book but the Greek New Testament, with Wilberforce putting his questions and admitting his doubts to Milner and Milner giving answers in reply. Convictions came upon him gradually but powerfully. First he realized the truth of what he was reading. But then, as he confided to his diary,

“What madness is the course I am pursuing. I believe all the great truths of the Christian religion, but I am not acting as though I did.” [Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, 53]

So far his Christianity was all intellectual assent. It was not yet life-changing conviction. And part of the reason for that was he feared that becoming a Christian in truth would mean that he would have to leave politics. A conversation with John Newton, the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, whom he had known as a boy through his aunt and uncle, cleared up that problem. Newton told him to remain in politics as a Christian to serve the Lord there. And before long, Wilberforce was a convinced and wonderfully happy Christian as he would remain the rest of his life. People had borne witness to him: the long-dead Philip Doddridge, the Cambridge professor, Isaac Milner, and the ex-slaver trader turned Anglican minister, John Newton and of course supremely the apostles themselves in the New Testament. And he heard, he heard the bell-like tone of the truth in all that had been said to him and read to him and came to believe it and surrender his life to it.

But now Wilberforce had a new concern for his good friend, William Pitt, the young Prime Minister. How could he be a witness to Pitt? Well he spoke to him of the great change that had come over his life and the reasons for it. But he also invited Pitt to accompany him to hear Richard Cecil, one of the celebrated evangelical preachers of the day, a preacher of great clarity and great power. The two men sat side by side as Cecil preached what Wilberforce thought was a wonderful sermon on the Christian faith. He was loving every minute of it. He realized William Pitt had to be affected by what he was hearing. He was anxious to know what his friend thought of the sermon and couldn't wait until they had completely left the church before turning to Pitt and asking him what he thought about what he had heard. Pitt replied that he hadn't understood a word the man said. A message as clear as glass to Wilberforce was incomprehensible to Pitt, a man of no mean intellectual abilities himself and a man who would have called himself a Christian, as Wilberforce always had. Wilberforce would say that it was as if his earlier years had been a dream from which he had awakened. For Pitt, life remained what it had always been until he died, a comparatively young man of 46 in 1806.

Such is the story of this world. And Acts, as it were, is the first chapter of this story. It is an account of Christians bearing witness to Jesus, multitudes responding in faith and love, but many others alas refusing to believe. The Lord opens some hearts but not all. And so it has continued these many years since. But make no mistake: this is what human life and human history is all about. The famous historian, Arnold Toynbee, would say that human beings through all the ages have advanced only in technology, only in tools and machines. In managing the heart, in suppressing evil, in ensuring happiness, they are no further today than they were thousands of years ago. But life, life as God created it to be, the life that sin and alienation from God has stolen from mankind, eternal life has nevertheless been through the ages and is today springing

up all over the world. And it springs up through the witness that Christians bear on behalf of and about Jesus Christ, who will be described later in Acts as “the Author of Life.”

“Why do you stand looking up into heaven?” the angels asked the disciples after Jesus had disappeared from their view. The implication was that they had better things to do. They had an assignment and they were to be given the means to carry it out. And that assignment – to be the Lord’s witnesses – is ours today as it was the disciples’ then. It will be the Christian’s calling until the Lord returns.

There are so many ways to bear that witness – we’re offering you a new one in the English as a Second Language Ministry, *Better English on Sixth* – but we all have the opportunity day by day to say something about who Jesus is, what he did to save us from ourselves and our sins, and, in particular, what he has done for us. Every Christian can do that. Even our lives can bear that witness if we live a principled, happy, and loving life before others.

It is the Lord’s plan to save the world *with our help! Extraordinary! Amazing! But wonderful too.* But he did not leave us to ourselves. He gave us the Holy Spirit to make our witness powerful in the hearts of those being saved. What a great thing, a remarkable thing, is this calling and this opportunity to share in the coming of the kingdom of God. It is the worst mistake we make in our lives, to fail to take full advantage of this privilege. Pray, day by day:

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart and love that soul through me.
And may I nobly do my part to win that soul for thee.
And when I come to the beautiful city,
And the saved all around me appear,
I want to hear somebody tell me: It was you who invited me here!