“YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES”

Acts 1:1–14

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.”

Happy New Year! As the year 2018 is about to begin, we can be thinking about so many things. For many, a new year is the chance to make a new start. People make new year resolutions, pledging to lose weight or break bad habits. For the first several months of any new year, gyms are so busy with people working out. Many pledge to get out of debt and start saving and investing. People try to find a new, better direction in life. But what should our direction really be? Our bodies and our money? I don’t think so. In today’s passage Jesus gives his followers a direction. They had failed him. They were stuck in their own fixed ideas and habitual thinking. But it was like Jesus was pressing the reset button. He emphasized his resurrection and the kingdom of God, promised them the Holy Spirit, and told them they would be his witnesses. Today we’d like to think about what it means to be Jesus’ witness, and how we can really live that way today. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

Look at verse 1. Here the author addresses someone named “Theophilus.” His name meant “lover of God.” The author also says he wrote a “former book.” Who was this author? He was Luke. Luke’s Gospel is also written to “most excellent Theophilus.” Luke was not one of Jesus’ disciples, but was a Gentile convert later. Luke was actually a medical doctor and became Paul’s personal physician and traveling companion. Then who was “Theophilus”? He was probably a wealthy, high-ranking official who’d become a believer in Jesus and who sponsored Luke to do his research and his writing. Luke summarizes what his former book, Luke’s Gospel, was really all about: it was “all that Jesus began to do and to teach.” It’s what we should be looking for as we study the Bible: what did Jesus do, and what did Jesus teach?

Verse 2b says, “...after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.” Here, the focus shifts from Jesus to his apostles. Jesus began doing and teaching great things, but now it was up to his apostles to continue his work. What were his “instructions”? It’s a reference back to Luke 24:44–49. There Jesus instructed his apostles in four specific ways: First, he told them his death and resurrection were a fulfillment of the Scriptures. Second, he told them to tell people to repent and receive forgiveness of sins in his name. Third, he told them to be his witnesses. Fourth, he told them to stay in Jerusalem and receive the promised Holy Spirit.

Read verse 3a. Jesus wanted his apostles to be sure he really was alive. He gave many convincing proofs. In Luke 24, he showed them his hands and feet, the places where nails had been driven to fasten him to the cross. He even ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence. Then as now, it’s hard to believe the resurrection. But the resurrection of Jesus is the core of the Christian message. Because he rose from the dead, everything Jesus said and did was true. And because he rose from the dead, we have hope that death won’t be the end for us either; we too will rise from the dead someday and be with him.

Read verse 3b. After his death and resurrection, over a period of forty days Jesus appeared to his apostles. Forty days suggests a time of preparation. This time, it was spiritual preparation for the apostles to take over the ministry of Jesus. During this time Jesus had one main point: the kingdom of God. It’s the core message of the whole Bible: paradise lost, and paradise restored. The Bible says Jesus’ death and resurrection are the gospel, the good news (1Co15:3,4). But the real point, the big picture, is the kingdom of God. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, we have a living hope in the kingdom of God. In Acts the apostles repeatedly give the kingdom of God as their main message (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31). It was actually Jesus’ message (Lk4:43; 8:1; 9:11). To people today, the kingdom of God can sound like a fairy tale. But it’s not a myth, or fiction; the kingdom of God is real, more real than we can imagine. What is it? It’s where God rules in people’s hearts. God rules by his grace. The kingdom of God is where repentant sinners who come to Jesus are welcomed by God’s grace. It’s an experience now but also a place in the future. The Bible describes God’s kingdom as a place of healing, of eternal fellowship with God, of light, love and life, of deep satisfaction for our souls, and true security. To be Jesus’ witnesses, we need to believe his resurrection and experience the hope, peace and joy of his kingdom (Ro14:22). To be Jesus’ witnesses, we also need to be telling people the good news of his resurrection and the hope of his kingdom.

Read verses 4,5. The apostles didn’t want to stay in Jerusalem. Why? Because all Jesus’ enemies were there. And most of the apostles were from Galilee. They wanted to go home. They wanted to go where they could relax, where things would be much easier, where people were much more open to Jesus. But Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem. Verse 4 calls it his “command.” It was something they would have to obey, by faith. How could they obey this command and stay in that place? Jesus also mentioned a promise: “the gift my Father promised.” If they obeyed his command, they would receive the promised gift, the Holy Spirit. Jesus had already promised them the Holy Spirit (Jn14–16). In fact, John the Baptist had, too. The Bible repeatedly mentions the promise of the Holy Spirit to all believers (Ac2:33; Gal3:14; Eph1:13). It’s such a wonderful promise of God, to receive the Holy Spirit. But God gives the Holy Spirit only to those who obey him (Ac5:32). We receive the Holy Spirit at the beginning of our Christian lives. But from time to time we need to receive the Holy Spirit again. We need to be renewed by the Spirit and filled with the Spirit.

Read verse 6. Wow. Jesus had been speaking for the past forty days about the kingdom of God, but they were thinking only about restoring the kingdom to Israel. He could have lost his patience with them. He could have lost hope in them. But how did he respond? Read verse 7. He didn’t smash their Jewish-centered hope. He just taught them about God’s sovereignty in fulfilling his plan. He told them and us not to waste our time speculating on how God’s plan will be fulfilled. Then he said something else. Read verse 8. Jesus could be patient with them and not lose hope for them because he believed the Holy Spirit would change them. He believed that through the Holy Spirit they would become his powerful witnesses to the ends of the earth. His main point, his main direction, was: “You will be my witnesses.”

The expression “witness” of Jesus is repeated eleven times in the Book of Acts (1:8,22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39,41; 13:31; 22:15; 26:16; 28:23). In Greek, this word, “witness,” is literally our word “martyr.” To “testify” about Jesus is repeated another seven times in Acts (4:33; 10:42,43; 18:5; 20:24; 23:11; 26:22). In Greek, again it’s the verb form of the word “martyr.” So to be a witness or to testify about Jesus is repeated a total of 18 times. This tells us that being a witness of Jesus is a major theme in the Book of Acts.

What does being his witness mean? Literally, his witnesses were the people who’d been with him during his life and ministry, seeing all that he did and hearing all that he taught (1:1,2,21,22; 10:39). It was a very special group known as the twelve apostles. They especially told people that Jesus died and rose again (1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:30–32). But it was more than just repeating what had happened. It meant telling people the good news of Jesus (5:42; 8:12,35; 10:36; 11:20; 13:32; 14:15; 17:18; 20:24). It even meant warning people (10:42). Witnesses were people who’d been chosen (1:2,24; 9:15; 10:41; 22:14). Not only that, they’d been changed by God’s grace through Jesus (4:33; 6:8; 11:23; 15:11,40; 18:27; 20:24,32). They’d repented and received the forgiveness of sins by believing in Jesus (2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). It means witnesses of Jesus are a much larger group than just the original twelve apostles.

Apostle Paul is the most famous example. Paul wasn’t there with Jesus during his life on earth. In fact, he’d been an enemy of Jesus’ followers and their message. But the Risen Jesus met him, forgave him, and called him to be his servant. Paul’s story is told in detail in the second half of the Book of Acts. He becomes an inspiring role model of what it means to be Jesus’ witness. So what are the core aspects of being a witness of Jesus?

**First**, a witness of Jesus has experienced God’s grace personally. Jesus’ disciples had been eyewitnesses of his life and ministry, but that wasn’t really what made them his witnesses. Judas Iscariot had seen everything but had never opened his heart to God’s grace. In fact, Peter hadn’t, either. In his deep heart Peter thought he was better than all the others. He thought he had made great sacrifices for Jesus. He thought he was closer and more loyal to Jesus than anybody. He seemed good outwardly, but underneath, he was self-righteous and didn’t really know himself. In his self-righteousness he thought he knew better than Jesus, and wasn’t really listening to him. Then, he failed. Despite all his big talk, he denied Jesus three times before a little servant girl. Only then could he realize that Jesus was right and he was wrong. Only with Jesus’ help could he remember how Jesus had predicted his denials. Then Peter went outside and wept bitterly (Lk22:54–62). Finally, he began to taste the grace of God through Jesus. Only by experiencing grace could Peter really become Jesus’ witness.

Paul was the same. From childhood he’d been a Pharisee, conforming to the strictest sect of the Jewish religion (26:5). He was thoroughly trained in the law of the Jews and was as zealous for God as anybody (22:3). But all his training and zeal and strictness only made him self-righteous. Though he heard the testimony of God’s servant Stephen, saw Stephen being stoned and heard Stephen’s prayer for his enemies to be forgiven, he stood there giving his approval and guarded the clothes of those who were killing him (22:20; cf. 7:57–8:1). Then he began destroying the church, going from house to house, dragging off both men and women, putting them in prison (8:3), and breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples (9:1). He was working so hard and thought he was serving God by eliminating heretics. In fact, he was persecuting Jesus. He was so self-righteous, and so blind. Right in the middle of one of his persecuting escapades the Risen Jesus visited him, forgave him, called him to be his servant, and opened his spiritual eyes to see his grace (Ac9). From then on, Paul became a man of God’s grace. He went on to write most of the New Testament, and always wrote about God’s grace. He said, “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1Ti1:13–16). Because Paul knew God’s grace so personally, he poured his life into telling people about it (Ac20:24).

Experiencing God’s grace in our lives doesn’t have to be so epic. But it does mean we have to turn from our wicked ways, from our self-righteousness, turn to Jesus, put our faith in him, and then, start telling others about God’s grace. It tells us the real motivation of being one of Jesus’ witnesses. It’s not just because it’s the truth, or because it’s our duty. We actually *want* to tell others, because God’s grace in Jesus is such good news available to anyone.

**Second**, a witness of Jesus is changed at the core with a new life focus. The apostles heard Jesus speak for forty days about the kingdom of God, but all they could think about was the kingdom of Israel. They were ethnocentric, concerned only about their own culture, race and people. Fundamentally, they were self-centered. Though they’d followed Jesus closely and heard and seen everything, they still were always thinking mainly about themselves. This is why, when he was arrested, they all ran away. For them to be Jesus’ witnesses, their life focus would have to change, from self to Jesus, from their own nation and kingdom to Jesus’ kingdom. With this new life focus, they would willingly go not only to Jerusalem, but to all Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. They even would be willing to die for Jesus.

It takes time to be so deeply changed at our core. Again, Peter is an example. He thought he should be ministering to Jews, not Gentiles. He couldn’t get past his racial bias. God had to show him a special vision and give him strong direction to go to a Gentile named Cornelius and share the good news of Jesus with him (Ac10). Paul, too, is a good example. In his former life he had never imagined that God wanted to save the Gentiles. He was only thinking about being the perfect Jew and making a great name for himself. But saving Gentiles is exactly what God called him to do. Paul became so changed that he willingly called himself an apostle to the Gentiles, and he loved and embraced them fully as true brothers and sisters in Christ. To be a witness of Jesus, God has to help us get past our self-centered mentality and see how he wants to use us to reach all kinds of people. The more God changes us at our core, the more we see that ministry is not for us; it’s for Christ and his kingdom.

**Third**, a witness of Jesus lives a changed life like Jesus. As Jesus was so humble and so loving, so witnesses of Jesus imitate his humble and loving character. The early Christians experienced this. In their community there were no needy persons; they were not selfish with their property and shared with anyone who was in need (Ac2:44,45; 4:32–35). Their Christ-like lives may have been even more impactful than their great preaching. As believers in Jesus, he’s sending us out into this harsh and selfish world to represent him. The Bible calls us Christ’s ambassadors (2Co5). When we claim to believe in Jesus, the non-believers around us start looking closely at our behavior and lifestyle. How are we spending our money? How are we treating people? Often it’s not what we say, but how we behave and how we live that opens and moves people’s hearts.

**Fourth**, a witness of Jesus is bold. Read verse 8a again. The key word here is “power.” Without the Holy Spirit, we have no power to be Jesus’ witness. In fact, we’re too afraid. We’re afraid of what people will think. We’re afraid of being rejected. We’re afraid of suffering. But when we receive the Holy Spirit, he gives us power. He makes us strong and courageous. He makes us bold. In fact, the early believers prayed for boldness, and throughout Acts it’s repeated that Jesus’ witnesses were bold (4:29,31; 9:28; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 28:31). We too should be praying to be bold in sharing our faith.

**Fifth**, a witness of Jesus shares from the Bible who Jesus is and why he came. At the end of Luke 24, Jesus himself explained from the Bible to his apostles about the meaning of his death and resurrection. In Acts 2, Peter explained from the Bible about Jesus’ death and resurrection. In Acts 13, Paul also explained from the Bible about Jesus’ death and resurrection. He did it wherever he went (17:2,3; 18:11; 28:23). Witnesses of Jesus don’t share random things; they explain reasonably from the Bible who Jesus is, what he did, and why people should believe in him. Being Jesus’ witness involves teaching the Bible, whether it’s one-on-one, or in a small group, or bringing people to hear a Bible message.

So how can anyone be Jesus’ witness? Read verse 8 again. It’s only when the Holy Spirit comes on us. The Holy Spirit gives us power to grasp the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the hope of the kingdom of God. He gives us power to change deeply, at our core. He gives us power to have a new mindset, to be passionate about serving Christ and his kingdom. He gives us power to live like Christ, humble and full of love. He gives us power to be bold. He gives us power to explain the Bible to others. We live in a world where so many people live without God. It’s not very open to Christianity. In fact, it often lures us to live just the opposite of the way Jesus taught, with false hopes and a self-centered life. At the end of 2017 we may feel like we’ve failed miserably as Jesus’ witnesses. But the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to set a spiritual reset button. He can renew us with resurrection faith and hope in God’s kingdom, with God’s grace and a Christ-centered mind-set. He can empower us newly when we’re exhausted or hurt. He can give us a new heart and mind to understand the Bible deeper and deeper. What should we do? Like the apostles, we need to obey and stay in our Jerusalem. We need to encourage each other and pray together and wait for the Holy Spirit. May God speak to us and give us a wonderful new spiritual direction in our hearts at the beginning of 2018, to live as Jesus’ witnesses by the power of the Holy Spirit.