

A Time to Watch...and a Time to Witness

Acts 1:6-11

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The Book of Acts began with the instruction Jesus gave his disciples to wait. They were to wait because they were going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Now as the story unfolds, we find that with the baptism of the Holy Spirit will come power. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” The power will have a purpose. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In these opening verses of the Book of Acts Jesus does nothing less than promise his disciples they will be powerful witnesses. Could it be that we are meant to be heirs of that same promise? Could it be that Jesus, the risen and resurrected Lord intends to use us, to use our lives, as a powerful witness?

I wonder what it means to be a powerful witness. When we journey through the Book of Acts, we will discover that God uses witnesses, witnesses filled with power, in some amazing ways. Thousands of people are converted to the Christian faith. Signs and wonders are clear demonstrations of power as the lame walk, spirits are cast out, and the dead are raised to life. The gospel begins in Jerusalem and by the last chapter it has reached all the way to Rome, the seat of earthly power. Prison doors are miraculously opened, chains fall harmlessly to the ground, the earthquakes and walls crumble. A whole lot of power is on display in the Book of Acts. If I were a religious huckster trying to get a congregation motivated to study the Book of Acts, I might go as far to say by way of invitation that Acts is a story about a gospel that is...World reaching’, scripture teachin’, public preachin’, leavin’ the demons screeching kind of power.

In Acts, you are going to find an Earth quakin’, prison breakin’, soul shakin’, disciple makin’ power. The Holy Spirit is going to come and fill disciples with power. As the old skit put it so well, the Holy Spirit is here to Pump You Up!

Although that kind of introduction and invitation to the Book of Acts might seem over the top, we almost need something like that to grab our attention. It is hard for human beings to imagine the power of God and what that power can do. When the Book of Acts begins Jesus is with the disciples. This is after Jesus suffered and died on the cross. And yet when Acts begins Jesus is with the disciples. How can that be? Jesus suffered and died; a death witnessed by the whole crowd that gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover. How can Jesus be with the disciples? We know the answer. Jesus has been raised from the dead by the power of God. The disciples are witnesses to God's amazing power to raise Jesus from the dead. The power of God is on full display. Despite the power of God being on full display as the resurrected Jesus gave the disciples many convincing proofs that he was alive, when the disciples ask what Jesus is about to do, the scope of their hope is severely limited. They ask Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Here they are, in the presence of the Son of God who has been raised from the dead, and the best they can do is ask about the kingdom of Israel being restored. Too small! Too limited! Too narrow! The God who raised Jesus from the dead is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. The imagination of the disciples does not match the power of God. Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Jesus makes it clear God isn't just setting up the kingdom of Israel, what God is doing in Jesus is going to impact the whole world. "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Jesus doesn't say Israel will not be restored. But what he does say is his target is the whole earth. The disciples, as is so often the case with disciples, don't dream big enough. Their vision is limited. Their understanding of the power of God is too small.

This becomes even more obvious when Jesus finishes speaking about being witnesses to the ends of the earth. If the phrase to the ends of the earth expanded their horizon, what happens next shatters it completely. "After he said this, Jesus was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." After Jesus told them about the whole earth, he was taken up into heaven. Jesus ascended into heaven, and if we remember the creed, it is in heaven that he "sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. How as

humans can we ever grasp the awesome power of God? “Immortal, invisible, God only wise; in light, inaccessible, hid from our eyes.” Disciples who can only imagine Israel being restored have their vision expanded to include the whole earth, and then the horizon is shattered when Jesus ascends to heaven. Maybe we need some kinds of bombast to draw us into the Book of Acts, some huckster shouting about earth quakin’ and prison breakin’ to shake us awake so that when Jesus promises that we will receive power to be witnesses we embrace that promise to its full extent. The one who made that promise has not only risen from the dead, he has ascended to heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. What immense, incredible, immeasurable and amazing power is in the hands of God? What immense, incredible, immeasurable and amazing power will he pour out on his disciples when they are filled with the Holy Spirit?

At the risk of being accused of running a bait and switch, I want to pause for a moment, and look at the power of God in another light. As I present a different take on the power of God, my hope is that we would recognize the tension that is presented to us in the Book of Acts. As soon as God pours out power into our lives, we are at risk. We are at risk of underestimating the power, as we have already observed. But when the power is poured out, we are immediately in danger of overestimating. We are not in danger of overestimating the power of God. That is impossible. The danger of overestimating has to do with our own selves. We are immediately in danger of overestimating how much power we have, of believing the power we have is our own power.

Almost as soon as the Holy Spirit pumps us up, we are in danger of being puffed up. The Apostle Paul warns us in the first letter to the church of Corinth that we have to be on guard against being puffed up. He also warns against making others puffed up, of seeing the work God does through certain people and putting them on a pedestal. He also warns against looking at the gifts of the Spirit, certainly a demonstration of God’s power at work in human lives, and saying ones with certain gifts are better, are more important than others. The warning Moses gave in the Old Testament to the people about to enter the Promised Land is spot on as a warning for us about to enter the Book of Acts, for all disciples who journey through the Book of Acts.

Moses warned that when Israel possessed the Promised Land, they would be tempted to say, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced (all this).” As God pours out power through the Holy Spirit and as that power works in real ways in real human life, be on guard people of God. Do not say, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced all this.” God does want to pump us up with the power of the Holy Spirit. Just don’t let it become being puffed up.

There is a tension that will always be present when God pours out power into the lives of disciples. It is a real tension. Perhaps the best way to live with that tension is to look at Jesus, the one who has ascended to the heavens, the one who possesses all power and authority and might. Jesus has already demonstrated how to handle power. Jesus already demonstrated the right attitude for handling power. So, the Apostle Paul, who knew the danger of being puffed up, calls on followers of Jesus to, “Have the same attitude as Christ Jesus:

‘Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow , in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.’” (Philippians 2:5-11) Do you want the perfect example of a powerful witness...God has already given us Christ Jesus. What a powerful witness Jesus is.

With such an amazing model of a powerful witness, the door is opened for us to explore how God’s power can lead us to be witnesses. I wonder if this one mom knew she was being a powerful witness. She would drive over to pick up her son on a Sunday morning. She let her son spend the night with his friend on a Saturday night, but when Sunday morning rolled around, she drove over to that friend’s house, knocked on the door, and said, “I’m picking my son up. We always go to church and so he needs to get ready and come with me.” Did she have any idea she was being a powerful witness.

That same woman who would pick her son up when he spent the night at his friend's house did more than just go and pick her son up. She told that friend that if he spent the night at their house, then he had to follow their rules. And their rule was that on Sunday morning, you woke up and went to church. So, whenever that friend spent the night in her home, she woke her son up, and she woke the friend up, and she took them to church. I wonder if the thought running through her mind on those Sunday mornings was that she was being a powerful witness.

Whether the mom knew it or not, she was being a powerful witness. I know because the boy told me about it. Not the one whose mom did the picking up and the waking up. The boy who told me was the friend. It is a very sweet story. I kept waiting for the boy to tell me how weird it was that his friend's mom did this, and how he didn't like going to church, and he wanted to sleep in or watch cartoons. Instead this boy said that being brought to church opened doors in his life and led him to faith and gave him a solid foundation because he trusted in Jesus Christ.

After that young boy started going to church, the church did something really great. The church matched him up with an adult mentor. Whether the adult mentor knew it or not, as a mentor he was being a powerful witness. As that young boy became a young man, he was given a chance to stand up before the church on a youth Sunday and tell his story, talk about his faith. Doesn't it make your heart soar to know that our young people can be powerful witnesses?

Several years ago, I was sitting at a table listening to this young boy tell his story. His name is Mike. Mike gave his witness. It was a pretty special morning, because Mike had grown up quite a bit. He was now around 45 years old. And across the table was the man who had been his mentor years ago. The man's name was Ron. More than thirty years before, when Mike was in the church youth group, Ron was his mentor. Mike told his story. Mike gave his witness. He told about having his friend spend the night and that friend's mom showing up at the front door bright and early and taking them to church. He told about learning the stories of faith in Sunday school He told about his mentor.

And then Mike told about the day in high school when he came home and found his dad was dead. In a deep valley of despair and depression, his father had taken his own life. Mike came home to find out his dad was dead. Mike said it was an incredibly long night, a night of sadness and sorrow and loss. And then with tears in his eyes Mike told about a knock on the door late at night. Mike, a kid in high school, a kid whose dad had died, opened the door. And there was Ron, his mentor, his friend, his brother in Christ. Ron showed up to do what the bible tells us to do, to mourn with those who mourn, to weep with those who weep. Mike, now somewhere around 45 years old, looked at Ron, now well into his 60's, and he said, "Thanks Ron. I love you."

Being a powerful witness can be so many things. With God all things are possible. We might do things that are earth shakin' and prison breakin', things that are gospel preachin' and ends of the world reachin'. But let's not forget that we might end up being the powerful witnesses who drag kids along to church, who sign up to be a mentor or a youth leader, we might be the powerful witness who finds out in the middle of the night that a brother or sister in faith is facing the toughest loss they have ever had...and in those moments we pray that God pumps us up with the Holy Spirit, that God fills us with the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we can be witnesses to the love of Jesus Christ that grabs hold of us and never lets go. That kind of a witness is powerful.

And sometimes the way God calls us to witness is simply amazing. Tomorrow one of you will give a great gift. A young man needs a kidney transplant. One of you was working out in a kickboxing class and you heard of the need. You thought, "God has given me so much. Maybe I can give a kidney for another person." Now months later, after all the testing to make sure it was a match, Mary Slattery will have an operation tomorrow to remove one of her kidneys. Her kidney will be transplanted into the body of a young man. Mary is giving the gift of life. That is a powerful witness. Mary has said, "God has given me so much. I want to give this for another person." Yes indeed, we are surrounded by powerful witnesses. O Lord, in your grace and mercy, with your unfailing love, continue to pump us up. Amen.