

THE WORLD MISSION PROMISE

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.

Last week, we talked about Jesus' world mission command. The world mission command was verse 4b: *"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about."* This time, we are focusing on the world mission promise that Jesus gave in 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."* Many people have called verse 8 a command, and there is certainly a strong hint of command within it. But it was spoken by Jesus as a promise, and that is how I would like to present it today. Jesus promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit will descend on them with power. And he promises that they would become his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

There is a good reason to think of this as a promise instead of a command. A command is disheartening and ineffective if the people to whom it is given have no ability to carry it out. For example, when God called Abram at the beginning of Genesis 12, he said, "Leave your country, you people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you," that was a command. But when he said, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you," that was a promise. The command was something that Abram could do; the promise is something that God was going to do for him.

The key part of the promise that Jesus made in Acts 1:8 was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. For some time, I've realized that I don't understand the Holy Spirit very well, and I need to know more him. Through reviewing what the Bible says about the Holy Spirit, I have recently learned a few things that I would like to share with you.

One thing I learned is that the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was not entirely new. The Holy Spirit has always been present and working powerfully in the world. He was there in Genesis 1:2, where *"the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."* Many passages in the Old Testament talk about the Spirit of God coming upon individuals and empowering them to do his work at key times in Israel's history. In the time of Moses, God empowered 70 elders with his Spirit so that they could help Moses administer of the law (Nu 11:25). When the tabernacle was being built in the wilderness, God gave his Spirit to the artists and craftsmen (Ex 31:3, 35:30). During the time of Judges, the Spirit of God came upon Gideon and Samson and gave them

power to defeat Israel's enemies (Jdg 6:34, 13:25, 14:6, 15:14). The Spirit of God repeatedly came upon King Saul, even at times when he was disobedient (1Sa 10:10, 11:6). In fact, the work of the Holy Spirit is everywhere in the Old Testament, because it was the Holy Spirit breathing the word of God into Moses and the prophets who enabled them to write the Old Testament scriptures. One striking verse about the Holy Spirit appears in Psalm 51, King David's psalm of repentance: *"Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me"* (Ps 51:11).

When we come to the New Testament, we again see the Holy Spirit working very powerfully even before the day of Pentecost. Before John the Baptist was conceived, the angel said to his father Zechariah, *"He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth"* (Lk 1:15). When John was born, *"his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied"* (Lk 1:67). Jesus was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35). When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove, and that is how John the Baptist knew that Jesus is the Messiah (Lk 3:21; Jn 1:33). When Jesus preached his first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, he quoted from Isaiah chapter 61: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor"* (Lk 4:18-19). When Jesus taught, he did so by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:18). When he healed the sick and cast our demons, he did so by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:18).

Although the Holy Spirit was already working in the gospel accounts, these same gospels contain many promises about the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist testified that Jesus was going to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Mt 3:11). One of the greatest promises that Jesus gave during his ministry was about the Holy Spirit. In John chapter 7, when Jesus came to the Feast of Tabernacles, it says (Jn 7:37-39):

37 On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." 39 By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

When the risen Jesus visited his apostles for the first time on the evening of Easter Sunday, he breathed on them and said, *"Receive the Holy Spirit"* (Jn 20:22).

The Holy Spirit is fundamental to our understanding of the gospel. Why? Because the coming of Jesus established a new covenant, a new relationship between God and his people, that is not based on the written law but on the transformational work of the Holy Spirit. God promised his people in Jeremiah 31:33:

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel

*after that time," declares the LORD.
 "I will put my law in their minds
 and write it on their hearts.
 I will be their God,
 and they will be my people.*

God promised that the Holy Spirit would fulfill the law by moving people to obey God's will. It says in Ezekiel 36:25-27:

25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

One could say that the fundamental reason why Jesus came to this world was to repair our broken relationship with God, so that we could receive the Holy Spirit and be transformed.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is a very important event in biblical history, but it is not unique. There are actually four different Pentecosts mentioned in the book of Acts, and they follow the progression of geography that Jesus gave in Acts 1:8. The first Pentecost, which is described in Chapter 2, occurred in Jerusalem on the actual feast of Pentecost, when the apostles preached to Jews who had gathered in the city. In Chapter 8, there was a Samaritan Pentecost. When the apostles heard that people in Samaria had accepted the gospel, Peter and John came down from Jerusalem and laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Ac 8:17). In Chapter 10, there was a Gentile Pentecost. God brought Peter to the home of Cornelius, a devout Roman centurion. When Cornelius and his family members heard the gospel message, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they were baptized (Ac 10:44-48). And in Chapter 19, there was an Ephesian Pentecost. The Apostle Paul met some disciples who had been baptized by John the Baptist. Paul placed his hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit (Ac 19:6).

At each of these Pentecosts, believers in Christ were baptized with the Holy Spirit. Some scholars think there is a difference between being *baptized* with the Holy Spirit and being *filled with* the Holy Spirit. But in Acts, the two terms seem to be interchangeable. Before the ascension, Jesus told his disciples that in a few days they were going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Ac 1:5). But when the day of Pentecost came, it says, "*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit*" (Ac 2:4). Developing a theology of the Holy Spirit is somewhat difficult, because he doesn't conform to our systems. The Spirit does what he pleases.

After Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit in verses 4-5, the disciples asked Jesus a question. Look at verse 6: *“So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”* It is easy to criticize the apostles for asking this question, because they seem to be focused only on Israel. But given that context and background, this is not a bad question at all. This is a good question, because it reveals that the apostles had been carefully listening to Jesus, and that they knew the Bible very well. Many Old Testament passages about the coming of the Holy Spirit are also talking about the restoration of Israel. For example, there is a beautiful passage in Isaiah 28:14-17:

14 The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever, the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks, 15 till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest. 16 Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field. 17 The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.

Also, that prophecy that Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost from Joel chapter 2 links the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the coming of *“the great and dreadful day of the LORD”* (Joel 2:28-32). So when Jesus told his disciples, *“...in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit,”* it was very natural and very biblical for them to think that the restoration of Israel and the punishment of God’s enemies was at hand.

How did Jesus answer this question? Look at verse 7: *“He said to them: ‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.’”* Jesus did not say that their question was self-centered or wrong. Nor did he deny that there would be a restoration of Israel. In fact, he confirmed that it was going to happen. The times and dates have already been set by God, but they highly classified, top-secret, not for us to know. Nevertheless, there was something very important that the disciples needed to know.

Read 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.”* After turning their attention away from times and dates, Jesus gave them two absolute promises.

The first promise is, *“You will receive power.”* Until that time, the apostles had been rather powerless. They had failed to stay with Jesus and abandoned him when he was arrested. The top disciple, Peter, had publicly disowned Jesus three times. After the resurrection they became joyful, but they still lacked unity and clarity about what they were supposed to be doing. In John 21, seven of the apostles were back in Galilee and had restarted their fishing business. Despite having been well taught and

trained by Jesus for three years, they were passive, discouraged and aimless. What did these disciples need? Power. Spiritual power, *divine* power, always comes with a purpose. The power that God would give them would not be given to make them look good, but to make them very useful to God.

What is spiritual power? Spiritual power is not the same thing as self-discipline. Some people appear to be very diligent and disciplined in their personal lives. When we see such a person, we may think, "Hey, that person is powerful!" Discipline is good. Growing in discipline is a necessary part of our sanctification. But people who are highly disciplined are not always powerful. Sometimes they interpret their own strength as divine power when it is actually just their own strength. Sometimes they stick to their own routines and become reluctant to change when God calls them to change. The kind of power that Jesus is speaking about in verse 8 is a power that goes far beyond all of our human resources and capabilities. It is what Jesus called "streams of living water." It is the river of life that flows from the throne of God in heaven (Rev 22:1). According to verse 8, this power is something that we *receive*. It is not something that we generate, develop, or earn. It is a gift from God (4). It comes free of charge to those who believe. *Receive* sounds easy, but it is not. It is hard part because, quite frankly, many of us are not receptive to the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we are full of greedy, sinful or lustful desires and would rather hold onto those desires than receive the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we are angry, resentful or bitter, and we would rather hold on to our bitterness than receive the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit is calling us to violate our traditions. Sometimes we are just in love with our own ideas and would rather do things our own way. The power that Jesus promises from the Holy Spirit is unconventional power. It allows us to break out of the mold or pattern that has been set for us by this world, by our own sin and weakness, and by our human circumstances to do things that would otherwise be impossible.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you..." The you's that appear here are plural. This is not a promise for just a few special individuals. When the Holy Spirit comes, he comes upon the Body of Christ and calls disciples to work together with common purpose and understanding. If one person stands up and says, "The Holy Spirit told me such and such," and no one else knows what that person is talking about, then it was probably not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not operate by human consensus, but he does want to give believers a common understanding. When we review the first two chapters of Acts, we see that the Holy Spirit was working primarily to help the apostles understand and believe the teachings of the Bible and to share that understanding with others (1:2, 20; 2:16-21, 25-28, 34-35). There is a famous saying: "Knowledge is power." That is quite true. Proverbs 24:5 says, *"A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength."* When the Holy Spirit did come upon the apostles, they were not suddenly changed into mighty men of steel who could do all kinds of impossible things. They were still ordinary human beings, living in ordinary bodies of flesh. The power that they actually

received was a fresh, deeper understanding of God's word, a renewed passion to serve God, and the boldness to speak about Jesus Christ with real knowledge and personal conviction.

Which brings us to the second part of the promise. Verse 8b says, "*...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" When we hear, "*You will be my witnesses,*" what do we think of? Walking up to strangers and telling them about Jesus? We sometimes think of witnessing as an activity that Christians are supposed to do, as in "Go and do some witnessing." I know a sincere Christian who goes witnessing on the Penn State campus every Wednesday night, walking up to students at the Hub and sharing the gospel with them. That's a very admirable thing to do. But it's interesting that the verb Jesus uses is not *to witness*. The verb is *to be*: "*You will be my witnesses.*" Witnessing to Jesus Christ is not merely something that we do; it is something that we are. It is something that we become when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, when Jesus himself comes to us and makes his home with us, and other people encounter the risen Jesus alive in us. One author has noted that some Christian churches and organizations are very active in evangelism, and others are not. Interestingly, the ones that seem to be the most active are often the ones who present an oversimplified version of the Gospel that reduces it to an easy formula: "Pray a sinner's prayer so that you can go to heaven." But Jesus said, "*You will be my witnesses.*" We are not testifying to a formula but to a living person. A witness of Jesus is someone who has seen Jesus, who knows that he is alive, who declares and reveals Jesus to the world not just by what he says but by his demeanor, character, and actions.

To be effective witnesses of Jesus, we need to have *credibility*. Credibility means that we know what we are talking about. It means we tell the unvarnished truth in an honest and authentic way. Many of the gospel messages being preached today are not credible but obviously misleading. If someone says, "Accept Jesus as your personal savior and you will immediately experience peace and joy and God will solve all your problems," that is not credible. If someone says, "Jesus is going to make you rich," that is not credible. The gospel is not all about having a rosy life in this world. It is all about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died on the cross, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, rules from heaven, and will come again to judge the living and the dead. Credible witnesses of Jesus will testify to these historic truths of the Christian faith. Credible witnesses of Jesus will be filled with the Holy Spirit and will bear evidence of the fruits of the Spirit. Credible witnesses of Jesus will also have the right motive. They are not evangelizing to gain prestige for themselves by increasing the size of their own flock. Their witness grows out of genuine godly concern for the people of this world.

The last part of verse 8 is a list of places: "*...in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" To the apostles, this part must have seemed

unrealistic and overwhelming. Jerusalem was the place where Jesus had been crucified, where religious officials hated and opposed Christ. Samaria was the home of the Samaritans who had antagonistic relationships with Jews. And “to the ends of the earth” is like a fairy tale. It sounds like the end of a movie: “To infinity and beyond!” Even if the apostles had wanted to obey this, there is no way that they could have obeyed. Which is why Jesus didn’t give it as a command, but as a promise. The apostles didn’t have to come up with a plan and execute it. It was going to happen, whether the disciples were able to do it or not.

This last part of verse 8 is a prophetic outline of the whole book of Acts. In the first seven chapters of Acts, gospel was preached in Jerusalem. After the stoning of Stephen in chapter 8, a great persecution broke out, and the believers were scattered. Some of them went down to Samaria and preached the gospel there, and the Samaritans believed. Chapter 10 tells how Peter, against his Jewish instincts and wishes, entered the house of a Gentile named Cornelius and preached the gospel there. And then Jesus, all by himself, converted the greatest enemy of the gospel, a man named Saul, and changed him into the Apostle Paul who did carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. This was not the apostles’ mission which they were to carry out by their own carefully made plans and organization. It was God’s mission to a lost world, and God already had in mind how he was going to do it. God was going to work through the small decisions of obedient apostles. Sometimes he was going to work through their disobedience. And sometimes he would work through world events that were beyond the disciples’ control.

Read verse 8 again: *“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.”* To me, this verse has seemed overwhelming. Building a campus ministry seems like a relatively small thing, but even that is proving to be difficult. Many of us are not students. We have busy lives, demanding careers, houses that need repair, and babies to take care of. We have ambitious prayer topics such as, “Double the ministry by 2010.” Guess what? It is now 2010. The command to make disciples of Christ here in our own town and campus, not to mention other nations, does not seem realistic. Jesus does not command us to do this do by our own effort. It is something that he has promised will happen because he has willed it to happen. May God help us to be open and welcoming toward the Holy Spirit to receive divine power, so that God’s mission may be accomplished.