

THE CHURCH'S BUILDING PLANS
ACTS 1:6-11

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The last things that people do and say in this life often have a powerful impact. One of the most memorable lines in American history came from a young 21-year-old spy who was captured by the British in what is now New York City as he sought to bring information to General George Washington. Just before he was executed Nathan Hale was reported to have declared, **“I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”** That statement was not only a reflection of the character of an American patriot, it also became a source of inspiration to other colonists.

What I have observed when a loved one dies is that family and friends typically talk about in detail--- and over and over again--- the last words and actions of the deceased. There seems to be something natural and necessary for us to do that. The last words and actions of an individual often leave a lasting impression. When people realize that they are dying, they often give extra care and attention to their last words and actions.

It is for this reason that it is especially important for us who call ourselves Christians to consider carefully the last words and deeds of Jesus Christ before He left this earth. Knowing that He was about to ascend into heaven our Lord carefully and deliberately left His followers with His final instructions. These instructions were building plans of a sort.

There was a building committee that came up with the plans for the original church. This committee consisted of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God the Son communicated instructions from the Trinity to the followers of Jesus. The Lord Jesus described to them the plan, the power, and the promise for the building of His church upon the earth. We are going to examine these elements this morning.

I.

First, we are going to examine THE PLAN (PROJECTOR ON--- THE PLAN), which is described in vv. 6-8 of Acts #1. Last week, as we began our study of Acts, I noted that Jesus had made several appearances to His apostles. During these appearances, He talked to them about the kingdom of God and how His death and resurrection relates to that kingdom. He also told them that they were to stay in Jerusalem until they received power from the Holy Spirit.

In our passage today Jesus makes His final appearance to the disciples. In #24 v. 50 in the Gospel According to Luke our author wrote that Jesus led the disciples out of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives (MOUNT OF OLIVES 01) just east of the city. This same author tells us in v. 12 of Acts #1 that the events we are going to look at indeed happened on the Mount of Olives.

Either on the walk to the Mount of Olives (MOUNT OF OLIVES) or on the hill itself, the apostles asked Jesus a key question. According to v. 6, **“So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’”** They were asking about the plan. Specifically they were asking about the timing of the plan. Is it now that Jesus is going to establish His kingdom upon the earth with Israel in a leadership role? (PROJECTOR OFF)

This was a natural question to ask. For Jesus had been speaking about the kingdom of God. Last week we saw that there were several aspects of this kingdom of God. Sometimes in the Bible “kingdom of God” refers to God’s sovereign rule over all of the earth. Sometimes it refers more specifically to an earthly kingdom over which the Messiah will rule. Sometimes it refers to the church age during which Jesus rules from heaven over the lives of His followers.

The disciples were asking about the Messianic kingdom when Jesus would be ruling physically upon the earth. They understood that Israel, the Jews, would have a leading role in this kingdom. They wanted to know when it was going to happen. That they would be focusing upon the Messianic kingdom is understandable in that the Old Testament associated an outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the coming of the kingdom. In v. 8 Jesus talks about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament Book of Zechariah, for example, we are told about the inauguration of this future earthly kingdom. In #12 vv. 9 & 10 (PROJECTOR ON--- ZECHARIAH 12:9) we read, **“And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. (ZECHARIAH 12:10) And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy...”** At the end of #2 in Joel the prophet also speaks about an outpouring of the Spirit which proceeds the deliverance of Jerusalem in this future kingdom. Given this background, it is understandable that the disciples should be asking about the timing of the coming of this kingdom.

There are some Christians--- evangelicals as well as non-evangelicals--- who deny that there is going to be any literal future messianic or millennial kingdom on the earth where the nation of Israel will have a prominent role. These people argue that Israel blew its opportunity to be used of God. The Jews as a nation rejected Christ as their messiah. So all of the Old Testament promises made to Israel are now being fulfilled in a spiritual sense in the church.

If this understanding is true, we would have expected Jesus at this point to straighten out His followers, to say, “Whoa, boys, you still don’t get it. Israel has blown it. There is no more special role for Israel. It is the church now that is going to be the instrument of God’s rule.”

But Jesus doesn’t say anything like that, because there is going to be a future role in a coming kingdom for Israel. We just have to look at the news to see that Israel has

already been returned to a position of prominence on the world stage. When the Messiah comes, the kingdom will be restored to Israel. The only issue here is the timing of the event.

In v. 7 He says, **“It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.”** “Just exactly when I am coming back and when this earthly kingdom is going to be set up is not something with which you should concern yourselves. It is not appropriate for you to know the exact timing.”

Jesus follows up this admonition with a key statement about His plan for the church. In v. 8 He says, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** The disciples are not to focus on the timing of the Second Coming. They are to focus upon their responsibility to be witnesses.

The original Greek word for “witnesses” is *martures* (MARTYRES...), from which we get our word “martyrs.” In the early church so many people died for their witness to Jesus that the word for “witness” came to be associated with our present usage of the word “martyr.”

In its original usage a “martyr” was someone who told the truth about someone or something. In this case the follower of Jesus is one who tells the truth about Jesus. This had special meaning to the first apostles who were eyewitnesses of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF) Flip over to Chapter 10 in Acts, and notice what Peter says to a group of Gentiles. Beginning in v.39 of #10 Peter is quoted as saying, **“And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”**

As the gospel spread, people became Christians who had not actually seen Jesus as the apostles had. So their witness came to involve their personal experience with the risen Christ as their Savior and their knowledge of the testimony of the first apostles and Christians. So it is that our personal story about our relationship with Jesus serves as a witness today.

The Book of Acts reveals to us that these apostles and other Christians were largely successful in their responsibility to be witnesses to the truth about Jesus. In Acts #17 v. 6 (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 17:6) the Jews at Thessalonica in Greece say this about the Christians: **“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...”**

Verse 8 in our passage gives us further information about the plan. It tells us not only that the responsibility of Jesus’ followers is to be witnesses, but also it tells us where they were to be witnesses. (JERUSALEM JUDEA SAMARIA) Jesus says that they are

to start in Jerusalem, move on to the surrounding area of Judea, to go north to Samaria, and then expand outward to the rest of the world.

The Book of Acts is structured upon the basis of this aspect of the plan. In the first seven chapters we are told about the witness of the disciples in Jerusalem. In chapters 8-11 we learn about how their witness expands to all of Judea and to Samaria. In the remainder of the book we see the gospel carried to other parts of the world.

Many have noticed that v. 8 could be taken either as a command or as a prophecy. Did Jesus make this statement as a command to His followers? Or should this be seen as a prediction of the Lord about what was going to happen? The Greek grammar could be taken either way. In Acts #10 reference is made by Peter to the responsibility that was given to the apostles who lived with Jesus. In the next verse (ACTS 10:42) Peter says, **“And he [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.”**

Because of this statement Acts 1:8 could be interpreted as a command. But perhaps it could be taken as a prophecy as well as a command. For the Book of Acts shows that the gospel was indeed taken to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the rest of the Roman Empire. Today we continue to work at bringing it to the remotest parts of the earth.

(PROJECTOR OFF) The plan is still in operation. The church of Christ continues to be under construction. The pattern that Jesus laid down for reaching Jerusalem, then the surrounding area, and then the rest of the world would seem to have application for us. Both as individual Christians and as a church we would seem to have a responsibility to be witnesses in our immediate area, then in the region in which we live, and then in and to the rest of the world.

As a church we seek to follow that pattern by encouraging one another to witness to those in our sphere of influence and by providing opportunities in our church activities and programming to bring people in to be exposed to the gospel. We hope to do that in our church services and in our youth and children's programs and in our widows' outreach.

In our intermediate area we have had people involved in prison ministry. Don is always on the lookout for volunteers to help in Bible studies at the Clark County Detention Center. Kathleen is always on the lookout for volunteers at the juvenile correction facilities. Dan and Eva are happy to have help with the Good News Club in the public school. Rob would be happy to have people go with him on his monthly visits to two nursing homes. Historically we have had a strong missions program that has been involved in bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The responsibility to be witnesses still stands. In one sense all of us who are Christians are witnesses. The issue is whether we are good witnesses or bad witnesses. The truth about the gospel does not change, but the responsiveness of people to the gospel is

affected to some degree by the quality of our witness. If we want people to believe the truth about Jesus, we have to speak up. We also have to be working toward a life of integrity and consistency that backs up our testimony that Jesus is the only way to God and that He transforms lives for the good.

II.

Verse 8 makes reference not only to the plan but also to THE POWER (PROJECTOR ON--- THE POWER) that is need to energize the church's building plans. In order to build something we need resources to implement the plan. Here the resources are primarily spiritual. Jesus said that the disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. I pointed out last week that the disciples prior to the Day of Pentecost were timid. They had very little boldness. In Chapter 2 we will see a total transformation as they experience divine boldness.

Alfred Nobel (ALFRED NOBEL) was a Swedish chemist and engineer. In 1867 he received a patent from Great Britain for a certain powder which he had developed. According to one account he asked a friend who was a Greek scholar what the most appropriate word for "explosive power" would be in Greek. The friend told him that the closest word would be *dynamis* (DYNAMIS), from which we got the word "dynamite."

It is this dynamic power which we are going to discover in our study of Acts that gave the first Christians boldness and effectiveness as they carried their witness to the ends of the world. It is this same dynamic power that is available to every Christian today. Last week I cited the example of Christian drug programs as an example of the effect of this spiritual power.

III.

The third element that is included in the church's building strategy as revealed in our passage is THE PROMISE (III. THE PROMISE). We find that promise described in vv. 9-11. Before the promise is specifically given, we are told about Jesus' ascension into heaven. We are given just the barest details of what happened. Luke himself was not an eyewitness. So the good doctor stuck to the basic facts upon which all of his sources agreed.

Verse 9 tells us that Jesus **"was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."** I was part of an ordination council a number of years ago that was examining a young man who was a candidate for ordination as a minister. I asked him a question to this effect: Where is Jesus Christ right now, and what form does He have? The young man responded that Christ is in heaven and that He is a spirit who moves around just like God the Father.

I didn't say much at that point, but this young man was wrong. Jesus Christ is not just a spirit floating around in heaven. He is a human being as well as a divine being. He has a resurrection body which He inhabits that is in heaven. We have a fellow human being who is at the right hand of God the Father.

What is the significance of the ascension? **First**, it is a proof that God the Father accepted the atoning work of Jesus Christ upon the cross. The resurrection is the central proof that Christ has indeed paid the penalty for the sins of the world. But His miraculous ascension into heaven gave further evidence that Christ was indeed who He claimed to be and that His sacrifice had been accepted by God the Father.

Second, the ascension provided visible proof to the disciples that Jesus Christ had indeed gone to the right hand of the Father in heaven. Jesus told the disciples in John #14 that He was going away to prepare a place for them. This gave them evidence that Jesus was going to prepare a place for His followers.

According to Hebrews # 7 v. 25 (HEBREWS 7:25), “[**Christ**] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” The disciples were not left with the picture of a dead Messiah. They were not left with a resurrected Messiah who just disappeared, who might leave some doubt about where He had gone. Instead He ascended into heaven before their own eyes so that they could have confidence that He had indeed gone to the right hand of the Father and that He would indeed live to make intercession for them, to be their advocate before God the Father.

Third, Jesus had said (JOHN 16:7), according to John 16 v.7, “**Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.**” Seeing Jesus go away could give them greater confidence that the Holy Spirit was indeed going to come upon them as He said that He would, though they probably didn’t understand everything that this would mean. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Fourth, the ascension served as a counterclaim against the Roman understanding of divinity. After Julius Caesar died in 44 BC a comet appeared in the night sky for seven days. It was hailed by the Romans as a sign that Julius Caesar had taken his place among the gods. Two years later the Roman senate declared that he was a god.

Octavian eventually replaced Julius Caesar on the throne of Rome. He was renamed Caesar Augustus. (AUGUSTUS COIN) In my Christmas messages I pointed out that on coins minted during his reign, he had the words inscribed *divi f, divi filius*, which means son of God. Caesar Augustus years earlier had actually been adopted by Julius Caesar.

During the first century AD Roman emperors were not officially regarded as divine during their lifetimes. Caligula ruled from 37-41 AD. Nero ruled from 54-68 AD. (PROJECTOR OFF) Both of them made efforts to be declared gods during their reigns. Neither succeeded. Both came to ignominious ends. Nero was probably ruling when Luke wrote this letter.

Seneca was the tutor of Nero. He wrote about the proper Roman understanding of “divinization.” He said that witnesses had to be found to testify that they had seen the

late emperor ascending into heaven. Only thereby could he prove to have become a god. (N. T. Wright, *Bible Review*, February 1998, p.17)

Do you see the relevance of Luke's testimony here? He was writing to a Roman official who knew all of this about Roman religion and culture. Luke was describing to Theophilus how witnesses had seen Jesus ascend into heaven. He was the true God. The difference was that He was alive from the dead.

Fifth, the ascension of Jesus is a picture and a foretaste of our own ascension. In 1 Thessalonians #4 the Bible says that at some point in the future we are going to be caught up from the earth and join the Lord Jesus Christ in the sky. We who are Christians will then be forever with Him. So the ascension of Jesus tells us something about what the rapture of the church will be like.

After the ascension v. 10 tells us that **"two men stood by them in white robes."** In the 24th chapter of his gospel account Luke also noted that there were two men in white who appeared beside the tomb of Jesus after the resurrection. The fact that there were two men had significance to the Jews because the Old Testament law said that for a legal matter to be decided there had to be two witnesses, and they had to be males.

The identity if these two witnesses is not revealed. Some have suggested that they might be Moses and Elijah, both of whom had ascension experiences--- Moses ascended to Mt. Sinai to meet the Lord. Elijah was seen to ascend into heaven itself. They also both appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. Others have suggested that the two were simply angels.

What the two witnesses said is more important than who they were. According to v. 11 they said, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."**

Here then is the promise. These heavenly messengers assure the apostles that Jesus is coming back sometime, and that He is coming back in the same way as when He left. So the deal is that Christians will be caught up from off of the earth just like Jesus ascended into heaven. Then, after a seven year tribulation upon the earth, Christ will descend from heaven onto the earth

The Old Testament book of Zechariah seems to describe this return in more detail. In the 14th chapter, after describing a final great battle in which the enemies of God (ZECHARIAH 14:3) surround the city of Jerusalem, the text says, **"Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. (ZECHARIAH 14:4) On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley..."** Seismologists have discovered that a fault line runs through the Mount of Olives.

The promise about Jesus' return is designed as a motivation for us to do our jobs, to be faithful. When the church has been built, when the gospel has been taken to the ends of the earth, our Savior will return. (PROJECTOR OFF) The promise of that return should motivate us to be at work building His church.

The work of being church builders is the work of being witnesses--- of following the plan, of using the power of the Holy Spirit, and of trusting the promise of Christ's return.

I lived on the East Coast for over twenty years of my life. I saw some beautiful old lighthouses, and I read stories of shipwrecks and rescues. According to one story I read there was once a crude little lifesaving station on the East Coast. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and, with no thought for themselves and their own safety, they went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost.

Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station. It became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and to give of their time and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and crews were trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided. So they replaced the emergency cots and beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place. It was treated by many as a kind of club.

Fewer members were interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions. The work was dangerous and difficult. So lifeboat crews were hired to do the work. The lifesaving motifs still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a lifeboat in the room where initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off of the coast, and the hired crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had languages that were hard to understand, and they looked and acted differently than the club members.

The beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside of the club where the victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But these members were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of people

who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. So they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old station. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore.

Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

There are such exclusive lifesaving stations in the world around us. Some of them have nice buildings and prominent members and nice social activities. May we not be numbered among them. May we not forget our reason for being. Both as a church and as individuals let us remember that a central reason for our existence is to be lifesavers-- and witnesses of what we know about Jesus Christ.