

Acts 1:1-11 & Luke 24:44-53 Ascended to Empower

Go and wait

Ascension Sunday
May 2021

Acts 1: 1-11 (ESV)

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. **3** He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. **4** And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; **5** for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

The Ascension

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” **7** He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. **8** 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.” **9** And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. **10** And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes,¹¹ and 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.”

Luke 24: 44-53 (ESV)

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” **45** Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, **47** and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

The Ascension

50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. **52** And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, **53** and were continually in the temple blessing God.



Intro:

The Ascension is a big Gospel moment. It's part of the connection between what God did in the descending and rising work of Jesus in his Birth, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension and Christ's reign in glory during the age of the church now. It's the overlap point at which Luke's ends his Gospel and begins his Book of Acts.

The Text

In both the Gospel and Acts accounts Jesus has a command and a promise for his disciples as he leaves them. In the Gospel they are to wait in the city of Jerusalem for the promised empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

[Luke 24:49]

...But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” [Luke 24:49]

And in the Book of Acts:

⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” ... ⁸ ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,
[Acts 1:4,5 & 8]

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” ... ⁸ ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, [Acts 1:4,5 & 8]

The common focus here is waiting to receive God’s spiritual power to be and do something ‘supernatural’, or above human capacity.

On the point of his departure for the last upward leg of his earthly mission, Jesus is saying that there is more heavenly power coming to earth in the Holy Spirit falling on them - yes, on them! They will be clothed or covered for something new. So the instruction is to wait together in Jerusalem until that happens. This sounds very corporate which I will come back to when we get to application.

Two Things About This Promise:

1. who the promise of power is for
&
2. what the promised power is for.

There are two things I note about this promise:

- who the promise of power is made to,
and
- what the promised power is for.

Q1 Who is that promised spiritual power for?

A1 The promise was made to people who had been and were continuing as disciples of Jesus even after the trauma of the cross and resurrection.

- They were men and women who had committed themselves to becoming human the Jesus way as children of God.
- They were actively desiring to live in the Kingdom, or Reign of God as Jesus modeled that.
- They sought to be loving, forgiving, generous, righteous and loyal to Father God.

Thus: the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit was being affirmed for existing disciples of Jesus. Not everyone we met in the Gospels got to hear this promise:

- The rich young man who loved his wealth more than Jesus was not in view.
- Those who walked away because what he said was too hard were not in view.
- The 9 lepers who never acknowledged their healing were not in view.

This was a promise for genuine disciples open to Jesus shaped transformation to be empowered in such a way that others could recognise so that God’s Kingdom advanced among the willing.

So, the question to check for anyone here seeking the empowerment of the Holy Spirit is this:

- Q0** Are you a disciple of Jesus?
Is that your life’s chosen theme and thread?
Are you seeking to become more like him as a child of God?
Does your heart stand to attention when Jesus speaks?

If you are not a disciple of Jesus then the promised power is not for you.¹

Q2 What is that promised spiritual power for?

¹ Simon the Magician in Acts 8:9-24 thought he could buy the power of the Holy Spirit!

A2 This is something even the first disciples after three years of intensive training from Jesus were a bit confused about themselves!

In the Acts passage, after he promised the baptism in the Holy Spirit:

⁶ ... they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. [Acts 1:6]

The male mind in particular seems to easily misunderstand power! Some of Jesus’ followers still thought they were associates of a political messiah who was about to give power for the restoration of the nation among the nations. They wanted to know the time frame for the re-empowerment of Israel as top nation as had been enjoyed under King David. He told them to wait for Father God’s time.

The positive outcome from concern about timing is more clarification from Jesus as to the purpose of the promised spiritual power and what it was for.

⁸ 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.” [Acts 1:8]

They were to be empowered to be a witness to the living reality of Jesus with this global strategy even after the cross and the tomb.

This affirmed what had been reported in Luke’s gospel account:

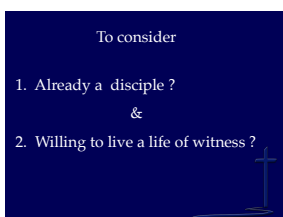
⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” [Luke 24:48-49]

There Jesus speaks in the present about what they had already seen yet needed the promised power from on high to witness to because left to themselves, they were not upto the mission being assigned

This is the essential Ascension conversation between disciples and their risen friend and Lord.

Application

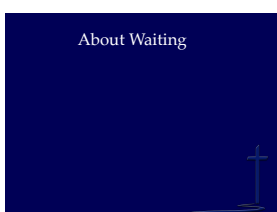
So as we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God in glory let’s take his words seriously:



- Are you a disciple?
- Are you available and desiring to live lives of witness that reveal Jesus to other people?

These are very serious clear questions: **Q** Yes or No?

If we are disciples of Jesus and willing to be empowered as witnesses then the command applies to wait. If we are a church of disciples then the command applies corporately for us to wait together – until empowered.



People of faith wait for God.
You may recognize that after two years of waiting for a new vicar?
You wait for one and God sends 2.

People of faith wait the same way -

- surfers wait for a wave
- farmers wait for the right day to plant or harvest
- expectant parents wait for their baby to come

People of faith accept in peace that we are essentially powerless:

- We cannot make waves in the sea to surf on.
- We cannot make the hot dry day to harvest a crop.
- We cannot rush a pregnancy

So, unless we are naturally gifted in patient faith, we need to learn waiting for God's time. This is not easy in a world that is always in a hurry.

Development

The failure to wait for God is typically linked to some false sense of having captured and contained or eliminated God!

Illustration

The story of how King Saul could not wait for the Judge-Prophet Samuel to come and offer the sacrifice illustrates this well.

In 1 Samuel 10: Samuel the prophet instructs Saul the warrior-king of Israel:

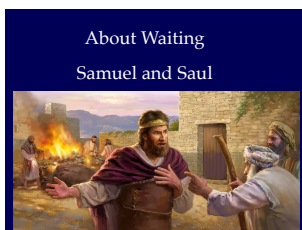
8 ... go down before me to Gilgal. And behold, I am coming down to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do."

As the seven days dragged on Saul saw all his army and people deserting and hiding in fear of the Philistines. Saul grew more and more anxious and could not wait beyond the bare seven days. So as soon as a week was up he did the classic wrong thing. He gave up on waiting and attempted to take hold of God's favour in his own way. He gave up on obedience in faith and tried to manage God upwards.

He got religious and worse touching what he should not touch to calm his fears. This is so human and the more capable in our skill sets we are the more we are inclined to do it. It's taking the forbidden fruit in Paradise. It's the Tower of Babel. It's rebellion and divination.

Jesus saying: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." [Luke 6:20] recognizes that the rich find waiting very difficult while the poor have no choice so they are likely to get it as God's gift.

So in 1 Samuel 13:8 ff we read that with his army dissolving around him, King Saul stepped in where he should not have to make the sacrificial offering to the Lord God so he would have the Lord God of Israel's favour in the imminent battle.



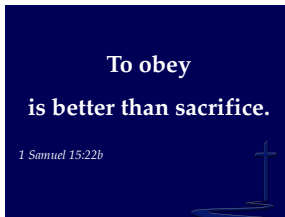
¹⁰ As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came. And Saul went out to meet him and greet him. ¹¹ Samuel said, "What have you done?"

Saul replies like a scared school boy needing a fig leaf saying:

"When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, ¹² I said, 'Now the Philistines will

come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favour of the LORD.’ So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering.”

This inability to wait showed that he not able to work with Samuel or obey God. More obedience failures would follow and next time Samuel would speak words we may engrave on the walls of every church.



To obey is better than sacrifice,

1 Samuel 15:22b

This detour from Ascension to the story of Samuel and Saul is to illustrate how hard it is to wait and how dangerous it is not to wait and manipulate God through whatever religious techniques we may apply – even in God’s name!

Some thoughts from Paul Tillich

I think of the theologian who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within an doctrine.

I think of the Bible student who does not wait for God, because he possesses him, enclosed in a book.

I think of the church member who does not wait for God, because she possesses Him, enclosed in an institution, a liturgy, a tradition, a denomination.

I think of the believer who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in his own experience.

It is not easy to endure this not having God, this waiting for God.

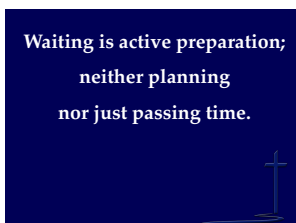
Yet, since God is infinitely hidden, free, and incalculable, we must wait for Him in the most absolute and radical way. **He is really God for us in so far as we do *not* possess Him.**

When we possess God, we reduce Him; and make an idol.

Only in idol worship can one believe in the possession of God. ²

Q So how can we as St Matt’s do this waiting?

A The community of the first disciples model something for us modern disciples in a hurry.



I put this this way:

Waiting is active preparation; neither planning nor just passing time.

- Waiting in God is about aligning ourselves with him in his time and for his purposes. It’s about deepening shared relationship, trust and devotion:
 - “Our Father in heaven, Thy Kingdom Come.”
- Waiting is about letting God be God and preparing ourselves to recognise and receive that when God moves ad God wills.
 - “Thy will be done on earth as in heaven”

² Paul Tillich The Shaking of the Foundations, SCM Press 1949, p.p.149-151.

- It is preparing but not planning.
- God will make a wave for which the surfer can prepare.
- God will send a wind for the sailor to catch.
- God will grow a fruit for the basket that is ready

So back to the community of disciples told to wait in Jerusalem until they are clothed with power by the Holy Spirit.

If our calendar reflects the time span between Ascension and Pentecost it was 10 days.

As we can read Acts chapter 2 we know that on the Day of Pentecost - 10 days later - "They were all together and in in one place."

Evidently a lot had happened in those 10 days of waiting to achieve that.

Instead of devising 5 year mission plans or undertaking SWOT analyses they had actively waited and prepared themselves. They were not watching the sundial and simply passing time with first century distractions.

We are told:

- They went back to Jerusalem.
- When they got there they devoted themselves to prayer.
- They got practical and chose Matthias as a replacement for Judas so there were 12 Apostles to lead the Jewish mission.

Then in my imagination I read between the lines of the wider story:

Since the Resurrection Jesus had commanded their attention. He now told them to stay together without him and wait for the next thing. I imagine a Marae or meeting house type context with people camped together for 10 days although they were also worshipping in the temple so were not in hiding as following the crucifixion 40 days earlier.

There were things to talk about.

The women might have asked:

"How come you brave men hiding in the city considered us women crazy when we first reported the empty tomb and seeing Jesus alive?"

Q What needed to happen there?

The disciples who saw the Risen Jesus on the first day may have asked Thomas, "Brother Thomas, why did you not believe us? What is your estimation of us?"

Q What might have happened there?

Then there was the issue of hot-headed Peter?

"Brother Peter, how come you drew a sword to defend the Lord and then denied you knew him three times? How can we trust you as our leader?"

Q What might have happened there

Meeting with the risen Messiah for 40 days or so will not have removed or healed those hurts.

I believe that waiting together involved reconciling, forgiving, loving.

Waiting involved remembering the words of Jesus and acting on them. Love one another as I have loved you.

The Great Commandment was very much part of their waiting.

They probably did not know it but this group were the embryonic church waiting to be born. They were waiting to be ready for what God wanted to do in spiritual empowerment for their coming life.

You don't give power tools or guns to anyone not able to handle them.

Unless they were aligned, reconciled and prepared, spiritual power would be wasted if not dangerous in this group.

Conclusion.

So where are we in this?

What I am I saying to St Matt's today?

If we desire a new Pentecost and a revival of mission flowing from that it involves waiting so that God may be God.

Waiting then as now is about preparing in prayer, and doing what it takes so that we are all together and in one place. Five people once a month on Zoom will not do it.

This church needs a lot of praying to prepare it for what God wants to do. Church prayer meeting ...

Our task now is to wait the way those first disciples waited so God can birth his new thing among us.

We are in a space like between Ascension and Pentecost.



- Are you available for this or are you a disciple in a hurry looking for a quick plan to get us busy?
- Are you ready to avoid managing God and simply wait to let God be God?

We are the sprint runner being told:

To your marks, get ready, Now WAIT!