

Waiting for the Promise

*“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which
you have heard me speak about.”*

Acts 1:4

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We don't like to wait. Everything about modern society seems to be about speed and convenience. There was a time when a selling feature of Heinz ketchup was that it was worth the wait, a sign the ketchup was nice and thick and loaded with tomato. We now put ketchup in squeezable bottles because otherwise it takes too long for the ketchup to come out of the bottle, and we want our ketchup and we want it now. Whether worth the wait or not, we don't like to wait.

In the early nineties we bought our first computer and immediately got set up with America Online. What a thrill it was for the boys to gather around the computer desk and listen to the beeps and bops and eventually the fuzzy static that signaled we were 'online'. No one would be thrilled by that delay today. One wonders how long it will be before we tire of fibre optic connections.

As we turn our attention this morning to the book of Acts, we enter into that interval between the resurrection and the day of Pentecost. Jesus is now preparing the disciples to take over the task of spreading the gospel, and building the church. Yes, Jesus will still be at work, but the face of Christianity will be visible in the disciples, rather than the risen Lord. The command given the early church is still our purpose, our reason for being even today: *"...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*^a Notice, they aren't going out to teach about economics, politics, or the environment, nor any number of social issues that so dominate the conversation today. They are to bear witness to a person—Jesus. General Linda Bond on one occasion said that in all things people had to be told "the love of Christ compels us."

When we distill all of the programs, positions and possessions carried by the church, this is still the core, the very essence of our message. Jesus. Martin Lloyd Jones, in his wonderful study on Acts puts it like this: The message of Christianity is not about improving the world, but about changing people in spite of the world, preparing them for the glory that is yet to come.¹

By focusing their efforts on that—the person of Jesus—the church was able to fulfill the Lord's command to go out into the world and make disciples. The result from making disciples was they changed the world. I sometimes think we have it backwards today. We think by changing the world we will create disciples, but instead our voice is lost among the noise of all those other voices that want to change the world. That might have become the lot of the early church had Jesus not set them on a particular course of action. Basically, hurry up and wait. According to G. Campbell Morgan:

Waiting for God is not laziness. Waiting for God is not going to sleep.
Waiting for God is not the abandonment of effort. Waiting for God means,

^a Acts 1:8

first, activity under command; second, readiness for any new command that may come; third, the ability to do nothing until the command is given.²

As we wait in this period between the resurrection and Pentecost, let me suggest that by following the example of the disciples, we too will be able to be successful in the awful task of waiting. We are now in the interval between the ascension and the return. However, through faith they were able to remain obedient to Christ, and wait patiently for the promise to be fulfilled.

Obedience

"Do not leave Jerusalem..."

You can imagine that after forty days of teaching with Jesus they were pretty pumped. Forty days of hearing about the kingdom of God, about the joy that was now set before them. My goodness, it doesn't take a whole lot for people these days to whip out their cellphones to take a picture of their breakfast, announce to the world they've received a needle, or to be the first posting details of some famous persons death. We hear something new, something different, something to grab attention, and we have to share. For forty days they had been listening to Jesus (which in itself was worthy of a post or three) talking about and giving instructions regarding the greatest kingdom that will ever be, announcing the greatest news that will ever be. You can imagine they wanted to share. There was family in Asia, friends in Joppa, acquaintances in Alexandria.

But Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem, which suggests they were intending to depart. "Lord, it's not all that safe in the city." Do not leave Jerusalem. "But I really need to tell my brother..." Do not leave Jerusalem. "Lord, shouldn't we go to those places where you attracted big crowds." Do not leave Jerusalem. I heard someone just this past week use the example of a well-trained pet, that when told, "Stay", will keep its eye on the master, forego the delicious morsel of meat or the dog-treat sitting at it's feet, until the signal or command is given to eat. If a dog can be trained to obey, why is so difficult for us to obey?

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD'S unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.

Psalm 32:8-10

From a young age we tend to be the opposite of a well-trained animal. I've watched children who are told "No" to a cookie or a candy, slowly circle the forbidden dish, with each pass coming just a little closer, until the command fades from memory or mommy

leaves the room, and woosh!, away it goes. Of course, adults are just as given to disobedience as a child, though our acts played out on a different stage and usually with more dire results.

Jesus would say with no ambiguity at all: *"If you love me, you will obey what I command."*^b That we disobey speaks more loudly than we might care to admit or think as an indication of the degree to which we love Jesus. Abraham's love was tested on Moriah; David's love was tested on the wall of his palace; Peter's love was tested by a fire. Where is it your love is tested?

What commands or command have you been given, and yet struggle to obey? You slowly circle the plate of delicacies, looking for loopholes or justifications, until that object, person, or practice wholly consumes your thoughts. Or, possibly, like David, have you yielded to the desire and given in to the excitement of the moment? Is it perhaps possible that our inability to obey stems from our not waiting on the Lord? In spite of the dangers, in spite of their eagerness, the disciples were obedient, and waited upon the Lord.

Patience

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift..."

That the disciples were eager to get going—and the task they wanted to be about was a noble task—is demonstrated in the question they ask: *"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"*^c You can almost hear the faint hint of the query many a parent has heard: "Are we there yet?" Of course, the question arises because often there is a reward, a prize, a person, or special place that is waiting at the end of the journey, and kids are eager to have it. A child in the car has to wait, and the constant inquiry, though annoying, reveals the intensity of the desire. I remember driving to Florida for one vacation, a short three-day trip through terrain of varying beauty, and yet so much of the beauty was missed because at the end of the trip there was the promise of Disneyworld, and all eyes were on the promise.

Our problem as adults is that very often there are other options. Yes, there is the promise of a gift for those who wait, but there is no one to stop us from not waiting. While a child has to wait for the reward, as grown-ups, we can childishly grab any old thing that bestows instant gratification. And so, our patience, if not well developed and hardened, gives in to the slightest hint of pleasure, possession, or reward. We are willing to settle for less, and convince ourselves in the moment that what we have taken hold of is not a lie. And in that moment the awaiting gift is forgotten.

^b John 14:15

^c Acts 1:6

Abram was promised an heir, and more than that, was promised a nation. He was seventy-five-years-old when the promise came and along the way, his patience—and that of Sarah—began to wane. There was an easier, quicker way for them to get an heir. Surely you know what its like to be told to wait when no one else is waiting. All the things you want, others are enjoying already. The gift loses its attractiveness. Abram and Sarai lost their patience, and pierced themselves with a thousand griefs.

Paul, writing to the church at Galatia writes: “...when the time had fully come, God sent his Son...”^z, and to the church in Rome, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”^d It wouldn’t be until he was one hundred that Abram received the promised gift—but then again, it wasn’t until after the passing of twenty-five years that Abram was *ready* to become Abraham. Who but God knows what additional griefs would have been incurred if the child had come any sooner? Isaac’s birth wasn’t delayed as much as it came at the right time—God’s time. For hundreds of years Israel awaited the promised Messiah, and though it appeared to linger, it came at the perfect moment on God’s calendar.

The disciples were told to wait for the gift. Though they must have felt prepared, ready to take on the world, they were obedient, and waited. And in the end, I wonder how many of those one hundred and twenty in the upper room would often think or say to one another, “Man, I’m I glad I waited.”

Our patience has certainly been tested this past fourteen months, and will likely be tested in the coming months. That we have seen so much unrest can surely be attributed to the frustrations we people are feeling, along with the disappointment if not downright exasperation that fifteen days to flatten the curve will soon to be fifteen months of empty promises. You are, at the end of your patience. The prophet Habakkuk knows your pain. He cried out:

GOD, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, “Help! Murder! Police!” before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place. Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke. The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head.

Habakkuk 1:2-4 *The Message*

Those words could have been ripped from last nights news, or a screen capture. Is it any wonder that for many Christians today there is a growing tendency to gaze to the future and ask, “Are we there yet?” I know there have been times this past year when I have plopped into the armchair and gasped, “Come Lord Jesus!” Perhaps you’ve felt the

^d Romans 5:6

same way.

All I can say to you is, wait for the gift. Be obedient to whatever the Lord is saying to you, and wait for His time. Of course, essential to our ability to obey and wait is faith.

Faith

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about."

Jesus is likely referring here to the promises given Joel: *"I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."*^e

Or even Ezekiel, through whom God said: *"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."*^f

Those are but a few of the times when God promised to do a new thing, and bring about that which man was powerless to do by himself. Then there were the promises of Jesus, given on that final night before the crucifixion:

"...I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you...the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

John 14:16-17, 26

No disrespect intended, but these are not empty words like 'fifteen days to flatten the curve'. When the Lord makes a promise, He is not promising in the way a parent promises, saying, "We'll see," or the government says—you don't need a mask, you do need a mask, get the vaccine and gather, get the vaccine and don't gather, no new taxes. We can take the Lord at His word, because His Word never fails. Paul would say, "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."^g Here's the thing, there are those who play Bible Jenga, and they come to the inspired Word of God and they start pulling things out. Six day creation? That's a myth—yank! A literal Adam and Eve, I don't think so—yank! Abraham a real person—yank! King David? Yank. And on and on it goes, pulling out of the Word of God anything they don't like, everything they assume to be embellishment or theft from other sources, and pretty soon the Word

^e Joel 2:28-29

^f Ezekiel 36:26

^g Romans 10:17 NKJV

comes toppling down. What kind of faith can be built on a shaky stack of blocks?

Contrast those Jenga players to Jesus, who when He wanted to build up the faith of the disciples—who had seen Him in person—went back to the word of God—*“Then He told 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, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. He also said to them, “This is what is written...”^h* While we wait for the promise of God, we can strengthen and build up our faith by listening to and reading the written word, which Jesus, the apostles, the church fathers and the faithful down through history have affirmed as truth, and upon which they built their faith. One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is that *“when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”ⁱ* That doesn’t mean that he will give us a brochure laying out the itinerary for the coming journey, but that through Him we will be able to see the truth and not fall into the deception and lies that will abound around us.

I don’t know what you have been praying for or for what you’re waiting upon God, but like the disciples in that interval between the resurrection and Pentecost, we need faith to be obedient in waiting for the promise to be fulfilled. Abraham received a son; Israel received a land; David received a throne; the church received the Spirit—and through faith, by waiting obediently, you will receive what the Lord has promised.

We are just as in need of the Holy Spirit as were those first disciples who by faith were obedient in waiting. And they would have had, in those days some expectation of what might take place. It was when filled with the Holy Spirit Samson would defeat an army; they knew through the power of the Holy Spirit Ezekiel bore witness to a valley of dry bones becoming a mighty army. They might not have had all the details, but they did have the written and the Living Word of God inform them, and that was all they needed to tarry in Jerusalem as they were told, and to wait.

Although we don’t have the benefit of a forty-day crash course lead by the greatest teacher of all history, the Bible does not disappoint us, for we read of person upon person who had not met Christ, coming to faith through the witness of the disciples, and being filled with the Holy Spirit. J.C. Maccauley calls the Holy Spirit “the indispensable equipment” adding “only in this case we do not use the equipment; the equipment uses us.”³

Let me ask you, have you received the promised gift? Have you tarried with the Lord and implored Him to send the fire? Do you perhaps need a fresh infilling, a rekindling

^h Luke 24:44-46 HCSB

ⁱ John 16:13

of the fire within?

Just as Jesus knew those early Christians needed power from on high, He longs for His children today to wait upon the promise, and is fully able to once again pour out upon us His power without which all our efforts are doomed to failure. Without His power we are no more than the dried up bones that Ezekiel spoke of, scattered about and with no breath of life. Maybe that's how you feel this morning. You are tired and worn out from working in your own strength. But the good news is this, He still comes in power. We too can experience our own Pentecost.

We call out to dry bones come alive come alive
We call out to dead hearts come alive come alive
Up out of the ashes let us see an army rise
We call out to dry bones come alive

Call out to the Lord this morning. And then in faith, obediently await the Holy Spirit, and be empowered to be His witness.

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Endnotes:

¹ Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity: Studies in the Book of the Acts, Vol 1* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 18.

² http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/w/waiting_on_god.htm

³ J.C. Macauley, *A Devotional commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), 18.