

# Jesus' Passion for Discipleship

*Acts 1:6-11*

Pastor Dale Evans, April 30, 2017, AM Worship

## Introduction

The Book of Acts as a mere piece of literature is remarkable in its own right but it is an important Scripture for us to understand. It gives us insight as to the practices and struggles of the first Christians. It gives us the “historical legitimization” for the reading of the writings of Peter, Paul, James, Jude and John as Christian Scripture. But it is more than an historical account of the first years of the Christian movement. It provides a theological framework to interpret this history and a canonical structure that links the Gospels to the epistles that follow. Its role as the sequel to the Gospel of Luke firmly establishes the nature of the gospel, the person and work of Jesus the Christ, the expansion of God’s kingdom rule in the world and anchors them in the structure of God’s overall intention. This is an intention that was determined from the beginning, hence Luke’s use of Jesus’ genealogy going back to Adam. It provides an interpretive structure for the Old Testament and the framework for understanding the gospel’s role in the New Covenant promises. It is in this New Covenant infrastructure that we are confronted with the decidedly prominent concept of relationship. First of all, it is a new relationship that individuals have with God himself, a relationship that has been opened through the work of Jesus and exemplified in His own relationship with the Father. It is also built upon an interpersonal commitment to one another as he builds community with and among his followers that transcends social, political, geographic and historical boundaries.

During the morning sermons for the month of April we have been seeing Jesus’ passion for various ideas. This play-on-words has been intentional in that each of these concepts are integral to the gospel’s outworking and Christ’s sacrifice on the cross ensures and enables each of these. We have seen His commitment to obedience with His desire to do the Father’s will, His focus on the redemption and to suffer for our sins. He was intent to bring peace to assure fearful hearts and ensure we understand the mind and revelation of in the Scriptures. This morning we want to take a passage from the Book of Acts and show that Jesus had a passion, a commitment, an intention to create a people for Himself: for Him to “be their God” and for them “to be His people.” Indeed it was Jesus’ passion “to make disciples.” Now Acts is not often looked upon as a central or key text in the presentation of discipleship, but I think after this morning we will see just how important it is in understanding this idea.

Thinking back to the Gospels, and the Gospel of Luke in particular, we saw how Jesus was committed to His disciples. The idea of a travelling teacher with an

entourage was not novel in the first century. In the typical manner, Jesus traveled from town to town and village to village. He presented His hearers with a message of hope, love and encouragement that called individuals to repentance from sin and darkness to trust in Him and what He was to accomplish. Along the way He gathered many who followed as students, learning more of His message. These students or “disciples” typically would learn and then extend the message of the teacher to other locales. The gospel presentation of the disciples shows that very fact. They were learners, followers and witnesses of the works of their teacher/master. They struggled and wrestled with the implications of what seemed to be a strange teaching but yet were gaining confidence in how Jesus’ words explained and fulfilled what they had grown up with in the Scriptures.

Our passage for this morning brings us to a crucial impasse in this activity. How does this message continue with the departure of the teacher? Most of the time when the teacher died, the teaching either died or began to significantly change with the next generation who were known to be disciples. But if Jesus’ work and message is the fulfillment and substance of the purposes of God, just how does discipleship work to ensure faithfulness to the original? How are His first and then all subsequent followers to continue to be like and to share the message of Jesus? Let us go to Acts chapter one and see Jesus’ passionate commitment to faithful discipleship and His announcement of the means to ensure this seemingly impossible deed.

## **Exposition**

Turn in your copy of the Scriptures to the Book of Acts and chapter one. The first chapter of Acts starts with an introduction that links this document to what we know as the Gospel according to Luke. It continues the narrative and actually recaps the closing of the Gospel to provide continuity to the new direction the storyline is about to go. His time with them was evidently intermittent, with appearances for comfort, instruction and correction. He charged them to remain in Jerusalem at this time. Verse 6 sets the stage for what appears to be his last engagement with them physically.

### **A Final Calling (Vs 6,7)**

In verses 6 and 7 we are witnessing a final calling.

*<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” <sup>7</sup> He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.”*

### **An Anxious gathering (6a)**

I am sure that at each of these encounters they were becoming more and more sure that each could be the last. Each of these was indeed an anxious gathering. Jesus was preparing them for His departure even before His crucifixion. His exodus or departure was to provide the means for their exodus from sin and to lead them to the “land of promise” that involved intimacy with God and restored, perfect fellowship with one another.

### **An Intriguing question (6b)**

So this time they ask Him, yet again, a burning and intriguing question. “Is it time?” What exactly the disciples understood regarding the nature of their question is not clear from the text. What is interesting is that Jesus does not correct their question but provides an alternative orientation. The focus appears to be “at this time”. I believe that Luke expects his readers to know whom “Israel” is at this time from the presentation found in his Gospel. There may have been still some political hope for a national restoration, but by now we know Jesus is preaching a spiritual kingdom that transcends this world’s geography. I think they were expecting an eschatological completion of the story. “Is it now?”

### **A Perplexing answer (7)**

Jesus then provides what had to be a most perplexing answer. “It is not for you to know.” I am sure that faces dropped all around. Frowns and furrowed brows developed. Minds began to race and secondary questions were being thought out. Maybe there was more conversation and instruction that Luke did not record. Maybe this whole encounter took place over days and not the moments it appears here. But what we are to feel is the sequence of ideas that is presented.

### **A Final Charge (Vs 8)**

Jesus took this and turned it around and gave them a final charge.

*<sup>8</sup>“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.”*

### **A Surprising twist (8a...but)**

Jesus took this potentially discouraging moment and made it a positive and motivating encounter. Many commentators seem to skip over the conjunction and get to the meat of the statement. But this “but” is important to see the connection to the question-answer that went before and to see the impact of this statement on the flow of the narrative that follows. Now may not be the ultimate

and final fulfillment of the kingdom, “but” there is more. It is a “more” that is intentional and important. It is a “more” that involves further Scriptural fulfillment and personal struggle. It is a “more” that will continue throughout the text and even into the future (even our future).

### **An Encouraging promise (8a)**

His answer did though provide an encouraging promise. In the face of the loss of their teacher/master, they would not be at loss for connection, encouragement and ability. They will receive the power to endure, the power for consistency, the power to proclaim, all from the arrival of God’s own Holy Spirit. They would have understood this blessing. They had been told and seen first hand the leading and empowering of the Spirit in Jesus own life (Luke 4:1-15 is programmatic for Jesus ministry). This was more than encouraging it was exhilarating. They were promised the same connection, the same relationship, the same empowerment that enabled Jesus to preach, teach, encourage and endure even death on the cross! What a thought! I am sure they were seeing this as the fulfillment of Ezekiel, Jeremiah and even Joel as to the New Covenant nature of their community.

### **A Taxing challenge (8b)**

But this great promise was coupled with a serious and taxing challenge. They will be witnesses of his work and message to the world. Beginning in Jerusalem and proceeding to an Israel that believes and extending to the gentiles as the whole world falls under the expansion of the kingdom. Yes, it is time for the kingdom to be restored to Israel! Yes, all who have the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be brought into the rule and relationship with the Father. You (and those after you) will be the witnesses, the true disciples with the gospel and Spirit transforming the world.

### **A Final Commitment (Vs 9-11)**

The story could have ended right there, but we are confronted with the purpose of the “delay” in the eschatological fulfillment. God’s plans and purposes are for the growth of the kingdom and the development of his disciples to be in a real-life, real-time acquisition of trust and expression of faithful deeds. There is clearly a lag between what they heard and how they lived it out.

*<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, <sup>11</sup> 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.”*

### **An Inspiring vision (9)**

At the conclusion of Jesus final promise and challenge, they were evidently standing there flat-footed, caught up in the spectacle, this inspiring vision of Jesus' departure. He was lifted up in the glory-cloud of God, the Shekinah, and left their sight. Several of them had seen His glory, all had witnessed His resurrection body and now all witnessed the ultimate vindication of His claims. Luke wants us to remember the departure of Moses and Elijah and the transitions that occurred then and to correlate that to what is happening here. This is an intentional transition, a purposeful portrayal.

### **A Challenging query (10-11a)**

But the disciples still weak and needed some push. Divine messengers in white robes who begin with a challenging query soon joined them. They ask, "why, just why are you still standing here looking up?" We don't know how long the disciples were there or what was in their minds. But the challenge from the angels indicates it was not a mere lingering in worship and adoration. There was likely some of that too, but they were given a divine "pat on the behind" here.

### **An Empowering affirmation (11b)**

This question was then followed by an empowering affirmation of what they knew to be true and was to become the foundation of their testimony. "This Jesus, will come." This Jesus who came, lived, died, rose and ascended is the fulfillment of God's purposes and plans. This Jesus is not done yet with the gathering, building and growing of his kingdom. This Jesus gave you a pattern and purpose for living. This Jesus is still at work in your midst and will be at work it those who follow you.

## **Explanation**

So what does Luke want us to know about what Jesus is doing here? Jesus is commissioning his disciples to continue to grow as a community that is:

1. Spirit-filled: There is to be a sense of following Jesus that recognizes its vital connection to Him via the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Spirit is one of the distinguishing features of the New Covenant and this era of redemptive history. Discipleship is the pattern of living for New Covenant, Christian, indeed "Spirit-filled believers." It is not an addendum to the Christian experience, or a secondary, expanded way of discipleship.
2. Spirit-empowered: This also implies that our growth and change as well as our expression of discipleship are empowered by the same Spirit. We are called

to learn, know, share, love and live in the Gospel and these are verbs, action words to be enabled by the same Spirit that now indwells us. This is often hard to explain and hard to live, how we are to be working and yet understand that it is God working in and through us in the power of the Spirit. This is both incredibly terrifying and liberating at the same time.

3. Spirit-led: This Spiritual life of discipleship then also implies being led by the Spirit to accomplish His will, the will of the Father and the Son, Jesus. We know this will from His revelation to us. True, gospel driven, Spirit-led discipleship will be obedient to and engaging with Scripture.

4. Anchored in the past: This discipleship is aware and anchored in past events. Indeed it is grounded in the factuality of what has occurred and confident in hope knowing why the past has occurred. It is “this Jesus who was taken”...

5. Engaged in the present: But this discipleship is not inward gazing or some self-actualizing contemplation. It is active and engaged in the here and now. “Why are you standing here”...

6. Oriented toward the future: And even more, it sees the future as assured, giving confidence to decisions and actions in the now. It indeed is “to the end of the earth/will come”...

## **Elaboration**

Our discipleship should be:

1. Christ centered (in faith): Discipleship is about Jesus and His gospel. It is about the visible expression of inward realities that seeks to conform to His image and His will. It requires us to long for and work to know Him in and through His word. It requires thoughtful engagement with Scripture that is committed to applying the word to all of life in faith, even when it seems problematic. God’s wisdom may not always align with “our wisdom” and indeed feel like “foolishness”. It is accomplished in reading, conversing with one another, listening to lessons and sermons and in contemplating the words of our singing.

2. Spirit empowered (with hope): Discipleship must be driven by and motivated by a God-centered, Spirit empowered energy. We should be careful not to be moved by guilt or manipulation. We must be careful not to substitute program for the Spirit, to rely on these as tactics to “encourage” growth and change. They will create false and temporary patterns that aren’t of the Spirit. Tools they can be, but not alone.

3. Community (in love): And discipleship is of necessity a group project. The Bible is very clear regarding the value and need for community. The “lone wolf”

disciple is not found nor condoned in Scripture. Gathering to listen and engage is a requirement of Gospel, commissinal discipleship. That is why we provide Sunday classes, Flock gatherings, Ladies Bible studies, Iron Sharpeners, and the like, to promote the community aspect of learning, growing and change.

Let us leave today, encouraged by Jesus' passion for discipleship to long to be and share a discipleship that is truly in measure with Jesus' model and plan for all of His disciples!