
Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
Preface	v
Introduction	1
1. Resources for Finishing Our Lord's Unfinished Work	9
2. Replacing the Traitor	25
3. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit	37
4. The First Christian Sermon—part 1	
The Introduction: Explaining Pentecost	47
5. The First Christian Sermon—part 2	
The Theme: Proclaiming the Risen Lord	57
6. The First Christian Sermon—part 3	
The Appeal and Results	69
7. The First Christian Fellowship	79
8. A Miracle to Confirm the Word	93
9. Peter's Powerful Sermon—part 1	
Peter Preaches Christ	103
10. Peter's Powerful Sermon—part 2	
The Necessity of Repentance	113
11. How to Handle Persecution	125
12. Sins of the Saints	143

13.	The Early Church Pattern for Evangelism	157
14.	Spiritual Organization	175
15.	The Man with the Face of an Angel	187
16.	In Defense of the Faith	197
17.	The First Christian Martyr	217
18.	The Persecuted Church Reaches Out	227
19.	The Faith That Does Not Save	237
20.	The Faith That Does Save	249
21.	The Transformed Life	261
22.	Marks of an Effective Personal Ministry	279
23.	Salvation Reaches Out	287
24.	The Gentile Church	307
25.	The Folly of Fighting God	317
	Index of Greek Words	329
	Index of Scripture	330
	Index of Subjects	339

Resources for Finishing Our Lord's Unfinished Work

1

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky

while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” (1:1-11)

The work of Jesus Christ is both finished and unfinished. His great work of providing redemption is finished, and nothing may be added to it (cf. John 17:4). His work of ministry and proclamation, however, is not finished. That work He only started. Along with the other gospels, **the first account composed** by Luke for **Theophilus** (the gospel of Luke), records **all that Jesus began to do and teach** during His life on earth. The rest of the New Testament describes the continuation of His work by the early church. We are still finishing it until He comes.

Christ’s work of redemption is completed, and the church’s work of evangelism begins. Acts chronicles the initial stages and features of that unfinished work, and sets the path the church is to follow until the end.

As the book of Acts begins, an important transition takes place. During His ministry on earth, the work of preaching and teaching was done primarily by our Lord Himself as He trained His disciples. Now it is time to pass that responsibility on to the apostles, before He ascends to the Father. The burden of proclaiming repentance and the good news of forgiveness to a lost world will rest squarely on their shoulders. The apostles will also be responsible for teaching the truths of the faith to the church.

From a purely human standpoint the apostles were in no way ready for such a task. There were things they still did not understand. Their faith was weak, as evidenced by our Lord’s frequent reprimands of them (cf. Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28). Nor had they acquitted themselves well during the traumatic events surrounding Christ’s arrest and crucifixion. They had not only failed in public witness but also in private loyalty and in personal faith. Peter, their acknowledged leader, had vehemently and profanely denied even knowing Jesus. His faith and spiritual character were not strong enough to withstand the challenge of a lowly servant girl (Matt. 26:69-70). With the exception of John, all the disciples had fled in fear of their own lives and were nowhere to be found at the crucifixion site. Although Jesus had explicitly predicted His resurrection, the disciples scoffed at the initial reports that His tomb was empty (Luke 24:11). When Jesus appeared to them, He found them cowering behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities (John 20:19). Thomas, not present at that first appearance, refused to believe even the testimony of the other ten apostles (John 20:24-28). Only a

second appearance, and the Lord's invitation to touch His crucifixion wounds, cured Thomas of his skepticism.

The apostles themselves obviously lacked the understanding and spiritual power to complete Jesus' unfinished ministry of evangelism and edification. However, in these His last words to them before His ascension, the Lord Jesus Christ reiterates (cf. John 20:22) the promise of the Spirit. He will empower the apostles (and all subsequent believers) with those resources necessary to finish the Savior's unfinished work. They needed the correct message, manifestation, might, mystery, mission, and motive.

THE MESSAGE

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. (1:1-2)

As already noted, **the first account** refers to Luke's gospel, which he **composed** for **Theophilus** (see the Introduction for further details). That **account** was largely concerned with the earthly life and ministry of our Lord, revealing **all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up**. From the inception of His earthly ministry until His ascension, Jesus had instructed His disciples by both deed and word. His miracles were to strengthen their faith; His parables were to clarify spiritual truth for them; His teaching was to formulate their theology. He revealed to them the truth they would need to carry on His work.

It is axiomatic that those who would carry the message of Christ to the world must know what that message is. There must be an accurate understanding of the content of Christian truth before any ministry can be effective. Such knowledge is foundational to spiritual power and to fulfilling the church's mission. The lack of it is insurmountable and devastating to the evangelistic purpose of God.

The apostle Paul was so concerned about this that it was central to his desire for all believers. In Ephesians 1:18-19a he wrote, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe."

To the Philippians he wrote, "This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so

that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:9–10).

Paul's prayer for the Colossians eloquently expresses his longing that all believers be mature in knowledge:

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience. (Col. 1:9–11)

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul charged Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." Then he challenged his son in the faith to teach sound truth to others (cf. 1 Tim. 4:6, 11, 16; 6:2b, 3, 20, 21; 2 Tim. 1:13, 14; 2:2; 3:16, 17; 4:1–4).

The writer of Hebrews rebuked some of his readers' ignorance of the truth: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food" (Heb. 5:12).

Mere factual knowledge, of course, was powerless to save those Hebrews, or anyone else, unless it was believed and appropriated. In Matthew 23:2–3, Jesus warned against imitating the hypocritical Pharisees: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them." Jesus set the pattern of consistency in behaving and proclaiming because, as Luke observed, He **began** both to **do** as well as to **teach**. He perfectly lived the truth He taught.

Paul admonished believers to "adorn the doctrine" they had been taught by how they lived their lives. He wrote, "Show yourself to be an example of good deeds . . . sound in speech . . . showing all good faith that [you] may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect" (Titus 2:7, 8, 10). Evangelism is telling people that God saves from sin. What adorns that message, or makes it believable, is a holy life that clearly demonstrates God can save from sin. It is self-defeating to proclaim the message of salvation from sin while living a sinful life. The messenger must manifest the power of the message he is proclaiming. Jesus preached righteousness and lived it perfectly. We have to preach the same message and strive to live it as perfectly as we can.

Two major factors contribute to the church's powerlessness today. First, many are ignorant of biblical truth. Second, those who may know biblical truth all too often fail to live by it. Proclaiming an erroneous message is tragic, yet so is proclaiming the truth but giving scant evidence that one's life has been transformed by it. Such people cannot expect others to be moved by their proclamation. The exemplary nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Robert Murray McCheyne gave the following words of advice to an aspiring young minister:

Do not forget the culture of the inner man—I mean of the heart. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, His instrument—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. (Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoirs of McCheyne* [Chicago: Moody, 1978], 95)

Those who would be effective in preaching, teaching, and evangelism must give heed to those words. Sound doctrine supported by holiness of life is essential for all who would minister the Word.

Even after His resurrection, Jesus continued to teach the essential realities of His kingdom **until the day when He was taken up**, a reference to His ascension. (Luke uses this term four times in this chapter, vv. 2, 9, 11, 22.) That day, marking the end of our Lord's earthly ministry, had arrived. As He had predicted, Jesus was about to ascend to the Father (cf. John 6:62; 13:1, 3; 16:28; 17:13; 20:17). During His ministry, He had **given orders** to the apostles **by the Holy Spirit**, who was both the source and the power of His ministry (cf. Matt. 4:1; 12:18, 28; Mark 1:12; Luke 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18). Jesus' ministry in the Spirit's power demonstrated the pattern for believers. They, like the apostles, also are to obey Him (cf. Matt. 28:19-20). The Holy Spirit is the source of power for believers' ministry and enables them to obey their Lord's teaching.

The verb *entellō* (**given orders**) signals a command (cf. Matt. 17:9), emphasizing the force of the truth. It encompasses a series of commands to obey God, as well as threats in light of the consequences of disobedience.

While Jesus instructed thousands of people in His days on earth, His primary and constant learners were **the apostles whom He had chosen**. Equipping them for their foundational ministry was a critical goal of His teaching. Their qualification was simply that the Lord had chosen them for salvation and unique service (cf. John 15:16). He

saved, commissioned, equipped, gifted and taught them so that they could be eyewitnesses to the truth and recipients of the revelation of God. They established the message believers are to proclaim.

The importance of this instruction in preparing these men for finishing the Lord's work cannot be overemphasized. Our Lord was building into them the teaching that is later called "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42)—the organized body of truth that established the church.

The effectiveness of every believer's ministry in large measure depends on a clear and deep knowledge of the Word. No wonder Spurgeon said,

We might preach 'til our tongue rotted, 'til we exhaust our lungs and die—but never a soul would be converted unless the Holy Spirit uses the Word to convert that soul. So it is blessed to eat into the very heart of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in scriptural language and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows from you. (Partly cited in Richard Ellsworth Day, *The Shadow of the Broad Brim* [Philadelphia: Judson, 1943], 131)

THE MANIFESTATION

To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. (1:3)

The apostles needed not only the proper message but also the confidence to proclaim that message even if it cost their lives. They could hardly have been enthusiastic about proclaiming and facing martyrdom for a dead Christ. They needed to know that He was alive and would fulfill His promise of the kingdom. To secure that necessary confidence, Jesus **presented Himself alive, after His suffering**, to them. He offered them **many convincing proofs** (cf. John 20:30), such as entering a room where the doors were locked (John 20:19), showing them His crucifixion wounds (Luke 24:39), and eating and drinking with them (Luke 24:41–43). Most convincing, though, was His **appearing to them over a period of forty days**, beginning with the day of His resurrection. The Greek text actually reads "through forty days." That affirms that though He was not with them continuously, He did appear in their presence at intervals. Although it is by no means exhaustive, the most extensive summary of those appearances is found in 1 Corinthians 15:5–8.

The end result of these appearances was that the apostles became absolutely convinced of the reality of their Lord's physical resurrection. That assurance gave them the boldness to preach the gospel to the very people who crucified Christ. The transformation of the apostles from fearful, cowering skeptics to bold, powerful witnesses is a potent proof of the resurrection.

There have been many suggestions as to the content of the Lord's teaching during the forty days. The mystical religionists held that He imparted to the apostles the secret knowledge that characterized gnosticism. Many in the early church believed He taught them concerning church order (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 33–34). Luke, however, shuts down all such speculations when he reveals that during this time the Lord was **speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God**. He taught them more truth related to the domain of divine rule over the hearts of believers. That theme, a frequent one during the Lord Jesus Christ's earthly ministry (cf. Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 10:7; 13:1ff.; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; 9:2; 17:20ff.; John 3:3ff.), offered further proof to the disciples that it was really He.

The Lord wanted them to know that the crucifixion did not nullify the promised millennial kingdom (cf. Isa. 2:2; 11:6–12; Dan. 2:44; Zech. 14:9). The apostles no doubt had difficulty believing in that kingdom after the death of the King. The resurrection changed all that, and from that time on they proclaimed Jesus Christ as the King over an invisible, spiritual kingdom (cf. Acts 17:7; Col. 1:13; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15; 2 Tim. 4:1; 2 Peter 1:11; Rev. 11:15; 12:10; 17:14; 19:16). The kingdom will be manifested in its fullness at the second coming. At that point our Lord will personally reign on earth for a thousand years.

The **kingdom of God** (the realm where God rules, or the sphere of salvation) encompasses much more than the millennial kingdom, however. It has two basic aspects: the universal kingdom, and the mediatorial kingdom (for a detailed discussion of those two aspects see Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959]; for a more detailed discussion of the kingdom, see *Matthew 8–15*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1987], 348–51).

The universal kingdom refers to God's sovereign rule over all of His creation. Psalm 103:19 reads, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all." Other passages that describe the universal kingdom include 1 Chronicles 29:11–12; Psalm 10:16; 29:10; 45:6; 59:13; 145:13; Daniel 4:34; 6:26 (cf. Rom. 13:1–7).

The mediatorial kingdom refers to God's spiritual rule and authority over His people on earth through divinely chosen mediators. Through Adam, then the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, the judges, prophets, and the kings of Israel and Judah, God revealed His will and mediat-

ed His authority to His people. With the end of Israel's monarchy began the times of the Gentiles. During that period, which will last until the second coming of Christ, God mediates His spiritual rule over the hearts of believers through the church (Acts 20:25; Rom. 14:17; Col. 1:13). He does so by means of the Word and the living Christ (Gal. 2:20). The final phase of the mediatorial, spiritual kingdom will dominate the earth in the form of the millennial kingdom, to be set up following Christ's return. During that thousand year period, the Lord Jesus Christ will personally reign on earth, exercising sovereign control over the creation and all men. At the end of the Millennium, with the destruction of all rebels, the spiritual kingdom will be merged with the universal kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24), and they will become the same.

During the church age, then, God mediates His kingdom rule through believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit and obedient to the Word. That is why Peter calls believers "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9).

Today, Jesus Christ does not manifest Himself physically and visibly to believers. Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29), while Peter wrote, "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8). His manifestation to us is no less real, however (cf. Col. 1:29). Such personal communion with the resurrected and exalted Savior is essential for finishing His unfinished work of ministry.

THE MIGHT

And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now . . ." but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; (1:4-5, 8a)

Having received the message, and witnessed the manifestation of the risen Christ, the apostles may have been tempted to assume they were ready to minister in their own strength. To prevent that error Jesus, after **gathering them together, commanded them not to leave Jerusalem** (cf. Luke 24:49). To the apostles, who were no doubt fired with enthusiasm and eager to begin, that must have seemed a strange command. Yet, it illustrates an important point: All the preparation and

training that knowledge and experience can bring are useless without the proper might. Power had to accompany truth.

To make certain the apostles were not only motivated but also supernaturally empowered for their mission, Jesus commanded them **to wait for what the Father had promised**. That promise, made repeatedly during the Lord's earthly ministry (cf. Luke 11:13; 24:49; John 7:39; 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 20:22), was that the Holy Spirit would be sent (cf. Acts 2:33). God's pledge was to be fulfilled just ten days later on the Day of Pentecost.

The apostles, like all believers of all dispensations, knew of and had tasted the working of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus sent them out on a preaching tour, He told them, "It is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matt. 10:20; cf. Luke 12:12). In John 14:17, Jesus told the apostles the Holy Spirit "abides with you, and will be in you." Like the other believers in the old economy, they experienced the Spirit's power for salvation and life, as well as for special occasions of ministry. In the new economy, inaugurated at Pentecost, the Spirit would permanently indwell and empower them in a way that was unique.

While this promise of power was primarily for the apostles (as was the promise of revelation and inspiration in John 14:26), it also secondarily forecast the enabling power the Spirit would give to all believers (cf. Acts 8:14-16; 10:44-48; 19:1-7). The general promise was at the heart of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the New Covenant. Ezekiel 36:25-27 records God's promise for all who come into the New Covenant: "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you." There was to come a fullness of the Spirit in some way unique to the New Covenant and for all believers. But there was also a special anointing for the apostles.

A magnificent comparison to this sense of the promise is the baptism of Jesus Christ. Our Lord was obviously in perfect accord and fellowship with the Holy Spirit, yet at the moment of His baptism, Scripture says, "heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:21-22). This was emblematic of the fullness of power He would receive from the Spirit to do His earthly work. One chapter later, Luke records that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" (4:1). When He spoke in the Nazareth synagogue He began by giving testimony to the unusual enabling of the Spirit by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,

and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18–19). Luke 5:17 suggests the same source for His healing power.

Others received such anointing for unusual service, such as Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, who by that power prophesied (Luke 1:67–79). In all of those cases, the Holy Spirit came in special fullness to enable unusually powerful ministry to take place.

Jesus further defines the promise of the Father for them as what **you heard of from Me** (cf. John 14:16–21; 15:26; 20:22). Our Lord’s next words, **for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now**, are reminiscent of John the Baptist’s statement in John 1:33: “He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’” The promise was to be fulfilled, and the disciples would be **baptized with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now**—ten to be exact. Jesus promised that after He departed, He would send the Spirit (John 16:7).

Despite the claims of many, the apostles’ and early disciples’ experience is not the norm for believers today. They were given unique enabling of the Holy Spirit for their special duties. They also received the general and common baptism with the Holy Spirit in an uncommon way, subsequent to conversion. All believers since the church began are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Yet these early apostles and believers were told to wait, showing the change that came in the church age. They were in the transitional period associated with the birth of the church. In the present age, baptism by Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit takes place for all believers at conversion. At that moment, every believer is placed into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). At that point the Spirit also takes up His permanent residency in the converted person’s soul, so there is no such thing as a Christian who does not yet have the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9; cf. 1 Cor. 6:19–20).

The baptism with the Holy Spirit is not a special privilege for some believers, nor are believers challenged and exhorted in Scripture to seek it. It is not even their responsibility to prepare for it by praying, pleading, tarrying, or any other means. The passive voice of the verb translated **be baptized** indicates the baptism by Jesus Christ with the Spirit is entirely a divine activity. It comes, like salvation itself, through grace, not human effort. Titus 3:5–6 says, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” God sovereignly pours out the Holy Spirit on those He saves.

The Spirit's presence, leading, and might were absolutely essential if the apostles were to be effective in continuing the Lord's unfinished work. They had already experienced His saving, guiding, teaching, and miracle-working power. Soon they would **receive** the **power** they needed for ministry after **the Holy Spirit** fell on them.

Power translates *dunamis*, from which the English word "dynamite" derives. All believers have in them spiritual dynamite for use of gifts, service, fellowship, and witness. They need to experience the release of that power in their lives through not grieving the Spirit by sin (Eph. 4:30), and being continually filled and controlled by the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). The latter takes place as believers yield moment by moment control of their lives to Him, and is the same as yielding their minds to the Word (Col. 3:16). The result of being filled with the Spirit is expressed by Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:16, 20 "that [God] would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. . . . Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us . . ." (For a complete discussion of the filling of the Spirit, see *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1986].)

THE MYSTERY

And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;" (1:6-7)

A paradoxical component of the resources for continuing the Lord's ministry was something believers don't know and can't find out. The apostles shared the fervent hope of their nation that Messiah would come and take up His earthly kingdom. Often Jesus had taught them prophetically about the future (Matt. 13:40-50; 24, 25; Luke 12:36-40; 17:20-37; 21:5-36). The enthusiastic question **they were asking Him, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"** is thus perfectly understandable. After all, here was the resurrected Messiah speaking with them about His kingdom. They knew of no reason the earthly form of the kingdom could not be set up immediately, since the messianic work signaling the end of the age had arrived. It must be remembered that the interval between the two comings of Messiah was not explicitly taught in the Old Testament. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were greatly disappointed that Jesus had not redeemed Israel and set up the kingdom (Luke 24:21). Further, the apostles knew that

Ezekiel 36 and Joel 2 connected the coming of the kingdom with the outpouring of the Spirit Jesus had just promised. It is understandable that they hoped the arrival of the kingdom was imminent. Surely it was for this kingdom they had hoped since they first joined Jesus. They had experienced a roller coaster ride of hope and doubt which they now felt might be over.

Jesus, however, quickly brings them back to reality. It was not for them **to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority**. The Scriptures teach many things about the earthly and glorious reign of Jesus Christ in His kingdom, but not the precise time of its establishment. **Times** (*kairos*) refers to features, characteristics of eras, and events. God, **by His own authority**, has determined all the aspects of the future and the kingdom. But as far as men are concerned, that remains one of “the secret things” that “belong to the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29). All that believers can know is that the kingdom will be established at the second coming (Matt. 25:21–34). The time of the second coming, however, remains unrevealed (Mark 13:32).

That Jesus does not deny their expectation of a literal, earthly kingdom involving Israel is highly significant. It shows that their understanding of the promised kingdom was correct, except for the time of its coming. If they were mistaken about such a crucial point in His kingdom teaching, His failure to correct them is mystifying and deceptive. A far more likely explanation is that the apostles’ expectation of a literal, earthly kingdom mirrored the Lord’s own teaching and the plan of God clearly revealed in the Old Testament.

Since the season of His coming cannot be known, and the Lord could return at any moment in the rapture of the church (cf. 1 Thess. 5:2), believers must be continually ready. All must remember the Lord’s solemn warning in Mark 13:33–37:

Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is. It is like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrowing, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all, “Be on the alert!”

Such continual vigilance and anticipation, through all generations of believers who were looking for Jesus to return, has served as true incentive to live with urgency and minister with passion.

THE MISSION

“you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (1:8b)

Rather than engage in useless speculation over the time for the coming of the kingdom, the apostles were to focus on the work at hand. **Witnesses** are those who see something and tell others about it. I once witnessed an attempted murder. When I testified in court, they wanted to know three things: what I saw, heard, and felt. I was reminded of 1 John 1:1–2, where John writes, “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life . . . we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you.” A witness for Jesus Christ is simply someone who tells the truth about Him. The apostles, as Peter points out, “were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

This was the foremost purpose for which the empowering of the Holy Spirit came. And the early church was so effective that they “upset the world” (Acts 17:6). Jesus commands all believers to be His witness in the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).

So many Christians sealed their witness to Christ with their blood that *marturēs* (**witnesses**) came to mean “martyrs.” Their blood, as the second-century theologian Tertullian stated, became the seed of the church. Many were drawn to faith in Christ by observing how calmly and joyously Christians met their deaths.

There is a sense in which believers do not even choose whether or not to be **witnesses**. They *are* witnesses, and the only question is how effective their witness is. If the church is to reach the lost world with the good news of the gospel, believers must “sanctify Christ as Lord in [their] hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks [them] to give an account for the hope that is in [them]” (1 Peter 3:15). Titus 2 indicates that how Christians live their lives lays the platform of integrity and believability on which effective personal witness is built. In that text, Paul writes that we are to so live “that the word of God may not be dishonored” (v. 5), “that the opponent [of the Christian faith] may be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us” (v. 8), and “that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect” (v. 10), so that we may make it possible that the saving gospel comes winsomely to all.

Beginning in **Jerusalem**, the apostles carried out the Lord's mandate. Their witness spread beyond there to **all Judea and Samaria** (the neighboring area), and finally **even to the remotest part of the earth**. Verse 8 provides the general outline for the book of Acts. Following that outline, Luke chronicles the irresistible march of Christianity from Jerusalem, into Samaria and then through the Roman world. As the book unfolds, we will move through those three sections of the expansion of the church.

This beginning was to dramatically alter the course of history, and the spread of the gospel message has continued past Acts to reach all the earth. Today, believers continue to have the responsibility for being Christ's witnesses throughout this world. The sphere for witnessing is as extensive as the kingdom—all the world. That was and is the mission for the church until Jesus comes.

THE MOTIVE

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (1:9–11)

The Lord Jesus Christ was about to depart for heaven to return to His former glory (cf. John 17:1–6). Before doing that, He left the apostles with a final, dramatic moment which provided powerful motivation for carrying on His work. To their amazement, **He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight** (cf. vv. 2, 11, 22). Jesus, in His glorious resurrection body, left this world for the realm of heaven to take His place on the throne at God's right hand. Back on the Mount of Olives (Luke 24:50), the shocked apostles **were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing**. To their further consternation, angels, described as **two men in white clothing**, suddenly appeared and **stood beside them**. Such angelic appearances were not unusual (Gen. 18:2; Josh. 5:13–15; Mark 16:5). Two of them confirm the promise of Christ's return as true (cf. John 8:17). These angels asked the bewildered apostles, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?"** They are called **men of Galilee** since all the apostles (with the exception of the dead traitor Judas) were from that region. The angels' question, **"why do you stand looking**

into the sky?" indicates more than curiosity at the miracle. The word translated **looking** indicates a long gaze, in this case a transfixed look as if losing someone. The question, then, is a mild rebuke to the apostles. They were not losing Jesus, as they feared. Maybe some of them remembered the vision of Ezekiel, who saw the glory of God depart to heaven from Israel (Ezek. 10:18-19) and feared it was happening again.

The angels went on to say, **"This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."** The promise of Zechariah 14:4 will come to pass, namely that the Messiah will return to the Mount of Olives. The angels stressed that **this** same **Jesus** whom they had watched ascend would one day return **in just the same way** as they had **watched Him go into heaven**. He will return in His glorified body, accompanied with clouds (cf. Dan. 7:13; Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Rev. 1:7; 14:14), just as at His ascension.

This becomes a compelling motive. No one knows when He will come, but everyone must live in anticipation that it could be in their lifetime (cf. Rom. 13:12-14; 2 Peter 3:14-18). The truth that Christ will return provides a powerful motive to serve Him. Paul writes, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). In Revelation 22:12 the Lord Jesus Christ said, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done." Believers must serve Christ faithfully in light of His imminent return. In Revelation 16:15 Jesus warned, "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame" (cf. 1 John 2:28).

The task of finishing the work that Jesus began, the duty of evangelizing the lost world, is a daunting one. But the Lord in His mercy from the start has provided all the spiritual resources necessary to accomplish that task. It is up to each believer to appropriate those resources and put them to use. "We must work the works of Him who sent [Jesus Christ], as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work" (John 9:4).