

“Promise Keeper. Promise Giver” – Acts 2:1-41

WCP

Intro

Last week we started into this new series going through the book of Acts and talking about the power of story; particularly the under-dog rising above impossible odds kind of story of which Acts is absolutely included.

In recent years, one such story that was reintroduced to a whole new generation of readers through the films was J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy. In *The Two Towers*, there is this one scene powerfully portrayed in the film where king Theodin, Aragorn, and a number of the other travellers are all huddled inside a mountain fortress called “Helm’s Deep”, seeking to defend themselves and the people of Rohan against a sea of orcs who’ve come to wipe them off the face of middle earth. As the battle rages on, it begins to become clear to all that defeat is imminent, and they will not be able to hold off the attacking army for much longer. And yet, as the sun begins to rise on that fateful day, Aragorn remembers the promise of his friend Gandalf who had promised to come to his aid once he’d gathered the exiled armies to join the fight. “Look to my coming on the fifth day,” he’d said. “At dawn, look to the East.” And trusting in this promise, Aragorn and the king ride out from the fortress right into the middle of the battle just as Gandalf returns on the Eastern hillside; breathing new life and power into the battle, and securing their victory against otherwise impossible odds.

After seeing their Master and friend risen from the dead, Jesus’ apostles were also fighting bravely in an otherwise impossible mission; a mission that Jesus had given them before He ascended into heaven to make disciples of all nations. But, they had not yet received the promised power from the Holy Spirit that Jesus had spoken of in **Acts 1:8**; and so – Luke tells us in chapter 2 now – they were all together in one place waiting and praying for this promise to be kept. And when Jesus does come through on His promise and they are all “clothed with power from on high,” they too “ride out” into the battle with a whole new passion and vigor, so much so that – you see in **2:13** some watching all this assume that they must be drunk; and no – not b/c they were stumbling around hugging everyone and telling them how, “Jesus loves you man!” – but b/c they were now proclaiming the wonders of God in the gospel so fearlessly and so unhindered by any social constraints, that it was *as if* they were that guy we’ve all seen who’s a few sheets to the wind singing “My heart will go on” with abandon on a Karaoke stage. There was a whole new life and power breathed into their preaching, now that Jesus had been faithful to keep His promise to them. And we see in Peter’s preaching the very first Christian sermon, that they truly did all become Jesus’ witnesses as He’d promised, and the “victory in battle” that day – **vs. 41** tells us – saw 3000 added to their number.

But, maybe for you reading this today, you look at this amazing experience the apostles had when Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit came upon them, and you think, “Well sure they were bold! If something like that happened to me I could be that passionate and powerful a witness for Jesus too! But, I could check with my parents I guess, but when Jesus saved me at

the age of four, I'm 99.9% sure that there wasn't no "violent wind" or "tongues of fire over my head" that came, and – yeah – I went to French Immersion, but I certainly wasn't fluently speaking languages I'd never learned before either." And, considering all that, you wonder, "How am I supposed to be a powerful witness for Jesus today when none of that is my experience?"

And we'll dig into this in a lot more depth this morning this morning, but – right off the top – a helpful, and I trust also freeing, distinction to consider whenever you come to stories like this in the bible, is to learn to be able to discern the difference between books/passages that are **prescriptive** (i.e. passages that are telling us/"prescribing" for us exactly how we are to do something) and **descriptive** (passages that are simply describing how something happened in a given circumstance). For instance, when David knocks out Goliath with his sling and smooth stones and then cuts off his head, that is not prescribing for us how we should deal with schoolyard bullies; no, it's describing how the Spirit empowered David to win an otherwise un-winnable battle.

And what I would suggest to you is that here in our passages, and what we're going to encounter throughout the book of Acts, is *primarily* descriptive material which is meant to *inform* how we continue to live out the Great Commission today, but *not* ultimately to prescribe *how* we are to go about accomplishing it.

And my prayer is that as we understand that, and also as we come to see just what was happening when the promised Spirit was first given to empower this pioneer church, that it will breathe new life and power into *our* witness today, and give *us* that same boldness and abandon as we proclaim the wonders of God in *our* lives as well.

And, in order to do that, I want to look at our passage here in three ways this morning: I want to show you **The Promise kept, The true power of the Promise, and finally The Promise offered (x2).**

So, if you've closed your bibles, please open them again to Acts 2:1 and we'll dig into this next part of the story; again, describing the continuing works of Jesus on earth by the power of His Spirit, as the promised Spirit is now given to the apostles.

Ok, so let's start out by looking at:

1. The Promise kept

I not going to spend a great deal of time on this first point, but that doesn't mean for a second that it's not still incredibly significant. And the point here is simply to highlight the fact, first of all, that Jesus is faithful to follow through on the promise He made to His disciples in Acts 1. He promised them before He ascended into heaven that He would send His Spirit to empower their witness, and what we clearly see in chapter 2 now, is that that is *exactly* what He does.



Beyond that, God had already been promising the pouring out of His Spirit for generations; both in the prophecies like the one Peter cites in our passage from the prophet **Joel**, to places like **Ezekiel 36** where God tells His people, *“I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.”* or **Isaiah 44:3** *“For I will pour out water on the thirsty land And streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring And My blessing on your descendants.”* And of course, as we looked at last week, in John’s gospel in particular, Jesus promises His disciples that when He goes He will send the Spirit/Comforter to remain with them.

App

And again and again, you seeing Jesus doing this; making what would be un-keepable promises if anyone else had made them, and coming through every single time. Why do I want to highlight this so much? Because I want *you* to see that Jesus is faithful; to know that you can put *your* trust in Him as well. All of us at one time or another – sometimes repeatedly – have been let down, duped, or full-on swindled by people in the past; and eventually that can wear on us to the point where we don’t want to put our trust in anything!

The apostle Paul said is well in **2 Cor. 1:20**, that, *“All the promises of God find their ‘yes’ Jesus.”* And as we continue our study through Acts, I pray your confidence in being able to put your trust in Jesus only continues to grow, as you see that He is absolutely trustworthy to fulfill every promise – rightly understood – in His word. And I say “rightly understood” b/c – as we already saw last week – Jesus being faithful to what He’s promised doesn’t always/even often mean being faithful in the way we think He should be. So, don’t steer into the ditch that says, “Jesus didn’t provide the way I expected Him to, so He’s obviously not trustworthy.” He *is*, but as the sovereign, Promise-giver, He also has complete freedom to follow through on His promises in the way that He knows is *truly* best, irrespective of whether or not we agree that it’s the best.

So, that’s **The Promise kept**. Again, not a long discussion, but key to understand I think as we move now to look at:

2. The true power of the Promise

And I say the “true” power b/c – particularly in light of what we discussed last week in Jesus’ promise to send His disciples this “power” to be His witnesses – when we come to sections like this in the book of Acts where the Spirit does these amazing, miraculous things through the His witnesses, it can be incredibly easy to become distracted and begin to focus more on the sign and forget what it is that the sign is pointing to.



Here's what I mean: when we were going through our "I AM" series, there were a number of times that Jesus performed miraculous signs both to demonstrate His deity as well as to teach some deeper spiritual truth about who He is and how He relates to us as well. But we see a classic example of focusing on the sign and missing what it's pointing to in a place like **John 6** where Jesus miraculously feeds over 5000 people with just 5 loaves and 2 fish. If you don't know the story, the next day that same crowd comes looking for Jesus to do the same thing; and Jesus said to them plainly, "*I tell you the truth, you are looking for Me, not b/c you saw miraculous signs, but b/c you ate the loaves and had your fill.*" What was Jesus' point? The miracle/sign/whatever is not the point! The one doing the miracle is.

And in Acts 2, and everywhere else the apostles do something miraculous in the book of Acts, the very same thing is true, viz. the miracle/sign/etc. is *never* the point; the one doing the sign is. But, you see, this is where understanding the title of the book of Acts becomes important again; b/c – ultimately – the "One" doing the signs in the book of Acts is *not* the apostles, it is Jesus' continued work on earth *through* the apostles, and *by* the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember, Jesus did *not* transform His disciples – then or today - into powerful people, He transformed us into witnesses. And the point is that the signs that Jesus performs through His apostles by the power of His Spirit are *only* intended to create a platform on which they can, then, give a credible witness.

But let's take a look at this sign that Jesus performs through the apostles, b/c it's important for understanding how it is that Jesus supports them in their witness.

You see in **vs. 1** – look with me there – Luke tells us when and where this all goes down. The disciples are all together in one place he says, and it's the day of **Pentecost**. Now that word "Pentecost" just means "50th day" and it was called that b/c this festival took place 7 weeks after Passover, the celebration where the Jews celebrated God's liberating them out of slavery in Egypt; this is why Pentecost was also referred to as "the Feast of Weeks." This was also a time when the Jewish nation would celebrate the completion of the grain harvest. But, closer to the historical time-period of the NT, the Jews also began to celebrate this feast as commemorating the giving of the Mosaic law on Mt. Sinai, as it came to be understood that this had happened 50 days after the Exodus from Egypt.

Now that event on Mt. Sinai is incredibly significant as it relates to the specific features of the miraculous sign we see in **vss. 2-4**. Look there with me. Luke writes (**READ vss. 2-4**). So, we see a violent wind, fire and the sound of voices. Compare that with the account of God's giving the law to Moses summarized in **Heb. 12:18-19** where he writes (**READ Heb. 12:18-19**). Given those similarities, I don't think it's insignificant at all that this sign Jesus performs through the apostles in happening on a day when the Jewish nations are all gathered together in Jerusalem to celebrate the giving of the law.

B/c what we see happening here in Acts 2 is, actually, God's creation of a *new* and *better* covenant with His people, as the Promised Holy Spirit is poured out - not to give the law of God once again – but now to write it on the hearts of men and women as the Spirit comes to dwell within them. Remember, that's what we read about specifically in Ezekiel's prophecy, "*I will*



put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.” And this promise is echoed again in **Jeremiah 33** and **Heb. 8** which speak of this new covenant God will form with His people.

So, in these two verses, we have all the same miraculous phenomena we see in Exodus 20, and then, in the midst of that, the apostles are given a miraculous gift whereby they can speak in languages that they have never learned before, so that all the different people groups represented in Jerusalem at this time for the Feast of Pentecost can understand them proclaiming the wonders of God in their own tongue/language. Look at **vss. 7-8** with me. There we read (**READ vss. 7-8**). So, **vs. 6** tells us the first sign – the sound of a violent wind - drew the crowd, but it was the second/third signs that empowered and enabled the apostles. Enabled to do what? **To be witnesses**. The entire rest of chapter 2 – really of the book of Acts – is about Jesus’ enabling of the apostles to be witnesses, *not* to be powerful miracle-workers. Do you see the difference?

And in this first pouring out of the Holy Spirit, Jesus enables His apostles – particularly Peter – to deliver the most efficient evangelistic message of all time; covering all the different languages/people groups present at the same time! I can’t tell you how much I long for this spiritual gift every time I preach at our Monday morning ESL bible study although, I suppose that would pretty much defeat one of the main purposes of the class which is to help them learn English.

But again, the thing I’m trying to emphasise here is that the true power being given to the apostles is *not* ultimately the gift of tongues – and we know this b/c after this they don’t retain this gift indefinitely – but the empowering of Jesus by the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses; the gift of tongues was simply the means by which they were able to do that.

So, I show this to people and they often want to push back and say, “Oh I get it; you’re a Cessationist (meaning I don’t believe these gifts – tongues/prophecy/healing - are still active for Christians today)”, and I will always push back immediately and say, “Absolutely not! I definitely believe that those gifts are still active today, I just don’t see them as the point.” Which is why when some of my Charismatic friends tell me that I need to learn to speak in tongues, I say, “Why would I want to do that? Jesus said the Promised Spirit would give me power to be His witness, not to be a tongues speaker/healer/etc. If Jesus *wants* me to speak in a language I’ve never learned before so I can be His witness to somebody one day, I think He can *absolutely* still do that; in fact, I *want* Him to do that. But that will be of His initiative, not mine.” And, if you think about it, you know what the apostles *weren’t* doing in that upper room all together? They weren’t thinking, “Man, do you know what would be awesome? If the Holy Spirit would make it so that we could just talk and everyone would be able to understand what we were preaching about!” They weren’t doing that; they wouldn’t have even thought to ask for that. No, it was the initiative of Jesus, working by the power of His Holy Spirit dwelling within His apostles – what some have called the reversing of the curse at the tower of Babel - that enabled them to speak in all these other tongues *so that* they could be empowered to be even more effective witnesses.

App

So, what that means, based on what we said as we started out here this morning, is that you don't need to have a hurricane in your house/tongues of fire resting on your head/speak in tongues/prophecy/etc. in order to be a powerful witness for Jesus; you don't! What we *all* need is the empowering of the Spirit living inside of us once we put our trust in Jesus, to faithfully witness to the works of God in our lives whenever/however He gives us the opportunity to do so. If He chooses to empower our witness to Him by also enabling us to demonstrate some of these miraculous signs, then great! Let's be open to that should Jesus desire to initiate something like that in us by His Spirit. But like the apostles in our passage today, let's remember that these signs/wonders/miraculous gifts are not, actually, the true power/the thing we should be seeking/the point, being witnesses is! That's the true power Jesus said we would receive when He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell inside of us.

Ok, so that's **The Promise kept**, and **The true power of the Promise**. The last thing I want us to look at is what that witness looks like in this instance. Again, this is *descriptive* of what Peter did, not prescriptive; but I think there are still some things we can learn from it. So, let's look lastly at:

3. The Promise offered

So, when we look at Peter's witnessing to Jesus and the wonders of God being declared by all the apostles, I think we see at least two elements that we can apply as we seek to be empowered witnesses for Jesus in our own context today.

1. Peter points to Jesus alone as the giver of the Promise
2. Peter offers the Promise to all without distinction

So, if you look at **vss. 22-24** we see, first of all, Peter is explaining how it is that Jesus is **able** to give the Promise – look with me there. Peter says (**READ vss. 22-24**). So, right away, in what is probably one of the most non-seeker-friendly messages ever, Peter shows how – b/c Jesus' death was actually God's plan all along – even though, yes, these Jews listening *are* guilty of putting Jesus to death along with the religious rulers and the Romans, God simply overruled that decision and raised Jesus to life again b/c – as Peter says – “it was impossible for death to hold Jesus.” Then if you look down to **vs. 32** Peter says (**READ vs. 32**). So here, explicitly using that “witness” terminology, Peter now refers back to the “many convincing proofs” Jesus gave them that He was alive which we read about in **1:3**. So, Peter's saying, it wasn't just God's *plan* to raise Jesus from the dead; He really did raise Him, and we are all witnesses to that!

Vs. 33 now is key – look with me there. Peter says (**READ vs. 33**). Ok, so this is how Peter points to Jesus alone as the One who can give us the Promised Holy Spirit. Why? B/c **He's the One who has it!!** You see Peter says that there that He – Jesus – “received the Holy Spirit from the Father” and then has now poured it out on His apostles that He had chosen which is why they are seeing these miraculous signs take place through them.

Now, I'm not even gonna try to unpack here how that all worked out in a Trinitarian sense; how Jesus – who is the second Person of the Trinity – can “receive” the Holy Spirit - the third Person of the Trinity from the Father and then pour Him out. Bottom line for our purposes here: Jesus is the only One who *has* the Promised Holy Spirit, so you must come to Him in order to receive the Spirit yourself. And in witnessing to this fact, Peter and the other apostles are pointing people to Jesus as the only hope for receiving this Promise of the Spirit which they would have heard about all through the OT.

App

This is something that is essential for our own witness today and, again, the whole reason Jesus doesn't make us powerful, but makes us witnesses. B/c in removing our weakness and making *us* powerful in any way, people would always be tempted to be drawn to us and our power instead of Jesus, the only hope for life and salvation; and – God help us – we'd let them. So, in making Jesus the focus of our witness, we truly offer hope to people of receiving the same Promised hope themselves, and of Christ's finished work on the cross being applied to them.

Secondly, if you look at **vs. 39** with me, we see how Peter offers the Promise to all w/o distinction. He says (**READ vs. 39**). So, not only are Peter and the apostles speaking to the whole crowd and declaring the wonders of God to them, Peter says here explicitly that this Promise is available to *all* regardless of language, age, or even ethnicity. He says as much in **vs. 21** as well in referencing the prophecy from Joel that, “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

App

This shows us two things as it relates to our witness. First of all, we see a reminder of something that we talk about often here, viz. we don't get to choose *for* God who should be on His team. Or as I often say it: God hasn't called us to be Bouncers/security guards at the gate to His Kingdom, He's called us to be Greeters: welcoming people to come and find the same grace we have freely received ourselves. Second of all, Peter's witness here is a call for us all to work/strive/labour towards that multi-lingual/multi-ethnic picture of the fully realized Kingdom of God that we see in **Revelation 5**, where blood-bought/purchased men and women from every tribe, language, people and nation are all gathered around the throne of God worshipping Him for all eternity. *That's* what we are to work towards and that is the call of Jesus' Commissioning in Acts 1:8. Bottom line is this: church is not about us and protecting our own little kingdom here on the Westside of Vancouver; it's about *His* ever-expanding Kingdom that that He says He wants us to join Him in expanding - without distinction - the very ends of the earth.

Conclusion

And just look at the result of this faithful witness – look with me at **vs. 37**. Luke tells us **(READ vs. 37)**. As a result of Peter’s faithful pointing to Jesus as their only hope, along with his cogent, reasoned pleading to reconsider their previous understanding of Him which had led to putting Him to death; these listeners – all hearing this message spoken perfectly in their own language – are cut to the heart/devastated/overcome with dread at what they have done.

It’s hard to describe what this feeling must have been like; it’s a case of mistaken identity in one sense, but on a cosmic scale and which resulted in the treasonous murder of the Lord of life. And all of a sudden, like a pent-up damn that’s been released all at once, light and truth come flooding into their hearts and minds, and they get it/understand at last the immensity of what it is that they’ve done and they’re utterly lost. You see, they say to the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” “What can be done?!” “Is it too late to do something about this/fix this?”

And you see, Peter’s hope-filled reply is, “No! No, it’s not too late!” He tells them **(READ vs. 38)**. He holds out hope to those who are desperate and without hope and says, the Promise is for you too! Turn from your sin and in faith put your trust in Jesus, and then – through baptism – publically identify yourself as one of His own, and you too will receive the Promised hope of the Holy Spirit. And we see in the closing verses of our passage, as the Spirit empowers this witness, 3000 men, women and children put their faith in this Jesus, and cross from death to life/defeat to victory/Spirit-less to Spirit filled. Can you even imagine what that must have looked like?! Wouldn’t you have loved to be a part of that day?

The hope of the Promise for us today, is that you still can. No, we can’t travel back in time to that moment, but did you know that Holy Spirit that empowered Peter and these apostles’ witness then, is the very same Holy Spirit living inside of you today if you’ve put your faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins? Did you know that as you are willing to step out fearlessly and lovingly witness to the hope available in Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection, that – as Peter says at the end of vs. 39 “all those whom the Lord will call” are gonna listen and be cut to the heart as they see their sin before a holy God; and they’re gonna ask you, “What shall I do? Is there still hope for me?” And you’re gonna have the awesome privilege of being the very first person to welcome a newly born son or daughter of God into His family.

And some of you have known that privilege yourself, even in this past year. Did you know that in this past year alone God has used the faithful witness of some of you in this church to see five people, that we know of anyways, trust Christ for their salvation? And that’s not a testimony to you or to me or to this church, that’s a testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit working *through* you and me as we just seek to humbly, faithfully be witnesses to the One who is powerful in our weakness; as we move from trying to expand our own kingdom, to expanding His to the ends of the earth. And my prayer for us is that this is only just the beginning.