

Good-Bye Jesus • Acts 1:1-11

When you really love someone it's hard to say goodbye. The last time I saw my father alive was the week of my parent's 50th wedding anniversary. Our family was in Florida to celebrate with them. My father had been in and out of hospitals over the previous year and wasn't doing very well. When our few days with them were up and it was time for us to return home my dad stood at the door and said to me, "Please don't go." I told him I needed to go back home to preach at Wooddale Church. My father was a pastor and I expected him to understand that, but he said it again: "Please don't go." I put my arms around him and hugged him good-bye. As I did he whispered in my ear, "Please don't go." Those were the last words I heard and saw my father say to me before he died. The emotions of that moment will always be with me.

I wonder what the emotions were like on another good-bye day. It was Jesus' last day on earth. It was time for him to go home to heaven. If I'd been there I think I would have pleaded with him: "Jesus, please don't go. Please, Jesus, don't go."

His disciples had spent 3½ years with him. He was their Friend, Provider, Teacher, Counselor and Savior. How could they ever make it in this world if Jesus returned to heaven?

The story of Jesus' good-bye is reported in the New Testament book of Acts. Actually, it's the second volume in a two book set written by Luke, the first century historian/physician. The first volume is called the Gospel According to Luke. It's the story of Jesus from Christmas to Easter and it is the longest and most detailed of the four New Testament biographies of Jesus. It starts out like this:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning,

it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

It was common to address ancient Greek literature to a specific person, but we're not sure who Theophilus was. The name is a combination of two Greek words: "Theo" for "God" and "philus" for "lover"; so, Theophilus was either someone who was loved by God or was a lover of God. And that's us—you and me. We're lovers of God, so we could be called Theophilus, too.

Having finished his first volume Luke picks up pen and parchment to write volume two:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

There was no doubt that the once dead Jesus was literally, physically and supernaturally alive again.

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

The first line of Acts is really amazing. It tells us that the story of Jesus is more than from heaven to earth, from Christmas to Easter and from miracles to teaching. That was only the beginning. The Gospel of Luke reports what Jesus began to do and teach, so when the gospel ends Jesus is just getting started. Easter was really the end of the beginning. Jesus had lots more to say and do—more miracles to perform, more lives to transform, more of all he had started.

The story of Jesus is not limited to 33 years on an ancient strip of land along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It didn't end 2000 years ago. Jesus is still at work in our world. I find this to be breathtakingly exciting because this includes us. We couldn't be there when Jesus walked on water, healed the sick and raised the dead but we can experience the presence, power, teaching and ministry of Jesus right here in the 21st century. And that is Luke's theme throughout the rest of this second volume of the story of Jesus.

Luke the historian explains that Jesus stretched his farewell over 40 days. During those 40 days after Easter he hung out with his followers. He ate meals with them and talked to them. They could examine his hands and feet to see the scars of crucifixion. There was no doubt that the once dead Jesus was literally, physically and supernaturally alive again.

During the 40 days after Easter there was one topic that dominated Jesus' teaching: he *“spoke about the kingdom of God.”* This had been a central theme through the years of Jesus' teaching but his disciples still didn't get it. They thought “kingdom” referred to an earthly government with a border, capital city, army and laws—like the kingdom

of Israel or the United Kingdom of Ireland, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales or like the United States of America. But that wasn't what Jesus was teaching at all.

The Kingdom of God referred to the people of God living out the will of God here on earth. Jesus was calling his followers to a totally different way of living with love instead of hate, salvation instead of condemnation, forgiveness instead of revenge. Jesus was calling them to a kingdom of doing God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. One last time before saying good-bye Jesus was pushing hard for his followers to live as citizens of the kingdom of God not the kingdom of earth.

During one of their last meals together Jesus made a spectacular promise, although not a new one because he had brought this up before. He promised them the Holy Spirit. He said that he was going away but another would come.

We'll learn a lot more about the Holy Spirit as we study Acts in the coming weeks and months. We'll discover that the Holy Spirit is an absolutely distinct person but a whole lot like Jesus. We'll see that he is obviously God—as much God as Yahweh in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament—but distinct and different. We'll see how the Holy Spirit gives power, friendship, love, instruction and courage. And not just to them then but also to us now.

As we learn about the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts we will sometimes have difficulty distinguishing between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But, I think we understand that. I remember one time telling our children to “go and ask your mother” to which they responded that there was no point because we both always say the same thing. And so it is with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. They are distinct persons but they say the same things.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come. His disciples asked if that meant that the kingdom would be restored to Israel. They were certainly patriotic but terribly inappropriate. They could not get it that the kingdom was about divine lifestyle not human government.

Jesus graciously sidestepped the question by telling them that he didn't know God's timetable for the future of political Israel but he did know

that the Holy Spirit was coming very soon. It was all going to happen in just ten days.

Jesus taught that when the Holy Spirit comes he will give supernatural power to live out the Christian life. He will reside inside of Christians and he will guide, encourage, instruct and bless them. But they will also be given a job to do. They will become messengers of God to tell about Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the rest of the world.

Acts 1:8 is one of the most important statements made by Jesus Christ in the entire New Testament. Here we discover that we have responsibilities as well as privileges. We are called upon to be witnesses. Witnesses tell what they have personally experienced. Being a witness may be difficult and may come with a high price. The Greek word for “witness” is “martus” from which we get our English word “martyr”. The truth is that most of those who initially heard Jesus speak these words did become martyrs. It actually cost them their lives to do what Jesus called on them to do.

Christians are to be international in their relationships, no longer identified by citizenship in a specific nation but part of the family of God in the whole world. This is the blueprint, the strategy, for how Christians were to change the world for God. They were to move out in concentric circles—from their hometown to their province to neighbor nations to the whole globe. Acts 1:8 serves as an outline for the whole book of Acts as the gospel of Jesus Christ spreads out from Jerusalem to the rest of the world. And all of this would be possible because of the Holy Spirit. Not because of armies or laws or politics or money. The power of Christ’s cause would be spiritual and supernatural.

We’re going to have to wait in our study of Acts to see how all of this started to happen. It meant a ten day wait for them. There were 40 days from Easter until Acts 1 and another ten days before the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. Something else had to happen first and that was the departure of Jesus.

Jesus disappeared. It was so spectacular that there aren’t many details given. Apparently the dis-

ciples were standing around him and Jesus physically lifted up off ground, disappeared in a cloud and was gone. This was no protracted “Minnesota Good-bye”. Jesus just left and returned to heaven.

Jesus had done what he came to do. The Son of God became human. He lived an exemplary life. He taught and showed us how to live as citizens of his kingdom. He died to pay for our sin, rose from the dead to conquer death and now it was time to head for heaven.

Jesus could have just disappeared to heaven but he chose to make it public. His disciples needed to know that volume one of Jesus’ story was complete and now it was the beginning of a new volume.

Jesus was returning to headquarters where he could represent us to God. One of the amazing teachings of the New Testament is that Jesus is in heaven now talking to God the Father about us. I find it most heartening that today Jesus is talking to God the Father about each of us as individuals—about our needs, our heartaches, our opportunities, our decisions, our illnesses, our hopes. Jesus is also back in heaven building subdivisions for our future residences—he’s preparing places for us to live. And he is our commander in charge of his worldwide endeavor. He is the chief strategist for how the gospel is to be spread throughout

generations and through the whole world. On earth Jesus could be only one place at a time. Now the Spirit could be everywhere all the time. It was God’s very good plan.

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As Jesus’ disciples stood there dumbfounded, surprised and overwhelmed two angels appeared. Isn’t it interesting that angels appeared when Jesus was born in Bethlehem at Christmas and when Jesus rose from the dead in Jerusalem at Easter. Angels were often around during the critical junctures in Jesus’ story.

These angels said something amazing: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Jesus wasn't abandoning his followers. He was leaving them for a while with a job to do and he promised he would come back again. That promise has kept Christians going ever since.

Sir Ernest Shackleton was the great British explorer whose expedition at the beginning of the 20th century is one of history's most dramatic stories.

Shackleton's ship, the *Endurance*, became trapped in an icepack and was eventually crushed. He and his crew knew they had no hope of surviving where they were. So they took supplies, loaded them into wooden lifeboats and dragged the lifeboats over the ice and eventually to open water in the hope of escaping the horrors of extreme cold on the only unpopulated continent in the world.

Their hope was to somehow get back across the Drake Passage to South America but increasingly they realized that was impossible. So Shackleton decided to cannibalize two of the lifeboats and make them into a vessel that could go get help from a whaling station on South Georgia Island nearly 800 treacherous miles to the northeast. He took four men with him and left the other 22 members of his crew on desolate Elephant Island off the coast of the Antarctic Peninsula. No one else knew they were there. Their supplies were limited. The remaining lifeboat was their only protection from the elements. The weather was bitter cold with fierce winds. Their only hope for survival was that Shackleton and the others would make it to South Georgia Island and back.

They all called Shackleton "The Boss". He left his second-in-command, Frank Wild, in charge on Elephant Island. For 4½ winter months they waited. Every morning Wild would wake the men and speak the same words to them: "Get your things ready, boys. The Boss may return today!" Those 4½ months must have seemed like forever.

Then on August 30, 1916, a ship was sighted. Shackleton had returned. When he set foot on Elephant Island one of his men shouted, "Thank God, the Boss is safe." They were more concerned about the safety of Shackleton than about their own rescue.

As it was for those disciples then so it is for us Christians today. Jesus is our Boss. He has gone to heaven but he promised he will return for us. During the coldest days of waiting we keep saying, "Get your things ready. The Boss may return today!"

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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