

## Work While You Wait

### Acts 1:1-11 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering, he presented himself to them 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." <sup>6</sup> Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. <sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> "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 disciples had three years seeing Jesus, walking with him, listening to him. Then, on that one Friday, he dies. No Jesus walking with them to the Mount of Olives that night to pray. No listening to Scripture with Jesus in the synagogue that Saturday, the Sabbath. No Jesus as the sun rises on the first day of the week, Sunday...until a report comes from the women and also from two disciples who had been journeying to the nearby town of Emmaus. Jesus appears to them that night, but he's gone before the morning. No Jesus on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. No Jesus for a week until next Sunday when he appears again when Thomas is there. Will things go back to the way they were? Will Jesus stick around this time?

In the forty days following Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the disciples only got to see Jesus a handful of times. His post resurrection appearances were not some kind of road show tour; he used scattered, sparse, and intermittent appearances to continue to give convincing proofs that he had truly risen from the dead (often by eating a meal with them) and further instruction about the kingdom of God to the apostles he had chosen. 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." (verses 4-5)

The disciples heard this, and they got excited. They gathered around Jesus and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (verse 6) Many Jews had in their minds the idea that the Messiah was going to save them politically, rescue them from the cruel, iron fist of tyrants like the Romans, and was going to establish a government, a kingdom, that would rule on earth. In short, they expected the Messiah to usher in a time of heaven on earth.

Is that what we're waiting for? Are we waiting for the kingdom of God, heaven, to come to earth? Are we waiting for a God who will save us politically? Do we look to our government leaders as our saviors, that they will legislate and enact laws that will make our lives better, happier, more God-pleasing? Are we exercising our unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness this side of heaven, that I look to God to make me happy day in and day out? Are these the right pursuits? Do we pray to God, "Are you at this time finally going to give me happiness? Are you at this time finally going to give me a congressman, a representative, a president who will finally make my life better?" When we do this, we are coming to God like the apostles did asking if now, finally, Lord, you will make our lives better?

Jesus' answer: "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." (verses 7-8) Now is not the time to wait around, waiting for a political Messiah with an earthly palace and kingdom, to make your earthly life better. Don't worry about when God will rid the world of sin and will judge and condemn his enemies. Instead, you are going to be empowered by the Holy Spirit whom I send to you. You have work to do. You will be my witnesses. You are going to tell people about me, lead them to repentance and forgiveness of sins which come in my name. You'll start in Jerusalem. You'll go all over Judea and Samaria – yes, even to those people, the Samaritans, that you were raised to hate. In fact, you are going to go to the ends of the earth testifying about me and what I have done to save all people from their sin, from the devil, and from eternal death in hell. This is the kingdom of God that you will be working to grow, to add to. This is the work you will do. This is how my kingdom comes.

“After he said this, [Jesus] was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” (verse 9) The apostles stood there looking intently into the sky. Were they thinking that Jesus would return, that this was no different than when he went into the tomb for three days? He still came to be with them. He still taught them. So, is he really gone? Won't he come back? How many of the apostles were trembling with the words “Don't go,” stretching out their hands to hold on to Jesus just a little longer? He said to them only days ago that he would be with them always to the very end of the age. What is going on here? Is he actually leaving them?

We have the same promise from Jesus that he will never leave us nor forsake us, that he will be with us always to the very end of the age. Do we feel, though, like Jesus leaves us? This happens mostly when our expectations are contrary to our reality. Maybe as we think that God should take away our pain, give us happiness, give us government leaders who will solve all our problems, and these things don't happen, we feel abandoned by God. When we think that God should make our lives easier but everything only gets harder, we wonder if he is really there, if he actually answers prayers or if that is just some story that people tell little kids. We stand still in life, looking up, pondering these things, like the disciples who stood there looking intently into the sky.

Then suddenly, two men in white, angels, stood beside the apostles and break them from their wondering. “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.” (verse 11) Why are you just standing there? What are you waiting for? Don't worry about Jesus. He's coming back. You, though, have work to do, the growing of his kingdom as the Holy Spirit works through you.

This scene is reminiscent of what happens in the fall when Mommy turns to leave little Johnny at preschool for the very first time. Little Johnny stares in disbelief as Mom leaves. Tears start to form, followed by cries of sadness. The teacher consoles little Johnny saying, “Mom will come back. But right now, we have work to do,” and leads him to the activity table.

Forty days after rising from the dead, Jesus ascended back to heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Before he left, he told his apostles that they had work to do. They were going to be his witnesses in their area, in the neighboring areas, and to the ends of the earth to build his kingdom. He gave his apostles work to do while they waited for him to return. They would only have to wait 10 more days before the Holy Spirit came upon them with power on the Day of Pentecost to carry out this work - witnessing to Jesus' life, works, death, resurrection for the forgiveness of all our sins.

That work of being Jesus' witnesses continues today. We have the same mission to bring the good news about Jesus and his forgiveness for all people to the ends of the earth. We have that message that proclaims Jesus as our perfect substitute, the one who paid the price to eliminate our sins from us forever. He has given to us the same Holy Spirit that he gave to his apostles after he ascended into heaven. It is that same Holy Spirit who is working here today through his Word. It is that same Holy Spirit who has worked in me and you to believe in this Jesus and everything that he has done to forgive us and has made us perfect. That same Holy Spirit works through us as we witness to Jesus while we wait for his return.

But it's not as if Jesus is just chilling up in heaven, feet kicked back sipping a Mai Tai waiting for that opportune moment to return. Jesus' ascension into heaven was not the end of his work. As we heard in our Revelation reading, he now rules with an iron scepter over the world and the whole universe as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. With justice he judges and wages war against any force that tries to keep us away from him. With his power, he moves heaven and earth so that we would belong to him and his victorious kingdom. Jesus governs over every little detail here on earth so that more people can know him and know his perfect life lived for them and his innocent death suffered for them so that they are forgiven of all sins. He also moves heaven and earth so that we have the opportunity to serve as his witnesses to the ends of the earth to accomplish this purpose. This is what it means that Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the Father, a position of power, a position of ruling.

On top of that, Jesus is also doing everything else he promised for us. He is preparing a place for us in heaven right now for that time when he will come back to take us to be with him forever in heaven. At the same time, he is with us always to the very end of the age. We don't see him, but that's his promise. He has always kept his Word, even if we don't feel like he does or feel his presence.

This is what our Ascended Lord does. He did not ascend into heaven promising a happier, easier life. Instead, he promised that he would rule all things for our good by sitting at the right hand of God the Father, that he would use all things to bring us closer to him, that nothing would ever be able to separate us from his love for us, his sacrifice for us, his forgiveness for us, that he would make us his witnesses all over the world. And he promised he would be with us always to the very end of the age. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. In the meantime, while we wait for our Ascended Lord to return, we have work to do. God bless you as you serve as his witnesses to the ends of the earth as his kingdom comes. Amen.