

“THE JERUSALEM PROJECT”

(Acts 1:3-11)

11.24.19

INTRODUCTION

I had plans to do one more of our “big questions” before we moved into the holiday season, but God had other ideas — and I am really excited about what He has led me to share today. And our starting point for all this is not, as you might think, at the beginning of Christ’s earthly life, but rather at the end of it so, if you got your Bibles or testaments, head on over to the first chapter of the book of Acts, the fifth book in the NT. Now next week we’ll be starting our Christmas messages as we head into that special time. And after the first of the year, we will be returning to our “big questions,” of which we still have some great ones to look at. But today is also going to be great; we are going to begin a couple of new initiatives, based on one singular focus, that should resonate with and actually add to the “reason for the season” that we are shortly celebrating. So, let’s begin with a moment of prayer.

TEXT

After His suffering, [Jesus] presented Himself to [the apostles] 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.” Then they gathered around Him and asked Him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to 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.” 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” — Acts 1:3-11.

ANALYSIS

One of my favorite verses is one that, though attributed to Jesus, is actually given to us by the apostle Paul, who in Acts 20 shares these words from Christ: ***“It is more blessed to give than to receive”*** — ***Jesus Christ, quoted by Paul, Acts 20:35b***. And many of us totally get that. How many times haven’t we watched a loved one begin to open a present we prepared for them? I know for myself, watching my wife or kids open the presents I’m giving to them is still the highlight of Christmas for me. Even now as my girls are grown, I still enjoy watching them open whatever gift it is and look for the smile on their faces. Of course, I get a good rewind of the little kid experience with my granddaughters.

One of the things I have enjoyed the most since I have come to Redwood Falls is simply being a part of this church family. You all have been one of the greatest gifts God has ever given me. I am daily thankful for each and every one of you. And that joy got me thinking, especially at this time of year, about gifts and giving and all that stuff. And slowly over time, God started connecting some dots for me.

God of course is the greatest gift-giver of all time. He has given us all life itself in the person of Jesus Christ, His very own Son, and then crowned that amazing gift with the promise of heaven with Him for all eternity. What could be better than that? But God has given some other amazing gifts as well. One of them is us, all of us, this body of believers. This church body, everyone here, is a gift — a personal love gift, so tenderly put together by God Himself. I love how the New American Standard translates Paul’s words in Colossians 2, that we as a church body have ***been knit together in love — Paul, Colossians 2:2a (NASB)***. That’s what God has done, and continues to do, with us. He has and is putting us together in love — His love. That includes everybody, and it’s for everybody. We have all been blessed by this gift. And we have been blessed to be a blessing; what God has given to us is in turn to be given to those around us. That’s what Paul meant when he said what Connor and Dan read just a few minutes ago: ***You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion — Paul, II Corinthians 9:11a***. There it is: blessed to be a blessing!

So, let’s look again at our passage from Acts 1. Jesus is just about to physically leave this world to return to His Father. But as He had said during the Last Supper: ***“I will not leave you as orphans” — Jesus Christ, John 14:18a***. And that is what Jesus was talking about in these final moments when He told His disciples: ***“You will receive . . . the gift My Father promised.”*** There’s a gift coming — coming to you and for you. And what would that gift entail? Two things:

- 1) You will receive power — the Holy Spirit. Why? Because . . .
- 2) You will receive mission — ***“you will be my witnesses.”***

Wow! We will be given the opportunity to work for Christ’s kingdom, and we will be given the power to succeed in that opportunity. And then we are given one more thing: job location. If I’m going to be given a job, it’s nice to know where that job is going to be. And Jesus told them: Initially, their job will be ***“in Jerusalem”*** — in other words, their job would start right where they were.

So, now let’s tie that back into the Scripture that Connor and Dan read, from II Corinthians 9. When we do ministry, when we are being Christ’s witnesses, not only are we ***supplying the needs of the Lord’s people***, as Paul described it, but we are also giving testimony to our lives in Christ; as he said, ***others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, [underscored by] your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else***. And we, in turn, will receive the double blessings of both being recipients of ***their prayers for you AND their hearts [going] out to you*** — all because the testimony of your service will be reflecting ***the surpassing grace God has given you***. As Solomon made note of: ***A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed — Proverbs 11:25***. Not a bad way to make a living, huh?

APPLICATION

OK; so, what’s this all look like? Well, hopefully it will look like what we are going to call “The Jerusalem Project,” from that idea that ministry starts where you are — in this case, with our church family right here. Everyone should have three (3) inserts in your bulletin. Take them out while I begin to introduce what the “Jerusalem Project” is all about:

- 1) The first one is the pink sheet in your bulletin and is called a “Church Family Process: The Jerusalem Project.” This sheet may look familiar; we’ve done something like this a few times before. This is a 30-day program of meditation and prayer on 10 texts; the texts themselves are on various aspects of giving and sharing our gifts. By the time the 30 days

is ended, every one of these texts should have been studied three (3) times. Instructions for how to specifically do this meditation is on the sheet.

- 2) The second one is a soft-green sheet called “The Jerusalem Project Ministry Volunteer Sheet,” and is simply a sheet by which you and your family members can volunteer your talents and gifts to our body. This is open to all ages. You’ll have room to detail what it is specifically that you would like to share, and how often you might be available. This is something I want you to take home and talk over with your family. How has God gifted you? What are your passions? What are your talents and abilities? What are some things that you can do that you would be willing to share with us? Now it certainly may be things like helping out with worship music — playing an instrument or singing. But there are a whole bunch of other things going on around here besides music. That’s where I’m really excited to hear your ideas. I am especially looking forward to how we can plug our youth into things. We already have a number of them doing Scripture reading. But maybe somebody is interested in helping with sound. Maybe somebody would like to help with ushering or greeting. Or maybe you have another idea. The biggest point is that God has given us EVERYBODY who is here. Therefore, we want to connect EVERYBODY to an opportunity for service if at all possible. Now, just so this is understood: I am NOT, repeat not, trying to take over any ministries or cancelling any committees or responsibilities or anything like that. Where God is leading me, where He has impressed my heart, is to allow an opportunity for the body — that would be us — to minister to the body — that would be us. And I can tell you from personal experience: Some of the greatest joy I have known in the Christian life has simply been from being involved, from participating in something. I want to make sure that anybody who wants to do that will have an opportunity. And let me know if you have an idea that maybe has never been tried before. One of the gifts God has graced me with is creativity. In other words, if you want to offer something, we will figure out a way to make it work. For instance, maybe we discover a whole bunch of kids who would like to sing. So maybe all of a sudden, we’re looking at the possibility of having a youth singing group, and we just might then need a leader. How cool would that be? Or maybe somebody is into poetry, or maybe somebody would love to share a devotional they recently read that absolutely knocked their socks off. Why not? This is all about presenting the name and the wonder and the glory of Jesus Christ to the world — including to everybody right here.
- 3) And now, for the third sheet. This is the powder-blue half sheet that is called “The Jerusalem Project Prayer Net.” What is a prayer net? It is simply a sheet for each family unit name in our church body (so this works whether you’re single or married with eleven kids or whatever). These will be our prayer sheets, and this is how they will work:
 - a) Write in your family name and below that each individual family member’s name. If you want to include grandkids or anybody else that you consider a part of your family, by all means, do that.
 - b) Before you leave today, place the sheet in the receptacle up front. We’ll be keeping this tub in the church office between Sundays.
 - c) The Sunday before Christmas (December 22), we will take time in the service to distribute these sheets.
 - i) Each family unit will come up to take a sheet with another family name.
 - ii) Connect with that family and ask how you can pray for them.

- iii) That will be your family for the year (2020).
- iv) At the same time, another family will be asking the same thing of your family.
- v) Periodically, over the course of the year, reconnect with the family in your “prayer net” (the family whose name you drew) to update their prayer needs or praises or whatever. This is also a chance to simply get to know each other better, have fellowship with each other, building relationships with each other. This is a great opportunity for the body to minister to each other. Now this certainly doesn’t keep you from praying for anybody or everybody else, but the idea is to make sure that that one family is always a special focus of your family’s prayers.

What’s the point of all this? We are a family. Ideally, there are a couple of things that family does:

- 1) One of them: Unconditional love. That means coming alongside people to share the high moments and to help carry them through the low moments. Christ didn’t come here to judge; we aren’t here to judge. We are here to minister to each other WITH LOVE. We are here to come alongside each other regardless of the circumstances. We minister to each other regardless of the circumstances because that’s what Jesus did. And remember all the “one-another” Bible verses we shared a while back? You know: “Love one another, honor one another, forgive one another, encourage one another” — all those? Those aren’t suggestions; those are commands. The Holy Spirit gave us those commands to guide us into what loving each other truly looks like — and to remind each other that the church was not created for the sake of committees or boards or appearances. Paul said it best, in his letter to the Galatians: ***The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love — Paul, Galatians 5:6b.*** Did you hear that? The ONLY thing that matters. You see, the church was created to be a faith where faith could learn to express itself through love. The church was created to give Christians a place where they could learn to love each other like Jesus did — all while in the process of presenting the gospel to the world. The gospel is validated when the world sees the church reflecting Jesus. “Wow, Jesus really does change people, doesn’t He?”
- 2) Another one: Doing things for each other. Helping each other out. That is also called ministry, and serving each other — whether it’s music or greeting or praying or ushering or kitchen help or cleaning help or whatever — is all a part of what it means to be family. Ministry often creates a whole lot of things that need doing. Why not give as many people as possible the chance to help?

Now, regarding this “prayer net,” might you draw somebody’s family name that you hardly know? Very possible. Might you draw a name that maybe makes you feel a bit uncomfortable? Very possible. But feelings cannot be what dictates ministry. God directs ministry. That’s why we’re doing this. What we are aiming for, our goal in all this, is to continue to grow into being an authentic church, an authentic, transparent, warts-and-all collection of Christians that are sold out to the idea of displaying Jesus Christ to everybody here and everybody we meet. We are sold out to the idea that we are not perfect people — we are not even close. But it is in that imperfection that we welcome each other and come together because we are ALL united in our imperfection. We’ve all messed up; we’ve all failed.

But one day, 2,000 years ago, God revealed an amazing grace in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered His life as a substitute for ALL of us. He offered His perfect life for our

imperfect lives — a swap of unbelievable love and forgiveness — that would allow us to be seen by God Himself as though we were as perfect as His Son. And then, He deposited His Holy Spirit in us, to guide us, to continue to mold us into the image of His Son. And then, on top of all that, He gave us His Son’s body on earth: the church — US! That’s why we’re doing this.

It is also to remind us that we have an enemy: Satan. The apostle Peter, who knew a thing or two about Satan, said this about our enemy: ***Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour — I Peter 5:8.*** In other words, Satan is a predator, aggressively looking to attack, literally looking to eat people alive. But we have these verses from Christ and Paul to remind us of what we have been given in Christ, and how deeply we can rest in Him:

- 1) ***“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of My Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” — Jesus Christ, John 10:28-30.***
- 2) ***Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come — Paul, II Corinthians 1:21-22.***
- 3) ***[Y]ou also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of His glory — Paul, Ephesians 1:13-14.***

Sounds pretty secure, doesn’t it? So, if those verses are true, and we are that secure in the power of God the Father through God the Son, then what does Satan have left to do? Just one thing: Lies. Never forget how Christ described him: ***“He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” — Jesus Christ, John 8:44b.*** Satan can throw lies at us; that’s all he can do.

So, what are some of his lies? Some of these may sound familiar:

- I’m not good enough.
- Nobody wants to hear or see what I want to do.
- This isn’t going to make any difference to anybody.
- I’m sure somebody else can do this so much better than me.
- I’ve never done this before.
- What if I make a mistake?
- What if people laugh at me?

But the family of Christ doesn’t operate in lies. And the family of Christ doesn’t operate in fear. We operate in power — the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ promised, the accompaniment of His presence that He promised, and the reassurance of His love, which He promised. As Paul so strongly conveyed to his pastor friend Timothy: ***[T]he Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power — Paul, II Timothy 1:7a.***

CONCLUSION

The overall goals?

- 1) That we look past our comfort zones to the glory that will come to Jesus Christ by way of our claiming all He has to offer in our relationships with each other.

- 2) That we claim ministry as a family experience, as a “whole” family experience, where everybody has a chance to minister to everybody else.
- 3) That we support each other with the same intentionality that Christ showed when He purposely left heaven to live and eat and sleep and dwell on planet earth just like the rest of us. He did all this to show the love of the Father for His creation — not to judge them but to present a life that could save them.
- 4) That we are obedient. Christianity is not measured by ability or intellect. Christianity is measured by the obedience created by a surrendered heart.
- 5) That we understand what the angel Gabriel told Mary, and what Jesus told His disciples: **“[W]ith God nothing shall be impossible” — Gabriel, Luke 1:37 (KJV)**. Faith is nothing more than stepping out in the belief that God makes all things possible, that wherever He directs us, He’s already there to guide us.

Now if somebody has concerns about any of this, please don’t confine yourselves to only talking to each other. Talk to me. Tell me what’s on your mind. Tell me your concerns. Let’s come alongside each other to work through whatever is weighing on your heart. That’s a huge way that you can minister to me, and me to you.

Might there be some bumps in all this? Probably. Might there be some mistakes? Probably. Embarrassment? Probably. But look what gets exercised and grown in the process: honor and glory to God through growing love in the body, honor and glory to God growing through the use of our gifts (and the support for that use), honor and glory to God through growing ministry experience that can be used over and over again, honor and glory to God through dependence on Him to bring us through whatever experiences may be difficult, and honor and glory to God seeing God at work in our church family, in our individual families, and in our individual lives.

Honor and glory to God is what we’re about here — because honor and glory to God is what sparks true and honest ministry, which sparks authentic lives in Christ being seen, which sparks people outside the family taking notice, and asking questions, and needing answers. People all around us need the Lord, and that’s the ultimate reason why God has brought us all uniquely together, at this unique point in time — to create impact for his kingdom in this time and this place. That is what matters most; in fact, that’s all that matters. It’s all about God. Let’s pray!