

## **The Breath of God | *Keeping in Step with the Life-giving Spirit***

*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5.25)*

"The Ascension"

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*The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. 3 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. 4 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; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."*

*6 So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 8 but you will 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." 9 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. 10 And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. 11 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."*

*12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.*

Last week we began to look at the Holy Spirit. If you weren't with us I hope you'll listen to the teaching from last week... it sets the pace for what's coming.

In some sense this series is the bridge between two major Christian holy days – Easter and Pentecost. Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and Pentecost (the third great *celebration* on the Church calendar) commemorates the day when God's Spirit reverses direction and moves OUT to Jews and Gentiles alike. He begins to breathe new life into all nations... It's a moment that changed history... Without the day of Pentecost, Christianity would be a Jewish sect...and BECAUSE of that miracle there are over two billion professing Christians in the world.

This is the opening of, "Luke volume 2", the earliest history of the New Testament Church. It's been called a "theological history" because it teaches as it records...it instructs future generations of Christians in what to expect and in what the Church IS and what it's supposed to be and do.

And right at the start... this tiny group of disciples is labeled. That is, Jesus Christ gives them a kind of working title, "You will be My witnesses." This is WHO they ARE and what they WILL DO...the irreducible identity of the Church. It's not "you must be My witness" but "you will be."

Witnesses... Christians are witnesses? How do you feel about that identity and that task? Witnesses tell people what they've seen and heard...They tell a story...and Christians are witnesses? So why are we nervous about that? Why are Christians uneasy about telling a story and asking people to believe it? Why are Christians hesitant about doing it?

1) Why people are nervous about WITNESS? 2) How did it change for the early church? 3) Steps to take

Well, one reason people are uneasy about discussing their beliefs with others is that our society has some odd ideas about privacy. I remember a discussion on cultural differences in grad school class and a Sudanese friend was just shaking his head. He said, "I can't understand North Americans – they get insulted if you ask their weight... but when I watch your TV shows, they bring the camera right into the bedroom and no one bats an eye."

So... somehow we got into a place, culturally where it's not ok to talk about beliefs...it's private...and that's part of the equation here in South Florida.

Perhaps, though, one reason for this privacy is that people have spoken about beliefs in a way that is often perceived as domineering. And indeed, this was one of the arguments of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century atheistic philosophers (like Marx or Nietzsche) – beliefs are most often used to control others. And you don't have to be a Marxist to see that this charge is often true.

People will espouse beliefs in order to include or exclude people. So, witness or telling others what to believe can be a power-grab, can be judgmental (AS if I am better than you because I believe this...and you are inferior because you believe that.)

Sometimes proselytizing has been used to increase the size of the tribe so we can be a bigger block with more influence...Sometimes it has been like head-hunting...or like salesmanship... or marketing or even trickery. Jesus Christ Himself lambasted the clergy of His day, "You cross land and sea to make one convert and then you make him twice the son of hell that you are!"(Matthew 23.15)

Of course...one important fact to note is that all these excesses and aberrations can be said of any belief system that seeks to convince other people...Atheism can be evangelistic or zealous to make converts...So...why not just stop this kind of thing all together...You believe what you want and I'll believe what I want...and we'll just leave each other alone...

But... I don't do that with restaurants...or with movies or music...or my mechanic. I've told a lot of people about my mechanic just because I'm happy with the work he does and I want others to benefit from it... In other words, we always praise or recommend to others what we value or appreciate. It's why C.S. Lewis said,

"The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars." (end quote)

We can't help it! I like what Penn Gillette said,(he's the big guy in the comedy and magic team of Penn and Teller AND an outspoken atheist), he said that as much as he despises Christianity and any organized religion, he has no respect for anyone who holds to Christianity and does NOT try to convert others to it! He says it doesn't make any sense at all. If you like a mechanic and see someone spending money on what you believe is an inferior mechanic... don't you have almost a responsibility to tell about your mechanic (to give a witness)?

So...what if you really believe Christianity is true...Does that make it easy to "witness"? Does that take the nerves away and make it easy? Well...there are still some obstacles...even if you can get past the wrong motives...and simply want to commend what's true and beautiful and beneficial.

For instance, you're still asking people, "How bout it?" You're looking for a response. You're not just telling a sweet story but one that calls for a decision. And that's never easy...it risks rejection and even opposition. People have to admit they're wrong to become Christians...have to admit that we've offended God and need forgiveness. And it's dicey to go there with people.

And we ALL resist that... it's really hard to face our need and our "badness".

And the witness (the Greek word is "marturia" – like martyr) the witness may know the words of Jesus, "If they hated Me, they will also hate YOU!" (John 15.18) So that even if you are totally spot on in your motives... you're no better than Jesus Christ and He was hated... No wonder we're nervous!

And no wonder THEY were nervous, those cowering disciples. Even though they had seen Him repeatedly and unmistakably risen from the dead, they had NO DOUBT that He was alive and resurrected (v. 3 "many convincing proofs" that could not be denied) and that meant everything He taught was vindicated and true...But they'd also seen what happened to Him and now they were sort of taking over...taking the baton and called to be witnesses...MARTURIA! They were taking on a world that was very hostile to this message...an Empire that said, "Caesar is Lord!"

Like us they must have felt, "how will I answer objections?... what if I'm not natural or sincere or authentic enough?... I know there are areas of hypocrisy in my life...what if I'm rejected?... am I just a religious salesman?...I'M NERVOUS"

Well...what happened to change things for them and can it happen for us?...AND IF IT DOES HAPPEN to us, what exactly will change and what can we expect as we take up this identity of "witness"? Let me point to two missing ingredients: 1) Ascension 2) The Spirit.

The Ascension is what happened to the Body of Jesus. It cannot be found in a grave because it's not there...and it's not on earth at all. It's a physical body but also somehow "trans-physical". He could eat food and could somehow pass through locked doors. He could stand among them but also ascend into another realm...called heaven.

The first part of the story culminates here – "all that Jesus began to do and teach" ends here. Death is ended (as our choir sang on Easter) and the Kingdom of Life has begun to dawn. Jesus was "speaking of the things concerning the Kingdom of God" and they were to tell these things to the world: the obedient life of a sinless Human Being has been lived, a Man completely governed by God, showed what the rule of God looks like. He lived this way in my place. I am credited with His obedience! And the penalty for sin fell on this Man, the God-Man, Jesus Christ. And when He paid for all the sins of all God's people, He then defeated death. Death could not hold Him. Life and light has triumphed and this is what the Kingdom of God looks like...this is the message.

And now the New and Better Adam...who reclaimed dominion over a fallen creation...NOW that creation is under the feet of Humanity...He is the King that Adam was meant to be and He rises in the cloud of glory that was seen so many times in the Old Testament.

(Psalm 2.8) "I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession." (Psalm 110.1)"The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'"

When the disciples saw this they knew that THIS IS THE WORLD'S MESSIAH – Caesar is not Lord! Jesus Christ is Lord...and all creation is under His feet. In Him our humanity has ascended into the very presence of God.

They asked Him, "Lord is it at this time that you are going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?" and the answer is... "Yes! Israel's Messiah is Lord of the World and I am sending you out to announce it!"

And the second missing ingredient: they were NOT going to get this cool time-line of when it would all wrap up but they ARE going to get THE HOLY SPIRIT AND POWER. He will be the internal impulse to make them witnesses.

It's not up to us to MAKE OURSELVES witnesses... the Holy Spirit somehow comes mysteriously but actually INTO the life of the Christian and the Great Commission becomes like a spiritual law of life.

In the first Creation God said, "Be fruitful and multiply"... but those words didn't make Adam attracted to his wife (or vice versa)...It was the LAW OF THEIR BIOLOGICAL LIFE... God made man and woman to be attracted to each other... "Be fruitful and multiply" didn't create the drive...it just articulated it.

And in the same way, spiritually, the commission to go make disciples...to multiply spiritually... only articulates the Law of our spiritual life. The Holy Spirit whose direction is OUTWARD...when He enters a life He brings this impulse...like the biological drive to multiply or reproduce...Like salmon have a drive to spawn, so people indwelt by the Spirit have an impulse to tell...He carries with Him the law of life ...

Now...if you're feeling sort of sheepish about now and wondering, "Hmmm...I never witness...does the Spirit not live in me? If so where's this drive, this impulse to spiritually reproduce?" Well, let me say, IT'S NOT AUTOMATIC. You won't become a robot or a puppet on God's hand. And still Paul would face his own cowardice and inadequacies for the task (Eph. 6.19; 2 Cor2.16, 3.5-6). And, there are gifts and temperaments that differ within the church. All are called to tell...to witness...and all who have the Spirit have His heart...His drive and direction, OUTWARD.

But not all are evangelists or preachers...I get that. And just as it's possible to suppress or stifle certain physical drives OR on the other hand to refine or improve them...in the same way, it's possible to be "out of step with the Spirit" or "IN step with Him".

So...what's a Christian to do? How to get in STEP with the Spirit's drive and direction?

Here are a few practical steps you can take:

1) The more you focus on and learn and prayerfully appropriate the message, "the things concerning the Kingdom of God"...and the more you actually believe it – the more the Spirit's impulse will move you to witness. It's become more natural and organic and sincere. When you really see how messed up you are in selfishness and sin AND how wildly loved you are by the God who would rather die than lose you...that makes you want to tell people.

Just like when you are really satisfied at a restaurant or an art gallery...when you experience a pleasure ...you want to share it with others. Witness is really just boasting in God. And when you feel loved by Him...you want to share it.

2. We may not all be evangelists...in the sense of planting churches and winning great numbers to faith in Jesus Christ...BUT WE ARE ALL CALLED to the mission of the Church. We're called to be interested and devoted ("they were with ONE MIND... continually devoted to prayer") interested, devoted to seeing Jesus Christ known worldwide. That means getting informed about God's mission in different parts of the world and His people (missionaries). It means giving sacrificially, praying... Seeing that Jesus Christ, crowned with the praises of every tribe, tongue and nation IS the destiny toward which the Spirit is moving the world. This is part of what it means to keep in step with the Spirit.

Lastly, again...there is a pervasive sense of expectation in this opening chapter of Acts. It would good if we as a congregation picked up on it and as we walk toward Pentecost we pray together for the coming of the Spirit. We can hope for and pray for fresh wind and a renewed impulse of the Spirit's desire.

We can ask for a personal openness to new things...things of the Kingdom to be more vivid and lovely in our eyes.