

# “Empowered to Witness”

*John 20:17:1-26 & Acts 1:1-11*

Pastor James York

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**Prayer for Understanding** Your ways are wonderful, O God. The unfolding of your words gives light. As we turn to your Word read and proclaimed, let that light radiate into even the darkest shadows. Make your face to shine upon us, and teach us, your servants. We long for your good news. Amen.

Luke wrote the early church history in the Acts. **Acts 1-11 NLT** “In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach until the day Jesus was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit. During the forty days after Jesus suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And Jesus talked to them about the Kingdom of God. Once when Jesus was eating with them, he commanded them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until God sends you the gift God promised, as I told you before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, “Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?” Jesus replied, “God alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” After saying this, Jesus was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see Jesus. As they strained to see Jesus rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. “People of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday Jesus will return from heaven in the same way you saw Jesus go!”

Jesus explained to the disciples how sadness will be transformed to joy and then offered them peace. Next, the gospel of John records Jesus’ prayer. **John 17:1-26 NLT** “After saying all these things, Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “God, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you. For you have given him authority over everyone. He gives eternal life to each one you have given him. And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth. I brought glory to you here on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. Now, God, bring me into the glory we shared before the world began. “I have revealed you to the ones you gave me from this world. They were always yours. You gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything I have is a gift from you, for I have passed on to them the message you gave me. They accepted it and know that I came from you, and they believe you sent me. “My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you. All who are mine belong to you, and you have given them to me, so they bring me glory. Now I am departing from the world; they are staying in this world, but I am coming to you. Holy God, you have given me your name; now protect them by the power of your name so that they will be united just as we are. During my time here, I protected them by the power of the name you gave me. I guarded them so that not one was lost, except the one headed for destruction, as the Scriptures foretold. “Now I am coming to you. I told them many things while I was with them in this world so they would be filled with my joy. I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I’m not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the tempter. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth. “I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, God, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. “I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me. God, I want these whom you have given me to be with me where I am. Then they can see all the glory you gave me because you loved me even before the world began! “O righteous God, the world doesn’t know you, but I do; and these disciples know you sent me. I have revealed you to them, and I will continue to do so. Then your love for me will be in them, and I will be in them.”

Jesus prayed, God as you sent me into the world, so I am sending them, the disciples, you and me, into the world.

Growing up on the farm my dad showed and taught me how to be a farmer. One of the more difficult tasks was planting corn. In corn planting, it is important that your rows are straight and properly spaced otherwise at harvest the corns gets knocked down and wasted. Usually when you plant corn, you follow a mark left in the soil by a disc marker. The disc markers were broken on our international cyclo air planter and too expensive to repair, so we attached a board to each side of the planter and hung a chain that should always hover over the planter track of the previous trip. This required great skill from the driver. You had to be able to perceive the proper spacing from the previous trip being accurate within a few inches. You did this by fixing your eye on some landmark on the horizon to keep you going straight while at the same time using your peripheral vision to keep you spaced a set distance from the previous trip. Then, you looked over your shoulder at the chain to see if you were indeed properly spaced. If not you made subtle movements to achieve the proper spacing. This required finesse as the chain was ten feet behind you, so it took awhile for your driving to be reflected through the chain. It was easy to overcompensate and soon you would have squiggly rows that would be impossible to harvest without waste. At the same time, you had to constantly check the air pressure on a small dial on the planter directly behind you. Small changes in air pressure indicated a problem with the machine. Glance at all six disc planters to make sure they are not clogged, that they are properly preparing and packing the seed bed. Look at the fertilizer mechanism to make sure it is metering out the fertilizer and finally check a little metal bar that stuck up at the back of the planter. If everything was working properly, it would precisely tic about an inch back and forth every second. Of course, you also had to keep an eye on corn and fertilizer levels, tractor gauges and maneuver around occasional obstacles. Add in dust, bugs, sunshine, or poor lighting by night. To get the crops in you would be planting corn every waking moment until it rained, often going on only 4 hours of sleep. Someone would occasionally leave a sandwich and a jug of water at the end of the field.

All of that was the easy part of planting corn. The tricky part was turning at the ends of the field. You could not slow down because if you did, then the air pressure would drop and the planter would plug. As you crossed the corn row at the end of the field, you hit the hydraulics raising the planter, turned the wheel, and pushed either the left or right side brake to assist in the turn. Too much brake and you would turn so sharp your wheel would catch the drawbar and snap the hitch and the rest of your day would be spent welding and repairing the hitch. Not enough brake and your turn would not be sharp enough and you would have a wasteful gap between the corn rows and develop a bow in your rows. As you were coming around you quickly checked to make sure the planter was planting properly. There should be three corn seeds on each of the six rows where the planter was raised out of the ground. Just before you crossed the last end corn row you hit the hydraulics and lowered the planter back into the ground.

I learned all of this and much more from my dad. As a baby I rode in a car seat bolted in the tractor cab. As I grew, I sat on my Dad's lap and steered. Year by year I did more of the planting with my dad. He modeled, taught, and empowered me to be a corn planter, farmer, and the person I am today. One day, I brought him a sandwich and he said you are ready to plant corn and he left.

Jesus spent three years modeling, teaching, and empowering the disciples. Forty days after Jesus' glorious resurrection, Jesus said you are ready to be my witnesses and left.

The disciples were hoping that Jesus would fix the world making their life easier instead Jesus empowered the disciples to make the world more loving. Jesus was sent by God. Jesus sent the disciples and now God is empowering us to witness. We are to receive God's love, joy, hope, peace, and grace and pass them on. We are to know Christ and show Christ. We are blessed to be a blessing.

On the day of Jesus' ascension the disciples asked, "Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Now can everything be the way it's supposed to be. Please fix the world making earth like heaven. Jesus gives an answer that neither they, nor we, particularly like. "It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by God's own authority." We don't really like not knowing, not being in control, do we? We pray and many of our prayers are answered with "yes," others receive a "wait" or "no." Most of us want definite answers so we can make safe choices. Our faith then is in ourselves, in our knowing and control, rather than in God. Faith involves trusting through the "not knowing," being at peace through the uncertainty, loving through the "already and not yet."

The disciples were praying good prayers that seemed to be biblically based. Restore the Kingdom of Israel, the Davidic kingdom, protect the Temple, stop the Roman oppression and cultural strife. They were praying for themselves, for safety from persecution. The image of Jesus' crucifixion just 40 days ago was still fresh in their minds. They were praying for those around them for the sick, hungry, outcast, and the lost. They remember how Jesus healed and helped so many in their three years together. The disciples are standing with the resurrected Jesus. They are certain that God has conquered death with eternal life and realize that God can heal and solve all the worlds' problems, suffering, violence, and misery. They ask Jesus, "Is this the time when you will bring heaven to earth?" Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know God's timing and plan."

Today we are in a similar place. We want our prayers answered with “yeses.” God relieve us of fatigue, fear, and anxiety about the future. Financially bless us so we can make it through the recession. Give us and others good health. We, like the disciples, live in uncertain times, terrorism, war, natural disasters, governmental failings, inflation, gun violence, environmental crisis. Graduations are just around the corner. What is the future for our graduates? How will life be different for empty nesters? We have so many needs, aches, and pains. We pray for Jesus to fix things. This sermon is a little early, Ascension Day is May 18. Perhaps Jesus is giving us the same answer as the disciples on Ascension Day. “It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set. But you will receive power from the Holy Spirit and be my witnesses.” God is redeeming the world by partnering with us. Jesus is not going to answer all our questions, or solve all our problems, this side of heaven but Jesus is empowering us with the Holy Spirit to be God’s witness. Jesus speaks of personal, inner transformation in us. Jesus is working to do something more glorious than temporal restoration of the world. Jesus is eager to empower us with all the blessings of the Holy Spirit which will radiate out drawing others into God’s kingdom.

This does not make much sense or provide much comfort when we are buried in troubles. It didn’t make much sense to the disciples either for after Jesus ascended to heaven they stood their perplexed looking up, waiting for Jesus to come back and fix things. Jesus didn’t lift the disciples out of the troubled world. Instead, Jesus sent them into the thick of the world and not for a short time, but for the rest of their lives. In the face of great and impending trouble and darkness, Jesus physically left them. But Jesus did not leave them without help for Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit which we will celebrate in three weeks on Pentecost. Jesus was not establishing an earthly kingdom rather a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of believers. Jesus was not going to protect the temple building in Jerusalem rather Jesus was making a spiritual temple for the Holy Spirit in every person’s soul. This is perplexing. Most of us like what we can see, touch, measure and explain, the physical world, stuff, our circumstances. Jesus was giving the intangible, the Holy Spirit, love, peace, joy, hope, eternal life.

The disciples stood there staring up. Jesus had to send two angels to prompt them to get going, to be witnesses. The order is critical. Sometimes we try to reverse the order, to witness before we have been empowered. To try and give without first receiving from the Holy Spirit. Some Christians start by forcing their personal beliefs on others, to control others, instead of starting with the most important commandment and modeling of Jesus; every action must be founded on love for all people. How good of a corn planter would I have been if I had not observed and learned from my father? Jesus said as I have been sent by God, so I am sending you. We are Christians which means followers of Christ. We are empowered with the Holy Spirit to live, love, rejoice, and serve like Jesus. The Ascension was not the final act of Jesus, rather it marked a new phase of God’s work transforming people through our Spirit filled witness. Jesus directs the disciples out. Start with receiving the power of the Holy Spirit yourself then witness to your family, your church, your community, and it will ripple out transforming the entire world. Throughout the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is consistently out in front of the disciples, directing Philip to a eunuch’s chariot, Peter to the table of Cornelius, Paul to Macedonia, Lydia to Paul’s preaching, deacons to heal, believers to worship and celebrate communion. Jesus’ ascension is not his retirement rather it is so Jesus can be everywhere, with us, ahead of us, preparing the way for us. Look around perceive what God is doing and join God in doing it.

Imitate Jesus, be empowered and learn from the Holy Spirit and witness. We are to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, to join with the Holy Spirit in continuing Jesus’ work. Jesus prayed not for God to take us out of the world, not to fix the world. Jesus prayed for God to empower and partner with us in the world. Just as God sent Jesus, so the Triune God sends us.

I really don’t like Jesus’ prayer asking God to send me like Jesus. This means we are to strive to love and serve like Jesus. Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane to have the suffering of the passion taken away from him. God said “no,” so Jesus could save us all. God is sending us, at times, to do hard, difficult work such as: Love all including our enemies. Forgive all including those we despise. Share everything. Serve all. Remain faithful through ordeals. At times we will suffer and struggle. God’s love is visible through the cross, where Jesus endured awful pain. Sometimes the way of love hurts. We like the disciples will likely cry out for God to fix things but the answer maybe. Be comforted by the Holy Spirit within you and be confident that God has empowered you with everything you need to fulfill your calling, for only God knows the why and how everything will work out beautiful in the end. Have hope for we are empowered to live in and overcome a troubled world with the love of the Holy Spirit within us. Amen