

## Changing the World (1)

I believe there's something inside all of us that makes us want to do something great. We want our lives to be used in some meaningful way. We want to do something of value. Whether we are conscious of this or not, I truly believe there's an ache in us to be part of something that changes the world for the better. It doesn't matter who you are - I don't believe you want to just live an average, purposeless life where you don't really do anything of value that echoes into eternity for good. In fact I think many of us actually want to be part of something extraordinary, part of something that literally changes the world for the better and I believe that desire is built into us as image-bearers of God. We are created in the image of God and our God is always wanting to change the world!

So I have some really good news for you today – for all those who are part of the Church, the family of God. When God saves us, He doesn't only bring us into relationship with Himself, He also brings us into relationship with the Church, with His body of believers on earth - His family. More than that, God has actually empowered His church to literally change the world. That's right – if we are part of the Church that Jesus promised to build - we are called and empowered to change the world.

Over the next four weeks we are going to explore God's plan to use His global Church by using unique individual local Churches like yours to change the world. Today we are going to look at the final interaction between Jesus and His disciples as recorded in Acts chapter one. The first part of this chapter is set after the death and resurrection of Jesus and just before He ascends to heaven.

After realising that Jesus had conquered sin and death and Satan, the Apostles are pumped up - they're ready to go. They are chomping at the bit to change the world. But they're still a little misguided. They're still a little confused. They are yet to understand how Jesus wants them to change the world.

So in Acts one we see where Jesus basically sets them straight in what will be His very last conversation with them before leaving earth as a man and ascending to heaven to sit at the right hand of God, the Father. That's right, this is His last conversation with them and it's one of the most important they have ever had with Jesus. Let's have a look at the very last words Jesus spoke to His disciples on earth:

**Acts 1:6** *“Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

Now to understand what the disciples are asking here, we have to understand some Jewish history. For thousands of years the Jewish people, the family of Abraham, had basically been victims of massive empires rising up in the world and coming in and taking over and cruelly oppressing the Jews.

We see that start all the way back in Exodus when Egypt, the world's superpower at that time, uses their power to enslave the Hebrew people and to cruelly oppress them for years and years. Then after the Egyptians, it's the Assyrian empire that rises up and comes to power. The Assyrians defeat Israel, and send many of the Israelites away from their home into exile. Then after the Assyrians we see the Babylonians rise to power and they do the same thing. They defeat Israel, take over and then carry the people away into exile and oppressively rule over them. That is the history of the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament.

But also throughout the Old Testament we encounter the prophets who over and over and over again promised that one day a special deliverer would come to their rescue – the One they call the Messiah. The prophets promised that when the Messiah came, He was going to defeat Israel's enemies; He was going to rescue them and He was going to set them free from oppression.

Okay, so fast forward now to the New Testament era when Jesus comes onto the scene. At this point in Israel's history it is the Romans who have become the world superpower and just like all the other oppressors before Rome; they come into Israel; they overtake them; they occupy the land; they begin levying heavy, unfair taxes on the people; they regulate how and when the people can worship and express their personal faith. So once again the people of God find themselves under the thumb of an evil empire. So Jesus enters that reality and begins to claim that He is in fact the long-awaited Messiah. He declares that He is the One Who was promised all those years ago by all those prophets throughout the Old Testament.

So you've got to understand that in that day, any good Jew when they heard that Jesus was the Messiah, would have naturally assumed Jesus was going to now rise to power, gather an army and drive the Romans out of their land and set Israel free politically. That's what the expectation would have been because that's how things had been done for centuries. This is why at least in part, the disciples are so distraught and lost when Jesus is crucified. Not only have they just lost their rabbi, their teacher, their mentor and their best friend, but the Messiah has now been crucified at the hands of the very empire that He was supposed to overthrow.

You can therefore imagine how overjoyed those first disciples are when they see that Jesus has risen from the dead. All their hopes are rekindled. Now they have no doubt whatsoever that Jesus is the Messiah and their anticipation level for deliverance from the Romans is off the charts! Finally, after all these years, the time has now come for the Messiah to free Israel and restore the kingdom to Israel.

Notice they don't say the time has come to restore Your (Jesus) kingdom. They don't say the time has come to restore God's kingdom. They say that it's time to restore the kingdom to Israel. In other words, finally things will be put back the way they were when we were in charge of our own nation and destiny. They were looking forward to a political victory where the Romans were defeated and Israel was set free from their oppressors.

These guys have been with Jesus every moment of every day for the last three years and still they just don't get it, do they? They still don't understand what Jesus has come to accomplish. Well Jesus is about to set them straight in the next verse:

**Acts 1:7** *"He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.'"*

Jesus basically says, *"Hey, mind your own business ... don't worry about it ... you're asking about Rome and Israel and when empires will rise and fall – well that's all in God's hands. All that's going to happen at the proper time - God will determine that - it's not for you to worry about. That's not what we're doing here. That's not how we're going to change the world."*

See, again, for the disciples and for all of the Jewish people at this time, their expectation is that when the Messiah comes, He is going to set them free from their political enemies. That's what they think all those Messianic prophecies mean. Again, they still don't fully understand that what the prophets of the Old Testament really meant was that when the Messiah comes, He isn't just going to set Israel free. He's going to set all mankind free.

He isn't going to set mankind free from some measly political empires that rise and fall - He is going to set mankind free from our ultimate enemies which are sin and death. That is exactly what Jesus, the Messiah did through His life, death and resurrection. But the penny hasn't dropped yet for His disciples - they still don't get it. So Jesus says, *"Don't worry about Rome, guys. Don't worry about your kingdom. God's got that all under control."* It's what Jesus says next that is an absolute game-changer.

**Acts 1:8a** *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you..."*

These people have just been witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. They have just seen that in His hands, Jesus holds this unstoppable power over life even death. But again, they're still assuming that this power is going to be used to drive out the Romans. So Jesus effectively says they are half right – they are going to receive power. Jesus has this resurrection power, this power over death, this very power that comes from the Spirit of God that raised Him from the grave, and He says, *"You are going to receive that power. But it's not going to be used to drive out the Romans, it's going to be used for something much bigger, much more world-changing."* Look what Jesus says next:

**Acts 1:8b** *"... and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Jesus tells His disciples, *"This resurrection, Holy Spirit power which just raised Me from the dead, will come upon you so that you will be my witnesses, telling people about Me everywhere in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

So here's the picture: Jesus has died and risen from the dead - proving that He is the Messiah; proving that He is God in the flesh; that He is God with skin and bones on. Then after the disciples have witnessed the resurrection, they are ready to fire, they are ready to change the world - but they are misguided about how God is calling them to change the world. So Jesus effectively tells them,

*"You're going to receive power, you're going to receive this Holy Spirit, resurrection power, but the way you're going to be empowered to change the world, is by simply being witnesses to Me, by going to the ends of the earth and telling people everywhere about Me, what I have done on their behalf, how I have died to pay for their sin, and risen to defeat death. That's how you're going to change the world by being My witnesses."*

This is the last time Jesus speaks to His disciples and just when they are trying to get their heads around what He just said, He's gone! Just like that. It's like He says, *"I've got to run now guys, but don't worry, you're all good. You've got this. Wait for this power from on high and then go change the world. Catch you later!"* and then He's gone - just like that - back to His Father's side. He basically passes the baton for His whole mission to the disciples and then disappears.

Now let's fast forward to the very end of the Bible – to Revelation chapter seven. This guy named John is basically given a vision of heaven and of the throne room of God. God allows John to see where all of human history is headed. He allows John to see what it's going to be like around the throne of God, when Jesus returns and reunites Heaven and Earth, once and for all. So when John sees the throne of God in this amazing revelation this is what he wrote:

**Revelation 7:9** *"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."*

What John sees here is where human history is headed. He sees that day in the future, around the very throne of God, a crowd that is so big it can't even be counted. Within this crowd are people of all races, all nationalities, all languages, all backgrounds, all unified around the throne worshipping. That's where history is headed. That's where we are going.

Somehow, somewhere between Acts one and Revelation seven the entire world changes. Somehow between Acts one and Revelation seven, the world is turned on its head. We go from Acts one where eleven guys are given this commission - to Revelation seven where around the throne of God is a multitude of people too great to count from every race and every nationality and every language - all unified as one, worshipping God.

So here's the million dollar question. How in the world does that happen? **How do we get from Acts one to Revelation seven?** How is the world so dramatically changed? If we can answer that question, then that will give us some insight into how we can change the world through God's power.

I think we see the answer in Acts chapter thirteen. That's where we find the formula which, when applied, will take us from Acts one to Revelation seven. This is the story of a Church in a city called Antioch. This is what it says.

**Acts 13:1-3** *"Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul (Paul). While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul for the work to which I have called them.'* So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

So try and picture this if you can. Here's this Church in Antioch and one day when they're worshipping, singing and praying together, they sense that God is calling them to set apart two guys, Barnabas and Paul. And they sense that God is calling them to send out Barnabas and Paul to take the Gospel, this Good News of Jesus, to the ends of the earth, just like Jesus commanded in Acts chapter one. So they lay their hands on Barnabas and Paul and they pray over them and send them out on their way to fulfill the Great Commission – to fully embrace the mission of Christ.

Here's what we've got to understand - for this Church in Antioch to send Barnabas and Paul away would have been incredibly hard. Think about this. Paul is their pastor and Paul is an absolute rockstar. Apart from Jesus, Paul is probably the most influential figure in Christian history. This is Paul who wrote half the New Testament, and he is their pastor.

But when they sense God speaking, they don't say, *"No, God, not Paul. You can't have Paul, can't You send somebody else? There are plenty of other people You can send, don't send Paul, we want Paul, we need to keep Paul here."* They don't do that because they know how important the mission of Christ is and if God needs Paul and Barnabas elsewhere, then that's what must happen. So they lay hands on them and send them out. This is quite extraordinary.

That is how we get from Acts one to Revelation seven. This is extraordinary because the Church in Antioch is not saying, *"Hey, what's in it for us?"* They're not focused on what they want, what's best for them. Their needs must give way to the mission of Christ. They don't have this consumer mentality like so many Christians today where they're saying, *"It's all about me and what I need and what I want."* They are focused on what is best for the global mission of Christ and if that means losing Paul and Barnabas; if that's what will best accomplish the mission of Christ, then, *"Off you go guys – go and change the world."* That is exactly what Paul and Barnabas did. They changed the world.

That is how we get from Acts one to Revelation seven. That is how we change the world. By being a Church like the Church in Antioch, who understand that it's not about us. It's not about our preferences. It's not about our needs and what we want. It's about accomplishing the mission of Christ. There is only one mission and that is the mission of Christ. The Church does not have a mission. Christ has a mission and that mission has a Church - that mission has not changed in thousands of years. Christ has called us, His children, His disciples, His co-labourers in the Gospel, to join Him in the fulfilment of His mission across the whole earth.

So if God is going to use us to change the world, and I believe with all my heart, that is God's desire, then we must be a Church that prioritizes the mission of Christ. Let me say that again. **If God is going to use us to change the world, then we must be a Church that prioritizes the mission of Christ.** Now, that seems like an obvious thing for a preacher or Pastor to say, doesn't it? You might even think it doesn't need to be said and it certainly doesn't need a whole sermon! Or does it?

The fact is, this is much harder than it sounds. Prioritizing the mission of Christ is much easier said than done. The natural tendency of any Church, not just our Church, is to drift inwardly over time. Because of the sin that still dwells in our human heart, the natural tendency for all of us is to look inwardly, to believe the lie that Church is about me. That Church is about what I want; that Church is about what I need; that Church is about my preferences; that Church is about the temperature in the Worship Centre being the temperature I want; that Church is about singing the songs I want to sing; that Church is about the sermon being the length that I want it to be; that Church is about all these things that are about me. That is a complete lie. But that is the natural drift of our hearts over time.

Listen, and I say this with all love and humility. The Church is not about you or me. The Church exists to glorify God by accomplishing the mission of Christ, period. That's why the Church exists. There are so many good things that that a Church can and should do but unless all those things flow into or out of our commitment to the mission of Christ, then biblically speaking, we are not the Church. The Church exists to glorify God, by accomplishing the mission of Christ.

So here's the question for us. Do we want to be a Church that God uses to change the world? If the answer is yes, then we need to understand that being a world-changing Church has nothing to do with style. It's not about contemporary versus traditional. It's not about what our building looks like. It's not about any of that.

For us to be the Church that God uses to change the world, we will be known for our sacrifice, our surrender, our prayer, our worship and our absolute commitment to the mission of Christ, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week! If you want to know what that looks like on a practical level; if you want to know how we can fully embrace the mission of Christ and be the Church that God uses to change the world, then stay tuned.