

This past Thursday I saw a meme online that may express how we are all feeling right about now. It said “I’d like to cancel my subscription to 2021. I’ve experienced the free seven-day trial and I’m not interested.” Does that about sum it up for you? After a disruptive and abysmal 2020, I know all of us were looking for a fresh start, a new beginning, a moment of renewal, but the events of this past week have left us wondering if that’s possible.

Through the many conversations I’ve had, things I’ve read, and things I’ve felt myself, I’ve noticed the fallout of this past year, continued in this past week, have left many of us asking questions about ourselves, the church, and our world. Who am I and what is my life supposed to be about? Given the number of people in our country who have left church in the last year and the post-Christian world we find ourselves in, does the Church matter anymore? Can we really make a difference? And given the brokenness of this world, is there any hope, and is there anything we can do about it?

These are real and significant questions that we can either lose ourselves in or find answers for, which is why we are beginning a series this morning in the book of Acts called *Renewal*. We are going to spend the next several months, really take our time, remembering who we were always meant to be and what we were always called to do to renew our understanding, passion, and hope as the people of God. John Polhill expresses why Acts is the perfect book for us to study today.

“The Book of Acts is in a real sense a book for renewal. It calls the church back to its roots—to the early church in the upper room in its undivided devotion to prayer, to its missionary fervor, its fellowship and sharing, its mutual trust and unity. It sets a pattern for faithful discipleship, for a witness that walks in the footsteps of the Master, a wholehearted commitment with a willingness to sacrifice and even to suffer. It speaks to us when discouraged, reminding us that all time is in God’s hands, reassuring us of the reality of his Spirit in our lives and witness. It challenges us to open our hearts to the power of the Spirit that we might be faithful witnesses to the word and come to experience anew its triumph in our own time.” -John Polhill

The book of Acts is the account of the first Church. It is the second volume written by Dr. Luke that tells the story of history-altering events that occurred after Jesus ascended to heaven and sent his Spirit into his people. Through it, my prayer is that each of us would be renewed in our understanding of who we are in Christ and his purpose for our lives. That, together, we would be renewed in our understanding and passion for the Church, believing that our God is still at work through us, reminded of what is possible, eager to live out his mission, and seeing 2020 not as a loss for the church but a time of refining, purifying, renewal, and preparation for the Gospel opportunity it made possible in 2021. And that we would be inspired, even burdened, to take the triumphant Gospel message of renewal to a broken, helpless, hopeless world. That is my prayer, and that is what I believe God can do through our study of this book. You in for that? Let’s go.

[Acts 1:1-7] In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from

Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Luke begins Acts where his Gospel left off. He once again writes to Theophilus to confirm all he’s learned about this Jesus and his followers, and he links the two volumes by overlapping Luke 24 (read through last week) and Acts 1. The story does not end with a resurrected Jesus and his followers in the temple. Luke instead says the first volume was “all that Jesus **began** to do”. **He was just getting started.** Within 30 years of this moment, the Gospel will have triumphantly made its way from Jerusalem to Rome. Luke tells that story over 28 chapters, and God has continued writing that story for 2,000 years, authoring the next chapter through us in 2021. And that story is all about the Kingdom of God.

In one of over 60 mentions in his writings, Luke once again shows us the heartbeat of Jesus was the Kingdom of God. He showed up on the scene preaching the Kingdom, sent his disciples out to preach on the Kingdom, and after he died, was buried, and resurrected, he continued talking about the Kingdom, which is the rule of God over his people in creation. That will be brought to ultimate fulfillment at Christ’s second coming. But Jesus’s plan is for the Kingdom to begin to take ground now through this new people he will create through his Spirit. We are to begin to manifest the Kingdom now and give the world a taste of what is to come. It’s like when you are driving around and see some sign of construction, a foundation, scaffolding, walls...it’s not completely built, but it has started, and you notice and are intrigued. Followers of Jesus are called to begin Kingdom construction, with Jesus as our foreman. Jesus will have to clear that up with his disciples, and I believe we are due for a reminder ourselves.

[Acts 1:6-11] ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

The disciples ask if the Kingdom will be restored to Israel now. Their question is not wrong but misguided. The Old Testament prophets of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah all closely related the pouring out of the Spirit with the restoration of the Kingdom, so when Jesus says the Spirit is coming, they believe the restoration of Israel is to follow. Jesus does not reject the question, because Israel will one day be restored, but instead clarifies their understanding because they’ve missed the point. Their question reflects a nationalistic and political concern for Israel, while the Kingdom Jesus refers to is spiritual and universal, with Jesus ruling in the hearts of men and the salvation he provides being made available to everyone on the face of the earth.

I believe we all need Jesus to renew our own thinking on the purpose and plan of the Kingdom of God, myself included. We have convinced ourselves somewhere along the way that we are called to fight the culture in order to fix the culture, when what Jesus really wants is for us to create a new Kingdom culture so compelling that people can't resist. We tell ourselves "If only _____ happened, everything would be ok." That's how the world thinks, and when we think like the world thinks, we pursue answers that the world pursues, and our Kingdom-focus is blurred, and our Kingdom impact is diminished.

The answer is not found in a political party. It's found in Jesus. The answer is not found in a donkey or an elephant, but in the Lamb of God and the Lion of Judah. The answer is not found in fawning over human leaders with messianic titles but by committing your entire heart to the only true Messiah, Jesus. The answer is not identifying ourselves primarily by all of our divided subgroups, but by finding our united identity in Jesus. The answer is not sitting in an echo chamber to have all your ideas confirmed, but to saturate your mind in Scripture and be confronted and conformed by the Truth of Jesus. The answer is not silencing, canceling, or vilifying anyone you perceive on the other side. It's to love them with the love of Jesus. The answer is not found rioting as agents of chaos, but in laying down your life as an agent of peace like Jesus laid down his. The answer is Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, and our call is to participate in this world as citizens of his Kingdom and devote our lives to seeing it flourish. Any other option is idolatry. Any other option mocks what he lived for, died for, saved us for. Any other option compromises our ability to accomplish what he sends us for. There is only one hope for this world, and his name is Jesus, and he sends us to bring that hope to it. So how do we do that?

V8 is the key verse of this entire book and was my original life verse when I first started reading the Bible. In it, we are told of a person of renewal, the plan for renewal, and the power for renewal. Jesus says the Spirit of God will come upon his followers. We will talk much more about this next week, but it is through the Spirit that we are personally renewed. **The Spirit cleanses us of our sin, unites us to Jesus and one another, and lives in us forever.** If you have trusted in Christ, you have been made new by the pouring out of his Spirit upon you.

Jesus' plan for renewal is to send out his followers as witnesses. A witness testifies to what is verifiably true. Think of any courtroom drama you've ever watched on TV. For the apostles, they are qualified to begin this mission because they have been with Jesus since the beginning and have seen him resurrected. The last part of chapter 1 will include selecting a new apostle to replace Judas using this criterion. If the word witness sounds familiar, it's because we saw it at the end of Luke. There Jesus again said they would be witnesses, but he added the substance of their message. They were to take the message of the kingdom out to the world by preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. **The Gospel is message of renewal because it's the message of a renewed relationship with God.** It is the message of hope our broken world is so desperately in need of, and I pray the events of the last week and last year are a reminder to us all of that.

We sometimes try to complicate that, but it doesn't need to be. This past week Martha's boss gathered her work team and asked them all for their word of the year. Examples were determination, focus, resilient, and prioritize. Martha's was hope, and she added her verse of the year, Hebrews 10:23: Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, because he who has promised is faithful. In a single word and single verse, she expressed her single hope

found in Jesus. She was a witness. You can be too. Additionally, consider the Evangelism TE we are about to offer to learn more about how to be a witness for Christ. You can do it.

The Spirit is also our source of renewal power. All the best laid plans are worthless if you don't have the power to accomplish them. I hooked up some lighting at my house recently and when I plugged in the extension cord, nothing happened. I felt like Clark Griswold in *Christmas Vacation*. Come to find out, something had cut or chewed through my extension cord, I didn't receive power, and nothing worked. God's plan is so audacious that God's power is necessary to accomplish it. The Gospel journey from Jerusalem to Rome will be full of obstacles. But any time God asks something of us, he will provide the resources necessary to accomplish it. God has given you his unlimited power source in his Spirit to enable you to live out your purpose in this mission.

Pray for renewal. Start with your own. Ask Jesus to restore and renew you, and that he would also lead you to repent of anything that has gotten in the way of your undivided devotion to him so that you can be fully used by him in 2021. We will have a renewing impact on this world only to the extent that we have been renewed ourselves. We have to start there.

Pray for our church, that we would be renewed in our love for the Lord, our devotion to one another, and our commitment to living out the mission he's called us to. Something we'll see early and often is the centrality of prayer in the early church. In fact, right after Jesus ascends, v14 says the apostles return, gather with others, and **[Acts 1:14] ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.** Their prayers often preceded a significant movement by God in Acts, so let us pray in the hope that God moves significantly through us.

Pray for this world, particularly peace and healing for our city and country. Pray for our leaders, for humility and wisdom. But more than that, pray for God to do today what we see in Acts. The book of Acts is full of verses that say, "and he added to their number." God is still at work. God is still adding citizens to his Kingdom. He wants to use us to make that happen. Pray for it to be.

Look for the joy. The church in Acts gets their rear-ends kicked over and over, yet they not only persevere, but experience joy in God, in each other, and in the mission they're living out. Peter and John even rejoice for being counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ! There is a time for lament and grief. It's right and good. But those times cannot end with hopelessness because we are a people of hope. And the echo of hope is joy. **God is still with us, God is still on the move, and we will see him do amazing things.** We can experience joy in spite of all that's going on, but we have to look for it and choose to experience it when we see it.

This past week a Fellowship family member, Jeff Lowery, passed on to eternity after a long battle with cancer. You may remember him because I interviewed him on this platform two years ago, almost to the day. At the time, he had persevered through his illness, and in the course of the interview, he said "A lot of people ask in life, 'what's the meaning of life?' To me, it's not so much what's the meaning of life anymore as it is how do we find positive meaning in the face of trials and tribulation?" That's a man who looked for the joy and found it. Let him be an example to us as we walk through the trials and tribulations we're likely to experience in 2021 in because our God is good and there is joy to be found.

After Jesus gave these instructions, he ascended to heaven, exalted to the right hand of the Father. It was the end of his earthly ministry in his bodily presence, the end of his first Advent, and the very clear sign that it was now the disciples' turn. He will come again, but until he does, the mission he gave then continues in us today. **It is our God-given purpose.** Let us say yes to that mission like we never have before and then get ready to see him move.

We are going to close this morning by install the newest members of our elder board (elders and wives can come up) and thank a few guys rolling off. As most of you know by now, we believe the Holy Spirit has appointed David Six and Joel Dow as the next elders in our church.

[Acts 20:28] 28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you (appointed you) overseers (elders), to care for (pastor) the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Over the last month, we have given you all the opportunity to engage our leadership with any thoughts you have over David and Joel being in this role, and I can tell you that the feedback we have received has been overwhelmingly positive and affirming.

So today we have the privilege of doing something that does not happen often but is a vital practice of the church because, without leadership, there is no church. We are going to participate in the laying on of hands by our elders to affirm the choice of David and Joel to join the elder board and dedicate them to the work God has called him to.

Before we pray for them, though, I want to thank three elders whose terms completed during 2020 and we finally have a moment to appreciate them. Would you show your gratitude and appreciation for Bob Breunig, Bret Schuck, and Perry Jager. Additionally, Kirk Williams is handing the baton of chairmanship to Mike Webster, and I've asked Mike to pray for David/Jeannie and Joel/Kristin.

David and Joel, as you stand before this congregation, let me remind you of the awesome responsibility you are taking on to lead, oversee, and shepherd God's people here at Fellowship Dallas. But let me also remind you that you have been given all you need to effectively fulfill the duties and responsibilities of this role. You have been appointed by his Spirit, who lives within you, and empowers you to faithfully lead in this church. You are a beloved child of God who is pleasing to his Heavenly Father. And you have been called for such a time as this, to this good and important work of being an elder in this church and lead out in the mission God has given us.