

The Indestructible Mission of Jesus

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 October 2023

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, most companies or organizations have got a mission statement where, in just a few words, they try and sum up what their organization is all about and what they are trying to do.

And the mission statement, in a sense, clearly and concisely is supposed to articulate their reason for being or the heart of their organization. And here are some mission statements from some of the world's biggest companies.

So Google, say. Their mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. Amazon, say.

Their mission is to be Earth's most customer-centric company. TikTok, say. Their mission is to capture and present the world's creativity, knowledge and moments that matter in everyday life.

And Starbucks, their mission statement is to inspire and nurture the human spirit. One person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time. That's the best one so far.

[1 : 03] And IKEA have a mission statement, which is typically IKEA, which is to offer a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them.

Not quite as snappy as the rest. But there we go. So Tesla have a mission statement to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy. And Microsoft's mission is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more.

Now, I only mention these mission statements because the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ also has a mission. And that is really what the book of Acts is all about. In fact, we could even say that Jesus gives his mission statement in Acts, in Acts chapter 1, verse 8.

We looked at it last week and we read it there. Acts chapter 1, verse 8 says, So the risen Lord Jesus is speaking with his apostles and he is saying that he will accomplish his mission through his church by the Holy Spirit to the ends of the earth.

That is the mission. And so in Acts chapter 1, what we read is Jesus ascending as king and then preparing his people for mission.

[2 : 33] And because it's his mission, well, it is mission indestructible, as we'll see. So three points this afternoon are firstly, the power of Jesus. Secondly, the priority of prayer.

And then thirdly, the plan of God. So I'd like us to look at these in turn. The power of Jesus, the priority of prayer, and the plan of God. So first of all, the power of Jesus. And we see this in verse 1 to 11 as Jesus ascends into heaven.

So last week with our introduction and overview of Acts, we thought about how Luke was writing the Acts of Jesus. He was recording how Jesus continued to do his work on earth after he had gone to heaven.

And so the apostles needed to be sure of the power of Jesus as they were being sent out into the world to be his witnesses.

And we need to be sure of who Jesus is and of his power and of what he wants to do. We need to be clear on the absolute power of Jesus. And so just look at verse 3.

[3 : 42] After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

So this is the resurrected, the risen Lord Jesus Christ speaking to his disciples and then calling them and sending them out on mission. And we read that he spent 40 days with his apostles before he ascended into heaven.

So the story is that Jesus was crucified and he died. But then God raised him to life again, confirming that he is the Messiah. And so for the apostles to be witnesses to Jesus, his life and his death, they also had to be witnesses to his resurrection.

And so as Jesus spoke to them about the kingdom of God, he was preparing them for their involvement in his mission. But as well as being witnesses to his resurrection and as well as listening to his teaching about the kingdom of God, they needed to wait for the Holy Spirit to come and the Spirit would empower them to go out on the mission of Jesus.

And so after Jesus gives them his mission plan, there in verse 8, the focus turns to the ascension of Jesus. And it's called the ascension because Jesus ascends.

[5 : 05] He is taken up into heaven. And it's interesting because only Luke records the ascension of Jesus. In fact, it's the only incident in the life of Jesus that Luke describes twice.

At the end of his gospel and then here again at the beginning of Acts. So let's see it again in verse 9 to 11. 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? The same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. So Jesus' ascension is important.

Why? Well, because it reveals his power and his authority. So the apostles were not just witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. They were also witnesses to the ascension of Jesus.

[6 : 09] So for them, there was to be no doubt in their minds that Jesus is Lord. So here is the eternal Son returning to the presence of the Father.

Now that his work on earth is done. So through his resurrection, sorry, through his death and then his resurrection, Jesus triumphed over Satan and sin and death.

And now he is exalted to his throne at the right hand of God in heaven. And that is the place of ultimate power, of ultimate authority, where Jesus now rules and reigns as king.

And from there, one day Jesus will return and his mission will be complete. And so seeing Jesus ascend into the sky in a cloud told the apostles that this wasn't mission impossible.

It was mission indestructible because of the one who was sending them out on mission. The resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. And that's why they didn't need to gaze into heaven as if Jesus was gone for good and they'd said their goodbyes and that was it.

[7 : 22] And they didn't need to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the task before them because Jesus was no longer with them. But the promised Holy Spirit would be.

And that's why the power of Jesus in his resurrection and in his ascension not only emphasizes the moment for the mission of Jesus to proceed in the world, but also gives the motivation for the missionaries to go out in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit to witness to him.

Because if they were going to face persecution and if they were going to suffer for bearing witness to Jesus, then they needed to know the absolute power and absolute authority of the one who was sending them out.

So just as the resurrection of Jesus proves that Jesus lives, so the ascension proves that Jesus rules and reigns. So Princess Elizabeth, she ascended to the throne as Queen Elizabeth II on the 6th of February 1952.

And she was crowned on the 2nd of June 1953. And she reigned as Queen for over 70 years until the 8th of September 2022.

[8 : 41] And so when we read here of the ascension of Jesus, it is like his coronation as King. He ascends to the throne where he reigns as King and one day he will return.

And although we don't know when that is going to be, now is the time, now is the period for his church to be on his mission to his world.

And Jesus directs the mission from heaven. He superintends it. He manages it as the Spirit works on earth. And that's why this mission is indestructible.

And why success in this mission is guaranteed. And so this should be a massive encouragement for us today as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because while the church is the method that Jesus uses to carry out his mission, the success of his mission doesn't ultimately depend on us, on you and on me.

[9 : 46] It depends on the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working to advance his kingdom to the ends of the earth until the day that Jesus Christ returns.

And so as you look at our land, whether it's in the UK or in Western Europe, and you see the church as an institution decaying and declining and dying, we should never forget that the true church of the church as an institution.

And that's why, along with the apostles, we need to be convinced of the power of the risen and the ascended Jesus because he is Lord.

He is King of kings and Lord of lords. And so he rules and he reigns and he is still at work in his world. So that's the first thing we see in this passage, Acts chapter 1.

The second thing, after the power of Jesus, is the priority of prayer. So after Jesus has ascended into heaven, what do the apostles do? After Jesus has told them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come, they pray.

[10:53] Verse 14, they all join together constantly in prayer, along with the woman and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

So what kind of prayer characterized the early church? Well, there are two aspects to it. It was constant and it was corporate. So first of all, it was constant prayer.

Now, the original here in verse 14 has the sense of persisting, prevailing, faithful, continuing, constant prayer.

And of course, this wasn't just one isolated incident that they prayed before the Spirit came. And then when the Spirit came, they didn't need to pray because they had the Spirit. No, all the way through Acts and the movement and the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, every great movement seems to take place after a devoted time of prayer by the church.

So here in Acts 1, they're praying together. Soon after, the Holy Spirit comes. In Acts chapter 2, we read that the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

[12:09] And after devoting themselves to these things and to prayer, we read in Acts chapter 2, verse 47, that the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

So Acts chapter 1, Acts chapter 2, Acts chapter 4, after the apostles' first imprisonment, the believers prayed together. And the result, Acts chapter 4, verse 31, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Then in Acts chapter 6, the apostles determined to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. And so what happens? The word of God spread and the number of disciples increased rapidly.

Chapter 6, verse 7. Then in Acts chapter 8, prayer leads to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the so-called Samaritan Pentecost. Acts chapter 13, the church in Antioch fast and pray before they then send off Paul and Barnabas to proclaim the good news of Jesus in new places.

Then in Acts chapter 20, Paul is on the beach with the Ephesian elders and he's praying with them before he's then sent off on a journey that eventually leads him to Rome with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[13:26] So all the way through Acts, the emphasis on prayer is clear, corporate, constant prayer. It's obvious in Acts, but of course, constant prayer should also be the mark of our churches today because prayer is essentially like breathing.

It has got to happen. If you stop breathing, then there is a real problem. And so if we are not persistent in prayer, then there is a real problem because prayer is a priority in the mission of Jesus Christ in this world.

And so if we see the church as an organization more than as a mission movement, then we'll tend to think that its growth and its advance depends on us.

But prayer reminds us that it's dependent on God. Because if we do tend to think that results are down to us, then we might tend towards pride when good things happen, good things like more people or more believers or signs of growth.

But then we will tend towards despair when the good things don't happen. No new people, no believers, no or little sign of growth. And yet this constant prayer teaches us to humble ourselves before God and trust in him to know that he is the one who does the work.

[14:53] But as well as constant prayer, this was also corporate prayer because they all joined together to pray or they were with one accord. Now the original here doesn't just mean they were in the same place together in that sense, but they were united as one.

They prayed with one mind. They had one purpose. Not just the leaders, but everybody. Because this group was wider than the apostles.

It also included the woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. And presumably the rest of the believers who made up this group of about 120 people that are mentioned in verse 15.

And so the priority here in Acts is on all the church praying together, which has a clear application for the life and work of the church today, doesn't it?

And so we should never entertain the notion that joining together for prayer is a bit of an optional extra. Like going to a prayer meeting is for those who are especially keen and really spiritual.

[16:01] Or that going to other meetings that aren't prayer meetings, well, we choose. If that's our thing, we go. If it's not our thing, then we don't need to go. But what we see here is that constant corporate prayer is part of the DNA of the early church.

And so if we're to be a healthy gospel church and healthy gospel people, then constant corporate prayer has got to be part of our DNA as well. Joining together in prayer is a vital part of what it means to be the church.

And I'm sure that's why this constant corporate prayer is one of the first pictures that we have of the early church. If we want to know what the early church was like, well, they were a people devoted to prayer.

And so we must be too. So strategies and tactics and plans are all well and good. But we shouldn't be too focused on these when God chooses to work by his spirit through the prayers of his people. A man called E.M. Bounds, who was a Christian author, and he wrote many, many books on prayer. He was born in the 19th century, which will help make sense of the quotation I'm about to give you.

[17:16] This is what he said about prayer. He said, men are God's method. The church is looking for better methods. God is looking for better men. What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men who the Holy Spirit can use.

Men of prayer. Men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men.

Men of prayer. And so we shouldn't just be looking for better or more methods. We should be looking to be better men and women of prayer.

And that's why we've got this central prayer meeting at Christ Church Glasgow that meets on the first Wednesday of the month. And so I would encourage you to join us. If you haven't been before, come on the first Wednesday of the month to pray.

Because being faithful and constant corporate prayer is an ordinary part of church life. It is not an extraordinary thing. It is normal.

[18:23] Okay, so the power of prayer. Sorry, the power of Jesus. Secondly, the priority of prayer. And then thirdly, the plan of God. Now, in verse 12 to 26, Luke slows the action right down.

And he goes into great detail about the replacement of Judas, who was one of the disciples of Jesus, with this man called Matthias. And it seems strange because we've just read of the ascension of Jesus.

We've read of Jesus giving his mission plan and promising the sending of the Holy Spirit. And so the church is on the cusp of being propelled out to the world with the good news of Jesus Christ. And yet, what happens instead is we're brought back down to earth with a thud. And we're reminded of the betrayal of Judas, which seems like an odd thing to come.

Wouldn't it be better for Luke just to finish with the ascension of Jesus and then move on to Acts chapter 2 and the coming of the Holy Spirit? Why does he bother telling us all of this?

[19:32] Judas, after all, was dead. Matthias, interestingly, never appears again in the book of Acts. So why? Well, surely it's to remind us that the mission of Jesus is indestructible.

Because God has a plan. Where even the betrayal of Judas was part of God's plan. And so when Luke records the apostles in verse 13, Judas is the glaring omission.

Because there are 11 names mentioned there. And there should have been 12. And so Luke, in a sense, is highlighting the betrayal of Jesus.

And so before the mission to the world begins, this issue of Judas has to be dealt with in a sense because the credibility of God's saving plan is at stake.

I mean, how could anyone be sure of God's plan if even one of Jesus' closest followers betrays him? And so there's no attempt here to cover up what's happened with Judas.

[20:44] Judas' betrayal of Jesus was a problem. And it's a problem that everybody knew about. So verse 19 says, Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this. Everyone. So they called that field in their language, Akaldama.

That is the field of blood. And so I think what Luke is doing here is because he wants to reassure Theophilus, the guy he's writing to, and the rest of his readers to assure them and us that despite this very public sin and failure by Judas, it still cannot thwart the plan of God.

Because the betrayal of Judas does not affect the credibility of God's plan. It does not impact the message of Jesus. In fact, what Luke is saying to us through Peter's words is, Judas was part of God's plan.

And that's why Peter's emphasis here is on the fulfillment of Scripture. But he says in verse 16, Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus.

So Peter sees the betrayal of Judas and the selection of a replacement for Judas as part of God's plan. And that's why he quotes these two specific Psalms in verse 20.

[22 : 11] For, said Peter, it is written in the book of Psalms, May his place be deserted, let there be no one to dwell in it, and may another take his place of leadership.

So, get this, one of these Psalms tells how it was part of God's plan for Judas to lose his place. And then the other Psalm tells how it was part of God's plan for somebody else to take Judas' place. And so Judas' betrayal of Jesus hadn't obstructed God's plan in any sense. What Judas did was wicked.

We read that, and Judas was punished for it. But it was still part of God's larger plan. And so, well, we might be thinking, how are we supposed to resolve this tension between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility?

Well, the Bible never attempts to. These two truths, that God is sovereign and that humans are responsible, are like two train tracks that run in parallel.

[23 : 23] And the thing with two train tracks is that the train tracks never meet. They never cross, although they always go in the same direction. And that is why the mission of Jesus will never, ever be derailed by human sin or by worldly circumstances.

Judas didn't hinder God's plan, but was actually going along with God's plan. But why did Judas need to be replaced? Well, in the Old Testament, the people of God were represented by the 12 tribes of Israel.

And that's why there were 12 disciples, because they were symbolic of the new Israel, the new people of God. And so this hope of the new Israel and the new people of God would, in some sense, have been shattered if there were only 11 disciples.

And so with Judas gone, there was a need to restore this group to 12. And so ultimately, Jesus chooses Matthias for the job. And so the apostles are complete again.

They're ready to go and witness to Jesus in the world. And you notice that the qualification to be a witness for Jesus was to be a witness of the resurrection, along with all the other apostles, because the resurrection was then and is now crucial to Christianity.

[24 : 47] If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, there is no point being a Christian or believing that Christianity is worth anything. Christianity stands or falls on the reality of the resurrection.

And so that's why they needed these eyewitnesses who were witnesses to the life of Jesus, to the death of Jesus, and to the resurrection of Jesus, so they could go out into the world and share the message about him.

And so as we come to the end of Acts chapter 1, we are assured that Jesus has his witnesses and they are ready to carry out his mission.

And so, well, what is the application of all of this for us? What's it got to do with you and with me? Two things. First thing is that God has a plan and it will come to pass.

So what we see here is that the mission of Jesus is indestructible. Nothing can ever hinder the advance of his mission.

[25 : 55] If even Judas was a part of God's sovereign plan and even Judas was under God's sovereign control, now we can be sure that God is always working his purposes out even in the darkest of times.

And nowhere is this more clear than in the death of Jesus. Because in the darkness and in the suffering and in the crucifixion of Jesus, God was achieving his greatest work.

The very center of his plan and his purposes for this world was taking place at the cross where Jesus died. So through the cross, God was achieving our salvation and none of it was out of control, including the betrayal of Judas.

It all happened so that the scripture might be fulfilled. And that's why we can always be confident, whatever happens in this world and whatever happens in our lives, that God has got everything covered.

There is absolutely nothing outside of God's control. So no matter what happens, God will always have his way.

[27 : 11] Which leads us secondly to the application for us. Because if God's plan for this world will come to pass, then it's obvious and it's clear that God's plan for your life and my life will also come to pass.

Because if Jesus is ruling and he is reigning from heaven at his Father's right hand, then he is not only ruling and reigning over this world, he's not only ruling and reigning over his church, he is ruling and reigning over our lives, yours and mine.

And so there are never any accidents in our lives because God is working his purposes out for our good and for his glory. And so even in the darkest times, we must trust that God knows exactly what he is doing and he will have his way.

And that doesn't mean that life is going to be easy. Sometimes, even often, life will be really tough. It will be hard. And yet we must trust God whatever we're going through in life.

Because if we don't trust the plan of God, then what is the alternative? What is the alternative to believing that God is a good and loving God who has a plan?

[28 : 41] Well, the alternative is everything is just random and chance. There's no plan and there is no purpose and we have no idea how everything is ever going to end up.

That is one way to live your life. That is one philosophy to believe in. But the other is we trust the all good, the all loving, the all powerful God and we believe that he has a plan and he is working it out. We have seen how he has worked out his plan, his great plan of salvation for the world and so surely we can trust he is working out his plan for my life.

He knows better than I do and he is working it out well, which won't always be easy, but it will be his plan. He is working out his plan for this world and he is working out his plan for our lives.

That is the best option. That is the best thing to believe because it's right and it's true and God has shown how it's true in his son. Now, you know, you're using this