

THE GREAT TASK AFTER CHRIST'S ASCENSION

“So when they had come together, they asked Him: Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them: it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by His own authority. But you shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth”.

(Acts 1: 6-8)

In the next chapter we will look more closely at the biblical account of Christ's ascension. We will see how the Gospel concerning the ascension shows us Christ going on with His work. Before we move on to that event, I want to pay some attention to Christ's last words on earth, spoken shortly before He ascended.

Do "last words" have a special meaning? Often when someone we love has left for a long time or permanently, and also when someone has been taken from us through death, we try to remember the last words that were spoken to us by this person. Someone coined the phrase: famous last words. The last words of many important people have been meticulously recorded.

But often "last words" do not mean very much. Believe me, it's not so important what you say when you leave; it is more important how you communicate when you are still together. In the case of our text, however, the "last words" of the Lord Jesus Christ are of great significance, not just for the disciples, but for the entire church of the latter days.

For in these last recorded words, the Lord Jesus gives a mild rebuke and also a mighty mandate. He tells us very clearly what we should and should not be busy with until He comes again. We therefore have a proper orientation, direction, and purpose in life. Our theme is: the Lord Jesus directs His disciples to their great task in the time after His ascension. While they ask about the definite end, He speaks about the decisive beginning.

A QUESTION AND A RESPONSE

You have noticed, of course, that Christ's last words are in fact a response to a question asked by the disciples. I do not want to get into all the exegetical detail surrounding the time and the tone of that question, for that would take up too much of our time, but I do want to analyze the question briefly with you, so that we can better appreciate the Lord's answer.

The disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" There are explainers who suggest that this was a wrong question, which shows an impatient and worldly outlook. The disciples were not be prepared, they say, to wait and work until it pleased Christ to return. Some even suggest that this question was actually a rejection of Christ's teaching about His impending ascension and the intermediate time. But I do not think that we have to draw such conclusions.

It is really a very logical question. Luke tells us in Acts 1:3 that Christ during the forty days in which He appeared to the disciples was "speaking to them of the kingdom of God." The "kingdom of God" was Christ's main topic of instruction and discussion during the time between resurrection and ascension. What a glorious topic!

What does it mean that Christ spoke to His disciples about the kingdom of God? It is the very same theme which Christ preached at the beginning of His ministry on earth. It was already the theme of the preaching of John the Baptist, who said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). And of the Lord

Jesus, Matthew writes (4:17), “From that time (namely after John’s arrest) Jesus began to preach saying, ‘Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’.” The Lord simply took up the early theme of John the Baptist about the kingdom of heaven.

And how many times, for example in the parables, did the Lord Jesus not elaborate on the theme of the kingdom? It is no wonder, then, that after His resurrection the same “kingdom” teaching plays a key role in His instruction, and that the disciples ask a question about it. This kingdom, which continues without end, when will it come in fullness?

THE BREAKTHROUGH OF THE KINGDOM

Christ will have explained clearly to His disciples that the kingdom of God had its decisive breakthrough and victory in His own death and resurrection. The kingdom of God was eternally secure on the foundation of Golgotha, where the devil was defeated, where the atonement was made. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of the life and the resurrection, would never be defeated; instead it would grow and be victorious everywhere.

Jesus spoke to His disciples about how they could live again as servants, yes as children of God, in His kingdom, protected by Him always, to His glory and praise. Certainly, He will have told them also that the kingdom had not yet come in fullness or perfection. It was and is still: Thy kingdom come! Much still had to be “restored” (to use the words of our text), but the final reality would be that the kingdom of God would be perfected.

And that is where the question, the difficulty of the disciples comes in. It is not that they doubted the restoration of the kingdom. On the contrary, they had seen so much that they fully believed it. They did not ask, as many people do today, “Will the kingdom be restored?” Many people today say or think that the kingdom of God, with its promises of joy and peace, is a hoax, because life is only what you make of it. But the disciples are filled with the idea of the kingdom of God! Except, they ask: will you *at this time* restore the kingdom to Israel?

I’ll leave those words “to Israel” out for a moment and concentrate on “at this time.” For there lies, also in view of Christ’s answer, the weight of the question. Thy kingdom come, yes, Lord, that’s fine, but will you restore it at this time, now?

AT THIS TIME?

At this time, they say. That means: in our time, during our life time. The disciples know that the history of the world is going to a specific end. They ask about that end. Will it come about in their days? Will they see not just the beginning of that process but also its progression and conclusion? Jesus, will we in our life experience and witness the end of the ages, the coming in glory of the Holy One of God? Will we see the completion of the work to which you have called us as your disciples? Will we, who have stood at the beginning, witness the unfolding and the ending of the coming of the kingdom?

It is not unbelief which is expressed in this question. It is not mere curiosity, either. There is a certain longing, a yearning for the swift restoration of the kingdom of God. The disciples already had been through so much with the Lord, will they now also see the restoration of the kingdom? Therefore: how long yet, Lord? When will the final curtain fall on the ever-unfolding drama of history in which also our personal lives are taken up?

A GENTLE REBUKE

It is a question which must be properly appreciated. Sometimes we, too, say: Lord, is the end near? Is it not enough now? Sometimes, when great calamities befall us and God's people, we can yearn for the restoration of all things, the perfection of the kingdom of God. It is unfortunate that often adversity must bring us to experience and express this longing, but that is how it goes. And it is then important to know that our Lord Jesus Christ *understands* this yearning.

Christ's response to the question is in a sense a rebuke, a reprimand. But notice that it is a gentle rebuke, for Jesus understands the deep feelings in and behind our probing questions. But although gentle, the answer is also very clear and resolute, "It is not for you to know the times and seasons which the Father has fixed by His own authority." To paraphrase that simply, the Lord says: it is none of your business; leave that to the Father in heaven.

Literally it says: it is not *of you*, it does not belong to your realm. You have no say in that matter whatsoever. It is even so that the times and seasons do not belong to the *revelation* of God. Whatever God has revealed in His good pleasure – and He has revealed much – He has not made known to us the times and seasons.

Not that the times and seasons haven't been set. They have been. Christ does not want us to think that there is no time-limit. For the duration has been determined up to the day, the hour, and the minute. The Lord says that the times and seasons have been set by the Father's own authority. God in His sovereign decree, as the supreme authority, has *fixed* the times, that is, He has set them unchangeably.

Notice also how the Lord Jesus here speaks about times and seasons. The words essentially denote the same thing: the period between Christ's ascension and return. Yet there is a subtle variance in meaning. *Times* denotes the various periods of time, the total length, the duration. *Seasons* denotes more the developments during that time, the events in their sequence and relation, the situations and opportunities.

This is important. The Father has not just determined the duration of the time between ascension and return, but also what will happen in that time. He grants the opportunities and governs the situations. There will be times of prosperity and progress for the church, of much opportunity. There will also be times of adversity for the church, of much disappointment. But no events, whether in church history or in our personal lives, fall outside the authority of the Father.

NOT FOR US TO KNOW

It is not for us to know the times and seasons. This is a truth by which we must live. We like to know exactly what time it is. We want to be able to predict what opportunities might come our way. Yes, we'd even like to know how close we are to the return of the Lord. But all this has not been revealed to us. And any speculation on this is not only doomed to fail but is an outright insult to the Father.

You know that even Christ did not presume to have that knowledge. There is a well-known text in Mark 13: 32, where the Lord Jesus says that of that day no one knows, not even the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father. Nor the Son! Many explainers have struggled with those words, but Christ simply says that even He, in His capacity as Mediator, having come in the flesh and humbled Himself for our sake, does not presume to know of the day. We see here something of the great humility of the Son, who bides the Father's time and the Father's hour. If Christ showed such humility in leaving the times and seasons to the Father, how much more humility should we show in this respect?

It lies in the Father's own authority, it says. "Own" in the sense of unique and special, belonging only to God. No one else has this sovereignty. We have to learn never to argue with God about times and seasons, whether they be in our estimation too early or too late, for God alone has fixed these. And everything He does is always right on time, right on schedule, leading to the final trumpet and the appearing of the Son of man.

DO NOT WASTE TIME

It's not for us to know the times and seasons. Why not? So that we will make the most of the time that we do receive by God's grace and providence, and not waste one day. So that every single day we will walk by faith alone. So that we do not make our own little schedules and times which neatly interact and even compete with God's sovereign schedule, but live by faith, always. So that we trust in Him alone, in whose hands lies all time, also our times, up to the last second of the history of this world.

Whenever you know exactly how much time is left, it is tempting to misuse it. Instead of worrying about the time, we must concentrate on using the time well, and fulfilling our task as long as God grants the seasons. We who do not know the duration of the time must see to the proper usage of the time. And that is where the Lord directs His disciples and us. Not: how long yet? but: we will work, Lord, as long as you give the times and seasons, and when you return, you will find us faithfully labouring in your vineyard.

FOCUS ON YOUR TASK

I want to make a few remarks yet about verse 8. Notice the contrast, "*But* you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

The “times and seasons” are not your business, but I will tell you what you must fully realize: your task, your business. Do not ask me about the definite end, for we stand only at the decisive beginning. Indeed, it’s not over, it has only just begun!

I refer you back now to the words mentioned earlier: will you restore the kingdom *to Israel*? The disciples obviously still had a rather limited view of the extent of the kingdom and the kingdom-work. They saw it primarily – if not exclusively – as a matter of Israel, of the Jews. Their vision was restricted to the land and people of Israel. At least, from Christ’s answer we notice a very clear broadening of the circle: Jerusalem, yes, Judea, but also Samaria, and even the end of the earth!

The disciples are given a tremendous mandate: preach the Gospel to all creation, first to the Jews, but also to the Greeks, the Romans, yes, wherever people live, let the message of the Lord be heard, let the facts of salvation be proclaimed.

BEYOND ISRAEL

What a contrast. “In our time?” How will the disciples ever in one life-time be able to reach the ends of the earth? Restore the kingdom to Israel? No, extend the kingdom to the ends of the earth! For this, time will be needed, and it will be given by God. Opportunities will be created. Don’t think the end is near, for the task is still too great. Concentrate on your task.

The disciples could never do this monumental work on their own. They would not be able to witness in Jerusalem, let alone to the ends of the earth. But Christ promises them for this monumental task also the accompanying and enabling power of the Holy Spirit. “You will receive power,” it says, and this word means the ability to do what is asked. Jesus asks nothing of us except what He also enables us to do. He does not hand out impossible mandates. Difficult tasks, yes, but not impossible ones. You will receive power, clearly not from yourselves, but from above, from Me, “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” So that you can go and do what I command, and a decisive beginning can be made with this great task that will affect all creation, every tongue, tribe, and nation.

Don’t ask about the end, but see what opportunities I will give from the beginning, from Pentecost on, until the Gospel has been preached throughout the world.

The Lord Jesus fulfilled this promise. He gave power to these simple men to begin this monumental task. These people did things they never dreamt of before. They were enabled to stand up to kings and princes, to soldiers and emperors. They travelled far and wide, and they spoke as witnesses of what they had seen and heard in Christ. They did not worry about the times and seasons, for they were too involved with their work. They did not look at the clock, for they saw fields that were ripe for the harvest. As any farmer will tell you, when you have to bring in a harvest, you have no time to look at the clock. The exact time is unimportant when there is so much to do, every day.

OUR FIRST CONCERN

Now the question may be asked: does this mandate, given to the disciples, count for the whole church of the latter days, for us today? We cannot be, as the disciples were, eye-witnesses. The office of the apostles was unique. It must also be said that we are not all called to be ministers and missionaries. But it is still true for all of us that our foremost concern must be the proclamation of the apostolic doctrine, which is, salvation in Jesus Christ and Him crucified. We must see to it today that this work continues, with our prayers and gifts. We must “witness,” that is “testify” of Christ in our daily life, through our walk and talk. That is why we are here on this earth: to live and work for the coming of the kingdom of God, about which Christ gave us such wonderful promises.

That must be the focus of our daily work, no matter what our vocation is. In this respect, I refer you briefly to what we read in II Thessalonians. Some of the Thessalonians had come to believe that the return of Christ was imminent. They started to look at the clock. You know what happened? Some gave up their jobs and ceased their normal routine. I mean, why bother and work when Jesus can return any day? What sense is this life when the new life is about to begin?

Paul admonished the Thessalonians in the same way that Christ gently rebuked the disciples. Paul also stressed: much must happen before Christ returns, for example, the coming of the man of lawlessness! In any case, we must never cease our daily work because we are looking at the clock. As far as the times and seasons are concerned (I Thessalonians 5: 1), the Thessalonians should know that this is God’s realm. They are to continue their work. Paul strongly emphasizes this: if anyone will not work, he will not eat. And he exhorts all people living in idleness: do your work in quietness and earn your own living, and do not be weary in well-doing.

DO NOT BE WEARY

Do not be weary, says Paul, in well-doing. Sometimes the burdens of life, also the life of Christians, can be utterly wearisome. Why not just quit, and wait for Christ to return? What sense do this life and all our efforts have, also in view of all the trials? Well, you may pray, “Come, Lord Jesus,” for the Bride and the Spirit say “Come,” but at the same time you must continue your life and your work, for the glory of God and the benefit of your neighbour. Just go about your business, quietly, faithfully.

Intense and wrong expectations can be very paralyzing. False expectations can lead to idleness. But we are exhorted in the Lord Jesus Christ to live our lives faithfully, as God’s children, to do our work, and to leave the times and seasons in His hands.

Christ is coming. I hope He will come today so that we may be united with all the saints who have preceded us. But until He comes, as long as we are here, until He relieves us of our earthly task, despite all the weariness which sometimes

comes over us, we shall each one of us continue to work for the coming of the kingdom. We shall do so not in our own strength, but empowered by the Holy Spirit we shall continue to glorify God in our lives from day to day, each in our place. Our vision will be far and wide: the Moor, with the Philistine and the Tyrian, on the roll of nations He will count all these as born on Zion's holy mount, in many tongues, one God, one faith confessing (Psalm 87). Yes, keep your vision far and wide for the day when the decisive beginning of Ascension and Pentecost becomes the definite end of the history of this world. Then will the eternal marriage feast of the Lamb begin.

For, Lord, when Thou again in glory on the clouds of heaven shalt shine, we Thy flock shall stand before Thee. And until then, you will find us working, so busy with our task that the times passes quickly. And before we know it, Jesus has come.