

# Has God Left Us In The Lurch?

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, besides the earthquakes in Nepal, you can't deny that this week has been a very bitter week for our country here in South Africa, hasn't it? If you've just been following the news, last weekend, Emmanuel Sitole was attacked and stabbed to death in Alexandra Township just because he was from another country in a violent act of xenophobia.

On Sunday, last Sunday, Sister Gertrude Tiefenbacher, an 86-year-old nun in KZN, was beaten and killed in her own bedroom.

Jade Panayito, a young Port Elizabeth teacher, was kidnapped on Tuesday morning as she was waiting for a lift outside her home and she was later killed by her abductors.

Sandra Malcolm, a 75-year-old gran, was hacked to death in her home in Lakeside, not 15 minutes from here, last weekend. I've been, I must admit, I've been so depressed this week by the news.

And of course, our thoughts and prayers are with the families of these victims. But this kind of week, doesn't it, it causes us to despair. It causes us to despair about the state of our country, about our world.

[ 1 : 1 6 ] And yes, you know, I understand that suffering and crime is the result of the fact that this world is out of right relationship with God. And yes, as a Christian, I know that God has done something about our broken world when he came into it in Jesus Christ.

And yet, you can't help but wonder, where is he today? It was awesome when Jesus was here, walking this earth and healing people and changing the world.

But he's not here anymore. It's kind of like he up and left us to fend for ourselves in a cruel and merciless world. Do you feel that? Is that what you feel often?

That God has left you in the lurch? It's easy to feel that. But what I want us to realize this morning is that nothing could be further from the truth. Because we're going to join Jesus' first group of disciples on the day that he left them.

Unexpectedly. The day that they were feeling left in the lurch by Jesus. And I want us to see what he said to them to show them that he wasn't actually leaving at all. In fact, he was doing the very opposite.

[ 2 : 2 8 ] And so the first thing that we need to see from this passage this morning is how, despite what it might look like, Jesus is still working in our world today. And in fact, more than he ever has.

So join with me as we look at this passage. Notice how it begins. The very beginning of this book of Acts. Notice how Luke begins. Now Luke wrote Acts. In fact, Acts is the second volume of Luke's gospel.

If you didn't know that, Luke's gospel is volume one. Acts is volume two. It picks up right where Luke's gospel left off. But look how he starts Acts. He says, In my former book, Theophilus.

Now Theophilus was the man that commissioned him to write this account. In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.

Okay, so that word began is very important. You see it there in your Bibles? Acts 1.1. In other words, Jesus hasn't finished just because he's gone to heaven.

[ 3 : 33 ] In fact, the gospel accounts only record the beginning of Jesus' work on earth. And we see this further on in this passage. Look at the end of verse 3.

What happened after Jesus' resurrection? He appeared to them, his disciples, over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command.

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

And then onwards in verse 8, have a look. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Okay, so do you see what Jesus is doing here? In saying these things to his disciples. Jesus is in fact setting up the next stage of his ministry on earth.

[ 4 : 28 ] Part 2 of his work in this world. And he spent 40 days doing that. Between his resurrection and his ascension to heaven, he spent 40 days preparing his disciples for this next stage.

Those 40 days, Jesus wasn't on holiday, alright? Just before he went to heaven. He was working to teach and train his disciples for what's about to happen. And what's about to happen, he says, is that he's going to send his spirit from heaven to earth to replace him and to continue the work that he started.

But the Holy Spirit is now going to continue that work on a whole new level. And we see this, in fact, in the Gospel of John. So I want you to turn there.

Keep your finger in Acts and turn to John chapter 16, which is the book before Acts. And I want you to listen to what Jesus told his disciples the day before his death.

And he's talking to them about what's going to happen. The ministry of the Holy Spirit. John 16, verse 6.

[ 5 : 34 ] Towards the end, he says, You are filled with grief because I have said these things. But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the advocate or counselor will not come to you.

But if I go, I will send him to you. Alright, just there. Now he calls his Holy Spirit the advocate or counselor. The representative who will work on behalf of both Jesus and his people on earth.

But what he says here in John is important. He says, Unless I go away, he won't come to you. You see that? In verse 7. Unless I go away, he won't come to you.

So what Jesus is saying is that what's essential to Jesus carrying on his work on earth in the world today through his spirit is that he first leaves earth physically.

He says that's essential to the spirit carrying out his work. But of course his disciples don't want Jesus to leave earth physically. We're told they're filled with grief when he told them he was going.

[ 6 : 43 ] They want him to stay. And you can't blame them, can you? I mean, we would want him to stay as well if he was here with us physically. Just as much as a child wants their parent to stay with them if they've had some bad accident.

Maybe they've fallen down a ravine while hiking with their parent. They want their parent to stay with them. And yet the parent knows the best thing is for the parent to leave them temporarily to get the best help they can.

And that's kind of what Jesus is doing here. He knows that the best way to help his people is to leave them. So that his spirit can come. Which kind of makes sense, doesn't it?

If you think about it. If Jesus had stayed, just think about this. If Jesus had stayed physically on earth and he hadn't ascended and sent his spirit. Where would he be today?

If he had stayed here after his resurrection, where would he live? Do you think? In Israel? Maybe he'd have an apartment in Tel Aviv or live in Jerusalem. Maybe he would have moved out of Jerusalem. Maybe he would be in America.

[ 7 : 41 ]     America is a fairly good place to live. Lots of people. You could start a TV ministry there. America is a good place to start a TV ministry. Or maybe Jesus would go live in a hut on a mountain.

Where would Jesus live if he was here today? You wonder? Maybe he'd be in an apartment in Joburg. I don't know. But wherever he'd be, the thing is, he'd only ever be able to be in one place, wouldn't he?

If he's here physically. But it's only when Jesus leaves earth as a man and comes back as the Holy Spirit that he's able to be everywhere.

And carry out his work globally in a way that he never could have if he was still here physically. And so you see why he needed to leave the earth physically.

And the main thing that we need to understand this morning is, just because Jesus is no longer here physically doesn't mean that he's no longer here. It doesn't mean that he's left us.

[ 8 : 41 ]     It doesn't mean that he's abandoned us. In fact, he's more here than he's ever been. Not in one place, but everywhere, working invisibly right now in the Holy Spirit.

And because he is working in the Spirit, not only can he be everywhere, but there's another thing that he can do that he couldn't have done before. He can work in us, in our hearts, in a way that he couldn't have before.

And that's why Jesus needed to leave. Now, of course, it was vital that he did come to earth as a human being. Don't make the mistake of thinking that was unnecessary. It was vital that he came as a human being to die in our place, to represent us.

He needed to be one of us, to represent us, to take our sins on the cross. But, just as vital as it was then for Jesus to be human, it is vital now for him to be in the Holy Spirit.

It's vital for us today that he is here as the Holy Spirit, working in our hearts to turn each of us to believe in him and to follow him so that we can be saved.

[ 9 : 46 ]     You see, that's what the Holy Spirit does in our lives. The Holy Spirit applies what Jesus did 2,000 years ago. He applies it to our lives today and changes us so that we believe in it and that we are saved.

Otherwise, if the Holy Spirit wasn't working in the world, Jesus' death wouldn't have had any effect. It would have been for nothing. The Holy Spirit is essential for us to come to understand what Jesus did and to believe in it and to know it's true.

And so you see, the first thing we need to understand this morning, Jesus has not left us. He is here. He's continuing his work on this earth to save people from their sins more than he ever has before.

And the only reason that you are sitting here this morning is because Jesus is still working and he has brought you here. And he has spoken to us and continues to speak in his word.

Secondly, though, he goes on to tell his disciples something else. He goes on to tell his disciples how he's going to continue his work in the world. And he says something quite unexpected. He tells them he's going to continue his work through them.

[ 10 : 57 ] Namely, through their witness. And so we see Jesus works through the witness of his people, secondly. So look at verse 6. What happens here?

Just after Jesus tells his disciples about the coming of his spirit, they ask him this question. They say, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? In other words, when your spirit comes, as you've just told us he will, are you going to bring about God's new kingdom on earth?

And that's a fair question for them to ask because that's what God had promised to do in his prophets for thousands of years already. He had promised to establish a new kingdom, an eternal kingdom where there will be no more evil.

There will be no more suffering. There will be no poverty, no death. There will be no more suffering. Where Jesus will be king. He will rule justly and fairly and everything will work like it should.

That is what God has promised. A world like that. And God has said that that would happen when the Holy Spirit comes. He had said that through his prophets. So, for example, listen again to Isaiah chapter 32, which Pearson read for us earlier.

[ 12 : 07 ] It was a prophecy of God promising this new world to come, this new kingdom. And so it starts, it says, harvests will fail and the land will be overgrown with thorns and fortresses will be abandoned and the noisy city deserted.

Basically, it's just painting a picture of what our world is like, a broken, fallen world that doesn't work properly. But then this will happen. It says, till the spirit is poured out on us from high.

And what will happen when the spirit is poured out from high? Well, Isaiah 32 says, then the desert will become a fertile field. And the fertile field will seem like a forest. And the Lord's justice will dwell in the desert.

And his righteousness will live in the fertile field. The fruit of that righteousness will be peace. Its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.

Don't we long for that in South Africa? Secure homes, undisturbed places of rest, where justice reigns and righteousness rules.

[ 13 : 12 ] I mean, imagine, just for a second, imagine our country, South Africa, where everybody is in right relationship with God and lives in obedience to God and where everything is just and fair and good and that there's no poverty and everybody gets along with each other.

Don't you hunger for that kind of righteousness in our land? Don't you? I do. Don't you hunger for that righteousness? Well, you know what Jesus says? In his Sermon on the Mount, he says, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

In other words, Jesus promises us the world will be like that one day. The world will be like that. And so Jesus' disciples ask him, is now the time?

Is the world going to change? Are you bringing your kingdom like you've been promising? And Jesus says, he says, not yet. He says, not yet.

Have a look in verse 7. He said to them, this is in response to their question, are you bringing the kingdom? He said, it is not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes in you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[ 14 : 36 ] So you see what he's saying here? Now, come along with me and understand this. He's saying that the coming of the Spirit to earth will usher in God's kingdom, as he promised thousands of years ago that it would.

But something else needs to happen first before God's kingdom is established once and for all. And what is that? What needs to happen first? Well, the gospel message needs to be taken out into the whole world.

The message of what Jesus did to take away our sins. That's what he's telling. That's what needs to happen before God's kingdom arrives. Because think about it. Unless people hear and put their faith in the gospel for their sins to be forgiven, then they'll have no place in God's new world.

And so it's vital that before God's new kingdom arrives, that we're all hungering for and wanting and waiting for. It's essential that before that arrives, people are given a chance to be part of it.

And they're given that chance through the witnessing of the gospel. And so Jesus tells his disciples, not just his disciples then, but his disciples today, if you are a follower of Christ, this is what he's telling you and me, you will be my witnesses all over the world.

[ 15 : 46 ] You, in other words, you will be the means by which God establishes the kingdom as you spread the gospel. You will be my witnesses.

But now what does that mean? We often use that word, don't we? Witness. Witness to the gospel. A Christian is witness. What does the word witness actually mean? What does it mean to be Jesus' witnesses, if that's what he's calling us to do?

Well, witness, the way we use it today, means to testify to what is true. That's basically what the word witness means. To testify, to speak up for what we know is true.

Like a witness in a court case. Think of a court case. I don't know if any of you have been to court. But a witness, when the court calls a witness, then a witness isn't just an impartial observer, say to, I don't know, an accident or a crime.

A witness is someone who stands up and testifies about what they've seen. Not just observes, but they testify to it. That's the difference. And so, as Christians, we are meant to stand up and speak out for what we know is true.

[ 16 : 50 ] Not to be silent. Not to just be observers of Jesus, but to be witnesses of him. Which means our mouths must be open. We must be speaking about him.

We can't just come to church and listen to Jesus and learn about him. We are called to be witnesses. We're called to then witness to what we know to be true in our lives.

That's the first aspect of what it means to be a witness. But there's another aspect of what witnessing involves. If you think about it, witnessing is only ever done in the context of opposition, isn't it?

I mean, you don't need a witness in a court case if everyone agrees to the facts. Then you don't call in a witness. You only will call in a witness in court when the facts are being contested, won't you?

And so, as one person said, witnessing is not just seeing something and telling people about it. Witnessing is telling people about something they don't believe in. You see, as Christians, we witness to a truth that people don't believe in.

[ 17 : 57 ] And many people don't want to believe in. And so, that means we will face opposition when we do that. You know what the original word for witness is?

The one that's used in the Bible. It's the word martyr. Martyr. Someone who suffers for the truth. It's the same word. When Jesus calls us to be witnesses, he calls us to be martyrs.

Martyrs. Because naturally, when we witness to the truth, we will suffer for it. We will be opposed. To be a witness is to be a martyr. And Jesus often warned his disciples that their witness would be opposed.

And that they'd be tempted, therefore, to keep quiet, like we're tempted to keep quiet as Christians. And yet, he told his disciples they can't do that.

They mustn't do that. Because think about that. If they had. If his disciples had just kept quiet because they knew their witness was going to get opposition, then none of us would have heard the gospel.

[ 19 : 01 ] The gospel wouldn't have spread. The gospel wouldn't have grown. God's kingdom would have been limited to a handful of disciples. And that's it. It's only because they witnessed, knowing that they would be opposed for it, and each one of them suffered for their witness.

It's only because of that, that we are here today and we heard the gospel. But you see, Jesus tells his disciples over and over again that they will be opposed for their witness.

Make no mistake. And if you just read the book of Acts, which I encourage you to do. We're starting a new series on Acts. I encourage you to read through it over the next few weeks. You will see how many times that came true.

How many times Jesus' disciples were opposed. And there was so much hostility against them just because they were witnessing to the truth. And yet they had to.

They knew they must. But knowing this, knowing that they would be opposed for their witness, Jesus does two things here in this passage in Acts to aid them in their mission.

[ 20 : 02 ] First, he promises them his spirit, which we've seen, to help and strengthen them. But second, he also makes sure that they know that what they're witnessing of is true, is actually proven fact.

They wouldn't witness and risk their lives for something they weren't sure about, would they? You wouldn't. They wouldn't. And so Jesus makes sure that they know what they're witnessing to is absolutely true. Look at verse 3.

He says, You see that?

Why would Jesus do that? He gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. Well, he did that because he wanted his first eyewitnesses to be absolutely sure of what they were witnessing.

And it's those men, those first eyewitnesses that were standing with him then, those 12 apostles, it was 11 at the time, plus Matthias later on. We read later on in chapter 1. But those 12 men are the foundation of our church today.

[ 21 : 05 ] Because they were the original eyewitnesses of the facts. And so we must remember, just as an aside, that the Christian church is based on eyewitness evidence.

It's based on proven fact. It's not just a bunch of ideas like any other religion. A bunch of religious mumbo-jumbo. It's hard evidence that we are gathered around and that the Bible is based on and that the church is based on.

And so our job today as Christians is to continue to witness to that original evidence that the apostles recorded for us in our Bibles. And so how do we witness today if that's the case? We witness today as we bring people into exposure to the apostles' witness in the Bible.

That's how we witness. You can't witness without your Bible. Because that's where the evidence is. That's where the original eyewitness testimony is. And you witness today as you bring people into exposure to that original evidence.

So you see how Jesus is working in our world today. So remember, point one this morning is we know that Jesus is still here. Point two is how Jesus works. And this is how Jesus works.

[ 22 : 14 ] We've just seen. He works by His Holy Spirit in people's hearts. As we, His disciples, witness to the truth of His Word to people who don't yet believe in it.

That is when Jesus works in our world. That is how He works and He works powerfully. He works by His Spirit as we witness to the truth of His Word to people who don't yet believe in it.

That's why we're here, brothers and sisters. But we'll be opposed for that. And so we need to realize that the only reason we're still here on earth is to do that.

The only reason that we're still living in this broken world and suffering in this broken world is because of the mission. The reason Jesus left us here.

That's the only reason we're here. And that's what the disciples also needed to realize on that day that He left them physically. So look with me at verse 9. And just put yourself there.

[ 23 : 18 ] Think of what the disciples were feeling. 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? Why?

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. Quite a scene, isn't it? These two men in white were messengers from God.

And they were there to remind the disciples of the job they've got to do. So they were effectively saying to these disciples, Don't worry. Jesus is coming back.

So stop looking into the sky and get on with the work of witnessing because there's only so much time. All right. They were there to remind the disciples what they were there to do.

[ 24 : 16 ] Why Jesus left them behind. There's only so much time. And that's a message for us as Christians today. Get on with the work of witnessing because there's only so much time.

You see, this age that we're living in today, between the first coming of Jesus and His second coming when He returns to it, that age is a fixed period of time in history.

And this age that we're living in exists for the sole purpose of giving people a chance to hear and respond to the gospel before it's too late. That is the only reason this age exists between Jesus' first coming and His second coming.

It's the reason the world is still like it is, that God hasn't changed yet. You know, people often say, and you've heard this before, I'm sure, if you've been a Christian for any length of time, people say, well, God can't be loving because there's so much suffering in the world.

Have you heard that? God can't be loving. Look at all the suffering in the world. But you know what the truth is? The only reason that God has left the world like it is, is because He does love people enough to delay judgment until as many people as possible have heard the gospel.

[ 25 : 29 ] The reason we're still in a world of suffering is because God does love us. And He wants to give as many people a chance to hear the gospel as possible. But be sure that this age won't last forever.

Jesus says to us in Matthew 24, The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. Paul says later in Acts, God has set a day when He will judge the world with justice.

God has set a day. There is a day in God's calendar in heaven that He's marked off that Jesus is coming back, and He will judge the world with justice. And that day is approaching.

That day is approaching us at full speed. It could be tomorrow. And the most important thing that we must, and the most important thing that we can get involved in before that day is witnessing to the truth of the gospel.

There's nothing else that matters in light of where we are in history. And that's why this term at St. Mark's, we're doing something very special in our Bible studies.

[ 26 : 42 ] And that's why if you're not part of a Bible study this term, you should be. Even if just for this term. Because we're going to be doing a course that teaches us how to know the gospel and how to witness it to others.

Because that's what life on earth for a Christian is to be about in this age. It's to be getting involved in the church's mission to witness the truth. If you're a Christian here this morning, if you call yourself a Christian, but you're not involved in that mission in any way, what are you doing with your life?

You see, you can't be like the disciples staring up into the sky, waiting to be with Jesus. You've got a job to do while you're here, before he takes you home. Get on with the work.

And if you're not yet a Christian, then do this course that we're going to be doing, this term, and find out what the gospel is, because there's only so much time for you to respond to it before it's too late.

And so in closing, as we consider that, just the brokenness of the world we're in, we consider the problems, we consider the crime, we consider the problems in our country, and maybe the problems in our own lives, the things that we personally suffer from.

[ 28 : 03 ] As we consider all those things, remember, Jesus hasn't left us. And so don't be so preoccupied with the world's problems that you forget that Jesus is still here today, working in our world to establish his kingdom.

But also remember that Jesus does that through the witness of his people, and so don't be so preoccupied with getting to heaven that you forget the reason that he's left you here on earth.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you have left us here, and often we despair at that. We want to be with you.

We want the world to be restored. We want the world to be right. And yet we've been reminded this morning the only reason that you left us here is to give people a chance to hear the gospel and be saved.

Lord, help us to get our priorities straight in our lives. Help us to stop chasing after our own futile goals that won't last. And help us, Lord, to direct our attention to the mission that you've called us to do on earth, the witness to the gospel.

[ 29 : 14 ] And we do pray for this term as we meet in Bible studies to learn how to do that, that you will be with us and that you will use us as a church in Plumstead to reach out to this community, to witness to the gospel, and that people would come to you and be saved.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.