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What You Need to Know to Be a Witness

Acts 10:34-43

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The last words an individual speaks often carry great significance. In Genesis 49 Jacob blessed his twelve sons, gave instructions for his burial and then breathed his last. With his last words in Deuteronomy 33 Moses blessed the tribes of Israel and then went up on the mountain top and died. Sadly, last words are not always words of blessing. In 1 Kings 2:8-9, King David's dying breath was used to urge his son to commit murder by killing Shimei, an old man who had cursed David years before. Unable to forgive and to release his resentment, David tells his son, "*You must bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol.*" What a sad and unfortunate ending for a man who said and wrote so many beautiful words while he was alive. What a burden to leave a child with such a terrible command with your last words.

Do you recall the last words of Jesus? Not his last words on the cross, but the last words of the risen Christ? In Acts chapter one, we have the last recorded words of Jesus in response to the disciples' question, "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*" The disciples are all Jewish. They are people who have heard Jesus' teaching, seen his miracles, and they have spent a lot of time with Jesus. They are anticipating that Jesus will become king of a restored and independent nation of Israel. The disciples are still thinking more in terms of the kingdom of Israel than the kingdom of God. They still haven't grasped the breadth of God's gift in Jesus – that he is for people of all nations. Jesus didn't just come for the sake of his fellow Jews, he came for everyone. As disciples of Jesus we move beyond nationalism to being part of a world wide community called the church or the family of God that supersedes all barriers of nationality and ethnicity and culture. Listen to how Jesus answers their question, (Acts 1:6-8), "So when they had come together, they asked him, "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*" 7 He replied, "*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set 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, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.***" The Book of Acts is the unfolding of that verse (Acts 1:8). It tells the story of the Holy Spirit coming upon the first followers of Jesus filling them with courage and boldness **to witness and testify** about Jesus to other people. By the time you get to chapter 10, a very important development arises - we meet Cornelius, a Gentile soldier, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household; and gave alms generously

to the people and prayed constantly to God. One day he had a vision of an angel who told him to send for the Apostle Peter including detailed instructions as to Peter's exact location.

At the same time, Peter had a vision in which he was told to go to the home of Cornelius, a Roman soldier. This, of course, would have been unheard of because it was unlawful for a Jewish man like Peter to associate with or visit a Gentile, but Peter was obedient and went. Cornelius invited all his family and friends to his home to hear what the Lord has commanded Peter to say. That brings us to the scripture from Acts 10:34-43:

“Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that **God shows no partiality**, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know **the message** he sent to the people of Israel, **preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message** spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, **for God was with him**. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that **everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.**”

In Acts 1:8, Jesus tells the disciples they shall receive power from the Holy Spirit and be witnesses and in Acts 10 we see and hear Peter being a spirit-filled witness. What is a witness? A witness is someone who has experienced something. A witness is someone who has seen and heard things that he or she can tell others about – it may be an event, a person, or circumstances. When it comes to our faith, people can question our theological world view and belief in God, but it is harder for people to dismiss our witnessing to what God has done in our lives.

Let's look closely at what Peter shares as a witness because these verses in Acts 10 are a wonderful summary for what we need to know to be a witness. Peter begins by saying, “*I truly understand that **God shows no partiality**, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*”

The first thing to notice is **God shows no partiality, God's grace** is expansive. Peter's narrow nationalism, thinking God blessed his nation more than any other, that Israel was more favored than any other country; that his people were more favored in the eyes of God than Gentiles – this is shattered by his meeting a devout Italian soldier who feared God, gave generously to help others, and prayed constantly to God and whose prayers were answered (Acts 10:1-4). To be a witness we need to know the God of the Universe is concerned for all people, no matter whom they are or where they live. Peter is surprised to learn that someone who he thought was not acceptable to God, someone who Peter's tradition told him not to even associate with, was in fact acceptable to God. Peter had to get over his own prejudice in order to be a witness. Sometimes so do we. Our prejudices and biases, and the list for each of us is different, blind us to the reality of who God is and what God is doing in the lives of people who may be different than we are.

The second thing to notice is **the message about Jesus**.

*“You know **the message** he sent to the people of Israel, **preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.**”* Peter bears witness to two key things about Jesus – that in Jesus we have peace with God, ourselves, and others and that Jesus is Lord of all. This may not sound like it to you, but this is a radical statement for Peter to make. Remember who Peter is talking to – a centurion, a soldier in the Roman army and all his family and friends. Peter is telling that audience, Jesus is Lord, he is the Leader, not the emperor who claimed that title and demanded allegiance. That is holy boldness on Peter's part. As witnesses our message is about Jesus and how through him we can have peace with God as well as the fact that he demands our allegiance above all others who assert a claim upon us.

The core message of Christian witness is about Jesus who gives us peace and demands allegiance as the ultimate leader of every aspect of our life. Peter describes how the message spread from its origin in Galilee and what Jesus did. *“**That message** spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, **for God was with him.**”* Peter says God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power. In Acts 1 Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. When this happens in Acts 2 then the disciples begin doing what

Jesus did – doing good and healing the sick for God was with them. This is how the message about Jesus spread through the witness of the first disciples.

The message about Jesus would not be complete, of course, without mentioning Jesus' death on a tree or a cross and God raising him from the dead so Peter continues: *"We are **witnesses** to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as **witnesses**, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."* This is the part of the message that may be most challenging for us – Peter could talk of the crucifixion and resurrection from personal experience. We did not get to eat and drink with Jesus after he rose from the dead. As improbable as it sounds to some people, the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit are what inspired and empowered and the first Christian witnesses to share the remarkable news everywhere they went. New Testament theologian and author Howard Clark Kee wrote, *"No one observing the itinerant fishermen and craftsmen trying to launch an apocalyptic movement in Palestine in the name of an executed Galilean troublemaker would ever have supposed that by the end of the first century there would be flourishing communities of Gentile adherents in the major Mediterranean cities and in Rome itself."¹* The disciples couldn't keep their experience of Jesus to themselves. Everywhere they went – crossing barriers of race, culture, class, and gender, they bore witness to the good news that there was life transforming power, forgiveness of sins, and a new sense of identity and purpose, available through Jesus Christ.

Finally Peter says to Cornelius and all who are gathered in the house: *"He commanded us to preach to the people and **to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.**"* The end of Peter's testimony is the command of Jesus to preach the good news as well as to remind people that there will be a time of judgment and accountability for all people. Peter concludes with the invitation that everyone who believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of sins through his name which takes us back to the message of peace he began with.

I am truly thankful for people like Peter and Cornelius who were courageous and bold enough to witness to others about their faith in Jesus. All of us who are believers

¹ Howard Clark Kee, *Understanding the New Testament*, page 174.

today, have been fortunate enough to come to faith because others in previous generations have been faithful witnesses. Hopefully all of us, if we were to take a few moments to think about it, could identify members of our family, Sunday School teachers, Pastors, Youth Group leaders, camp counselors, or friends who bore witness to Jesus and helped us along the road of faith. Those people are very special to us and we are grateful for them. At the same time, we need to remember, that the Lord calls us to be loving, faithful witnesses for other people as well.

Here are some questions for us to ponder as we consider being a witness this week: Is the kingdom of God expanding through the work of the Holy Spirit in me? Have I brought anyone closer to Jesus? How am I acting to fulfill the last words of Jesus my Leader and Friend? Jesus says that bringing people closer to him is part of what we do when we receive the Holy Spirit and bear witness as his disciple. Following the Spirit's leading may mean being willing to leave our own comfort zone and putting aside our prejudice as Peter did in being willing to go to Cornelius' home, even though it made him a little nervous and uncomfortable.

Oswald Chambers observed in *My Utmost for His Highest*, "*The moment we recognize our complete weakness and dependence upon him will be the very moment that the Spirit of God will exhibit his power.*" **Jesus didn't save us just to get us into heaven, but to change us into the kind of people who make a difference in the world.**

How can we be witnesses? Being a witness is more than giving money to missions to enable other people to share about Jesus in places where we cannot physically go, as important as that is. Peter had to be willing to go to people who he initially thought were beyond the love of God. Are there people you feel are beyond the love of God or rejected by God? Could it be that God wants you to pray for and witness to them? Be open to opportunities the Lord may present, there may be people who would surprise you who are open to hearing the message about Jesus that Peter shared.

We're told that while Peter was still speaking to Cornelius and all in his household that the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles who were too busy praising God to notice. And they were all baptized in the name of Jesus.

Witnessing is basic to being a Christian. Jesus still hopes his followers will remember his last words and be an active part of a witnessing, loving, caring, praying, Spirit driven community where we learn how to be in right relationship with God and other people.

Like Peter and Cornelius, may we all be open to the people the Lord wishes us to witness to – whoever they are and wherever they may be.