YOU WILL BE MY WTINESSES

Acts 1:1-14

Key Verse: 8

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Thank God for his precious words that teach us that Christian life is to love our Lord Jesus because of his love for us and to feed his sheep as the expression of our love for him. May we grow in this love relationship with our Lord Christ Jesus. In today’s passage of Acts , before his ascension, Jesus promised the power of the Holy Spirit to his apostles that they might become his witnesses. In the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8, we see Jesus’ promise, his hope and his last will for us. He eagerly wants us to be his witnesses in the power of the Spirit. This year too, we want to hold to Acts 1:8, so for seven years consecutively, and indeed see the fulfillment of these in and among us.

In verses 1 and 2, Luke says, “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, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.” What Jesus did and taught in his messianic ministry on earth was just the beginning, and Jesus’ ministry continues to the end of the age. Particularly, what he did and taught was to proclaim the kingdom of God, healing the sick and driving out demons. He wanted to bring the people of this world to the kingdom of God through the salvation of their souls. There are so many things to do and to teach in this world. But we believe that what Jesus did and taught is the most significant and when we follow his example, our life will surely be pleasing to God. According to John’s gospel, it is to love Jesus and feed his sheep. Jesus finished the redemptive work, but he is not finished with his redeeming work. God wants us to take part in his continuous redeeming work.

Then in verse 3, “After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.” Again, we remember the plain truth, “no death, no resurrection.” He suffered and died and was raised from the dead. We should not forget Christ’s suffering, his prayer at Gethsemane, “Not my will but yours be done,” his trial and death on the cross. He obeyed God unto death, even death on a cross. Hebrews 5:8,9 says, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” We don’t want to suffer and we do not want our children to suffer. But in times of sufferings and hardships, God wants us to learn obedience. Through obedience we can outgrow childish ways and a self-centred life to maturity and ultimate salvation.

After suffering, resurrection came. Many could see Jesus’ death on the cross. But no human could see his resurrection. That was impossible as no one could see God’s creation. The risen Jesus had to show himself to his people, his resurrected body with nailed hands and pierced side. He said to them, “Touch me and see”, proving that he was not a ghost which has no flesh or bones, and so is not touchable and visible to the physical eye. He ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence. One early morning, the glorified risen Jesus stood on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and restored Peter and his companions’ failure in fishing through the great catch of 153 large fish. 153 is a definite and real number – the counting was real, so was his resurrection. He cooked fish and bread on a fire of burning coals and invited them to breakfast and ate with them. All these are concrete evidences of his resurrection, his being alive. Without the resurrection, Christianity crumbles. It is very critical to believe Jesus’ resurrection and live by faith in Jesus’ resurrection. He is alive and speaks to us through the words of the Scriptures. He is the resurrection and the life, and promises that if we believe, we will see the glory of God.

Verse 3 continues, “He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” Here we clearly see that Jesus’ greatest concern is the kingdom of God. From the outset of his messianic ministry, Jesus preached the kingdom of God, saying, “The time has come; the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk 1:15) He traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God (Lk 8:1). And he sent out his disciples to preach the kingdom of God. Even on the cross he invited one repentant sinner to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the place where God rules. The kingdom of God comes first of all in one’s heart. This is the invisible kingdom. Then the kingdom of God will be visible when Christ returns to the earth and this world becomes Christ’s kingdom. And then the kingdom of God will be forever in the new heaven and new earth. This is God’s master plan. The kingdom of God is our true and ultimate hope.

How important it is to live with a kingdom mindset, not an earthly mindset. Once Peter confessed to Jesus, “You are the Christ,” but right away he could not accept Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross, which was the way of the Messiah, the Christ of God. At this, Jesus said, “You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (Mt 16:23). Even here in this passage, after hearing about the kingdom of God from the risen Jesus for forty days, the apostles asked Jesus, “Lord, are you at this going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Their concern was still the kingdom of Israel, not the kingdom of God. How difficult it is to have the mindset of the kingdom of God and his purpose!

The kingdom of God is related to the kingdom of priests. God’s hope for the former slave Israelites was that the they might be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). Later on, Apostle Peter found Christian identity in these words of God and said to the Christians persecuted and scattered, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” (1 Pe 2:9). With this identity, Christians as living stones are to be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. We see that the kingdom of priests is also connected to a spiritual house. Those who have the kingdom-mindset strive to live as living stones. It is through the process of being cut and moulded to fit the house, the building. This process includes painful self-denial and self-discipline. It is so difficult to change one’s lifestyle. There are also external difficulties. So Peter encouraged the suffering Christians to come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men, but chosen by God and precious to him. Our fleshly desires and sinful nature that wants people’s recognition and an easygoing and comfortable life in this world have to be crucified as we come to him. So Galatians 5:24 says, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” We are to live by the Spirit, coming to him each day. We are also to acknowledge that God disciplines us with hardships, which includes the rod of men. So the author of Hebrews says, “Endue hardship as discipline…No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:7, 11). We don’t know what hardships will come this year. But we may endure hardships as discipline and grow in Christ Jesus, bearing the fruit of holiness and righteousness. Thank God that a baby boy is growing in Paulina’s womb. God encouraged the parents through this gift as they bore together the difficult time of the mom’s severe morning sickness along with their lives of mission. In God’s blessing, we have babies and children. Even from their babyhood and childhood, they may be disciplined and grow to be living stones, not natural stones which are useless. Proverbs 22:15 says, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.” And Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” Good habits should be shaped from childhood. God’s people here, young and old, all may form the kingdom-mindset, which is the mindset of a royal priesthood.

Now in verses 4-5 it says, “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.” This is Jesus’ promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is because the kingdom work cannot be done by human wisdom and power but by the Holy Spirit. Even Jesus carried out his messianic work being filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts 10:28 says, “You know…how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil…” The kingdom work is fundamentally a battle against the kingdom of Satan, which is the kingdom of this world.

Jesus said in John 16:7, “…It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.” Jesus also said in Luke 11:13, “…how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Here Jesus continues, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:3, “…no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” It is the work of the Hol Spirit that we confess, “Jesus is the Lord” from the bottom of our hearts. The Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of the believers, and the body of each believer is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in him (1 Cor 6:19). But here Jesus is talking about the power of the Spirit to live as witnesses of Jesus in this world.

It is written in Zechariah 4:6, “‘Not by might nor by power; but my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.’” After returning from Babylonian captivity, it looked impossible to rebuild the temple. It could not be done by human military might or intellectual power, but solely by the power of the Spirit. It was to encourage Zerubbabel the governor of Judea. The LORD says continually, “What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground…” The task would be like a mountain, but it would become level ground by the power of the Spirit. And then God says, “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it.” What confidence did God give to Zerubbabel! Finally God says, “Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.” The day of small things that may be ignored and despised can become the day of a big thing by the Spirit’s power.

In Acts, when a handful of believers gathered together and prayed, the Holy Spirit came upon them on the day of Pentecost. They became powerful witnesses of Jesus. Peter, who was once so cowardly, became very powerful in the power of the Holy Spirit and boldly spoke to the crowd. He first shared God’s vision through the Holy Spirit revealed in the Old Testament, what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old man will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (Ac 2:17-18). God fulfills his prophecies keeping his promises. Then Peter testified to Jesus, “Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Then he said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Ac 2:36-39). Another time Peter said to the Sanhedrin, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Ac 4:19-20). He had no fear at all to testify to Jesus before anyone and any group of people.

Look at verse 8 again. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Here the word “witness” contains the meaning of martyrdom. The point of the power of the Spirit is to be witnesses of Jesus. This is the meaning and purpose of life for those who have been saved by the grace of Christ Jesus. It is the life purpose of John the Baptist as written in John 1:7, “He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.” It is the purpose of life of royal priest, that is, to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light (2 Pe 2:9). Being a powerful witness of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit is Jesus’ promise, hope and last will for each of us.

I heard of one man of God who, on one occasion, preached to a great assembly of more than a million people in Brazil. That was definitely the demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. How can the power of the Holy Spirit be displayed to us? Last year M. Sarah and myself, each preached to over a hundred students at U of T. It was somewhat surprising that whenever we went to the campus, there was always at least one person who listened to the gospel message. We did not ask their email addresses or any other information, but just shared the word of the gospel. Most of the time I began with these words, “In your life there are some important people. I can say that Jesus Christ is the most important to you.” They usually responded, “Why?” Then I preached the gospel based on John 3:16, sometime sfor 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 30 minutes and even more. On several occasions, M. Sarah did not come back at the appointed time to the place we were supposed to meet to return home. She forgot the time when she shared the gospel enthusiastically for more than even 1 hour. I believed that God would grant me one regular Bible student out of a hundred. As for M. Sarah, God gave her one precious Bible student, John David, who came to the GTA Christmas worship service and to our own worship and is about to begin 1:1 Bible study. Just before ISBC, I met one student Joel, who to my surprise responded positively as soon as I spoke of the word of God and Bible study. He came to our Bible house and kept 1:1 Bible study 5 times. He even shared his life story of how he became a Christian and showed his desire to attend ISBC, but finally he could not attend because of his final exam schedule. After ISBC, he asked me about the conference and kept 1:1 Bible study. I thought God gave me indeed one regular Bible student. But to my great dismay, he stopped coming to Bible study since my family moved and he moved to another place from the dormitory at U of T. I still wonder not knowing what happened to him, asking God “Why?” in my prayer for him. Among the students to whom I preached the gospel, there was one person who emailed back to me for 1:1 Bible study. His name was Henry. We began 1:1 Bible study. In his case, he wanted to study whenever he had time because of his heavy school study and we studied in the dormitory, not in our Bible house. Up to now, we have studied until Genesis chapter 2. He is not a regular Bible student, but irregular. I wanted to know how God works in my gospel preaching. Actually I could not be sure of God’s work and I was discouraged. Then I could be reminded of the words of God in 1 King 18. The prophet Elijah told the king Ahab that there would be a heavy rain after the drought of three and half years, saying, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” Elijah was assured of this, but there seemed to be no clear hint of the rain. He told his servant, “Go and look toward sea.” “There is nothing there,” the servant said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” After this, Elijah became confident toward king Ahab. Indeed, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, and a heavy rain came. When I thought of these words of God, I realize that I should not ignore or despise small signs. I know that I could preach the gospel at campus last year through the work of the Holy Spirit. Whenever I spoke the word of the gospel, I myself could be strengthened. This year also, I want to share the gospel to more than 100 students at U of T, entrusting the results to God. Thank God that through our online ministry, God sent Emma and she has been studying with M. Sarah faithfully and sincerely since last September. What I want to say is that we may experience the power of the Spirit more and more as we witness to Jesus, through preaching on campus, 1:1 bible study, or the Sunday message. The power of the Spirit should be evident to us. Jesus’ promise and hope as his last will just before ascension be true to us personally and ministry-wise: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses…”

Let’s read verses 9-11 together, “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? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” This is really an amazing and distinctive promise. I think these two phrases, “this same Jesus” and “in the same way” are extremely important. This same Jesus, who lived on the earth in human history, crucified and risen, will come back – not the archangel Michael or any other person. He will come back in the same way he was taken up to heaven. It was through a cloud. What a vivid prophecy, graphic and picturesque! It is not even a similar way, but the same way. As you know, prophecy concerns a future event. It cannot have precedent. Who can dare to say, “in the same way”? But here is a promise of God with the expression, “In the same way”, letting us to know that there is a precedent, a pattern. These two descriptions, “the same Jesus” and “the same way” assure us of his returm. While on earth, Jesus himself said that he would come back on a cloud in power and great glory. Specifically, Luke 21:27 says, “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” Jesus continued, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

With this promise, the men of Galilee returned to Jerusalem and all joined together constantly in prayer. May we all the more join in prayer on top of each one’s personal prayer.

Forming the kingdom mindset may we be Jesus’ witnesses in the power of the Spirit in the hope of his coming again.