

Empowered Witnesses – John 15:18 - 16:4

Jesus is now just a couple of hours away from His arrest and crucifixion. Soon He will suffer agony on the cross. Following Christ's death, resurrection and ascension into Heaven, Jesus has chosen His disciples to reach the whole world with His Gospel. For them to be prepared, for them to achieve this task, Jesus is using this Upper Room Discourse to motivate and equip His disciples - so that they would be ready for their next mission.

Read John 15:18 - 16:4

Jesus began this discourse with 'do not be afraid'. If they were feeling anxious, imagine their response to what he says here. 'The world hates you/they will persecute you' - not might, but will. 'The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God' - 'whoever kills you' not 'people may try to kill you'. How would you feel upon hearing this? How would you feel as Jesus is dragged away by soldiers to suffer a gruesome death?

The disciples had a plan - a revolution that had been promised. Jesus would be the Messiah, the Christ, God's chosen king. Like King David, the disciples expected to be mighty men of the new King Jesus - alongside Him in the spotlight. Jesus would restore Israel, and reign with His disciples beside Him. This plan appeared to be biblical, required faith and a miracle. Yet suddenly, instead of a great glorified king, they get a crucified leader. Instead of a revolution, they are promised persecution.

Q. What would go through your mind if you were in the disciples' position? How would you respond?

Persecution Without Power = Denial

Read Mark 14:50, Matt 26:56 and Luke 22:54-62

The disciples ran. Fear of persecution drove them into hiding. This is a very stark example for us. You can walk closely with Jesus and yet be totally flummoxed to the point of even denying Him on the basis of what appears to be failure. A weak faith, which is what the disciples had at this point, will exist relatively well as long as life is working out - but it is unlikely to withstand during the day of trial and trouble.

Too many Christians today resemble the disciples in the immediate aftermath of the cross: afraid, defeated, hiding and mute - mortified by the thought that their Christianity might be uncovered. Many nominal Christians may be just about willing to admit they go to church but a million miles from confessing out and out devotion to Jesus Christ. Many 'Christians' in the church in the West aren't prepared to give their money let alone their lives - nominal Christianity will burn like straw when it encounters the fires of persecution. We have brothers and sisters around the world today, who are losing their lives on account of their unbreakable devotion to Christ. Without The Helper we're all powerless to be witnesses. Holy Spirit empowered faith will be like gold, refined in the furnace shown to be precious and real.

Q. What challenges do Christians face today? Where can we be tempted to hide or deny God's word?

Q. How can fear and guilt weaken our witness and conviction of the gospel?

Persecution With Power = Witness

Read John 15:26, Acts 1:8 and Acts 2:32-36

What a transformation. In the space of a few weeks, Peter goes from denying he even knew Jesus to preaching in front of thousands, standing up to the authorities. The baptism of the Holy Spirit performed a miracle - an undeniable change in the heart of Peter, and the other disciples.

Q. How do you imagine and understand the 'power' that the Holy Spirit brings to the disciples (Acts 1:8)?

What is this 'power to witness'? Let's not suddenly lose everything Jesus has been teaching already in this discourse, and call the 'power' something other than what he's been emphasising: dwelling in His house, knowing his love, knowing his peace. This is the power to witness, because all of these things help us overcome 'fear of man' that is rooted in insecurity. The Spirit affirms our identity as 'sons of god' and our purpose to 'bear witness'. Too often in the charismatic tradition, we have linked power automatically to 'signs and wonders' and so we make witnessing about those things, and if we aren't doing those things then we can't properly be witnesses. That is wrong and in contradiction to what Jesus is teaching. **Read Romans 5:3-5**

Q. How is our faith and witness affected the more we are convinced in our heads and hearts of God's love for us?

I think it's so important that we grasp hold of precisely what it is Jesus says His disciples will become upon receiving the Helper - He brings power, not to be his 'healers', 'preachers' or 'miracle workers' - but to be His 'witnesses'. A witness who has seen and known the love and God and will tell others. The most effective witnesses, are not those 'workers of wonders' but men and women whose hearts are overflowing with the love of God and love for God.

Let us not pretend that we live in a society today that is warm to the gospel. Secularism is the religion of the West - and the Word of God is rejected and mocked. You may not be burned at the stake for preaching the gospel, but hatred of Jesus and His words remains just as hot today as ever it did. For Christians, there is no alternative. The disciples were called to be witnesses, this is no 'private faith'. If you claim Christ as your Saviour, He claims you as His witness. To do that you need The Helper - we are hopeless without Him.

Q. How can we try to disqualify ourselves from witnessing? What stops us from sharing the gospel?

Q. How can we take a bold stand as witness of the gospel, like the Christian Reformation example 500 years ago?

Q. How do we show the love of God to our friends and family? How does God's love encourage us to be bold?