

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ²until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴On 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. ⁵For John baptized with ^u water, but in a few days you will be baptized with ^u the Holy Spirit.”

⁶Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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.”

⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹“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.”

You Can't

You can't. Those aren't exactly my favorite words. It's not that I heard them on a regular basis. But if anyone ever told me there was something that I couldn't do – I'd do the best I could to prove... I can and I will. After all nobody likes to be told what they can or can't do. But it's actually a good thing for people to tell you what you can or can't do. It means they care.

Kie, I'm not going to be the happy, hopeful, humanist – who says, “You can do anything.” Because the truth is, “You can't do everything.” There are a lot of things you can't do. People may tell you, “Yes you can. There is no stopping you.” There may be many things that you can do but as you get older, suddenly you find out the things you once could do, you can't anymore. Time slows everyone down and death stops us all.

But what does this have to do with your confirmation? In your classes you learned the Third article of the Apostle's Creed – “*I believe that I can't... by my own reason or strength believe in the Lord Jesus or come to him.*” And I'm reminding you, “You can't.” It's not just you. We can't. If you find yourself beating your head against a wall of things you can't do or even if you feel like you can do all things through him who strengthens you – Jesus reminds us, even though you can't – there is one who can.

Luke starts out with a recap of part 1. I already wrote you about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven. After instructing, after suffering, after giving many convincing proofs, after 40 days Jesus said to them, *“Don’t leave Jerusalem, wait for the gift my Father, promised, which you have heard me speak about.”* They’re excited. Jesus is talking about gifts. They’re ready to take on the world. They’ve got Jesus with them. The Pharisees and Romans killed him once – they won’t try that again. Not even death can defeat them.

And there were gifts, but then Jesus tells them what they will do. *“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* Jerusalem we can do that, Judea that’s going to take some time, but Samaria... we don’t even like them and the ends of the earth – we can’t. The Bible is full of examples of people who know what they can or can’t do. When God called Moses into service, he balked. I’ve tried that once. It didn’t work. Send someone else. God responded with, *“Go... you’re brother Aaron will speak for you.”* When Jeremiah tried the same tactic, *“I don’t know how to speak, I am only a child.”* It didn’t work. Because God doesn’t want us to tell him what we can’t do – especially when he calls us to do it.

Calls his disciples, *“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* The only catch, the only thing that made this seem so impossible for them, was that **Jesus would no longer be there with them, holding their hand along the way.** When that truth sank in, they were overwhelmed. How could they survive on their own? They can’t. It’s that simple. This was beyond them. It was bigger than them. It was more than they could handle without Jesus.

The humanistic approach to life tells us, *“You can do whatever you set your mind to. The only thing that will stop you is self-doubt.”* That’s both optimistic and a lie. And yet we are taught that you can be whatever you want to be, sometimes you just need to dig down deep inside to find the strength to do so. You can probably do a lot of things. You can get an education. You can be an electrician a pipefitter. You can serve in the military. You can do so many things. But you can’t do them all. You don’t have time for that.

Then there are the things that you don’t think you can do. That you would gladly excuse as, *“I can’t. I’m too young.”* Jesus tells us, *“You will be my witnesses,”* and there is no need for us to wait because the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all people. Suddenly we are full of excuses. We tried that once... it didn’t work. You can’t tell me. You don’t know my situation. Kie – you are just at the beginning of growing up. It may feel like some time off but soon you will be moving on in life, high school and maybe college. You are promising to remain faithful. Soon you will no longer have your parents around on a daily

basis. We will no longer be meeting on a weekly basis. That can be overwhelming. How will you survive on your own? The simple answer, “You can’t.” You said earlier, “I Believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in my Lord Jesus Christ or come to him.”

God should respond to our excuses, “You’re right. You can’t do anything without me.” But he doesn’t start barking orders like a drill sergeant. He doesn’t become a motivational poster, “You can do all things...” God never promised that he wouldn’t give us more than we can handle. There were times when Paul also wrote, “*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself*” (2 Corinthians 1:8).

Jesus never pointed to our inner strength, our ability. He never wanted his disciples to rely on their own potential. He wants them and us to be realistic about our abilities. He says, “*Out of the heart come, evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*” God wants us to realize that we are weak; that we don’t have the ability to do whatever we want to do. Jesus gave them a much greater strength. He promised to give them a source of strength, something that comes from outside of them: the Holy Spirit. This is what, or rather who, gave the disciples confidence in the face of certain death. This is what gave them the ability to realize that, “You can’t,” but “God can and will.”

If you would have told the disciples all that would happen in the book of Acts I’m certain they would have responded, “I can’t do that.” They were tasked with the proclamation and application of all that Jesus accomplished. He suffered, died, and rose for them. He ascended into heaven for them. He returned to the Father’s right hand a position of power and authority where he continues his work. The cloud is a sign of God’s presence, just think of the pillar of cloud in Exodus or the cloud at the Transfiguration. If we ask, “Where did Jesus go?” We know. Jesus returned to the Father, not a place up there but to be with the Father. Jesus is welcomed into the Father’s presence.

Jesus is now preparing a place in heaven but he is interceding on our behalf before the Father. He rules the world for the good of the church. What God has in mind is not to restore Israel to the “good ole’ days” but to restore the nations. This mission would consume the rest of their lives. The Holy Spirit was poured out on them. They went out to all nations, 11 out of 12 apostles died un-natural deaths (minus Judas, plus Paul). But they weren’t alone. It wasn’t without the Holy Spirit, God, working in and through them, giving them strength, forgiving, and encouraging them along the way so that they could do these things.

If God were to lay out your life before you, you might respond, “I can’t do that.” There may be even moments where you don’t want to do that. But God is always there encouraging us with his Word and Sacrament and sending his Holy Spirit through these means so we can be his witnesses. We can carry the torch of faith, and pass it on to the next generation, and not just to family and friends but to the ends of the earth. Don’t think that you have to leave the country, the state, the county, to serve and love those next door. The future of the church does not rest on your eloquence or your abilities.

The future of the church rests in the hands of God. He’s told you what to do; He’s empowered you to do it. But it’s not you. You’re not alone. But when you feel alone remember Elijah and the words of encouragement God gave to him, “You’re not alone. There are 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” With encouragement, Elijah went back to work. That’s the way the church responds. When Christians are left alone—they quickly despair. When they fail to worship, and be served by God and one another, their faith loses energy. But when they have the support of others, they are able to grow.

If you are wondering if you will be able to survive the trials and temptations that you are facing right now – then let me ask you – have you been in the fellowship of the saints as often as possible. Have you received the Lord’s Supper often? Have you spent time speaking with fellow Christians who have similar struggles? The way the devil works is the same way lions hunt. He looks to separate the weak from the pack, break you apart from the group. Those who are under attack are often those who have removed themselves from the church.

With the support of fellow Christians you can. Not that it’s you. It’s Jesus working through you. That’s why Jesus established the church and gives pastors, teachers, one another – for the purpose of fellowship. Remember that we are community and you are cared for. We need that support so that we can say with the help of God – You can’t but empowered by the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament – you can. Amen.