

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.* ⁴⁶ *He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

⁵⁰ *When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. (Luke 24:44-53)*

God Has a Plan

How do you feel when someone you love leaves? All our married lives, my wife and I have lived at a distance from our parents. So for our children, visits with grandparents always end with a good-bye. When they were little, sometimes there were a few tears when it was time for that good-bye. That's a normal reaction. When I was in high school, our pastor took a call to Japan. In his farewell sermon, he talked about visiting elderly relatives that they didn't think would live long enough to see them come back to U.S. in two or three years. I'm sure that when they said good-bye to those people, there were tears. But when Jesus ascended into heaven, when his disciples knew that they were not going to see him again in this world, they went back to Jerusalem rejoicing. What a difference from the way they reacted on Maundy Thursday! When Jesus told them that they wouldn't see him anymore, they were deeply saddened. But when he actually left, they rejoiced. Why? Because they finally understood God's plan. Jesus had died and risen again and he promised them his love and his presence even when they couldn't see him. They understood that his leaving was all part of God's plan to get them and us home to heaven. **God has a plan.**

I.

God wants the church of every age to know about that plan. **The Old Testament Scriptures tell us about God's plan.** Jesus said, **"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."** On the day in which his disciples learned that death was beaten and their Lord was alive, they finally understood God's plan. But the plan itself was not new. Jesus had been telling them about it for three years. The truth is, God had been telling them about it all their lives because he had revealed that plan to the men he used to write the Old Testament, what Jesus calls the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms. The Jews divided the Old Testament into these three divisions. So Jesus said that everything that was written about him in all three divisions of the Old Testament had to come true. He was pointing out that the whole Bible is really about him. Not just the New Testament. All of God's Word is about Jesus, even the verses that list who was born into what family and the ones that talk about how to feed the poor in Israel. The Bible is God's message to the world. The heart of that message is Jesus.

But what does the Old Testament say about him? Jesus said, **"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."** The Old Testament proclaims the good news about Jesus. Now, Jesus did have to open his disciples' minds so that they could understand the Scripture. An unbeliever will not understand God's message. They may understand what the words mean. Lots of unbelievers understand that we Christians believe that Jesus died to pay for our sins. But no unbeliever understands that message is true. Only the Holy Spirit can open our hearts to understand and believe that Jesus is indeed our Savior. Because that's true, unbelievers do often miss the point of specific Scripture passages, especially in the Old Testament. Almost never do you find an unbeliever who accepts that the Old Testament is about Christ. Why not? Because believing that the Old Testament is about Christ would mean believing that God stepped into his creation and told his people about Jesus before he came into this world. If God really told that Jesus

was coming in advance, that would have to mean that he wanted us to believe in him. But unbelief doesn't believe or trust in Jesus.

So unbelievers always miss the point Jesus was making: God revealed Christ in the Old Testament. God said that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead. Just to give one example, Isaiah 53 says, **“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”** The Christ would suffer. The chapter goes on to say, **“For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.”** Not only would he suffer, but he would die. But then Isaiah says, **“After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life.”** The Christ would live after he died. This is only one example of God telling his people his plan centuries before it came true.

But there was another part to what the Old Testament said: repentance and forgiveness has to be preached to all nations. Isaiah 49 says, **“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”** This is one of many prophecies of God sending the gospel out from Israel into the Gentile world. As he says so many times, it goes to the very ends of the earth. God wrote about you and me already in the Old Testament. God promised again and again that his Savior would come and save the world, save us. You and I were always part of God's plan.

II.

God's plan didn't stop, though, when the Old Testament ended. **The New Testament apostles are witnesses of God's plan.** Jesus said to them: **“You are witnesses of these things.”** What things? His suffering and dying and rising again. Every one of those eleven men knew those things were true. God appointed them to tell the entire world that good news. That was the plan, too. In fact, from the day of Pentecost forward, they were even witnesses of the beginning of repentance and faith being preached in all nations beginning in Jerusalem. These eleven men were there when three thousand people were baptized on one day and they watched the church in Jerusalem grow by thousands in the months that followed. They were part of the expansion of the church throughout the Roman world. By the time John died in the mid-90's, the message of Christ had crossed land and sea and claimed hearts in almost every part of the Roman Empire.

But the Roman Empire did not reach to the ends of the earth. When these men died, most of the world had still never heard of Jesus. But God used them to found the Church. God used them to give the Church the New Testament Scriptures. Through those Scriptures, those men are still telling God's story today. Every Christian who is alive today is a believer because someone told him the words that these men were responsible for writing and collecting. They are still witnesses who testify all over the world and in almost every language known to man.

Jesus ascended into heaven so that God's plan could move forward. The plan was not for him to stay down here and visibly reign in Jerusalem until Judgment Day. The plan was for God to work through the Church. When we proclaim the good news about Jesus, God reaches into hearts and gives faith. Jesus announced that plan when he ascended into heaven. Since that day, he has not appeared publicly to the world. He has worked through us, and our mission of carrying the good news out into all the world. We are witnesses of Christ.

Do we take that mission seriously? There's only one way to reach heaven: through faith in Christ. The only way to come to faith is to hear the good news. God has given that good news to us and he told us to be his witnesses. Are we faithful? Are we faithful in personally sharing the good news with people who need to hear it? All of us know fellow believers who need to be encouraged with the good news from time to time. Do we do that? Or are we too afraid to speak about Christ even to each other? Do we fathers lead our families in devotions? Do we talk about Jesus to our wives and to our children? Do you wives share the good news with the children God has given you? Do you encourage your husbands to be the spiritual head of your house? If we cannot even talk about Jesus to our own families, how will we ever talk about him to neighbors and coworkers and friends? Do we do that?

Do we support our congregation's efforts to reach out to those we can't personally reach? For six years I've been your pastor and year after year, we struggle to make a very reasonable and modest budget. Do we care so little about the gospel that we're only willing to give God the leftovers? Only after we pay for our smart

phones and our cable TV and our high speed internet connections and our cars and insurance and house payments – do we wait until then to begin to ask ourselves what we can spare so that the gospel is preached here at Peace and throughout the world?

If we aren't faithful in spreading the good news, God will still find a way to bring the gospel to those he has chosen to believe. But we will be guilty of sin. Finally, if we aren't willing to share the good news and to support the gospel as God commands us to, why should God continue to shower us with his love and his blessings? Why should God defend us from the power of the devil? Why should God protect our faith and bring us home to heaven? The truth is, he shouldn't. He should write us off today as not worth the trouble and cut his losses.

But God doesn't do that. Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of his Father and to rule all things for the good of the Church. While he's there, he reminds his Father every day that he died and he paid for our sin. He paid for our laziness and our fear and our unwillingness to give a generous offering or to personally speak about Jesus even to our own families. He died and paid for our unfaithfulness. Then he rose. And God has wiped all our sin away. God sees us as perfect, as if we had done all those things. God loves us in Christ.

Now, God calls us to be his witnesses. That's our job until Jesus returns. God calls us to joyfully join in sharing the good news that our Savior died and rose and now he is in heaven, working for us. Jesus promises that he will rule all things for our good, so we can approach our job without fear. He is watching over us today. And succeed or fail in our efforts to serve him, he will bring us home to heaven.

All those promises explain the joy the disciples felt as they walked back to Jerusalem that day. Even though they weren't going to see Jesus with their physical eyes, they were a part of his plan. They had all his promises. They were going to have the privilege of spreading the gospel throughout the world. They were only waiting until the Holy Spirit came – and that would only take ten days. We are not apostles. Most of us aren't pastors or teachers. But we are all believers. God's plan ran from eternity, through the Old Testament prophets, to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and through these men and then across two thousand years of church history and thousands of miles of geography until God claimed us with the gospel. That is a cause for joy. And until our Lord returns, we get to share that message. That's his plan. That's one of our greatest joys in this life. Be a part of that message, by your personal witness to believer and unbeliever alike and by your support of the work we do here at Peace. And rejoice to be a part of God's plan. Amen.