

A.D. Episode 6
The Pebble Plan
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“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.”

INTRODUCTION

Good morning!

This morning we’re going to talk about having a vision for our lost world.

We see this world vision mentality in the Book of Acts throughout the new mini-series *A.D.* It’s in virtually every episode where the Church is acting upon the last words of Jesus given to them on His last day on earth.

Have you ever thought about your last day on earth?

It’s a sobering thought that most of us try hard not to think about, but it is coming. Each and every one of us has a trip to take one day. Death is stalking us all. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, *“It is better to go to a funeral than a party because death is the end of every man and the living take it to heart.”*

That reminds me of a favorite *Twilight Zone* episode where an old woman won’t answer her door because she’s afraid it will be Death, and if Death touches her it’ll all be over. A very young Robert Redford plays Death and he tricks her into letting him inside her apartment under the guise of being a wounded police officer. He has been stalking her, trying to get her, and he finally succeeds.

You know what that means to me?

It means that we should be sober minded, as it says in 1 Peter 1:13. Whether you are rich, famous, poor, or common, you will have a last day and that day should be an exciting moment because your life counted. It was invested in eternal things.

When you look Him in the eye, you’ll know that your life mattered. Death will be an exciting moment for you, like crossing the finish line as a winner!

Have you ever considered what you will say in that final hour, your very last words made with your very last breath, when your time finally arrives?

If you had one last message to convey to your loved ones, you would probably take the

time to clearly communicate your final wishes, right? You would tell them the most important thing on your heart...your last will and testament.

Billions have already left us and crossed over into eternity. Some thrilled. Others fearful.

Let's consider these final words of some of the most famous:

England's Queen Elizabeth I: *"All my possessions for a moment of time."*

Evangelist Henry Ward Beecher: *"Now comes the mystery."*

Hollywood mogul Louis B. Mayer: *"Nothing matters. Nothing matters."*

President George Washington: *"I die hard, but I am not afraid to go."*

Inventor Thomas Edison: *"It is very beautiful over there."*

Pastor John Wesley: *"The best of all is: God is with us."*

Actress Joan Crawford (when her housekeeper began to pray aloud for her): *"Damn it! Don't you dare ask God to help me."*

After 400 years of silence, God had something to say too, but He did it in an action...one that launched His invasion plan of Earth. Without fanfare or fireworks, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob penetrated our darkness in the first Christmas, and He did so in dramatic simplicity to some poor, smelly shepherds in a small town called Bethlehem.

By taking the form of a helpless baby, a remarkable event that forever changed the history of the world, He came with one purpose...to die at the hands of His own creation to pierce our darkness.

As Isaiah said in 9:2,

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

Imagine that.

Jesus, the Creator of all, became the Passover Lamb of Egypt that the Angel of Death bowed to, and had to acknowledge that His blood was the perfect covering on the doorposts of our heart where Death would no longer reign.

The end result?

His sinless death killed death forever. That's Christianity in a nutshell. Death died. God

died for us to kill death. Amazing!

And now consider these last words. The last words of Jesus Christ on the cross, perhaps the most significant of all dying words ever uttered.

He said, “*It is finished,*” or in the original Greek *TETELESTAI*, which is a business term that means “paid in full.”

When you make your last payment on your home or car, the bank acknowledges your debt as satisfied and stamps your bank note with PAID IN FULL. That is what Jesus meant when He said, “*It is finished.*”

Your debt is paid.

And then to prove that His sacrificial payment satisfied our debt to God, and His righteous judgment of our sins, every single sin—past present, and future (since they were all future then)—He uttered these final words...and then came back to life after three days!

But Jesus has another distinction is His resurrection.

He had a second “last word” moment, after His resurrection, when He gave His disciples a global task...the marching orders for the Church, also known as the Great Commission, and then He left them to do it.

Look with me at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel to see His last words to us, His final wish.

*Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.** And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

So with these final words, Jesus left the disciples to carry out His last command, which we see conveyed in the Book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament. And what they did next, as demonstrated in the film *A.D.*, was carried out in their following The Pebble Plan...God’s strategy to spread the gospel.

MESSAGE

In order to grasp The Pebble Plan, let’s first take a look at 1 Thessalonians 1:8 and a key word in that verse:

*The Lord’s message **rang out** from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in*

God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it,

This word for the phrase “rang out” is *EXECHEO* in the original Greek and it means to sound forth, to ripple, as if a pebble had been dropped into a pond.

Paul is commending the Thessalonians for their example of sharing the good news with their region and the Holy Spirit chose that particular word *EXECHEO* to reinforce the pattern of their evangelism efforts.

The effect of that dropped gospel pebble creates a ripple effect that reaches out in a progression of rings. If you picture sound waves emanating from a source, in this case Thessalonica, you get an idea of God’s plan to reach the whole world with the gospel message by rippling out with it.

Jerusalem would be the epicenter of this gospel earthquake.

Shortly before Jesus ascended into Heaven, He said this to His followers in Acts 1:8 to those who would fulfill His Great Commission,

“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.”

In this simple verse, Jesus laid out the order of His command in a spiral progression of evangelism to communicate his good news, namely that sin and death was conquered.

According to Acts 1:8, we see this in a three-step spiral strategy in the Book of Acts. This is the Pebble Plan.

They were to go first to their own city (Jerusalem), then to the surrounding country (Judea and Samaria), and finally into every other country (the ends of the earth). We see this evangelism principle in Acts as laid out in the *A.D.* storyline as the first century Christians followed this Pebble Plan.

In chapters 1-7, the disciples reached out with the gospel in their city, Jerusalem. That’s Phase One.

After a while, they began to get a little comfortable in their new position as God’s vehicle to reach the world, the Church, and didn’t “go” into their region as He commanded.

So He nudged them to go even farther than just their city with some persecution. He wanted the whole world to know what He had done, not just the Jews. Of course, they didn’t realize this until later on, but God wanted to save the Gentiles too.

In chapter 8 God allowed the Jewish believers to experience persecution, and the frontrunner in this attack was a man named Saul. (We all know his story and how Jesus confronts Him, but that’s another sermon.) Suffice it to say for now that Saul has a change of heart after meeting his Messiah, and becomes a significant believer who changes the world by taking the gospel to the ends of the earth in phase three.)

But the point right now is that this persecution is God-ordained and He uses it to move

the Jewish believers out of Jerusalem to reach out to their surrounding area with the good news of Jesus Christ to Judea and Samaria. Their oppression scatters them out of Jerusalem with the gospel message. That's Phase Two.

In chapters 13-28 we see Phase Three where the believers go out even farther to the rest of their world, to the uttermost parts of the earth in Rome, Greece, and beyond. Besides the obvious example of Paul to Rome where he was beheaded, consider where tradition says the other Apostles who did not die in Jerusalem uttered their last words:

- Peter crucified upside down in Rome
- Andrew crucified in Greece
- Philip hung upside down with hooks in his ankles in Phrygia
- Matthew in Ethiopia
- Jude clubbed to death in Iran
- John in exile on the island of Patmos
- Bartholomew crucified in Armenia
- Thomas speared in India
- James (Alphaeus) in Egypt
- Simon was sawed in half in Spain
- Matthias was crucified in Georgia

Generally speaking, we can see that these men took Jesus at His word to go, left Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, and went to the ends of the earth with the gospel. Even Luke died by being nailed to a tree in Thebes and Mark died in Africa. They all went out from their city, Jerusalem.

So we see a clear progression of the ripple effect strategy of Acts 1:8 in those closest to Jesus.

- City (Acts chapters 1-7)
- Country (Acts chapters 8-12)
- World (Acts chapters 13-28)

In a relatively short time, historically speaking, the gospel permeated every culture and even forced the Roman Emperor Constantine to abandon the false Roman gods and decriminalize Christianity to make it the new state religion (313 AD). Before this time, Christians were considered less than human. Listen to this account:

“Christians suffered from sporadic and localized persecutions over a period of two and a half centuries. Their refusal to participate in the Imperial cult was considered an act of treason and was thus punishable by execution. The most widespread official persecution

was carried out by Diocletian. During the Great Persecution (303–311), the emperor ordered Christian buildings and the homes of Christians torn down and their sacred books collected and burned. Christians were arrested, tortured, mutilated, burned, starved, and condemned to gladiatorial contests to amuse spectators.”

To eventually reach a point of toleration like this by Constantine must have been an enormous relief to every believer! All as a result of rippling out His message to the world that He gave them to do in Matthew 28. The gospel changed hearts, even Caesar’s heart, and his empire.

So what does this mean for us today? Do we have any obligation to fulfill the Great Commission as our brothers and sisters did in the Book of Acts?

APPLICATION

The Great Commission of the Church to “*go therefore and make disciples*” is sometimes mistakenly thought to be a command meant just for the people who stood there with Jesus 2,000 years ago...His marching orders were meant only for them, but He also intended it for us today...for every single Christian.

If you look at the full command, Jesus says we are to do three things:

- Go and make disciples (share the gospel).
- Baptize them.
- Teach them to obey everything He commanded us to do.

And what did He just command them to do?

Go and make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to do what He commanded them to do, which is to go, baptize and obey...including this command. It is a cyclical order because each one must teach the next one to do the same. It is a never-ending order for the Church, right up to you and me today.

Look what Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2,

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.

There is another cyclical progression here with Paul and Timothy, just like the Acts 1:8 progression of rippling out the gospel message from our town, country, and world, but on a personal level.

Paul discipled Timothy, and Paul is telling Timothy to do the same thing by discipling other faithful men, who will then in turn teach others. It is a cyclical in nature, just like the Great Commission in Matthew 28.

Consider this progression from Paul’s obedience to Matthew 28 and Acts 1:8:

- Paul discipled Timothy
- Timothy discipled faithful men
- Faithful men teach others
- Who do the same
- And so on....

It is a continual progression of evangelism and discipleship.

So does that mean that God wants you to go and move to Burma or the Ukraine or Tahiti?

It might mean that for you, and that's something that you and the Lord need to wrestle over in prayer for what He wants you to do with your life. No one can tell you God's will for your individual life. That is between Him and you. But...and you knew there was a but coming, right?

But...you know He wants you to share the gospel with this lost world right where you are at today...in your Jerusalem.

His overall will for every believer is to share what He has done for the world...the gospel...right here in your "Jerusalem" city.

This is also the easiest place for you to be effective in the gospel because you know the language, culture, and people. It would be much harder for you in a foreign land, but you could eventually adapt over time. But for today, right now, you can easily take a friend to lunch from work or help a neighbor move or make a friend at the gym with a cold drink.

It's all about being light in a dark world, standing out, by being different in using your skills or resources to love God by loving your neighbor. Just be a friend to someone like you would want someone to do to you. As Paul said to the Philippians, "*Consider the interest of others as more important than yourself.*"

Sounds familiar? Look with me at the Great Command in Matthew 22:34,

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The Great Commission and the Great Command go hand in hand. Start loving people here, now, today. And look for opportunities to tell them about Christ.

So for now, your Jerusalem is here, in this city, in this neighborhood, at your job and at your place of play, whether that's on a golf course, an ice rink, a bowling alley, or a

bridge game.

He has paved a way for all people to have a clean conscience, a restored life, and an eternal life of joy with Him forever; and He wants you to be the light to those in your particular darkened Jerusalem.

The best way to love God is to love what He loves... what he died for... your neighbor. Be a friend to them and look for opportunities to serve them, and hopefully share the gospel with them.

INVITATION / CLOSING

[optional: insert personal story]

I'd like to close with the words of our Master, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Turn with me to Matthew chapter 5, verse 13:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

All of us are shining His light in one degree of brightness or another, but let's excel still more in keeping with the Acts 1:8 job description of being His witnesses. We all need to have a world vision mentality like the first century believers.

Some of us are spotlights that light up the whole night sky.

Some are flashlights.

And some are covering up their glow so that their solitary match is barely flickering.

No matter. Make a small effort today to increase your brightness. That may mean just being nice...smiling...greeting a stranger...whatever. You are His light in a planetary darkness.

Look at Isaiah 60:1-4,

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Wherever you are, and to whatever degree you are shining His light, make the effort to do even more with clearly presenting the gospel to your lost friends and family, and start by just loving them.

Glow your life in such a way that others will be drawn to Him because of your brightness.

Start making a concerted effort to share the gospel and be involved in the Great Commission right where God has you today, in your Jerusalem, and be open to “ring out” even farther to your Judea or Samaria, or even to the ends of the earth.

Let's pray.