*2018 New Year’s Message*

**YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER TO BE MY WITNESSES**

Acts 1:1-14

Key Verse 1:8

***“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.”***

Acts is a history of the early church. It tells us real stories of a spiritual war. The church faced inward and outward challenges. But with the Risen Jesus’ promises, ***“You will receive power and you will be my witnesses,”*** the church grew beautifully and expanded triumphantly. The story of Acts has continued for the past two millennia, and it will continue until King Jesus comes again. Adoniram Judson, one of the earliest Western missionaries to Burma, faced many hardships. But he said, “The future is as bright as the promises of God.” May the Holy Spirit help us to start the New Year with a bright prospect, holding on to King Jesus’ promises anew.

1. **The Glory of the Resurrection and the Kingdom of God (1-3)**

Verses 1-3 tell us what the Risen Jesus did for his apostles during the 40 days before his ascension. First, he planted faith in the resurrection. Jesus presented himself to the apostles to give many convincing proofs that he was physically alive. His resurrection declares that he is the Son of God (Ro 1:4). It proves that he died to take away the sin of the world, and a perfect redemption comes to all who believe. The Risen Jesus is the King who has conquered death and received all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18). Death is the most powerful enemy that has controlled all humans. But Jesus Christ has freed all his people from the power of death by his atoning death and resurrection. God has exalted us to rule with Christ by his power of the resurrection in the spiritual realms (Eph 2:6). His resurrection gives us a living hope of our glorious resurrection in a spiritual body like him (1Co 15:49).

Second, he planted a glorious hope of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the theme of the Bible. Jesus’ first message was, *“The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near”* (Mk 1:15). Jesus bound up the brokenhearted, set the oppressed free, and healed the sick. He proclaimed good news of God’s grace, welcoming sinners and outcasts as God’s family members. The kingdom of God came on earth in people’s lives through his ministry. After his resurrection, Jesus spoke about how God’s kingdom would come to all peoples of all nations through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his Name (Lk 24:47).

The kingdom of God is also the restored paradise in the new heaven and the new earth to come. Jesus showed a vision of the perfected kingdom of God to Apostle John. It is shining with the glory of God (Rev 21:11). There will be no more night, for God will be the light. In the present world, all creation is subjected to decay, groaning in the struggles for survival. (Ro 8:20-21) In the new world to come, however, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. We will see God the Father and our Lord Jesus face to face. We will eat the fruits of the tree of life beside the river of the water of life (Rev 22:1-5). We will walk on streets of pure gold, passing by the pearly gates (Rev 21:11-21). There, all of God’s people, along with the multitudes of angels and all creatures will render eternal praise, honor and glory to the Father and to King Jesus who was slain and is glorified (Rev 5:9-13).

Planting faith in the resurrection and the glorious hope of the kingdom of God were Jesus’ last courses of discipleship for his apostles. After the apostles received the living hope, their lives were never the same. The glorious hope of the resurrection and the kingdom of God shone like a bright light in their souls. By God’s great mercy, we are set free from the power of death and are given this living hope. We should always keep the glorious hope of the resurrection and the kingdom of God to shine in our souls.

1. **The Promise of the Holy Spirit (4-7)**

On one occasion, Risen Jesus 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.”*** (4-5) Apparently, the apostles had decided to leave Jerusalem. Jesus understood their fear of the Jewish authorities and their sense of failure to stand with him during his suffering. Nevertheless, Jesus commanded them to stay in Jerusalem, waiting for a wonderful gift from the Father--the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit came upon God’s servants who were chosen for specific purposes. By his blood shed on the cross, Jesus opened the New Testament era which had been prophesied to come (Jer 31:31-34). Jesus opened a new and living way for us to approach God (Heb 10:20). Jesus also sent the Holy Spirit from the Father to come to us unlimitedly. The Holy Spirit would come to dwell in God’s people forever (Jn 14:16). Praise Jesus!

Then the apostles asked Jesus, ***“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*** (6) The Jews had long waited for a Messianic kingdom. It was prophesied that the Messianic age would begin with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29). So, when Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit, the apostles were thrilled. But Jesus said to them, ***“It is not for you*** ***to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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.”*** (7-8) Jesus didn’t deny the restoration of Israel. God’s promises concerning Israel would be fulfilled according to God’s timetable. Then Jesus told them what was the most important and urgent thing for them and his church. It was to receive power from the Holy Spirit and to be Jesus’ witnesses to bring God’s kingdom to all peoples of the world.

1. **You Will Be My Witnesses (8-14)**

Let’s read 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.”*** In these promises, our King Jesus showed a blueprint of God’s grand world salvation plan. He also announced that the age of the Holy Spirit is the age of salvation for all peoples through the witness of his church. The Holy Spirit has come to empower his church for this purpose. Since these are the last words of our Lord Jesus, I want to think about two things with you.

First, God’s broken heart for the perishing world. In the Old Testament times, God wanted Israel to be his witnesses by becoming a holy nation through their obedience to his word (Ex 19:6, Isa 43:10). But they disobeyed and failed. God sent his one and only Son into the world as the promised Christ and his faithful and true witness (Rev 3:14). Jesus testified to God’s truth and his grace. Finally, he testified to God’s saving love for the world through his death on the cross. Because of the Son’s obedience, salvation has come to all who believe in his blood (Heb 5:8, Ro 3:25).

The apostles had seen what Jesus taught and did. They were to witness that Jesus is Christ and Lord. They were to witness his death, resurrection, ascension, and his Second Coming. They were to proclaim salvation through repentance and forgiveness of sins in his Name. For them, Jerusalem was the most dangerous place. Judea and Samaria were the places where they would receive severest opposition. The ends of the earth were unknown lands which they had great limitations to go and to live in. Nevertheless, Jesus told them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Jesus sent them, because, without their witness, people of the world would perish, not knowing God’s saving love. Without their witness, there would be no more witnesses of the Savior and God’s world salvation work wouldn’t continue. From the word “witness” came the word “martyr.” Later, the apostles witnessed to Jesus until all of them except one entered into the glory of martyrdom (Rev 20:4). Through their obedience, Lord Jesus has built his church and we are saved today.

By God’s great mercy, we have received eternal life. We are to witness to Christ Jesus. Unless we witness, the world would soon find no light of life. Lord Jesus wants us to share God’s broken heart for the lost as well as his joy over one sinner who repents(Lk 15:10). Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold (Mt 24:12). Jesus said, *“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command”* (Jn 15:13-14). Lord Jesus wants us to be his witnesses by serving the people of this generation with his love, his heart, and his sacrifice. If we do so, he will honor us as his friends in his eternal kingdom.

Second, the power of the Glorified Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Witnessing Jesus challenges the power of darkness, and therefore it involves a spiritual battle. So, Jesus promised to empower his church by the Holy Spirit. What is the power of the Holy Spirit? Most of all, he pours out God’s love into our hearts (Ro 5:5). In God’s love, we can be more than conquerors in all things (Ro 8:37). The Holy Spirit gives us victory over evil spirits and sin (Eph 6:12-13, Ga 5:16). By keeping our purity in the Spirit, we can drive out evil spirits in people through prayer. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit gives us wisdom, boldness, and courage to witness to Christ (Ac 4:31, 5:41-42, 23:11, 28:31). When we witness, the Holy Spirit himself testifies to Jesus with us (Jn 15:26-27). The most amazing thing to see is how the Holy Spirit breaks the hearts of people to repent and become completely new persons.

The power of the Holy Spirit is the power of the glorified Christ. In verses 9-11, Luke recorded the apostles’ witness of Jesus’ ascension very vividly. As the apostles were looking intently into the sky as he was going, two angels said them, “***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.”*** God exalted Jesus to be King of the universe. Jesus did not return to his pre-incarnate state, but remains as the Risen Christ to be our King and High Priest. He intercedes for us, so that we may rise from our failures and continue our life of faith (Ro 8:34). The Holy Spirit reminds us of Jesus’ words and guide us into all the truth (Jn 14:26, 16:13). The Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus in us by revealing what he receives from King Jesus (Jn 16:15). Jesus said, *“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”* (Mt 28:20). King Jesus is with us and lives in us through the Holy Spirit (Ga 2:20). The Holy Spirit enables us to have God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ. King Jesus will come to restore all things to the Father (1Co 15:28). When he comes, he will reward each of us according to what we have done for him (2Co 5:10).

In this age of the Holy Spirit and of salvation, there is no more important and precious thing for Christians than to be filled with the power of God and to be Jesus’ witnesses. How can we be filled with God’s power?

In verses 12-14, Luke recorded what the apostles did. After Jesus’ ascension, they returned to Jerusalem and ***they all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*** They denied their plan to go back to Galilee. They laid down their dream of an earthly messianic kingdom. They entrusted the future of themselves, their families, and their nation to God. They refocused their lives to carry out the Lord’s Great Commission. Then they earnestly prayed for what the Lord promised—the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

To be filled with the power of the glorified Lord and of the Holy Spirit, we should first refocus our life. When our hearts are divided by earthly things and worries, we don’t feel happy or satisfied. When we give our life to Christ, we do not need to worry about our future. For he will guide our life that leads to eternal glory. The apostles were ordinary Galileans. When they gave their lives to the Lord Jesus and lived as his faithful witnesses, God honored them and put their names on the foundations of the heavenly city (Rev 21:14). King Jesus, the Righteous Judge, will honor each of his faithful witnesses with them for eternal praise and glory. Humanly we are not special people. But God chose us to be King and Savior Jesus’ witnesses. We should always live looking forward to the heavenly city where our names are recorded.

When we give our lives to Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us the power of witness for Jesus’ Name. What is the power of witness? When Jewish rulers threatened Apostles Peter and John, they replied, *“Which is right in God’s eyes to listen to you, or to him? As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”* (Ac 4:19-20) When the apostles were flogged, *they left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name* (Ac 5:41). When the early Christians were scattered by persecution, they were not saddened, but preached the good news about the Lord Jesus wherever they went (Ac 11:20). The Roman world was no better than the postmodern world today morally and culturally. But people were changed and the kingdom of God advanced in all the cities where the gospel was preached. When severe persecutions came from the Roman empire, Christians were humanly helpless like sheep to the slaughter. But numerous Christians persevered, looking forward to entering into Jesus’ glory. Then the Holy Spirit empowered them to witness to Jesus through their holy life of love, and even through martyrdom.

Recently I visit several Coptic churches after the Middle East directors’ conference that was held in Cairo, Egypt. Coptic Christians have kept their faith in the midst of persecution and discrimination by the majority of Muslims for the past 1,300 years. At the entrances of their main sanctuary, I saw a statue of Saint George with a display of the scenes of tortures he received. Through this, I could see how Coptic Christians have kept their faith by a martyrdom spirit. Saint George was a high-ranking Roman officer of the imperial guard when Emperor Diocletian ordered execution of Christians. Because of his good influence, the emperor tried to persuade him to deny his Christian faith by many means. One of the thing the emperor did was to send a beautiful woman to his room. But the next morning the woman became a Christian and began to witness to Jesus. When nothing prevailed, he let George be tortured by a machine that was specially designed to pierce his body to maximum pains, yet sparing his life. The saint endured the torture until the emperor gave up his hope of subduing him and ordered that he be executed. Among those who were deeply touched by his witness to Jesus was Constantine, a Roman army commander. He became the new emperor and issued a decree that tolerated Christianity in AD 313. It was 10 years after Saint George’s martyrdom. The church won the spiritual battle over the Roman empire, when Christians were given the power of witness for Jesus’ Name.

Next, we should pray for filling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, *“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name….”* (Jn 14:12-13) What a great promise from our almighty King! We cannot do God’s work, but the Lord does his work through our prayers. The Lord wants us to pray for the filling of the Holy Spirit, expecting great things from God. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is not an emotional or mystical experience as some people think. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus (Ac 16:7). When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we are filled with Jesus’ heart and Jesus’ love. We are filled with Jesus’ vision and Jesus’ passion. The filling of the Spirit is not a once for all experience. As the Israelites ate manna from heaven every day, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit every day. As we totally depend on the Holy Spirit and pray for his filling in us and in our community, we will see many great works of God.

There have always been spiritual revivals in a dark time when there were people who gave their lives to obey the Lord’s Great Commission and prayed. UBF was such a revival. In 1960s, Korea was among the poorest countries of the world. In spite of their country’s poor and dark situation, UBF ancestors began to pray earnestly to obey the Lord’s Great Commission. They decided to send the first overseas missionary to Jeju Island. For this, many of them offered their bus money and walked long distances to school. Others sold their blood to support the missionary. God blessed their obedience and prayer and began to open ways for them to go out to Germany and the United States. In the 1980s and 90s, God gave Korea UBF periods of rapid growth. All UBF chapters fervently prayed for world missions in every meeting. Though Korean staff were poor, they didn’t seek their security, but sent out leaders like the pillars of their ministries as missionaries. Then the Holy Spirit sent out 1,800 lay missionaries to 96 countries, making UBF the second global scale protestant lay missionary movement after the Moravian Missionary Movement that sent out 2,000 lay missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are many beautiful stories of UBF missionaries and shepherds who poured out their hearts and lives to the Lord like the woman who poured her alabaster jar of perfume on Jesus (Mk 14:3-9).

Through them, the Lord has built beautiful multi-cultural and cross-generational churches in the cities and campuses of the world, and God’s kingdom is advancing. God has raised new generations including our children to be the main force of UBF. And now shepherds and missionaries in Korea, North America, and Europe are beginning to retire from work. Still numerous campuses, cities, and countries of the world are waiting for missionaries and shepherds. This is time for our UBF community to pray for another powerful work of the Holy Spirit for world missions. May the Holy Spirit raise many silver missionaries among our senior members who would go to the 130 countries that are waiting for UBF self-supporting missionaries. The beautiful obedience of the first generation should flow through to the new generations. May God raise many young men and women among our new generations who embrace God’s vision and pour out their hearts and lives to the Lord.

Today, the world is rapidly secularizing. Tolerance and legalization for same sex marriages are now going to the point that each person should determine his or her gender identity according to one’s feelings. The Lord predicted that this kind of godless and wicked end time would come. Then he said*, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”* (Mt 24:14). The Lord’s words remind us that this is the time in which the church has more opportunities to preach the gospel. The Holy Spirit will work powerfully through his prepared servants. With our human strength or wisdom, we cannot fight the spiritual battle against the devil’s evil schemes in today’s postmodern and materialistic culture. Apostle Paul said, *“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”* (2Co 10:4-5) What are the weapons with divine power we have? We have the word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17). We have a powerful weapon of prayer. Moreover, we have the promises of power from the Holy Spirit. We have the promise of our glorified King Jesus: *“I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

Let’s take the sword of the Spirit and fight the good fight through prayers. The Holy Spirit will give us the spirit of witness with which Christians have overcame the world. Our Lord Jesus, king of kings, who are with us through his power of the resurrection, will surely give us a victory.