

# Is the Work Finished?

There are some who believe that the commission to preach the gospel as a witness is finished and that God's servants must now prepare the church for the return of Jesus Christ. To be sure, God's church must make herself ready (Rev. 19:7-8). But how does she do this? The Bible strongly suggests that preaching the gospel is one way the church (bride) prepares for her role in God's kingdom. In a very real sense, it is part of the training she must go through in preparation for positions of great leadership she will assume when Jesus Christ establishes God's government on earth.

## Preparing the Bride

The scriptures reveal that the saints will serve as kings and priests in God's millennial kingdom (Rev. 5:10). In that role they will be responsible for teaching God's law and His plan to a world that does not know Him. In a very real sense that is exactly what the preaching of the gospel is. It is declaring the great hope of God's kingdom to a world held captive by ignorance. The true gospel points to a great destiny God has for man and how that destiny will be accomplished. It is hard to imagine that any true believer would think such a message would be extinguished.

Despite this fact, a great number of Bible believing Christians are convinced that the commission to preach the gospel is over. Many hold to this belief based on one or both of two misunderstandings of scripture. The first is that the Bible speaks of a "famine of the word" in the last days (Amos 8:11). In other words, the preaching of God's truth will cease. The second belief is that only an apostle has the authority to preach the gospel and absent such a man the preaching must stop. Let us examine both of these points.

## A FAMINE OF THE WORD

When speaking through the prophet Amos, God declared that the time would come when He would bring a special famine upon the land. Notice what Amos writes:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. (Amos 8:11)

Why would God do such a thing? Why would He withhold His word at the end time? And does this mean that an Ezekiel warning will cease to be proclaimed at some point? These are very important questions and God's word answers every one them. Lets begin by putting Amos 8:11 in context.

In Amos chapter eight God is leveling an indictment against Israel for their rebellion against Him. He declares that their evil works have not gone unseen and that there will be a reckoning. This punishment will take place when the descendants of Joseph go into a horrible captivity much the same as that experienced by the northern kingdom of Israel over 2700 years ago. As was mentioned earlier, this captivity is referred to as a "great tribulation" or "Jacob's trouble." When this tribulation comes, God's church will be in a special place He designates. In this place of safety it will be protected from the great dragon and his agents. At that time prophetic Israel will be deprived of any access to the great truth preached by God's servants.

## The Two-Fold Commission

To better grasp this point, it is necessary to understand the two-fold commission Jesus gave to His church through His disciples. The first commission was to preach the gospel as a witness (Mt. 24:14). The second commission was to "feed" God's sheep (Jn. 21:15-17). This food is provided through sermons and Bible studies given by God's ministers on His Sabbath and Holy Days. It is also provided via literature designed to edify the body (church). Many people who are not a part of the body benefit from this instruction. Thousands have attended church services although they were never converted. Millions have

read booklets and magazines published by God's true servants. The time is coming however, when the last message will be preached and the last booklet produced. At that time, the world will no longer have access to this nourishment. Thus a famine.

This famine, however, does not include the termination of an Ezekiel warning (the first commission), and the scriptures bear this out. The eleventh chapter of Revelation describes two witnesses who will testify against the earth during the time of "Jacob's trouble" (Rev. 11:3-6). This alone proves that an Ezekiel warning will continue after God's church is taken to a place of safety. But there is more.

### **A Warning Never Ceases**

The history of God's work from the very beginning emphatically declares that a warning message never ceases until God executes His judgment. Consider some of the great defining moments in history and the role of a warning witness in each.

- A warning message was preached by Noah to a depraved world until the day he entered into the ark.
- A warning message was preached by Moses to Pharaoh until the day Israel left Egypt.
- A warning message was preached by Jeremiah to the nation of Judah while Nebuchadnezzar himself was mobilizing his troops to invade Jerusalem..
- A warning message was preached by the prophets of God until their last breath..
- A warning message was preached by Jesus Christ even while He was being led away to His death..
- A warning message has been preached down through the ages without ceasing.
- A warning message will be preached by His end-time church until it flees.
- A warning message will be preached by two witnesses until they are murdered.

### **BUT IT DOESN'T END THERE**

The book of Revelation indicates that even after His two witnesses are murdered (Rev. 11:3-7), God takes steps to ensure that an Ezekiel warning does not cease. He will accomplish this by engaging supernatural forces to continue this witness. Notice what the apostle John records when describing this event.

And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters. (Rev. 14:6-7)

Notice this angelic being is still appealing to mankind to turn from his way and to honor the Great Creator of the universe. Once again an Ezekiel warning continues.

### **Jesus Leaves a Work**

Jesus was well aware of the great work that lay ahead of His servants and spoke of it often. In one particular example He gives an important lesson concerning the end time and the great commission to preach the gospel. This lesson which was given in the form of a "kingdom parable" was spoken just

weeks before His arrest, trial, and crucifixion. It is called the parable of The Laborers in the Field and it reveals the importance of God's work at the very end.

In this lesson Jesus tells of a householder that searches out laborers to work in his vineyard and begins contracting them early in the day (Mt. 20:1). However, because of the size of the project it was necessary for him to seek out additional laborers (verses 3-5). The householder did this several times throughout the day (the third hour, sixth hour, and ninth hour). Even at the very end of the day (the eleventh hour), the householder is actively recruiting laborers for the harvest (verse 11). Once again, Jesus reveals a great need for a work to be done at the very end of the age. He then explains that the value of the laborers hired at the end was every bit as great as those hired at the beginning and their compensation reflected that truth (verses 8-16).

NOTE: There are many who see the "field" in this parable as referring to the church and therefore believe Jesus is referring to preparing the bride for His Kingdom. However, in the parable of The Wheat and the Tares, Jesus defines "the field" as "the world" not the church. (Mt 13:38) With this understanding, the parable of The Laborers in the Field refers to a work God's church will do in the world.

### **A Lesson from the Apostles**

Those who believe that the commission to preach the gospel as a witness is finished should consider the lives of Jesus' apostles. These champions of the faith comprise what are arguably the founding fathers of the new testament church. They dedicated their lives to proclaiming the great truth they were given by the Messiah. The scriptures reveal that an incredible destiny awaits these men because of their steadfast dedication to God's kingdom. Jesus indicated they would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Lk. 22:29-30). The book of Revelation states that their names will be on the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14). Suffice it to say these men will hold positions of great responsibility and trust in God's kingdom. But what does this have to do with preaching the gospel in the last days? The answer: PLENTY!

The apostles knew Jesus personally. They walked with Him. They ate with Him. They traveled with Him. They were taught directly by Him. They knew His message and they knew Him in ways that no others could. They understood Jesus perfectly when He commissioned them to go into all the world and proclaim God's truth (Mt. 28:19-20).

Additionally, the apostles truly believed they were living in the last days. They believed Jesus would return in their generation. Driven by this understanding, these men gave their lives preaching the gospel of the kingdom. They were men on a mission, and throughout their lives there isn't a hint that at some point they planned to stop preaching the gospel. The book of Acts actually describes an event in which Peter and John are ordered by the religious leaders of their day to cease and desist preaching this message. Notice their answer.

But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to harken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. (Acts 4:19-20)

Peter and John as well as all of the apostles were steadfast in proclaiming God's word and no power on earth was going to stop them. With this in mind, if the apostles were alive today, what would they be doing? Simply waiting for Jesus to return? Hardly! Perhaps engaging in some self-improvement program so that they would be better executives in the kingdom? Once again, probably not. Or would they be doing the work Jesus left them to do? Would they be preaching the gospel to all the world as a witness?

The work Jesus left His apostles would punctuate every minute of their lives. These men would eat, drink, and sleep the gospel of the kingdom. To think otherwise goes contrary to all the properties of reason. These men gave their lives in God's service THEN and they would do no differently TODAY.

## CAN ONLY AN APOSTLE PREACH THE GOSPEL?

There are some who believe that only an apostle can preach the gospel – that the commission to proclaim an Ezekiel warning was only given to those who sit as the leader of His church. This is simply not true. Some of the greatest champions in the Bible proclaimed a powerful gospel and were not apostles. Consider just a few examples.

Stephen stands as the first recorded martyr of the New Testament. This great servant of God was one of the most eloquent speakers in the history of God's church. The scriptures describe him as "full of faith and power" (Acts 6:8). Stephen preached one of the most powerful messages ever recorded in scripture, and he paid for that message with his own blood (Acts 7). His bold words rang out as an indictment against the religious leaders of his day and he preached the gospel in a way that has all but disappeared in God's church. This hero of the faith was not an apostle. But that did not stop him from declaring the good news of God's soon coming kingdom.

Philip was also a champion of the faith and an important instrument in preaching a message about the kingdom of God. The book of Acts chronicles a period when God's church was suffering great persecution (Acts 8:1). At that time Philip went to Samaria and proclaimed the gospel. While he was there God gave him the power to cast out demons and heal the lame (Acts 8:7). His work was so compelling that "the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spoke" (Acts 8:6). Philip's zeal for the gospel stands as an example to all of God's end-time servants. Philip was not an apostle. However, that did not deter him from the great work God had given him.

Those who believe that only an apostle can preach the gospel should consider the first four books of the New Testament. Two were written by men who held no such position. Yet the words recorded by Mark and Luke speak with great force of a King and the kingdom he will establish on this earth.

The idea that only an apostle can preach the gospel is found nowhere in the scriptures. Further, this belief violates every tenant of reason. It makes about as much sense as seeing a building on fire and refusing to scream "fire!" because you're not a fireman.

### **Israel and the Gospel**

The scriptures actually reveal that God doesn't even need a man to proclaim this message. In the Old Testament God used the nation of Israel to proclaim a great truth about His kingdom. Notice what Moses declares to the children of Israel in preparation to entering the promised land.

Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who has God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day? (Dt. 4:5-8)

Here God declared that Israel was to stand as an example to all the world of what it is truly like to be one nation under God. In a very real sense, God raised up Israel to preach the gospel. But it doesn't end there.

### **The Heavens Declare the Gospel**

When writing to the church at Rome, the apostle Paul made an interesting observation regarding the physical realm. Paul wrote that the universe stood as incontrovertible proof that God is real. It also stands as an indicting witness against those who refuse to believe in a creator. Notice what Paul wrote.

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse... (Rom. 1:20)

The Bible also indicates that the heavens play an important role in revealing who God is. King David of Israel, who authored many of the psalms, wrote "The heavens declare the glory of God"(Psa.19:1), and to be sure, they do. The heavens speak prolifically of God's mercy (Psa. 36), His righteousness (Psa. 50:6), His redemption (Isa. 44:22-23), and even His eternal nature (Psa. 104). Mankind may have difficulty declaring God's greatness, but the heavens do it with joy.

From the very beginning, the great God had a purpose in creating the sun, moon, and stars. That purpose was more than simply to beautify the sky. The scriptures reveal that God fashioned the heavens as an instrument in declaring His plan of salvation. The first chapter of the book of Genesis describes the creation of the heavenly bodies and reveals something extraordinary about God as a planner. Notice what it says.

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years... (Gen. 1:14)

Here God declares that the astronomical bodies (the sun, moon, and stars) are for "signs" and "seasons." These two words have profound meaning and reveal an extraordinary point regarding God's commitment to preaching the gospel. The Hebrew word for "sign" in this verse is *owth*. This word can be translated as "a signal," "beacon," "evidence," or "a mark." It is the same word God used when describing His Sabbath. Notice what God says:

Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you... It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed. (Ex. 31:13, 17)

God created the Sabbath as a link between Himself and man. The Sabbath is a "sign" God gave that would enable man to know his Creator. God created the heavens as a clock in which the Sabbath could be determined. But there is more. The Hebrew word "seasons" in Genesis is *moed*. This word means "appointed times." God's appointed times are His Holy Days.

God's Holy Days reveal a great plan of salvation for all mankind. God knew that plan from the very beginning. He created the heavens as an instrument to point man toward Him. The heavens declare not only God's strength, but also His great wisdom and love. This exquisite part of the creation reveals that the great Creator is mindful of His children and will ultimately lead them to Himself. The heavens truly do preach the gospel.