

UNDERSTANDING THE 'NUMBER 40' IN THE BIBLE

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Scripture: Acts 1: 1-5

The Acts of the Apostles, starting with chapter 1, sets it up for all that happened later. So, let's just look at the first 5 verses of chapter 1, for context for what was to follow.

Acts 1: 1-5

"1 The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. ³ To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. ⁴ Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

There's something deeply intriguing about the period after the resurrection. If we're honest, we would expect the story to end differently. Jesus rises from the dead, the greatest victory in history, and then, surely, He ascends to His Father. It is finished. It's accomplished. Everything is done. Mission accomplished, victory secured, and a return to the Father.

And yet He doesn't. The scriptures tell us that for 40 days after the resurrection, Jesus remained on earth. Forty days. Even though He had broken through the tomb, He was alive again, death was conquered, all these things. Yet, He still remained on earth for 40 days. Meeting people, speaking with them, walking with them, eating with them.

That must raise a question – why? Why was He still on earth? Because Jesus never did anything casually, He never acted without purpose. Everything He did was aligned with the will of God, the will of His Father, and the purpose of His incarnation, the reason why He came down to earth.

So, if He stayed for 40 days, then there must have been something essential still unfinished. There had to be. Not unfinished in terms of salvation. No! That was accomplished on the cross and sealed in the resurrection. But unfinished in terms of people.

As you begin to look at the gospel accounts and the opening of Acts, we begin to see a pattern. Throughout scripture, whenever you see the number 40, it is never accidental; always intentional. So, if we were to look at the number 40 in scripture, we would see that it consistently represents a period of testing, preparation, transition, new beginning. Always.

It moves from a time of hardship to a time of fulfillment of something new. It's a time when something is being worked out, when something is being revealed, when something is being made ready for something that is coming next.

KEY 40-DAY PATTERNS IN SCRIPTURE.

- Noah – 40 days of rain. Genesis 7:12 tells us that rain fell on the earth 40 days and 40 nights. Meaning: there was judgment, there was cleansing, and there was a reset of creation. Something happened, the world as it was ends and a new world begins afterward.
- Moses – 40 days on the mountain. Exodus 24:18. He stayed on Mount Sinai 40 days and 40 nights. Meaning: receiving revelation. It's what he got from God, an encounter with God, and then the formation of a new covenant. God was trying to form a people through revelation given to Moses over 40 days.
- Israel – 40 years in the wilderness. Numbers 14:33. Again, testing, teaching dependence, preparation for the Promised Land. Not punishment alone, but formation of a new identity of a people belonging to God, of God's character, God's purpose, God's vision, the formation of a new identity.
- Elijah – 40 days to Horeb. 1 Kings 19:8. He travelled 40 days to Horeb, the mountain of God. What was happening? Recovery from burnout, a renewal, and an encounter with God. From exhaustion to recommissioning.
- Jesus – 40 days in the wilderness. Matthew 4:2. Fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. A time of testing, victory over temptation, and then preparation for ministry. Private victory leading to public ministry.
- And then we see this: Jesus' ascension to heaven, to His Father, came 40 days after the resurrection. Ascension came 40 days after the resurrection, and He appeared to them over those 40 days.

What was He doing? Clarification, restoration, commissioning, preparation for the Spirit. So, the resurrection happened, but they were not yet ministry or mission ready.

It's always a season when you look at these 40 days.

- 40 days of rain in Noah's time, a cleansing before a new beginning.
- 40 days Moses spent on the mountain receiving revelation from God.
- 40 years Israel spent in the wilderness being formed as a covenant people.
- 40 days Elijah journeyed in exhaustion, renewal, and recommissioning, 40 days spent in the wilderness, preparation for ministry.
- Now, 40 days after the resurrection only, an ascension happened.

So, do you see the pattern? 40 is the space between what was and what will be. That's the 40 days – what was and what will be. It's a season of preparation. It's a season of clarification and formation.

So, when Jesus stays for 40 days after the resurrection, He's not delaying; He's preparing. Preparing His disciples not just to believe in the resurrection, but to live in the reality of the resurrection.

As I began to look at these 40 days, I realized that He was tying up what we might call the human side of redemption. What He had to do, He completed. But how we needed to respond was not yet completed. Not salvation, because that was complete, but people. He was preparing people. He was

teaching where there was confusion, restoring where there was failure, reassuring where there was doubt, commissioning where there was passivity, and preparing them for what was next.

So, that's what I want us to look at today. I want us to unpack that, because those 40 days were not just for the disciples, not just for first century people. Scripture makes it very clear that what Jesus did then was never meant to remain there. The apostle Paul reminds us that these things were written for us, for our instruction.

And John says very plainly that the works and words of Jesus are recorded so that you may believe and have life in His name. In other words, what Jesus did with them, He intends to do with us as well, because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The way He dealt with confused disciples then, He still deals with us now. The way He restored Peter, reassured Thomas, and walked with those on the road to Emmaus, He continues to meet people in the same way. More than that, Jesus Himself promised: "I'm with you always, even to the end of the age."

Those 40 days, beloved, were not just a historical window; they were a pattern of how the risen Christ works in the lives of His followers. He teaches, He restores, He strengthens, and He prepares His followers. And this means that what happened then, can happen now. What Jesus did in those 40 days, He's still doing in the lives of those who walk with Him today.

So, let's look at what Jesus was doing.

1. Bringing clarity where there was confusion.

Even after the resurrection, the disciples did not fully understand. On the road to Emmaus, they said, "We were hoping..." They had followed Him, believed in Him, trusted Him, and yet, they misunderstood Him. They did everything and still didn't understand Him.

So, what does Jesus do? Beginning with the prophets, Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning Himself. So He goes back, He teaches, He explains. Then later they say He opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. Because resurrection without understanding would not have sustained them. He was giving them a framework to interpret life thereon.

2. Giving proof where there was doubt.

Belief did not come instantly. Thomas needed to see. "Unless I see, I will not believe." Jesus meets him right there – not with rejection, but with invitation.

And then He takes it further with this beautiful, powerful line. "Blessed are those who have not seen like you, Thomas, and yet, like us, will believe." He was not just dealing with Thomas; He was speaking to future believers, including us.

3. Restoring where there was failure.

Peter, the one who said, "I will never deny You." And yet, he did. Three times. Jesus could have ignored it, but He doesn't. He recreates the moment. The charcoal fire, a question "Do you love Me?" Three times. Not to shame him, but to restore him.

And then He recommissions him. Because failure was not the end of Peter's story. Perhaps some of you here need to hear that. Failure in your lives is not the end of the story that God is continuing to write. He recommissions Peter.

4. Commissioning where there was a sense of passivity.

Before the cross, they followed Him. After the resurrection, they are sent by Him. "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you. Go and make disciples."

This is not a small shift. This is identity change.

- From followers to witnesses,
- Learners to carriers,
- Observers to participants.

He was giving them new purpose.

5. Preparing them for what was next.

Something surprising happens. Just as they are ready to move out, being commissioned, He tells them, "Wait! Wait for the gift My Father has promised." Because something greater was coming. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." He's preparing them for life without His physical presence, but with His spiritual presence. It was like they were all ready. It has the potential to do whatever you have made it to be. All it needs is to be plugged into a light switch for power to flow in and make it operative.

That's what He was telling them, that the power cannot come in your own strength; it comes from the Holy Spirit coming into you.

He also demonstrating a new reality to them. What was that reality? Fascinating moments. He walked through doors. That would have got their attention. The doors are closed and suddenly Jesus is in their midst. "Hi, how are you guys doing?" "Who opened the door? I didn't." And then He eats with them. Sometimes, they recognize Him, and sometimes they don't. What's happening? He's showing them what the resurrection body looks like. A body that is real, physical, yet transformed. And in doing so, He anchors their hope.

So, what were the 40 days? We bring them together. Not random days.

- They were days of clarity when confusion gave way to understanding.
- They were days of confirmation when doubt was replaced with strong conviction.
- They were days of restoration when broken hearts were made whole.
- They were days of commissioning where followers became witnesses.
- They were days of preparation when Jesus readied them for what was to come.

These were not just 40 days. They were formational days. They were being transformed, formed into something so that they could go out. Jesus didn't just rise. He stayed after the resurrection to make sure that the disciples were ready.

What does that mean for us?

This is not just history; this is deeply personal. Many of us are somewhere in those 40 days. You believe, but you're still confused. You serve, but you feel tired. You love, but you feel distant. You try, but you feel ineffective.

But the good news is this: Jesus is still doing today what He did in those 40 days.

You believe, but you're confused.

You believe Jesus is Lord. You believe He is good. You believe He is in control. And yet, your life doesn't seem to align with what you believe. What does your life look like? You believe God answers prayer, but your prayers haven't been answered. You believe God is good, but something painful has happened. You believe God has a plan, but you cannot see it. So internally, there's this quiet tension. Lord, I believe but I just don't understand.

And this is not new, because even after the resurrection they still did not understand from scripture, that Jesus had to rise again, even after the resurrection, on the road to Emmaus – we were hoping...

How does Jesus meet you? He doesn't rebuke confusion harshly. He just walks alongside and explains. He explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning Himself. He opened their minds.

What do you need to do, beloved, if you find yourself in this space? Stay on the road with Him. Stay in His word. Stay in conversation with Him. Sometimes when things get difficult, when things are blurred or distant, we tend to withdraw from God, stop spending time with Him, stop praying, stop worshiping.

But what we need to do is to draw close. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." You may not understand yet but understanding often comes as you keep walking with Him.

You serve but you feel so tired.

You haven't stopped. You still show up, still doing what needs to be done. You serve in ministry, but without the same joy. You once had joy when you did things for the Lord. Not anymore. Now it's just a matter of rote. You care for the family, but you feel emotionally drained. You carry responsibility but feel so unseen. You're functioning but you're not flourishing.

The truth is that even faithful people get weary and tired. That's why Jesus said, "Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." How does He meet us? he doesn't demand that we do more. He simply offers rest. And notice, after the resurrection He cooks breakfast for them. Boy, how I would have loved to have been there having breakfast with Him! Breakfast cooked by Jesus. Fried fish. If you thought you'd eaten fried fish and thought it was heaven, wait till you get there. The risen Christ serves His tired disciples. How beautiful!

So, what do we do in this space? Return to Him, not just for strength but to be renewed in your spirit. "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength." You don't have to quit serving, but you do need to be refreshed at the source. You do need refreshment.

You love but you feel distant.

You still love Jesus, that hasn't changed. But the closeness, the proximity that you once had, you don't have any longer. You still love Him, but you don't feel it. So, prayer feels dry and perfunctory. Worship feels just routine. And the word feels distant. You know the word, but you're not able to apply it to your life. You're still committed, but something feels less alive within you.

But even the disciples felt that. They didn't recognize Him. Mary stood before Him and thought He was the gardener until He said her name. Mary! Presence was there but perception was clouded. Why?

Sometimes it's grief. Grief clouds us. Sometimes it's disappointment. Disappointment dulls us. And sometimes it's just routine that numbs us. But in this space, He reveals Himself again. To Mary, He calls her name. to the ones on the road to Emmaus, in the breaking of bread He is revealed. He makes Himself known personally.

What do you and I need to do? We need to draw near to Him. Even if you don't feel it, beloved, draw near. It's okay to say to Him, "Lord, I feel nothing. I'm numb, I'm dulled. Lord, I know I love You, but I

can't even experience that love." It's okay to go to Him and say those words because the God of heaven doesn't condemn. Never! He'll draw near to you, He'll hold you. He'll restore you. He'll renew you. He'll give you back strength and purpose and focus and mission. That's what He does. He'll never put you down, never make you feel small, never make you think you're invisible. That's who God is. Distance in the way you feel is not distance in reality. He's always there with you.

You try but you don't feel ineffective.

You're trying so hard, but you feel so ineffective. You want to live well. You want to make a difference. You want to fulfill God's purpose, but internally you feel: Am I making any difference at all? So, you share but you don't see any results. You work but you don't see any fruit. You try, and at the end you still feel inadequate.

It happened again with the disciples. After everything, Peter says, "I'm done. I'm going back to what I can do without having to think. I'm going to go fishing." What happens? Nothing. Fruitlessness. They didn't catch anything. But Jesus meets them there. He steps in. He directs and He provides. "Cast the net on the right side." Direction and 153 fish provided. Suddenly fruitfulness returns. Why? Because effectiveness is not about your effort alone. It's about aligning yourself with God. "Apart from Me," Jesus said, "you can do nothing. You will receive power only when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." You are never meant to do any of this in your own strength.

So, if you bring it all together, the resurrection changed everything. But the 40 days changed the disciples because in those 40 days, confusion became clarity, fear became confidence, failure became restoration, passivity became purpose. And here's the beautiful truth, beloved. Those 40 days were not just about them. They're about us as well.

Many of us today are living in that 40-day season right now. A season where something has happened but not fully made sense yet. Something has begun, but it hasn't taken shape yet. You believe, but you're still being formed. And in those moments, it's easy to feel or ask: Why is this taking so long? Why hasn't this been resolved yet? Why am I still here?

But when we look at scripture, 40 days reminds us that that time is never wasted. It's always preparation time. God is clarifying. God is restoring. God is strengthening. God is preparing us. So don't rush it. We rush it when we try to get out of the season too quickly – looking for instant answers, quick fixes, or forcing decisions just to relieve the discomfort that we're feeling. We jump ahead of what God may patiently be doing in us.

I've said this so often. don't settle for an Ishmael when God has promised you an Isaac. Don't rush it. Stay present. Stay teachable. Stay with the process – trusting that God is working even when things feel slow or unresolved. Don't say it's just another phase. Pay attention. Lean in. Ask God: What are You showing me in the moment? What are the small stirrings that I'm feeling? Should I pay attention to them? Is God trying to say something to me? Don't walk away from Him when it becomes uncomfortable but go move into Him. Ask Him to clarify things for you. Beloved, the same Jesus who stayed with them for 40 days is still at work in you and in me.

So, if you find yourself in this 40-day season, and as I look around this room, I can see on your faces that many of you feel that's where you are, don't think that this time is wasted. It's not. God is preparing you for something to come. which means that there is something ahead. So, stay there. Stay in the word. Stay in prayer and stay attentive to His voice. Because while you feel like nothing much is happening on the outside, God is getting something ready on the inside. And often before He releases what is next, He prepares us to be ready for it.

Noah walked 40 days. Moses stood 40 days. The people of Israel endured 40 years. Elijah journeyed 40 days. Jesus Himself stepped into a 40-day season. So take heart, be encouraged, stay expectant during this time. lean into what God is doing right now and learn all that you can during this season. Because what comes next will be shaped by what God is doing now. Amen.

Father, we confess that we are sometimes so impatient to move on, to question, to look at bareness, to get upset, to think, Lord, that we are in limbo and all the while Lord, You rare doing a work in us. You are preparing us.

Lord, I pray for all those in this room, and those listening. If this is the '40-day season', I pray that You would give us patience. I pray that You would help us lean into You, for You to speak to us and help us hear You, to be obedient to You, to enjoy restoration and clarification and recommissioning. Help us, Lord, to be able to accept this situation, this season, knowing that You're preparing us for something that is ahead.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
