

## Preparing for LIFE! Acts 1: 12-26

Portions adapted from: "Light The Fire Again," by Steven Chapman @ SermonCentral.com

Next week we will begin an extended visit with a model church. This church is alive and vibrantly growing growth. They are immersing themselves in teaching and learning Biblical truth. They are gathering—seemingly daily—somewhere in the city for worship, fellowship, food, and praying together. Masks are coming off! In that environment of honesty and vulnerability, a deeply caring community is being born as members encourage and support one another. The wealthier members own their responsibility and care for the poor, people are sharing their property and possessions; a tangible spirit of unity and love, pervades this body. And as all of this is happening, so many of them are also witnessing to their faith both in word and deed that friends, family, and associates are making regular decisions for Christ. On two recorded occasions, a crowd of thousands has made a commitment to follow Christ; can you imagine the baptisms that are taking place as thousands publicly profess their faith? And yes, miracles are taking place as the proclamation, "*We are witnesses*" resounds throughout the city. Of course we are talking about the young church whose growth and adventures were recorded in the book of Acts, beginning in chapter two.

Would you like to be part of such a church? Does your heart yearn to have God move within this church in the same sort of way as He did through that church? Who wouldn't desire a taste of that kind of worship, discipleship, ministry and outreach?

How does this affect you personally? Do you desire for God to do something remarkable in your personal life...to stoke within you a life changing spiritual fire? Would it bring a spine tingling thrill to see God work through you like he worked through the members of the Jerusalem church?

And now maybe you are sitting there wondering, "*Well, why hasn't God worked in such a way in this church? Why hasn't he moved in my life in the same powerful way as He did back then?*"

Have you ever wondered what it was that ignited the first century church in Jerusalem? What was it that transformed a semi-defeated Bible study group huddled behind closed doors somewhere in the backside of Jerusalem into this highly energized, Holy Spirit empowered, growing and life-giving church?

If you are like me as you read Acts, you find yourself saying, "*God, I want more of that kind of spiritual activity in my church. I would give anything to be set on fire with the explosive power of the Holy Spirit in my congregation. I would love for my church to become an Acts two church.*"

To which God responds, "*I would too!*"

But then when you ask the follow-up question:

"How can we get started?"

How can the revolution get going again?"

I think the answer from heaven will be "*Well, start where the Acts two church started*"

And, this was not at Pentecost. The disciples actually began preparing for the birth and life of the church some 50 days prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Scripture records that when the day of Pentecost came, the disciples were all ready and all together in one place—to receive the Spirit—because they had already begun a habit of being together, meeting together, praying and worshipping together--*in one place*.

I know that the Holy Spirit was and still is instrumental in Christians experiencing such oneness and empowerment. After all, the pivotal event in Acts two, is the birthing of the church by the infilling of the disciples with the Holy Spirit--something we will look into on Pentecost Sunday, next week. **What made them ready for such a visitation?**

Is it possible that some people are more open to the work of the Holy Spirit because they have placed themselves in a position that is receptive and ready for his transforming work?

At the same time, is it possible that others don't experience such transformation because they just aren't open or prepared; they haven't placed themselves in a position to hear and respond to the Holy Spirit's guidance?

Today we can gather some clues as to what made these disciples ready for the coming of the Holy Spirit by looking at what they were already doing to prepare themselves beforehand for new life...before they became the church of Acts in chapter two.

1. They regularly gathered physically and spiritually; they were "of one accord."



Acts, chapter two, opens with these words: *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.*

Why were they already *all together in one place* when the Holy Spirit made his dramatic entrance? Had Jesus told them to sit together on Pentecost? Or was it because gathering in support of each other had already become their regular habit over the past 50 days of waiting?

- Perhaps it was their profound experience with Jesus at his last supper that kept them coming back to that upper room—to remember and somehow still feel close to him.
- Perhaps it was where they hoped to find him again as the resurrected Jesus dropped in to visit and teach them some more.

Perhaps both were likely the reasons that from the day of his resurrection forward, gathering as a group became their regular practice.

Notice that none of the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection indicate that the disciples were necessarily "together" early that morning, when the women came back from the empty tomb, looking to share their story of Jesus being alive. But certainly by that evening, with all the amazing rumors running rampant through the city, they were again together in that upper room—albeit hidden behind locked doors—when Jesus made his first appearance to them all (John 20:19, Luke 24:33). This set the pattern for the next 50 days and thereafter.

Luke records that Jesus revisited the disciples many times during this period, staying with them, teaching them more on the kingdom of God. You probably never thought about this before but surely he met with them as a group just like the good old days of his ministry (Acts 1:3-4).

Then following Jesus' ascension, notice that they return to Jerusalem to wait-- as He had told them to--back in that upper room, as scripture records: **where they were staying**—which implies that they were also now eating, sleeping, and essentially living together in that place or a couple of nearby places. So this is how they could be *constantly devoting themselves to prayer* as a group (when you add Mary, Jesus brothers, and several other women, Luke counts more than 16 people who were regularly gathering in that upper room).

And when next we hear that they are together, these gatherings had grown to over 120 disciples (Acts 1:13-15). That room was perhaps a lot bigger than we think. Luke's gospel also records that they were continually in the temple, worshipping and praising God.

***"They were all together in one place."*** Sadly our NRSV translation does not do justice to what Luke was actually trying to say. Translating directly from the Greek, what Luke was conveying was that the disciples along with Jesus' family *were continuing steadfastly with one mind in prayer* (Acts 1:14). So this was not simply a matter of having people gathered in the same building, but a true and honest connection between one another—in a fairly large group—where lives were opened, pain was shared and life's joys were experienced by everyone. They weren't just sitting together like we do on a Sunday morning they were spiritually, mentally, and

emotionally bound to each other, caring for each other, praying for each other; already experiencing the “body life” that came to be a hallmark of the Acts two church (Romans 12:4-16).

So, other than Jesus’ occasional group lessons, what else do you think went on during those secluded fifty days they spent together? **They were preparing for life as a community.**

- Remember the competition among the disciples that went on before.
- Remember the arguments that went on about who was better.
- Remember the high ambitions they had for themselves, and the heights from which they had fallen.

Those 50 days gave them time to talk about their failures, to experience forgiveness, to be encouraged-- to build community, to come together, becoming the body of Christ.

**The truth is that our hearts were made for community. We hunger for the deep, authentic relationships Jesus had in mind when He prayed that his followers would be one.** Yet in many churches, the connection we crave is lacking.

**How can this church become a place where nobody stands alone? This can only happen as we build communities where people are devoted to each other and “of one mind.”**

For us at Bedford Presbyterian, some such communities have already been birthed or currently exist in seed form: such as the choir and worship team, small groups, Bible studies, Deacons, Session. Like nothing else, such “one minded” groups provide the kind of life-giving community that builds and empowers each individual member of the body of Christ; now if we can just get group sizes up to 120 in this place—wouldn’t that be wonderful!

1. They regularly gathered, physically and spiritually, they were “of one accord.”
2. They were constantly seeking God in prayer.

You have already heard reference to the second clue in their preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They weren’t just together as spectators watching a few individuals perform; **they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer together.**

Isn’t there something luxurious about room service in a hotel? All you have to do is pick up the phone and somebody is ready; just waiting to bring you breakfast, lunch, dinner, a chocolate milkshake, whatever your heart desires and your stomach will tolerate. Or with the touch of another button you can summon someone to transform

your soiled shirt into a clean one or a rumpled suit into a pressed one. That's the concept that some of us have of prayer. We have created God in the image of a divine bellhop. Prayer, for us, is the ultimate in room service; better still with no tipping, and everything charged to that great credit card in the sky. Now prayer is many things, but I'm pretty sure that heavenly room service is not one of them.

Again let's consider the situation of those gathered in that upper room. Jesus had told them to wait. Nowadays, waiting is akin to wasting time. In our activist age, one would expect that this group, people who were to be witnesses to the world, would find some more meaningful activity than just being together and praying together.

**But "waiting," in the Biblical sense, implies an earnest seeking after God and His desires.** Our Bible declares, *they that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength* (Isaiah 40:31). This is why for these post-resurrection disciples praying was such a weighty matter. I'm sure there were prayers of thanksgiving and prayers of repentance. But probably most of their prayers were that God's plan would become clear to them, that His promises would be fulfilled, that they would be able to stand up in the face of the oncoming onslaught that was to be expected. These were prayers that reached down into their own hearts to test their own willingness to surrender to the direction of God.

As John Bunyan once said,

***"You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed."***

Pastor and author George Buttrick added the following:

***Prayer is not a substitute for working, thinking, watching, suffering, or giving; prayer is a support for all other efforts."***

And notice that these weren't just "Lone Ranger" prayer moments. These believers were gathered together to pray. Prayer dominated the time that they spent together with one another. In the midst of their shared moments, they got on their knees not only with one another, but for one another.

It's nice to hear someone say, "I'll pray for you." It is something entirely different for that same person to break away from the demands of their pressing schedule and say, ***"May I pray with you about that right now?"*** And then to spend time-together--at the foot of God's throne imploring God, seeking his face, listening for His voice.

These times of shared prayer may occur during Sunday morning worship. But they are more apt to occur in our small groups as we share our lives and struggles, or during phone conversations and home visits as we connect with one another through the week.

1. They regularly gathered together, physically and spiritually, they were "of one accord."
2. They were constantly seeking God in prayer.
3. They were immersed in God's word.

But what is it that guided and informed this single minded group? What was it that was shaping their prayers and preparing them for life in the church?

### **The study of God's word of course!**

The third clue to what they did during the 50 days prior to Pentecost, as indicated by their conversations, was that they spent much time studying God's Word. On those days when Jesus wasn't with them they could still turn to their Bibles to seek God's guidance.

It is in the midst of one of these Bible study prayer group meetings that Peter stands up and speaks. He apparently has been spending some time studying his Bible and he discovered something that needs to be done. He argues that what Judas did was necessary to fulfill scripture, and offers some biblical quotes to substantiate his point. Then from these verses, they determine that they need to replace Judas.

Two of the places from which Peter quoted were Psalms 69 and 109 both of which the disciples already considered prophetic on the life of the Messiah.

It was not surprising that Peter was looking for guidance in Psalm 69 because Jesus had previously applied this Psalm to himself at the last Supper: *If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfill the word that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.'* (John 15:25; Psalm 69:4). This was probably also one of the Psalms to which he referred while educating the Emmaus road disciples. Later, what so many of his disciples found here in Psalm 69 were echoes of the life of the Messiah that they had personally witnessed.

Remembering the event of Jesus clearing the money changers from the temple, the Apostle John recalled another line from Psalm 69:9 (John 2:17): *It is zeal for your house that has consumed me.*

And in his letter to the Romans, Paul also uses Psalm 69:9, "*the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me*" as an example of Jesus' humility (Romans 15:3).

Surely, as they watched the soldier raise a sop of vinegar to Jesus' lips, all his disciples were murmuring to themselves, *for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink*, again from Psalm 69:21.

So, it was not surprising that Peter was looking through Psalm 69 for what to do next. Quoting from this Psalm, Peter declared that Judas needed to be replaced; "*For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and 'Let another take his position of overseer.'*" (Acts 1:20; Psalm 69:25).

**The point I am trying to make is that God didn't give us the Bible so that we could sit in worship to hear just one weekly sermon and then go our way, unchanged and unscathed.** When the disciples were looking for direction they looked into God's Word! And when the disciples reflected on the events of their life it was God's Word that colored their impressions and gave meaning to their experiences. And that is just as it should also be for us!

Do you know these verses, tucked away in the folds of your Bible?

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:11

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hebrews 4:12

Do you see the problem? God's Word cannot be active in our lives if we ignore it and leave it lying on the shelf. In order to live out and to apply God's Word to the activities of our lives, we have to know what His Word says. Then we have to take the decisive step of making tough choices and actually doing what it says.

For many of us, the failure of the Holy Spirit to transform our lives has little to do with spiritual ignorance. The problem is spiritual disobedience. God has already made clear what he desires from us. We have sat through countless numbers of sermons that have regurgitated what the life of a Christ-follower looks like. What remains for us is our willingness to let the Holy Spirit now transform our own behavior, our attitudes and our character.

In the story of the two builders, what was the difference between the wise and foolish? The wise builder heard God's words and followed them. The foolish builder heard the same words, but did not put them into practice (Matthew 7:24-27).

It's time that we dusted off our Bibles, and put them to work dusting off our souls.

So, how are you doing here? How have you been preparing for the new life that the Holy Spirit would give you?

- Do you have a group of Christian friends with whom you are "of one mind;" concerned and caring for each other?
- And are you regularly gathering together to support and pray for each other?
- And are you spending time studying God's word together to find guidance for your life?

Yes? You are doing all this?

Here's one more thought: Even if every week you are in church, and at a Bible study... and you spend hours in prayer, praying both individually and with others, asking God to make His directions clear. **But if you aren't willing to put what you know, what God has made abundantly clear in His Word, into practice the Holy Spirit will never be able to kindle a spiritual fire within you.**

So there you have three indicators of how those early believers prepared for and displayed their openness to the Holy Spirit acting powerfully through their lives. They participated in group life. They spent time daily, both together and apart, seeking God in prayer. And lastly, they studied and applied God's Word to their own lives. And when the Holy Spirit arrived at Pentecost, He found them already together, of one mind and heart, and in one place ready to become the church...that group of excited witnesses that one future opponent would claim had "*turned the world upside down*" (Acts 17:6-- I would say "right side up!").

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How about you? Is there an area or two, or perhaps even all three, where you are visibly not ready for the Holy Spirit to appear. Be brutally honest with yourself; just you and God sharing this conversation.

*(pause)*

Remember, becoming an Acts two kind of believer in an Acts two kind of church is dependent upon this. It is by living a life in which these three disciplines are already active that we tell God we are ready for the Holy Spirit's work in our lives; helping us to grow into a church that is a loving place of fellowship where people are regularly being reached and lives are being changed, and where people are finding the joy of meaningful ministry.

Let's follow the lead of those early disciples in praying about this.