

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Acts 4: 23-31

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Last Sunday I introduced the sermon by speaking about one of my favorite movies, Star Wars. This morning I would like to do so again. Here's why. In that film the force that emanates throughout the universe accomplishes two things. First, it changes the lives of those who are impacted by its presence. Luke Skywalker, for example, is transformed from an angry teenager into a Jedi knight. He is able to accomplish things which would otherwise have been impossible. He becomes a different kind of person. Second, through him and others who have also been transformed by this invisible force, they are able to thwart the powers of evil and save his world from destruction. Having just heard the passage of Scripture that was read this morning, did you not sense that something of a similar nature took place in the lives of those early Christians? Not only were they changed, but the world in which they lived was also changed. Most importantly of all, this passage of Scripture is not a make-believe movie. It really happened and it continues to happen in our world today. What took place and what continues to take place is the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

So today let's take an insightful look at what this passage of Scripture is telling us. Let's also take a look at how this passage of Scripture has been replicated over and over again down throughout the centuries of Christian history. Finally, let's take a careful look at how it can apply to our lives today. Let's discover how the ministry of the Holy Spirit changes both people's lives and the world in which they live. But before we dive into the Scriptures, a word of clarification is needed. What do we mean when we talk about the ministry of the Holy Spirit? The word ministry has a rather simple meaning. It refers to that which we do for someone else, a service that we perform for them. So when we talk about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we're talking about what God through His Spirit is willing and able to do for you and me. Personally, I find that rather incredible. The God of all creation is willing to spend His time and effort to do something rather wonderful in our lives, to shape and mold us into something far better than what we could accomplish on our own. With that in mind, let's see what this passage of Scripture has to say to us.

It begins by mentioning that Peter and John had just been released from incarceration, which raises the question of by whom and what for. The day before on their way to the temple Peter had healed a crippled beggar. Now leaping and

dancing, he entered the temple along with them. Those who remembered him begging at the entrance to the temple were amazed, which gave Peter an opportunity to tell the multitudes about Jesus, the one in whose name the beggar had been healed. The Jewish authorities who ran the temple were not pleased. They arrested the two apostles and questioned them the next day. Telling them to stop preaching and teaching about Jesus, they released them from custody. Back among their own, Peter and John reported what had happened. In response, these early followers of Christ raised their voices in prayer. Let's take a look at this prayer.

First, they acknowledged the greatness of God. Then they told the Lord that they had expected this kind of response from the religious authorities in the temple because it had been prophesied by their ancestor David in the book of Psalms. He had foretold that this kind of oppression would be brought against God's people. Now that had taken place through an unlikely alliance between the temple priests and the Roman authorities, including Pilate and Herod, who conspired together to both execute Jesus, the Messiah, and then suppress those who preached in His name. Based upon this realization, they concluded their prayer with these words, "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:29-30). The temple authorities had told them to be quiet. They earnestly prayed that God would enable them to do just the opposite. The Lord answered their prayer immediately. This passage of Scripture then concludes by declaring that the place where they were meeting was shaken and that they "were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31).

So there you have it. After they prayed, these early disciples of Christ were transformed by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Any fears about their identities as Christians and what they were supposed to do were cast aside. They had been changed and in response great changes took place all around them. A spirit of generosity prevailed, everyone sharing their personal possessions with those in need. Church discipline was exercised, especially with regards to two within their company who had tried to deceive the early church. Additionally, many miraculous signs and wonders took place. People were healed of their infirmities as the church continued to meet in the temple at Jerusalem. Best of all the early church continued to grow. More and more people became Christians. The ministry of the Holy Spirit impacted their lives both individually and corporately, one person at a time, but multiplying that blessing over and over again in a multitude of people and in a multitude of ways.

The same is true with regards to the history of the Christian church. Prayer has always been a dynamic part of the work of the Holy Spirit. Such was the case in

1857 when six men joined together for prayer at noon at the Fulton Street Church in New York City. God honored their devotion and soon prayer meetings were being held all across the nation. Factories and businesses would actually shut down at noon for one hour so that people could attend prayer meetings. Based upon the theme of Matthew 26:40, "could you not watch with Me one hour," thousands of people came to faith in Christ and were received into the Christian church. All across the nation this prayer revival impacted towns and communities, often covered by the leading newspapers of the day. Some have felt that it was a spiritual awakening that prepared the nation for the great conflict that was soon to erupt between the north and the south.

To wrap things up, the ministry of the Holy Spirit serves two purposes. First of all, the Spirit of the Lord speaks to us personally and individually, convicting us of sin, calling us to become Christians, encouraging us to dedicate our lives to Christ. He is busy in some other ways as well, bringing revival and renewal to all of God's people in great movements of the Spirit that impact entire cultures and populations of people. Right here in America, there have been many great outpourings of the Holy Spirit, dating all the way back to the 1700's. We are in need of that again. Like those early Christians of the first century, let us pray that the ministry of the Holy Spirit will be experienced in our midst once again so that we, like them will be able to boldly live and proclaim the Word of God.