

As we continue in our series on great prayers in the Bible, today we find ourselves in the book of Acts in the New Testament; and after having just celebrated the birth of our Lord Jesus, we now find ourselves stepping into the context of his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven. As I worked through my study yesterday for today’s sermon from Acts 4, I found myself spending a considerable amount of time looking at the context in first three chapters of Acts – where I was again reminded of how foundationally important prayer was in the first church planted by our Lord Jesus. And so as we look at the concept the “power of prayer today” we are going to do so by spending a chunk of our time in Acts 1 before we move into Acts 4. The book of Acts opens with Luke the physician picking up where he left off in the gospel of Luke. Jesus had been resurrected from the dead and he met with his disciples, and in Luke 24:50-53 he writes: *“Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.”* So then in Acts 1 Luke speaks in more detail about what happened that day.

*I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*

*And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”*

*So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Acts 1:1-11*

One wonders what was going on in the hearts and minds of Jesus’ disciples as they stood gazing into the sky. Think about what they had seen and experienced. Think about the sermons, the teachings, the dramatic healings, and the miracles. They had come to regard Jesus as the Messiah, as the supreme and sovereign Son of God, anointed by the Father to be their Redeemer. And then it all came crashing down as they watched him be arrested, put on trial, tortured and then condemned to death on a cross. They hardly had any time to grieve before they got word from some of the women that Jesus had risen from the dead, which they considered foolishness - until Jesus came and stood in their midst. Then, for the next forty days, Jesus appeared to them time and time again as proof that he really was alive. And then he comes to them and tells them to “*wait for the promise of the Father*” by which they would “*be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*” Here we see again, as we’ve seen in our previous sermons this month, that God most often makes us “*wait*” in prayer before we can receive a promised blessing from Him. In our text for today the Word of God reveals to us how the first church “*waited*” in prayer as they prayed to receive the promised blessing of *God’s power* – which is how we are also to “*wait*” in prayer.

*Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. Acts 1:12-14*

Our text for this morning tells us that the disciples' response to Jesus' command that they "*wait for the promise of the Father*" was to go to Jerusalem and then gather together and "*with one accord*" devote "*themselves to prayer*" (Acts 1:14). Underline that verse because that's how the first church started: *it started with prayer*. Their first activity together wasn't worship or fellowship, as the eleven apostles and "*about 120*" other followers of Christ (Acts 1:15) *began with a prayer meeting*. Jesus said, "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations*" (Mark 11:17). From this first group in the first church that met in prayer, a river began to flow which spread throughout all the nations, reaching from an upper room in Jerusalem to a sanctuary in a Baptist church in Port Alberni.

God will bless His church with the power of the Holy Spirit *when His people seek Him by actively and aggressively waiting on Him in prayer*. "*If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land*" (2 Chronicles 7:14). Scripture conveys this message time and time again as we read countless stories of how God moved on behalf of His people by the power of His Holy Spirit, changing situations and circumstances, transforming hearts and lives, turning entire nations toward Himself, in response to the prayers of His people. The truth is brothers and sisters, God is not waiting for the world to turn to Him in repentance; He's not waiting for our leaders and our nation to seek His face; God is waiting for the people of His church to get on their knees and actively "*wait*" in prayer. Our text reveals the three ways in which the first church actively and aggressively waited in prayer.

1) First, we read first that they prayed *obediently*. In Acts 1:4 we read that before he ascended to heaven Jesus "*ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father.*" In our text for this morning we read that after Jesus ascended, "*then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away*" (Acts 1:12). Jesus told them to return to Jerusalem and wait, and so the disciples obediently returned to Jerusalem and waited. And again, just as in how God's Word defines the term "*wait*" much differently than we do, God's Word defines the concept of *obedience to God* in a much different light that we tend to see it. A heart that is truly centered on God and sees Jesus Christ as the supreme and sovereign Lord over and above all things - knows nothing of the resentful, begrudging obedience of duty we often speak of - but rather embraces obedience to God as a passionate, joyous heart response to the sovereign God of all grace.

We see that in the disciples, in that their obedience was *immediate*. The pace of the first chapter of Acts is furious from verse 4 onwards. Jesus gives his final instructions, he ascends into heaven, and no sooner is he out of sight than angels appear and challenge the disciples to get moving. Immediately they return to Jerusalem, climb into the upper room and start praying. Once the angels had shaken them out of their stunned shock of the ascension, the Christ's words compel them to immediate prayerful obedience to his command. May we be a people who immediately obey the words of our Lord Jesus!

The disciple's obedience was not only immediate; it was also *joyful*. Dr. Luke wrote of this at the end of his gospel in Luke 24:51-52: "*While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.*" Obedience which is rooted in duty and obligation is not joyful. But obedience which is rooted in a God-centered faith in the sovereignty and supremacy of the risen Jesus Christ is joyful: "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope*" (Romans 15:13).

The disciple's obedience was not only immediate and joyful, but also *full of expectancy*. In fact the disciple's obedience was immediate and joyful *because* they were full of expectancy. Jesus had given them the promise of sending the Holy Spirit, and so they rushed to Jerusalem with joy *because* they expected to receive the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that "*whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*" Because God is sovereign and good we can expect that He will do great things when we joyfully and immediately obey the call of His Word.

2) The first church actively and aggressively also waited for the power of the Holy Spirit in prayer by praying *constantly*. "*With one accord*" they were "*devoting themselves to prayer*" (Acts 1:14). The word "*devoting*" here in the Greek suggests steady persistence or constant perseverance over a long period of time. We find the same word in Acts 6:4 "*We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*" The leadership of the early church appointed deacons to take care of the day-to-day running of things so that they would be free to steadily persist and constantly persevere in prayer and the study of the Word of God. In the book of Acts they never lost these priorities, and that is how they maintained their spiritual power for so long. Constant prayer was the vital power of the New Testament church.

*"With one accord were devoting themselves to prayer."* Consider how God had prepared these apostles for this moment; think back to the night before Jesus was crucified as were praying together in the Garden of Gethsemane: "*And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, 'So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak'*" (Matthew 26:40-41). But now these men were quite different; they had seen Jesus die and rise from the dead and then gloriously ascend into heaven. And they had heard His promise of the Holy Spirit - so "*with one accord*" they "*were devoting themselves to prayer.*"

In days when those who claim Christ are too weary to pray and seem to be asleep in their spiritual walk because of the prevailing busyness of their lives; it's time for a fresh revelation of Jesus in all His glory: *the dying Savior, the death-conquering Lord, the ascending King*. These are days when we must pray that we, as God's people, would see a new vision of Jesus in all that he sovereignly and supremely is. God has promised to pour out the fire of the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that Christ might reign in our lives. That is what we must constantly pray for, which joyful and expectant hearts. Amen?

3) Lastly the first church actively and aggressively waited for the power of the Holy Spirit in prayer by praying *in unity*. "*With one accord . . . devoting themselves to prayer.*" The phrase "*with one accord*" is translated from one Greek word, which means "together in passion" and gives a sense of voices that are in such harmony that each voice has lost its distinctive character within the deeper song being sung. This phrase occurs 11 times in the New Testament, 10 of which are in the book of Acts, revealing how foundationally important unity is to the church. "*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! . . . For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore*" (Psalm 133:1, 3).

When the church comes together in vital communion, united in heart, mind, soul and strength: "*There the Lord has commanded the blessing.*" And nowhere is this unity more powerful than in the realm of prayer. Such was the unity of those early disciples as they actively and aggressively waited on the power of the Holy Spirit in prayer. Jesus has told them that "*if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven*" (Matthew 18:19). And so in believing in the sovereignty and supremacy of who the risen Christ was, is, and will be, they prayed in unity.

Unity in prayer comes when we share the same sacrificial passion for Jesus and the same humble devotion for Jesus. God created the church for His purposes by expanding His reign in the hearts and lives of His people. Jesus builds up his people by calling them to follow him *together*. We, in the church, are called to a relationship of loving *interdependence*. Again, this is another strange concept for many of us, as we live in a society and culture that values *independence*. Some Christians try to be spiritually *independent* and follow Jesus without the support and accountability of a church. You see we cannot choose to whom we're accountable to *because the church is God's idea, not ours*. God created us and Christ calls us to a relationship of interdependence. The truth is you cannot fully live for Christ until you fully embrace his church; you can't love Jesus until you love the church. Jesus said: "*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:35). The apostle John wrote: "*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us*" (1 John 4:11-12).

Just as in the early church, Jesus invites us to follow him together through our loving *interdependence*. Spiritual growth and maturity does not happen in a vacuum. When you choose to walk the road of spiritual independence, you lose the ability to see beyond yourself, and miss out on the shared experience of coming to know Christ *together*. Jesus shed his blood for the church, Jesus died for the church, Jesus is the church. It's his heart desire to shape and mold his followers *together* into a community that reflects his love and truth and joy and grace and glory - through their unity *in him*. In John 17:11 Jesus prayed his followers "*may be one, even as we are one.*" We are created, born and bred for relationship; relationship is what we live and breathe. Relationship is our course and calling in life. This has great ramifications for the Church. The Church is part of the whole; she is both influenced by the world around her and called to influence the world in which she exists. We are called to a relationship *together* that is greater than the activities scheduled on our overflowing calendars. We are called to a responsibility *together* of a relationship with Jesus Christ that molds and melts us *together* in such a way that changes the fiber and fabric of not only our own lives, but the whole of the world around us. The more we love God, the more we'll love each other, the more we will love others.

The power of our prayers reflects the depth and the unity of our relationship with God and with one another. We see that in Acts 4, where after the God fulfilled His promise and poured out His Spirit on those who followed Jesus on Pentecost, Peter preached the gospel to a crowd in Jerusalem and 3000 people came to faith in Christ. And afterwards Peter and John healed a lame beggar and Peter shared the gospel again and many more came to faith in Christ – which caused the religious leaders to arrest them and then question them about what they were doing. Peter responded by preaching the gospel to the Jewish council, who responded by forbidding Peter and John from sharing the gospel anymore.

*When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed" — for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. Acts 4:23-31*

Jesus said: *"My house shall be called a house of prayer"* (Matthew 21:13). God's Word reveals to us in these verses that God created the church to worship God by boldly asking God and praising God for His power through an intimate relationship of prayer. We read here today of three ways those in the early church boldly praised God in prayer for the fulfillment of God's promise to bless them with the power of the Holy Spirit.

1) Praying people boldly praise God in prayer *for what He had sovereignly done in their lives.* *"When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God"* (Acts 4:23-24). They were thankful for God's sovereign deliverance (*"When they were released"*) and they were united of one heart in their love for God (*"they lifted their voices together to God"*). When the disciples left the council they rejoined the others in the first church and instinctively broke into united prayer. There is great power in praying together. A few years back at a horse-pull in Canada, one horse pulled 9,000 pounds, while another pulled 8,000 pounds. Together, it was assumed that they could pull 17,000 pounds. But, when harnessed together they pulled 30,000 pounds, over three times what either could pull separately.

In the same way, God's power through His church is greater than the sum of His power in our lives individually. When this first church faced extraordinary obstacles, they prayed to a God who was infinitely beyond extraordinary, a God who had delivered them from sin and death - and by the Holy Spirit would continue to sovereignly deliver them from any and all forces set against them.

2) Praying people boldly praise God in prayer *for His absolute sovereignty over and above all things*. The first church prayed praises to God for His sovereignty over *creation* ("who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them"); for His sovereignty over *revelation* ("who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit"), and for His sovereignty over all of *history* ("The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together . . . to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place"). Those in the first church were bold in their faith because the God to whom they had prayed was the Creator of heaven and earth, the Sovereign God of the universe, who was totally and absolutely in control of all that had happened, was happening, and would happen. They were not concerned that they were being threatened by mere men. Regardless of who was against them, God was for them - God the Creator of the universe, the God of all creation, the God of all history, the God of all revelation. Because their lives were focused on God and His sovereign purpose, the apostles and the early church could be bold in their faith. Christ had defeated death itself; they could not be silenced. Praying people boldly praise God in prayer for His absolute sovereignty over and above all things.

3) Praying people boldly praise God in prayer *for what He sovereignly would do in their lives*. "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:29-30). These folks prayed not for their safety in the face of danger but for boldness of faith in the face of danger. The threats they faced, the threats we face, from both within and outside the church, are intended to silence us from boldly speaking of and living for Jesus. This prayer was an admission of their weak faith and dependence on God. May this be our prayer also!

"And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31). Romans 8:31 says: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Our faith in Jesus should be just as bold as it was for those in the first church. They prayed to the same God we pray to. The same God who shook them, will shake us. The same God who filled them with the Holy Spirit, desires to do the same *for us*. The God who empowered them to speak and live boldly for Jesus Christ is seeking to the same *in us*. May God save us from being a nice church filled with nice Christians. Shake us Lord and make us bold!

Hugh Latimer, the Bishop of Worcester, once preached before King Henry VIII. Henry was greatly displeased by the *boldness* of Latimer's sermon and ordered him to preach again on the following Sunday and do so in a way that would not offend the king. The next Sunday, after reading his text, Latimer began his sermon by saying the following: "Hugh Latimer, do you know before whom you are this day speaking? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away your life, if you offend him. Therefore, take heed that you speak not a word that may displease him. *But then* consider well, Hugh Latimer, that you have been sent to preach this message by the Great and Almighty God Himself, Who is all-present and Who beholds all your ways and Who is able to cast your soul into hell forever. Therefore, take care that you deliver this message faithfully." Latimer then went on to preach the exact same sermon he had preached the Sunday before, *with even greater boldness*. While Henry VIII allowed Hugh Latimer to live, some years later when the king's daughter Mary came to the throne, he was arrested, tried, and burned at the stake with his friend Nicholas Ridley, speaking the famous words: "Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle in England as I trust by God' grace shall never be put out."

Maher Dakhil, a member of Iraq's minority Mandaean sect from southern Iraq, a holder of two engineering degrees from the University of Baghdad, rose through the ranks to the highest level of Saddam Hussein's coddled community of scientists and engineers. His position meant compulsory membership in the Baath Party, but his ethnic minority status made him an ill-fitting bureaucrat - *and even more so after he encountered the gospel and gave his life to Jesus*. Under Saddam's reign of power the gospel burned within his heart, and Dakhil shared Jesus as a sidewalk evangelist, translated Scripture into Arabic, handed out sermon tapes, and wrote five books about his faith in Jesus Christ, which brought severe persecution into his life and eventually landed him in prison for 18 months. Maher survived such trials and following the invasion of Iraq, he served as a translator for coalition forces, as a chaplain in Baghdad hospitals, and oversaw the rebuilding the Olympic Stadium by U. S. 3rd Infantry battalion. Dakhil was able to secure an abandoned church building in Baghdad and with 50 people attending their first service, which ultimately grew into the largest church in Baghdad with over 800 attending. But not long after Maher Dakhil, his wife, his son, an associate pastor and their driver disappeared along the road on the way back to Baghdad from a pastor's conference in Amman, Jordan. Dakhil had called a friend by cell phone as they were crossing the border a few hours before, telling them he would be home shortly. Today he and his family are most likely at home with Jesus.

The early followers of our resurrected Lord Jesus turned the world upside down because they powerfully lived in anticipation of the return of Christ. As living witnesses to the sovereignty of God in the supremacy of Jesus Christ; they believed Jesus had risen, they believed that Jesus is reigning; and they believed that Jesus would be returning. And with that message, mission, and motive pressed deep into their hearts - countless lives were transformed by one encounter after another with the risen Savior, both in their day and throughout all of history. Many throughout history (like Hugh Latimer) and many today (like Maher Dakhil) have and still are boldly sacrificially giving their lives for Jesus.

We are here today; this church exists, as a consequence of the passion and boldness those in the first church had for the risen Christ. While we may not know when Jesus will return, we *do know* some things. *We know* that God answers prayer. *We know* that God powerfully answers the obedient, constant, unified prayers of His people. *We do know* that when we pray, God changes people and things. *We do know* that when God changes people and things – that He will do new and unexpected things. *We do know* that when we pray, God will change us and He will do new and unexpected things in our hearts and lives. *And we also know* that when God answers obedient, constant and unified prayer – by powerfully changing people and things, and doing new and unexpected things – and that God will do so in a way that will “shake the places we are gathered.” May we pray bold prayers to God that He might give us the power of His Holy Spirit to be a bold people for Jesus – and may God shake each one of us and shake our church and shake our building and shake our community and shake our world for Jesus Christ. Amen? Amen!

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