

# Waking the Sleeping Giant - 4

## *An Important Prayer Meeting*

As we finally start to wrestle with the text of the Book of Acts, I want to stress that I will not be doing a verse-by-verse analysis and many of the verses won't even be referenced in the sermons. This series will be long enough with me focussing in on the main themes and theological principles, it would take years if I went verse by verse. However, I want to really encourage you to make sure you read all the text as we go through and for this sermon, that would mean the first chapter of Acts. Before continuing I would encourage you to grab your Bible and read Acts 1 in a translation of your choice.

If I gave the Book of Acts to a Hollywood writer and asked them to prepare the script for a movie, I am pretty sure that movie would not begin in Acts 1. Like every good James Bond movie, they would want this story to begin with a dynamic action scene which immediately captures the attention of everyone, drawing them to the edge of their seats – as they are caught up in the drama of the opening scene.

That would probably mean they would start with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in chapter 2. In fact, a lot of scholars over the years have wondered why Luke didn't start his second work with that dynamic story.

The fact is, the early disciples could never have become dynamic instruments for the extension of God's kingdom if they had not obeyed the command of Jesus to wait for the promise Jesus gave them before leaving the earth to return to the Father's side.

**Luke 24:49** *"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

It is worth noting that this waiting took ten days - no longer. In our Christian life there must be a balance between spending time with God in worship, praise, intimacy and waiting on Him, and in fulfilling the ministry of Jesus in ministry and outreach.

The Upper Room, where the Disciples spent a good part of these ten days, appears to be a place of peace and quiet and security. There is little doubt that the Holy Spirit was present there in an unusual way. I can imagine that much time would have been spent looking back and thanking God for Jesus, for all that His life and ministry had meant to these followers.

Times such as these in warm fellowship with other believers in the presence of God are precious. Through prayer, we are drawn into a close and fulfilling relationship with God. We can imagine that in the Upper Room the Disciples were probably discovering who they were in Christ. Time would have been spent undoubtedly in worship and praise - pouring out their soul to God.

It would have been a special time where God received them as they were, rather than evaluating them for what they did or didn't do. It must have seemed to them like a foretaste of heaven, where one day we will all be around God's throne, exalting Him and worshipping His name.

All that for ten days. But as we see later, suddenly the “until” took effect, and they received the power that they had been waiting for. From then on it was action, ministry and the practical outworking of the power they had received. Within 24 hours they had produced 3,000 unpolished disciples of Christ who needed care and nurture in their Christian faith. And the action sparked that day continued for the thirty-year span of the book of Acts, with notable pauses, such as the Apostles desire to give themselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word as we read in chapter 6.

Now, nothing is significant in the period of ten days. The Apostle Paul, who had not been with Jesus personally, needed several years as his waiting time before God launched him into active ministry. The point is that time for pre-ministry formation is critically important, but we must not allow that time to continue indefinitely.

My concern is that we do not fall into a rut and become what some refer to as professional carriers or waiters. Of course, waiting is not optional - it is necessary. If we do not have the intimacy with God, we will not have the power or the direction. Waiting on God is essential. It is as necessary as food is to the human body. However, like food, waiting can be overdone. Physical obesity can prevent our bodies from being all that God intends them to be. Spiritual obesity can have similar outcomes. If we do not ever get out of the Upper Room and into the marketplace, we will probably never be part of the mission and ministry of Jesus in the world today.

**Acts 1:5-8** *“For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Their question must have filled Jesus with dismay. Were they still so lacking in perception? The verb ‘restore’ shows that they were expecting a political and territorial kingdom. The noun ‘Israel’ shows that they were expecting a national kingdom. The adverbial clause ‘at this time’ shows that they were expecting its immediate establishment.

Now, sadly, many people today seem to have similar concepts about the Kingdom of God. Of course, it is our Christian duty to strive for justice and righteousness and freedom and prosperity in our society. But some carry this too far and seem to forget the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:4 where he reminds us that our weapons in this spiritual battle are not of this world.

So, as we have seen many times over the years, people begin to walk according to the flesh by using force and political coercion and man’s methods to accomplish what they believe to be God’s kingdom values. But the Book of Acts clearly shows us that the crucial force for ushering in the Kingdom of God across the whole earth is the power of the Holy Spirit and personal witness.

**Acts 1:5** *“For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

Spiritual power for advancing the kingdom of God would come through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, differences in interpretation of what the baptism of the Holy Spirit means today have been used by Satan to separate segments of the Body of Christ for over a hundred years now. However, a brief look at some of the terms may just help to cool the fires of the debate and help us get past the conflict that has arisen over this issue.

Different terms are used for the power-bestowing event that Luke is describing here. *'Baptism of the Holy Spirit'* is one term; *'The Holy Spirit has come upon you'* is another. Then the verb *'filled'* in reference to the Holy Spirit, is used four other times in the book of Acts. It is used a second time for Peter who was filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8); in Acts 4:31 the believers were again filled with the Holy Spirit when they assembled for a prayer meeting; In Acts 9:11, Ananias ministered to Saul in Damascus to be filled with the Holy Spirit and in Acts 13:9 Paul was again filled with the Holy Spirit for his power-encounter with a sorcerer.

The expression, *'filled with the Holy Spirit'* is used only once in the Epistles, in Ephesians 5:18, where Paul contrasts it with being drunk with wine. Paul uses *'baptised in the Holy Spirit'* only once in his letters in 1 Corinthians 12:13 where he says that we were all baptised into one body by one spirit.

Issues such as whether we are *'baptised'* or *'filled'* with the Holy Spirit once or many times; whether it occurs at conversion or subsequent to conversion; or whether there is initial physical evidence to certify that it has happened - are more important to some Christian leaders today than others. In spite of the divisions and differences surrounding these issues, the reason they are raised in the first place is valid and that is because we all need to receive the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit into our lives and our ministries to the greatest extent possible in order to fulfill the mission of Christ in the world.

I hope and pray that the divisive debates about how this is to happen will be a thing of past one day. I long for the day when every sincere believer will be more concerned about having the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives than about how that is to happen and when.

**Acts 1:8** *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

In this verse we have what effectively is the fifth appearance of the Great Commission of Jesus in the New Testament. Those five passages are: Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:19-23; and Acts 1:4-8. Four of them (John being the exception) specify the international or global scope of the evangelistic task given by Jesus. On another occasion Jesus said,

**Matthew 24:14** *"... this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*

This seems to indicate that world evangelisation is not an endless task, but that it's following a divine timeline. The specific plan is to plant Christian Churches in every nation (or within every people group). Missions experts are now suggesting that there appears to be light at the end of the Great Commission tunnel. For the first time in history there is good reason to believe that the Church of Jesus Christ, as represented on earth today, has sufficient resources to complete the task of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to every people group, within this current generation. Missiologist, George Otis Jnr, had this to say at the end of the twentieth century:

*"The soldiers of the Lord of Hosts have now circled the final strongholds of the serpent - namely the nations and spiritual principalities contained within the 10/40 window. While the remaining task is admittedly the most challenging phase of the battle, the armies of Satan are now faced with a large community of believers whose spiritual resources, if properly motivated, submitted and unified are truly awesome. If the forces of God continue to push back the powers of darkness at the current rate, then before most of us alive today leave this earth, we will see the day when a baby born anywhere in the world will have the same chance to hear the good news of Jesus Christ."*

Now, when I speak about the end of the 'Great Commission tunnel' I am not saying that everyone in the world will embrace Jesus as Saviour and Lord, rather that everybody will be within reasonable reach of the Gospel. In other words, this gospel of the kingdom will have been preached to all the world as a witness to all the nations, just as Jesus said.

Now, obviously, no human plan or strategies could possibly accomplish this task before this current generation leaves the earth. It can only be done through an extraordinary outpouring of supernatural power through the Holy Spirit. Is that likely? Well, who would have thought that the Iron Curtain would be torn down so fast? Who would have predicted the demise of communism in eastern Europe? Who would have thought that whole nations would go from being 2% Christian to 60% Christian in less than 50 years? Things have happened in the past few decades that have never been dreamed of in former generations. The expectation and anticipation of such an outpouring of God's Spirit is growing.

Of course, the final thrust will undoubtedly be the most challenging battle since the powers of darkness took mankind captive in the garden of Eden. No sensible missiologist is predicting days or times, there is no sense of prophetic insight that the Lord will return soon. No one knows the hour nor the day, but one thing is certain, we are closer than we have even been.

**Acts 1:9** *"After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight."*

This event, which we call the Ascension, marked the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus. He will not appear in person to the world again until His second coming. During His lifetime, particularly towards the end, Jesus tried to prepare His disciples for His imminent departure. They loved Him so much that it was not easy for them to accept the fact that He would leave them alone. Peter was so upset at one point that he almost rebuked Jesus when he dared suggest that he would die soon. But Jesus sharply reprimanded him.

Later, Jesus calmly explained to them that it was to their advantage that He leave them. (John 16:7) But how could this be, they thought? How could anything be an advantage over being with Jesus personally? Quite simply Jesus told them that only if He went away could He send the Holy Spirit, Who would be with them in a way that He could not. It would be to their advantage to have the Holy Spirit Who was not tied to one place and time like Jesus was as a man. When they were indwelt by the Holy Spirit they would have access to the only power that would overcome the enemy who had kept men and women in bondage for centuries.

To even begin to scratch the surface of fulfilling the Great Commission, they needed a power that was equal to the power that created the universe and raised Jesus from the dead. That power would only be available to them if Jesus returned to heaven and sent the Comforter, the Counsellor, the Spirit of grace, the Holy Spirit of God.

It would be through the indwelling and all-consuming power of the Holy Spirit that the disciples would be able to see the fruit of Jesus' promise that they would do what He had done and even greater than that!

For the most part, the disciples were ready for Jesus' departure, and by then they had understood it reasonably well. Still, they were somewhat bewildered when He actually ascended into heaven before their eyes. They stared into the clouds so long that two angels had to come and move them along!

**Acts 1:10-11** *“They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*

This brought the disciples back to their senses and they went to Jerusalem and joined what was history's most powerful prayer meeting.

**Acts 1:12-15** *“Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James, son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty).”*

In his Gospel, Luke also says these disciples continued in praise and worship. This combination of praise and worship, with sincere prayer and supplication is an unbeatable formula for drawing near to God, opening ourselves to the voice of the Spirit and learning what the Father is doing. Ten days in prayer is a very long prayer meeting. I think most of us would have a hard time trying to block out ten whole days for worship and prayer.

However, as we look around the world today, more than at any point in the Church's history, men, women and young people are beginning to give this kind of priority to prayer and worship. Three-day and four-day prayer summits are happening across the world and growing in popularity. Pastors, leaders and intercessors are beginning to see that it is possible to spend that kind of time in prayer and worship. Once you get over the initial hurdle and allow the Lord to lead - the time flies.

These first disciples were re-grouping to begin the process of world evangelisation and they knew from the outset that the task before them required extraordinary spiritual power. There is no indication they knew the prayer meeting would last for ten days. They only knew that it was *“not many days from now.”* So, they had settled in for the long haul. They seemed prepared to pray until they knew beyond any shadow of doubt that God had responded.

Would God have responded if they had decided to take a well-earned rest? You could hardly blame them after all they had been through if they wanted to lie on the beach at Joppa for a few days. This is not a superficial question, because it raises the whole issue of whether prayer has any effect on God's actions.

I realise that many people who hold a very high view of God's sovereignty would assert that our prayer doesn't change God, it only changes us, and there is a great deal of truth in that statement. God is eternal and unchangeable and His character and nature are unaltered by anything that occurs in His creation and there is no doubt that this ten-day prayer meeting would have brought deep and significant changes in the disciples themselves.

However, our sovereign God has indicated that we have a very important role to play here:

**Jeremiah 33:3** *“Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.”*

**2 Chronicles 7:14** *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

The whole world has now been blessed because the disciples decided to be obedient to the Lord and give themselves to prayer for ten days. Not only were the disciples consistent and obedient, but they were also unified. They continued 'with one accord.' One reason corporate prayer is often more effective than individual prayer is because of the principle of agreement.

**Matthew 18:19** *"...truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."*

Why do you think Satan has pulled out all stops to keep the Church divided and fighting all over the world? He knows that if we can grow up long enough to put our petty differences aside and unite in prayer and worship as the one bride of Christ that we are ... that all heaven will break lose on our streets and Satan will lose thousands of prisoners every day!

So, the enemy of God continues to divide and conquer. Until we finally wake up to this and stop playing into Satan's hands, we will not see the kingdom of God manifest in this city or nation in any significant and tangible way.

May the Spirit of God speak to our hearts through His Word this day.