

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 8

Not a Fairy Tale!

Acts 2:37-41 *“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”*

I looked briefly at the above passage in my previous sermon, but today I want to drill down and extract some more insights from these verses.

Nothing can be as dead and dry, futile and frustrating as Church work without the power of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, nothing is quite as exciting and exhilarating, alive and powerful as a Church filled with the Spirit. The Church which was born in the midst of Jerusalem in Acts chapter 2 was certainly such a Church. This is not a fairy tale – the Church of Jesus Christ was born that day and it was a living, dynamic expression of the power of God to change lives.

We see God at work as the Holy Spirit descends on the day of Pentecost. We see God at work when Peter, a fisher of fish, too cowardly to confess Christ to a servant girl a few days earlier, receives the boldness to become a fisher of men and women. We see God at work, as thousands of people are added to the Church from one sermon. We see God at work, changing lives and performing miracles of forgiveness and deliverance in the hearts of His lost children. The Church was born that day in Jerusalem, and what a Church it was! Through its ministry, the entire world would be changed. It truly was a great and dynamic Church.

We want to be part of a Church like that, don't we? We want to experience the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit of God. We want to experience the life which comes from a mighty move of the Spirit in our midst. But we have to ask ourselves, what made this first Church so powerful? What made it the kind of Church God could use? What were the marks of its greatness? What was the character of its people? How is it different from what we see today and what can we do to reconnect with our roots?

The events leading up to the Day of Pentecost were unique for this small band of disciples of Jesus. They had endured one of the most traumatic and bewildering times of their lives. Jesus had been executed on the cross. The One they believed to be the Messiah had been killed, an innocent man murdered! They thought it was all over. They didn't know what to do. Then they heard the great news - Jesus was alive! He had risen from the dead. He then appeared to them to confirm this fact.

Even doubting Thomas was made a believer. Jesus then told them to wait in Jerusalem for the power of God to come upon them and after that, they would bear witness to Him all over the world. After He said this, He ascended into the clouds before their very eyes. Wow! What a wild ride that all must have been. I am sure they would have felt every emotion that a person can have.

So, they went to Jerusalem to wait. They waited and prayed for ten days until the Day of Pentecost, a Jewish feast day, arrived, and God showed up that day. By His Spirit, God poured forth His power on the one hundred and twenty disciples who were waiting as Jesus asked them to. It was a really powerful demonstration of God's presence with tongues of fire hovering above everyone and with everyone speaking in other tongues and the crowd understanding them in a multitude of languages. Something very strange was happening. God had showed up and things were about to change.

One thing that changed was that timid men became bold, one in particular. Peter, a few days before not able to confess Christ to a servant girl, now stood up before thousands of people and preached a sermon. He was now bold as a lion and unafraid. He had the power that Jesus had promised. At the conclusion of the sermon, he told them just who Christ really was.

The first mark of a great Church is really foundational to all the others. They were a *regenerate* Church. In other words, the people in this Church had been born again by the Spirit of God. Do you remember this is what Jesus told Nicodemus that every person needed?

John 3:3,7 *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again ... You should not be surprised at my saying; you must be born again."*

Jesus came to bring this new birth to people. He came to give us new life by the Holy Spirit. This is what makes all the difference. This is what makes us Christians. We are Christians because we have received this new life. We are made part of the Church because we are born from above.

Now that may seem so basic, but it is important that we understand this clearly. Far too many people's names have been added to Church rolls without ever adding the people to the Church. To be in the Church of Jesus Christ is no mere formality of adding your name to a roll. To be in His Church, you must first be born again. Your spirit must be regenerated by the Spirit of God.

This has not been the practice of every Church throughout history. Some Churches have and do admit people to their membership before they make a personal, credible confession of their faith in Jesus Christ. Many are baptised into the local Church as babies and grow up thinking that they are Christians because of that ritual which they played no part in. But the Scripture nowhere teaches that the application of water on the head of an infant regenerates that child's spirit.

The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is by faith. In other words, there must be faith in the heart of the person trusting in Christ. No one can believe for another person. Each person must come to Christ individually and to lead people to believe that they are okay when they are not, is deception.

So, Peter has just given a sermon to the Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem explaining many things to them. First, that the disciples were empowered to speak in various languages to these men from all nations due to the power of the Holy Spirit from God. Second, that Jesus the Nazarene was the Christ sent by God, whom the Jewish people crucified. But His death was planned by God, and now Jesus was resurrected back to life and exalted by God to sit at His right hand.

Furthermore, Jesus had sent the Spirit to empower His followers. These things were prophesied by the prophet Joel and King David, that God's Spirit would work wonders through people, and that God's sent one (Messiah) would not stay dead but rise to life. Peter then ends his sermon by reminding the Jewish crowd that they are the ones who had called for Jesus' death. They had effectively nailed the Lord and Messiah sent by God to a cross and crucified Him (Acts 2:23,36).

The crowd's response is one of conviction. They did not argue with Peter, or defend themselves, or deny that they had played a role in the death of Jesus the Messiah. They were pierced to the heart; they felt the pain of guilt because what Peter accused them of was true. They had put Jesus to death. And this Jesus had really been sent by God after all, and now His power and message was continuing on through the disciples and the Holy Spirit. So, they ask Peter and the rest of the apostles the best question one can ask when convicted of sin, *what shall we do?*

They wanted to know how to make it right. Earlier in Acts 2:5, it is noted that this crowd contained some "reverent" men, despite the fact that they had crucified Jesus. They were deceived, mistaken, blinded by mob mentality and anger, when they called for the death of Jesus (Matt. 27:22-26). But they had sinned nonetheless and wanted to make it right. They did not want to linger in their grievous wrongdoing. They are asking Peter how they could fix this.

Peter then shares the good news of Jesus with them - the whole reason that Jesus had willingly and knowingly come to earth to die. The way to fix this was to fix their entire life, from the inside, only by trusting what God could do for them. Peter calls the crowd to repent, which means to confess that they are not right with God and to turn away from their former way of living and turn back to God. Peter goes on to say that each of them should be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. To be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ meant to immerse oneself into water as a symbol of immersing ourselves in Christ. It was a way to show the rest of the world that the person being baptized was a follower of Christ.

Peter says that those who repent and are baptized will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit created this circumstance to begin with, attracting the crowd of Jewish pilgrims by speaking in their own languages through the remaining followers of Jesus. Now Peter, who has explained that the Spirit is responsible for the miracle that the crowd has witnessed, is telling the crowd that they too will receive this same Spirit. This is because the promise of the Spirit is for you (the crowd) and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.

As we see the spread of the gospel throughout the book of Acts, there are two distinct ways in which the Apostles preach. For the Gentiles, the Apostles call for their listeners to have faith in Jesus to receive the Spirit. And throughout Acts, Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit immediately upon belief. But in these early chapters, the Apostles call for their Jewish listeners to repent to receive the Spirit.

This might be because the Jews are the chosen people. They're already elect, they already believe. But they rejected the Son of God when He came. Now they're called to repent and turn back to God. Throughout Acts, Jews receive the Holy Spirit through repentance and the baptism in keeping with repentance, while Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit immediately upon belief. In the next chapter, Peter will preach again, calling the nation of Israel to repentance, in the hopes that it may bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth:

Acts 3:19-21 *"Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time."*

Peter is effectively saying, *"If you will repent and if Israel repents, Jesus will return to earth and take the throne of Israel. He's just waiting for you to receive Him."*

This makes clear that if the nation had repented of their rejection of Christ and returned to following God, "*times of refreshing*" would have come by "*the presence of the Lord*," that God "*may send Jesus*," meaning Jesus would return and be present among them, for He was "*the Christ appointed*" for Israel, waiting in heaven "*until the period of restoration of all things*."

Here at Pentecost, Peter calls for this repentance as well. Ultimately only some Jews repented and followed Jesus (3,000 in this chapter, 5,000 in the next), but not the entire nation, and not its leaders. The time of refreshing and the presence of the Lord was not received. It seems likely that the destruction of the temple in 70 AD was a definitive closing of that window of time when repentance was offered. Jesus returning to earth has not yet happened.

However, the lack of repentance from the Jewish people provided an immense opportunity for all the Gentiles. We are currently in what the Bible refers to as the time of the Gentiles, where we are grafted onto the tree of God's chosen people, Israel, through faith in Jesus the Messiah. God's grace for Israel has extended to the entire world, for those who believe. Non-Jews get to share in Israel's relationship with God, even if the nation itself has rejected Christ. The Apostle Paul addresses this in Romans.

Romans 11:25-26 "... a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so, all Israel will be saved ..."

For now, Israel has experienced this partial hardening, this stubbornness that keeps them from repentance, but ultimately it is God's will that they shall be saved, for they are His people and His promises are irrevocable.

Peter echoes Jesus' last command to the disciples. Jesus told them to "*be [His] witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). Now Peter is declaring to the crowd that the Spirit is for the Jews present and far off, for the entirety of the Jewish people spread across the world. The Spirit will come to as many people as the Lord our God will call to Himself; in saying this, Peter acknowledges that it is God who is calling people to reconcile to Him, God is pursuing those who are not in a right relationship with Him.

Peter continues to preach this message of repentance. He spoke earnestly and seriously about having seen Jesus risen from the dead, with many other words he solemnly testified. He continued to encourage the crowds to turn away from the corrupt way they were living and accept God's gift of salvation in Christ. He kept on exhorting them, saying, "*Be saved from this perverse generation!*" This was a warning, for if there is a need to be saved, it is to be saved from something. Peter was calling them to be saved from this perverse generation.

More specifically, the perverse generation of Jewish leaders who led the people of Israel against the Son of God, rather than embrace Him as God's Messiah. They are perverse in the sense that they are incorrect, crooked and corrupt. They are not in submission to God; they do not see clearly; they did not even recognize His Son when He was walking among them speaking the Word of God to them. Under their leadership, the entire generation of Jews have become perverse - misled and astray.

Peter is calling his audience to repent, to reject the way their current generation is going, and to be saved from the negative consequences that will result from their lack of repentance. Doing so would bring the "*time of refreshing*" when Jesus returns to earth (Acts 3:19-21).

Much present-day evangelism seeks to make coming to Christ easy. Many today would be appalled that Peter made the cost of coming to Christ so high. How could he expect them to turn their backs publicly on their culture? How could he ask them to risk becoming outcasts among their families and society? How could he demand that they accept as Messiah the very One their leaders had rejected and executed? They would no doubt predict that the results of Peter's sermon would be minimal.

Such was not the case, however. The crowd responds powerfully and those who had received his word; those who believed Peter's testimony; believed the truth of Jesus Christ and that He resurrected and was exalted by God; and that they needed to repent of their rebellion against God - these new disciples were baptized.

The number of new disciples of Jesus that day, those added to the group of disciples, was about three thousand souls. In actual fact, it was probably much more than that because it is entirely likely that they only counted the men. Sadly, in that society, women and young people were not considered important enough to be counted for much at all and so the full number of converts could have been far greater than 3,000.

This is an incredible increase. From 120 followers of Jesus hiding in a room in Jerusalem, to thousands of new believers who witnessed the disciples speaking in their own native tongues through the power of the Holy Spirit, who heard Peter's sermon about Jesus, and his call to repentance of sin, and responded in obedience.

All of this was done through and at the prompting of the Holy Spirit of God - the same Holy Spirit Who is available to us today. We are called to go out in the power of the same Holy Spirit and proclaim the message the Spirit gives us. Yes, we have access to the same Spirit of God we see poured out the day the Church was born. So, there is no reason why what happened on Pentecost cannot right here.

It is the Holy Spirit's doing.

It is the Holy Spirit Who does the convicting.

It is the Holy Spirit Who gives the understanding.

It is the Holy Spirit Who provides the confidence.

It is the Holy Spirit Who provides the message.

The only question we need to answer is, are we willing vessels or conduits of the Spirit?

What happened at Pentecost that day can happen today! There is no reason why it shouldn't be happening right now. Every Church building should be full to overflowing. We all love this incredible story in Acts 2 of the birth of the Church. What an amazing day that was. What an awesome sermon from Peter. What an outstanding outcome with so many coming to Christ.

The problem is, most of us treat this narrative like a fairy tale or a snapshot of an event so far removed from us today that the best we can do is imagine being there that day. Instead, we should be imagining that day being here! Why is it easier to imagine that we are observers on that great day than to imagine that day being replicated here and now in our very midst?

All the ingredients for another Pentecostal awakening are still in place – they always have been! The world is a mess and in desperate need of Jesus. The disciples of Jesus are still here, ready and able to wait and pray and believe like the disciples did in that upper room and at the temple for ten days.

The Holy Spirit Who was responsible for that whole remarkable event is the same Holy Spirit Who inhabits God's people and longs to revive the Church He birthed all those years ago.

What is missing? We know the answer, don't we? We just don't want to say it out loud or admit it. The only thing that's missing is our faith and our belief that God can and will do today what He did on the day the Church was born, and our willingness to step out like Peter and the other Apostles did and become available to the Holy Spirit to bring the same community-wide transformation He did all those years ago.

I pray that as we journey through the book of Acts and re-connect with our spiritual roots, that God will open our eyes and our hearts as we accept His call once more to embrace the mission of Christ.