

The Church



Better Together

We hope that this guide will prove valuable to you as you participate with us in 21 days of prayer. It is important that you read all of the scripture passages that are included. They set

the foundation for the devotionals. The blanks have been left in this digital copy for those who may want to print the guide out. If not, you will want to have writing materials available to complete the questions and applications. There are Wednesday devotions on the topics of prayer, fellowship and serving which are exclusive to our online participants. May God richly bless you on this journey.

"Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

- -1 Peter 1:13

Overview of the Book of Acts

Most of our focus for the 21 Days of Prayer will be in the book of Acts. The book of Acts, also referred to as the Acts of the Apostles, chronicles the early church from the ascension of Jesus through the early missionary efforts by the Apostles. Written by Luke, the Beloved Physician, some of the highlights include the coming of the Holy Spirit, the beginnings of corporate prayer and the church, the stoning of Stephen and the subsequent persecution, conversion of Saul, Peter's call to preach to the Gentiles, followers first being called Christians at Antioch, and Paul's Missionary journeys.

Better Together Study Guide Outline

Week 1: In Prayer We Receive the Power of the Holy Spirit

Week 2: In Fellowship We Receive Strength

Week 3: In Serving the Gospel Goes Forth

Sunday Sermon Notes, August 17

Sunday's message is available online.

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Monday, August 18—*Laying It Down*

Before you begin, read: Gen.22:4-14 with Luke 14:25-30,33

Focal passage: Luke 14:33, “So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple.”

For thought: What do you think brings most people to church? What comes to your mind when you think of church?

Some common responses to the question above would include encouragement, community, and worship.

For thought: What is worship to you?

Genesis 22 is often considered the first mention of the word worship in the Bible, in the story of Abraham taking his only son, Isaac, to the mountain of God to sacrifice him. In verse five he uses the word worship to describe what he and his son were about to offer on that mountain. When we gather with the church family, do we consider what we need to lay down, what we can possibly offer to a great and gracious God who has given so much for us? This story of Abraham heading up to offer his own son is so remarkable. Even if he did believe God would raise that child up afterward, do you think that made it any easier to raise that knife? Probably not, but he had already determined in his heart that nothing God could ask would ever be too much. That was his act of worship, that he would not withhold, from the Lord, that thing which he held so dear. In the Old Testament they were very aware of the need to offer. Through the sacrificial system of offering animals in their place, they saw a physical representation of the cost associated with their own sin. The offering of a son, however, was something that God would not require, until Calvary, when He would sacrifice His only begotten Son. The church, in Old Testament times, was built on requirement being met and appeasing God’s wrath toward sin. It included the Jewish heritage and identity as a nation as well, for God was preparing a nation through whom the Messiah would come. By the time Jesus stepped into history, it had become an institution. In the church age, over the past 2000 years, we have begun to recognize that the church is a body-- living, serving, growing together and unified in message and purpose, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. True worship, however, continues to require that we

lay our “Isaacs” down. It is radically different today, in that, we offer our lives in gratitude, not obligation. There is no wrath to be appeased, because God has caused all His wrath to fall on His Son. We lay our lives down at the point of our salvation, and we continually lay them down as an offering to our Savior. We now are to walk in freedom as dearly loved children of God.

Apply: Is there something that you hold dear, that you know is more important to you than the Lord? Is there something that gets more priority in thought, time, or energy than it should? Confess that to Him now.

Praying God’s Word: Dear Jesus, our Savior, You were before all things and in you they all hold together (Col. 1:17). In You we live and breathe and have our being. We owe everything to You. May our lives be poured out as a drink offering to You (Phil 2:27). We present our bodies as living and holy sacrifices, we pray we may be acceptable in Your sight, which is our reasonable act of worship (Rom 12:1). Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer (Ps. 19:14). Would you pray now for yourself and others in our church body to begin laying down anything that inhibits the free and effective work of the Spirit in your life and in our church? Let’s lay our Isaacs down. Write your prayer response to God below.

Tuesday, August 19—*The Holy Spirit Comes*

Before you begin, read: Acts 1:2-5, 12-14 with Acts 2:1-4

Focal Passage: “for John baptized with water but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Acts 1:5

For thought: What do you think it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? What difference would that make?

This rag-tag band of followers had just returned from a period of immense failure. Except for John and Mary, they had fled at the hour of Jesus crucifixion, scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Judas had betrayed Him; Peter had denied Him, not their best week. Judas had subsequently hanged himself, Jesus had restored Peter, and He had gathered them back together. How could this motley crew take up Christ’s cause now? Jesus had said, “wait for it,” and so they were waiting. But they were not just waiting. They were of one mind, and devoting themselves to prayer, and then it happened! There was the sound of rushing wind, then there appeared the fire over their heads. Suddenly the Holy Spirit filled them and there was an explosive outpouring of power as they each began to speak in foreign languages. This was unprecedented! This was the birth of the church. Suddenly they knew what they had been waiting for. For the first time, God would dwell not only with man but within him permanently, as well as corporately. Jesus had said that this Helper would be the ultimate guide to lead them in all God’s truth, all knowledge, all wisdom. This baptism of the Holy Spirit would turn a band of cowardly misfits into Apostles that would change the world. They would find courage they had never known, they would heal, they would preach. Peter, the erratic, hot-headed coward would stand up at Pentecost and preach what is arguably one of the best sermons ever proclaimed. Thousands would be saved through these guys’ preaching in languages that they had never been taught. Except for John, they all would ultimately die for the cause for which Christ had come, that the world might be saved through Him. Twelve regular guys turned their world and ultimately ours upside down, through the power of the Holy Spirit. It was the defining moment in Christianity.

For us, there is no waiting period. In the moment that we surrender our lives to Christ, He puts His Spirit in us as His seal, that He will never leave us nor forsake us, and as His promise of the same power that raised Him from the dead. We do not all speak in foreign languages,

but we do receive along with the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts that uniquely gear us for the ministry that God has planned for us.

Apply: Considering the power that is ours through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, how then should we live? How is this power to be applied?

As the disciples did in those early days, we as the church, in gathering together to pray and seek God’s will and purpose for our individual lives and for the church, will begin to see God’s power displayed in and through our church. God has orchestrated the church to have all of the parts that it needs to accomplish His will. Believers joined in one heart and with God’s power at the ready, can turn their city and their nation upside down in a spiritual revival. Pray in your personal devotional time for an out-pouring of God’s Spirit in your life and in our church. Join with our church family at every opportunity to pray together that God would move in power in our church.

Praying God’s Word:

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on us. Help us oh Father, to walk worthy of Your calling, to bear with one another in love and keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph 4:2-3). Help us oh, God, of patience and comfort, grant us to be like-minded toward one another in Christ. (Rom. 15:5) As we look to You, Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, perfect it in us now, as we pray, (Heb. 12:2) until you return in power and glory, Amen! Write your response to the Lord below.

Wednesday, August 20—*Teach Us to Pray*

Before you begin read: Luke 11:1-4, 9-13 with John 13:5-10 and Matthew 6:31-33

Focal passage: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

Matthew 6:33

For thought: What usually causes you to pray? What is the first thing you usually pray?

Prayer may be the most necessary and neglected part of the Christian life. Elizabeth Elliot, Christian author and speaker and wife of slain missionary Jim Elliot, once said, “Prayer is irksome. We are reluctant to start and delighted to end.” Obviously, she went on to say many deep and meaningful things from the scriptures, but why do we have such a problem with prayer? It certainly does not come naturally, but rather spiritually. In Jesus’s answer to his disciples’ request that He teach them to pray, He speaks what we have come to know as The Lord’s Prayer. It is a model of prayer for us. In it, He gives a brief outline of what our priorities should be in prayer. **First, we focus on God, the Father, and acknowledge the wonder of His name, His character, His attributes.** We cannot overstate His glory. Most of us were taught to wipe our feet when we enter our home. It was discipline, sometimes more needful than others, but just for that instant we honored those who had provided the home. Just for a moment we put aside our intended target and thought about whether we were sufficiently clean to enter. Trudging right on in with our muddy boots would show little regard for the one who kept it clean. When we stop as we enter His presence, and look at Him, think of Him, praise Him, it is guaranteed that whatever else we pray will be higher thoughts, more humble and noble, with His interests becoming preferable to our own. We will place His will, His kingdom, His agenda above our own. This is the proper perspective to take into His throne room in prayer. **Secondly, Jesus says to ask for our daily needs,** not because God doesn’t know, but to keep us aware of who is providing

everything we have and who is intimately acquainted with all our ways. We are elsewhere in scripture told to come boldly before the Lord, and that means freely, but as our perspective becomes more like His, the things of this world will certainly require less of our overall prayer time. We want to move away from the tendency to run into prayer with our wish list, drop it and go.

Thirdly, Jesus instructs that confession of our sin is critically important, both for our restoration in our relationship with Him and in our commitment to pattern that in our interactions with others. We love because He first loved us, and we forgive because we have been forgiven so much. **Fourthly, we are to invite God to lead in whatever path He has in front of us, and to keep Satan at bay while we proceed through it.** The Psalmist said that we would face the valley of the shadow of death, and at times must serve the table of our enemies. We are assured, however, that He would be there in our midst through His Holy Spirit. We will never walk alone. **Then finally, we end as we began, acknowledging our God and His glory.** It is interesting that when Jesus attempted to wash Peter’s feet, that he at first refused. Peter may have had trouble readjusting his idea of propriety with what Jesus required. Did he really think he knew better than God the Son? We should guard against that as well. Author Susan Heck said that prayer is the “absolute transfer of my will to God.” Prayer is the ultimate act of surrender where we acknowledge Him first, we believe in His ability and willingness to provide for us, we admit who we are before Him, we abandon ourselves to be who He calls us to be and to do what He calls us to do.

Most parents enjoy even a brief text or call from their kids throughout the day, but they long for an intentional, unrushed conversation that makes it clear, their child wanted to spend time with them. While our Father welcomes a word or thought at any point, let’s spend significant time with Him at least once each day. Let’s begin now, to pray in the way that Jesus said.

Thursday, August 21

Before you begin, read: John 14:16-17, Matthew 13:18-23 with Acts 2:5-13.

Focal passage: “So, they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “Whatever could this mean?” Acts 2:12

For thought: Why do you think so many in our culture are so antagonistic and vehemently oppose Christianity?

How have you seen people respond to the gospel of Christ?

It is understandable that not everyone will accept Jesus, after all it is not natural to want to give up the right to your life, which He does require. In the Parable of the Sower in Matthew Chapter 13, Jesus describes four reactions that we can expect to the Gospel by using the analogy of Gospel seed and the ground on which the Gospel lands. Some falls by the road or wayside, those who do not understand and do not take any interest in understanding. For those Satan snatches away even, the little they have heard. Secondly, it describes seed in rocky places, those who are receptive initially, and show excitement but never move to the point of surrender. As life brings its struggles, they fall away because they never had anything deeper than a good feeling. They leave you wondering, “where are they now?” Thirdly, there are those to whom the seed falls among thorns; they just have no room in their life for spiritual things. They hear and it bounces right off them. Then there is one that is unique. The last example is of the seed of the Gospel falling on receptive soil. They, perhaps their parents or their church have cultivated in them, an interest and when they hear the truth of the Gospel, they are all in. Their lives are forever changed. In Acts Chapter 2, the reaction to this outpouring of the Holy Spirit varied. There were some devout or interested, there were some who were perplexed and questioning, some viewed it with suspicion, some with disgust, some had no clue. There were different nationalities, cultures, and languages--a variety of soils. We, the church, are cultivators of the soil, planters and reapers. We want to be a visible, positive representation of the reality of life, sin, and repentance. When we encounter our community, we need to take into account the state of their soil. Some will not be interested, some

may come along for a while, some may show nothing but disdain for us and our Christ. Jesus said they do not have the Spirit; they don’t understand, and we should not be surprised by this. But there will be some who are ready. Paul said he always wanted to be ready in every situation with the Gospel, and we can be ready as well. We have tools to cultivate with. We have His Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and discernment, we have the scriptures to communicate God’s truth, and we have the body of believers. When the church comes together with one heart and praying for God’s Spirit to fall, powerful things begin to happen. For the scripture tells us where even two or three are gathered in His name, and agree as a body, He is there in our midst through the Holy Spirit and will move to accomplish His purposes. The late theologian and author T.W. Hunt, who wrote a comprehensive study of prayer called, “Prayer Life,” said that seven of every nine prayers in the Bible that God answered with a “yes” were prayers that someone prayed for someone else. It seems that when we come together as a body with a burden for the lost and pour out our requests to God in prayer, he hears and responds in a significant way. It is one of our primary functions as the body. In this, we really are better together. **Apply:** If you have prayer partner(s) will you begin to pray specifically for opportunities with the lost in our community, that God would pour out His Spirit that they might be saved? If you do not have a regular prayer time with others in our church, who could you enlist to pray with you? If no one comes to mind, pray that the Lord brings to mind those who could pray in unity with you. As He does, list them below and commit to contact them this week.

Praying the scriptures:

Oh, Father in Heaven, time is short, night is coming, the days are ending fast. We know that you are gracious and benevolent and do not desire that any should perish but that all come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Such as we have, we want to offer to a lost world around us (Acts 3:6). We know you and we long for them to know you, and the power of your resurrection, that they might be saved. We as a body commit to humble ourselves and pray, to seek your face and to turn from our sin. Hear from heaven oh, Father, forgive our sin and heal our land (2 Chron. 7:14). Write your response to God in prayer.

Friday, August 22—*To Those Who Would Believe*

Before you begin, read: Acts 2:14-36 with Heb.1:1-3

Focal passage: “God who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son...” Hebrews 1:1-2a

For thought: Have you ever had difficulty with changes in your church? Was it related to personnel, music, plans and programs or something else?

It was an exciting new day, the infancy of the church, but not everyone was on board. For all their history, God’s people had known God in a certain way. They heard God through the prophets, and they had intermediaries in the priests; they had never experienced God like this. Unlearned disciples speaking in foreign languages and they each were hearing and understanding in their native tongues? They did not understand this kind of interaction and they were uncomfortable with it. They needed something they could recognize as legitimate communication from God. Peter, through the power of his newly acquired Holy Spirit, stands and does a masterful job of bridging the gap between their perception of how God speaks based on all their previous experiences, and this new work through the Holy Spirit. He took them back to what they knew, the prophets. The prophet Joel had described how life would look in the last days. From the time that Jesus ascended and the Holy Spirit was ushered in, we have been living in the last days. These days are marked by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each believer and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit through their lives. This was radical in their day! Throughout Israel’s history, the Spirit had rested on certain individuals for specific purposes and prescribed periods of time. Now it was unilateral. People from every tribe and tongue, it seemed could have access. It was initially validated through signs and wonders performed by the Apostles, and for those who had wandered the hillsides watching Jesus’s miracles, it would have had a familiar ring. In this way the miracles of the Apostles brought credibility.

Prophesies generally had a two-fold application, both immediate and future. They could glean from the prophesy Peter quoted, that this new thing they were seeing was an out-pouring of God’s Spirit and that it would continue until the “glorious day of the Lord,” the end of this world. Peter does an impressive job of addressing each where they

were. He corrects their wrong assumptions of drunkenness, he quotes the Old Testament scripture for those who would be familiar, he draws in those who might have milled around during Jesus miracles, and brings them all to the same place. They would understand that salvation was not through association or family, it was for those who would call on the name of the Lord, the Messiah.

Not every movement bearing Christ’s name is necessarily genuine and it is wise to assess any ministry or movement according to Biblical criteria. Later, in Acts Chapter 17, we would see the Berean believers receive Paul’s words readily, but they did their homework, they checked his teachings against the scriptures. It is sometimes easy to lean on our preferences rather than doctrine, but we can trust the Holy Spirit, and it is His assessment that we must value most. When we encounter something new related to our faith, there are a few things that we can use to guide our opinion. Is it declaring the truth of the scripture? Does it honor God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as they are presented in the scriptures? Is the purpose to point people to salvation in Christ alone? If these are the kinds of criteria that we use, combined with much love and forgiveness, then the unity of the church body will not be compromised.

Apply: Are you finding yourself disgruntled or dissatisfied with something related to the church? Can you apply the criteria above to that situation? What did you discover?

Praying God’s Word: Dear Jesus, where can we go but to You? You alone have the words of life (John 6:68). Help us, Oh, God, to not let selfish ambition or conceit to enter into our thinking but in lowliness of mind consider others over ourselves (Phil. 2:3). Help us to always put on love first, which preserves unity (Col. 3:14). Now to You, able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all we could ask or think, according to the power of Your Spirit which works in us, to You be glory in the church (Eph. 3:20). Express your thoughts to God.

Saturday, August 23—*The Holy Spirit Speaks*

Before you begin read: Acts 2:22-24, 32-33, 36-41 with Isaiah 30:20-22

Focal passage: “ And your ears will hear a word behind you, “This is the way, walk in it, whenever you turn to the right or the left. ”
Isaiah 30:21

For thought: When someone comes to Christ, is it a logical decision that a person reasons out or is there something else?

The Psalmist said, “The entrance of Your Word brings light, it brings understanding to the simple,” and so preachers preach. God’s Word is not like any other writing; it has supernatural power to speak. It is extremely important that any evangelistic or Christian teaching contain clear Biblical content, quotes of scripture have power in and of themselves. Peter included three passages in this sermon, but it was not Peter’s appeal that had a profound impact on these people. That would have amounted to an intellectual or emotional response. There may be some who enter into the church through this means; it makes sense, it promises much, and so they express an interest. When questions about salvation arise, they may comfort themselves saying, “I have seen God work,” or “This scripture promises me, and I am claiming it.” Seeing God work is quite possible since God is always at work but, seeing Him work around you and having Him work in you are two different things.

In the same way there is a difference between focusing on a scripture that promises what you are want or need, and God revealing His truth through a passage. Conviction comes through the work of the Holy Spirit, both for salvation and for growth. It is the Spirit that speaks a word in our ear, “This is the way, walk in it.” That is what swept through and captured over 3000 hearts while Peter was preaching. Salvation is by invitation only. Until the Holy Spirit issues the invitation, no one can come to God. The scriptures were familiar to many on that day, but when the Holy Spirit brought conviction they responded, not claiming anything, but rather torn and heart broken. This is the proper response to the sudden realization of sin before a Holy God. Weeping is not a prerequisite, though many do weep. When a person is under true conviction of sin, though, their countenance will change. It would be difficult not to be impacted by the realization of

our sin. The Holy Spirit convinces us by showing us who we really are. Many of those present at Pentecost had previously viewed themselves as the chosen people, God’s people. In seeing themselves as sinners in need of a Savior, their responses are correct, and Peter helps by giving them the last piece of the puzzle. He tells them how to receive the forgiveness of sin and the indwelling Holy Spirit by turning to Jesus Christ. This is a good witnessing template; acknowledge who God is, acknowledge who you are and surrender yourself. This is not a catechism or process, it is not in the saying of the words, but in the intention of the heart. Perhaps a good question to ask is, “ What is it that you want God to do for you?” The proper response should include the desire for forgiveness and a willingness to lay it all down, to give it up to the only one who could or would welcome you in your sin.
Apply: Have you, at times, had a question about salvation? What, if anything, has now occurred to you?

Praying God’s Word: Father, You have poured out your Spirit as You had promised (Acts 2:21) and it is He who draws us to want to know You and the power of Your resurrection and even to experience suffering that You ordain, to die to ourselves (Phil 3:10). Help us to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow You (Luke 9:23). We can even rejoice in our tribulations, knowing that they produce in us perseverance, and that produces character and that gives us hope. That kind of hope does not disappoint, because Your love was poured into our hearts by Your Spirit (Romans 5:3-5). Search us, oh God, and know our hearts; try us and know our anxious thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in us and lead us in Your way” (Ps. 139:23-4). Express your prayer response to God.

If you have lingering questions about salvation, please contact one of our staff members. They would love to help.