

The Church



Better Together

In week one of our 21 Days of Prayer, we focused on the coming of the Holy Spirit in the early church from the book of Acts. We saw the power that was unleashed as they prayed. This week we will continue to follow the church functioning as a body, dealing with needs and facing persecution. We will see their fellowship central to their support and growth as they begin to go out. They really were Better Together.

*“And all those
who had believed were together
and had all things
in common.”
--Acts 2:44*

Monday, August 25—*Becoming the Body*

Before you begin read: Acts 2:42-47 with 1 Peter 2:9-10

Focal Passage: “Who once were not a people, but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.” 1 Peter 2:10

For thought: What makes the church unique? How is it special?

Israel had always eaten together, worshipped together, prayed together, read their scriptures together, contributed to the coffers corporately, provided for the priest. They lived their lives together, they traveled together, they won and lost battles together. There were often factions within the tribes; first through the period of the clans, then judges, then priests, to help bring order and justice. Most were born into the Jewish nation, but there were some Gentiles who believed. Much was prescribed by Old Testament law. There were four feasts in the spring, three in the fall of every year. The sacrifices were prescribed, daily rituals, purifications rituals, priestly service, were ordained by the laws. They were being taught obedience, accountability, and submission to authority by these things, because they were becoming something. They would become a nation, who followed Jehovah, the one true God, and through their lineage would come the Messiah. A study of the Old Testament, however, shows a people in a perpetual cycle of sin, captivity, crying out to God, God’s rescue, and a return to sin. Theirs was a bleak story had it not been that there was always a remnant, who truly believed. Fast-forward to Acts Chapter 2. They are doing some of the same things mentioned previously. They were devoted to the disciples teaching, to fellowship, sharing meals, and prayer. They worshipped in the temple together and praised God. There was something radically different, however, in the early New Testament church. It was not prescribed. What they did, they did because they had one heart, one mind, a shared joy and belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. They were willing participants in a spiritual gathering and the results? People were coming regularly; there was phenomenal growth, not orchestrated or prescribed but willing. These people had a new-found freedom. They had been bought with the blood of Jesus, they were forgiven, and something had changed them inwardly that had affected

them outwardly. Christianity is unique among all world religions, in that, only through Christ is there a certainty of eternal life, based not on the work of the individual, but on Christ willing sacrifice for mankind on the cross of Calvary. Only Christianity’s God places a part of Himself in the individual as a teacher, a help and a comfort. The Holy Spirit had come. Not to be confused with those who still clung to the old traditions, they were called “The Way” and later branded Christians, after their Christ. They met on a different day for worship, the first day of the week, in remembrance of their Savior’s resurrection on that day. Most notably, they held to the belief that whosoever will may come, and they were eager to share the good news of Christ. Similarly, we are more than an organization that does good. We have the Holy Spirit, if we are saved, and we join in many of these same activities because of our bond in the Holy Spirit. We are brothers and sisters, we are a body, and we have as our motivation a love for our Christ who loved us first and gave Himself to ransom our hearts held captive by our sin.

Apply: Do you have a willing heart to gather with our church for worship, fellowship, teaching and prayer? What would you have to change in order to do so?

Is there someone you need to encourage to join in on these things? Write their name below and commit to pray for them this week. Then take the opportunity to invite them to join you in worship, ministry, fellowship or prayer. _____

Praying God’s Word: Dear Father, You show us the path of life and in You is fulness of joy (Ps. 16:11). You have given us the seal of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and we are Yours (2 Cor. 1:22). We join now in one heart and one mind to ask you to fill us with your Spirit, today. Create in us clean hearts, oh God, and uphold us by Your generous Spirit. Then we can teach transgressors Your way, and sinners will be converted unto Thee (Ps 51:10,12-13). Write your prayer response to God. _____

Tuesday, August 26—*Such as I Have*

Before you begin read: Acts 3:1-20, 4:4 with 2 Cor. 4:3-7

Focal passage: “Then Peter said, ‘Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have I give thee: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.’” (KJV)

For thought: Do you ever think about what you have to offer? What comes to your mind?

It may have been an ordinary day as Peter and John ascended to the temple. It had been, perhaps, an ordinary day for the lame beggar at the gate, but that was all about to change. He was doing what he always did, taking any opportunity to receive something from the passers-by. He called out as he had many times, “Alms, alms?” and when they turned to address him, he likely felt comforted that they would offer something. These two men, however, looked with different eyes, and they have a very different kind of offer. They had followed Jesus for the past few years, they had witnessed his death and his resurrected body. They had felt the power of God come down as the Holy Spirit fell on them. Now, looking at this beggar, they saw a man’s temporary existence with temporary problems, but they looked beyond that to this man’s deeper need, the eternal one. How many times had they watched as Jesus stopped along the way for a blind man, a father’s dead daughter, a woman who had spent everything on doctors to no avail, to a woman at a well, to a demon possessed man among the tombs? To each one Jesus offered something more than just a temporary solution. He used their need as an invitation to know Him. With the same Spirit, Peter gets the man’s attention, in more ways than one. He pronounces healing to this man in the name he was determined to proclaim, Jesus of Nazareth. “Such as I have, I give thee.” This is the crux of the Christian life and of meaningful ministry, giving the such that we have. This is a helpful perspective in ministering with the lost around us, that in meeting their temporary needs, we can show them our Savior. This man immediately followed them to the temple and gave every indication that he believed. He immediately became a testimony, and he was still with them when they were later brought before the council for questioning. It is one of the sweet ironies of the Biblical narrative

that Peter, who had refused to stand with Jesus during his trial, has someone refuse to leave his side when he was under fire. This man got it. He understood that the power for his healing was from Jesus. The healing was a spectacle to be sure, for many had seen this man over the years in his sad condition, and now they saw him walking and leaping and praising God. They were struck with amazement at the miracle, but not for Jesus of Nazareth. Peter again seized the opportunity afforded him and proclaimed the gospel. As many as 5000 believed, and yet, there were those who did not. Many were blinded by Satan, by their own agendas, by unbelief. They hated the message; they despised the messengers. But we have this treasure, the knowledge of Christ, in our earthen vessels, the most important treasure of all. Peter never assumed people would get a clue by their association with him. He stated the gospel boldly. We see this with all the Apostles. They were determined to not let one opportunity go by to share the such as they had.

Apply: Can you think of benevolent organizations that do not share the gospel as a part of their mission? How does this make you feel in light of the example of Peter and John?

Praying the scriptures: Father, we have this treasure in our earthen vessels as well. We understand the gift that salvation is to us, that Christ is in us through the Holy Spirit and it is the only hope of glory we could have ever had! (Col. 1:27). We have nothing glorious in and of ourselves, but in you we have everything we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). Help us remember that we have been bought with a price, and to glorify you through our lives (1 Cor. 6:20). Allow us to see the deeper need in those we come into contact with. We are Your ambassadors, and it is for us to plead with the lost to be reconciled to God! (2 Cor. 5:20). Help us in our weakness, to be faithful. Share your response to God below.

Wednesday, August 27—*What is Fellowship?*

Before you begin read: Acts 2:42-47 with 1 John 1:3-7, 1 Peter 2:9, and Philippians 3:10

Focal passage: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His glorious light.” 1 Peter 2:9 KJV

For thought: What comes to mind when you hear the word fellowship? _____

Fellowship may bring to mind church potlucks, social groups and interactions at events within the church, and these would certainly be in keeping with the Biblical concept. The Greek word most often associated with fellowship is *Koinonia*. *Koinonia* contains within itself the ideas of sharing in common, being partakers with, partnering in and communicating. It also refers to benevolent actions that result from this close association as in Romans 15, 2 Corinthians 8 and in Acts 2:45.

Acts chapter 2 records that the early church had fellowship, as well as potlucks, prayer meetings, home groups and Bible study, so it might be helpful to broaden our understanding of what fellowship is intended to be and accomplish. Most references to any of the forms of the word fellowship are in the New Testament regarding Christians, the body of believers in Jesus Christ. There are instructions about when fellowship is appropriate and when it is not. If we contemplate for a moment what the early believers were experiencing, we find some compelling reasons to think that fellowship is much more than socializing. In following Christ, believing Him to be the Messiah, most of these people were cutting ties with, not only their church traditions, but often with their families, friends, and business associates. They were outliers in their Jewish culture and were having to forge a new identity. They would also face intense persecution and be scattered. When this happened, they would not have the comfort of each other, but rather the comfort of the Holy Spirit. They would no longer share meals together and openly worship; their fellowship would then be with God and the Lord Jesus alone. What they did have was fellowship in purpose. They were all committed to the Lord Jesus and to advancing His cause and His kingdom. They were invested; they were all in. They had one

heart, one mind, one faith, one doctrine. They shared something much deeper than emotional attachment; they were partakers together in the goodness of God and that bound them together in fellowship both with each other and with the Father. The Apostle Paul also wrote that we could have fellowship in Christ suffering, being hated as He was when we attempt to bring His light into a dark world. We have fellowship with the Father and the Son which makes us peculiar in our culture, as we are called to be. Paul uses this same word when referring to those who shared or fellowshiped in his distress, they felt it personally. This is how we fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who are suffering severe persecution. We should pray for them as if it were our very lives. There are also things that we are instructed not to have fellowship with. We are not to have fellowship or a shared interest in the deeds of darkness but rather expose these things. We are not to hold close, people and activities that do not honor Christ. Revelation 18:4 says come out from them lest you share (fellowship) in their sin. This is why it may be necessary to cut ourselves off from certain aspects of our former lives when we get saved. Bad company can affect our morals, and we have to guard our testimony against even the appearance of evil. Do we shun godless people? No, but neither do we court them. We pray for them and for opportunity. If we are sure the Lord is leading us to charge the gates of hell, the promise is that it will not prevail against us. We may also be led to withdraw from watching, listening to and participating in things in our culture that are broadly accepted, but ultimately not in our spiritual best interest. We must flee from anything we see is distracting, tempting, and luring, so that we are not blinded by our fleshly desire and led astray.

Apply: When we have the opportunity to gather with our church family, we can draw encouragement and enjoyment from being with them, but let's forge even deeper fellowship by our shared commitment to the purposes of Christ and advancing His kingdom.

Praying God's Word: Oh, Father, help us desire your fellowship above all, to long for the things You long for, to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus laid hold of us (Phil. 3:12). Let us go out into the highways and hedges and compel the lost to come in, that Your house may be filled (Luke 14:23). For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen (Matthew 6:13).

Thursday, August 28—*Count It All Joy*

Before you begin read: Acts 4:1-14 with James 1-2-5 and 1 Peter 3:13-16

Focal Passage: “And let endurance have it’s perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:4

For thought: Have you ever felt you were being scrutinized for your faith or not? Why do you think that was so?

Have you ever heard of instances of persecution of Christians around the world? What are your thoughts as you reflect on that?

Peter and John had experienced enough at this point that they had to know their teaching would not be popular with the religious elite. We have no indication that they were trying to be “in the face” of the officials, nor were they going to shy away from the truth of the gospel. It goes more to the cost/benefit ratio. It was a golden opportunity to proclaim the gospel, and they personally saw the benefit as so much higher than the cost, whatever it might be. Jesus had advised them as recorded in John Chapter 15, that they would receive much the same reception as He had. Some would believe, but many would hate them. This was just reality. When they were taken into custody, it presented another opportunity, and Peter took it. He appealed to their logic, he quoted the scriptures which they had full knowledge of and ultimately told them the unpleasant truth—they had killed Jesus the Messiah, God had raised him up and He was the one who ultimately had healed the lame beggar. The officials were speechless. The disciples were unlearned and under educated. To answer the Sadducees and the High Priest with such authority and clarity, was astounding and they wanted them silenced. These were apostles in training, and this was a lesson they would revisit repeatedly and would ultimately cost most their lives. “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge. For we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.”

It may be easy to take the position that they were The Apostles, that they had super strength, super poise, super conviction, super wisdom. In reality, all do, who bear the name of Jesus. They were 12 ordinary men who did extraordinary things through the power of the Spirit. The same Spirit that came to them at Pentecost, comes to us when we surrender our lives to Christ in salvation. So then, it seems that courage in the face of opposition to our faith is an act of the will; determination in the face of overwhelming odds in the public square is a choice. If we meet these challenges with faith, believing God to be good and right and absolutely trustworthy, we will be complete, lacking nothing. With a clean conscience and joy, we also can make a difference in our community and in our world.

Apply: Is there a situation in your life where you feel you may need to be more assertive about your faith? Write it below. Ask the Lord to open opportunities for you to share. _____

Praying the scriptures: Oh Father, most of us may never know true persecution in our lifetime, but we understand that there are many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who do experience it daily. We ask that through the power of Your Spirit they would be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, they would bring their requests to You (Phil. 4:6). We pray that you would uphold them today, with Your righteous right hand, (Is. 41:10) that You would carry them. We pray that with boldness they would preach Your word and testify of your love. Help us as we live out our Christian faith, never to shy away from proclaiming Your truth, even where it might not be well received. It is the name of our Savior we pray. Respond below.

Friday, August 29—*Living and Holy Sacrifices*

Before you begin read: Acts 6:1-7 with Romans 12:2-8

Focal Passage: “And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:2

For thought: Some people have trouble finding their place in the church or making a connection. Why do you think this happens?

With growth and expansion there will be issues that arise. In the Acts church at Jerusalem, it was the feeding of widows. With an influx of believers, some of the responsibilities were falling through the cracks and there were complaints. The disciples realized pretty quickly that as those responsible for the leadership in praying and preaching, they could not provide leadership for this ministry of feeding. As good leaders do, they delegated. Since the church was a body, they did not send down an edict but rather gathered the congregation and presented a plan. Pick seven men full of faith and the Holy Spirit. The congregants were in fellowship with one another through eating together, praying together, meeting together, so they had one heart and accepted this task willingly. The first deacons were named; it seemed that it was straightforward. There were no long, drawn-out meetings to discuss where everyone speaks their mind, no bickering, no power play. How was this possible? The scriptures that they studied were the Old Testament scriptures. By studying they would have learned things like their priority in God’s family was to love the Lord with all heart, soul and strength, that He is slow to anger and that His mercy endures forever and so should theirs. He desires mercy above sacrifice and rewards obedience with blessing and good things. They knew their frame, that they were but dust, that He formed them in the womb and had plans for a future for them, for their good and not harm. They trusted in the Lord for He was known to be good. So, when decisions came, they resisted scorn because they knew He would scorn the scornful but give grace to the humble. They knew to cease from anger, that he who is slow to wrath has great understanding and he who is

impulsive exalts folly. They knew that the entrance of His word gives light, it gives understanding to the simple. They knew to call on Him and He would answer and show them so much that they did not know. The key to the kind of unity that the New Testament church experienced? It is the same as it is today. Paul would later say it this way, “I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, but to think so as to have sound judgement, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.,” and also, “And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Unity of the church is preserved where preferences are laid down, where humility is taken on and where everyone is more concerned about the Lord’s will than their own. Living sacrifices willingly sacrifice for the good of the body and the glory of God.

Apply: Do you feel connected to our church in a meaningful way? Do you have a place of contribution or service here? God has that place for you. It may not look like what you imagined but trust Him that He is working all things for your good and be a willing sacrifice. When the opportunity arises, step forward.

Praying the scriptures: Dear Lord, You know the way that I take and are familiar with all my ways (Ps 139:3). You will lead me sometimes in paths I do not know, and it is not for me to direct my steps (Jer. 10:23). You have the power to make dark places light and rugged places like a plain so, I will trust you to lead me into the work you have for me (Is. 42:16). Teach me to do Your will, and let Your Spirit lead me, oh Lord I pray (Ps 143:10). Respond to the Lord in prayer below.

Saturday, August 30—*In His Image, In His Steps*

**Before you begin read: Acts 6:7-15, 7:1, 51-60
with 1 Peter 2:21-23 and 2 Corinthians 2:14-16**

Focal passage: “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.” 1 Pet. 2:21

For thought: Who do you think you resemble most?

Has anyone ever told you that you remind them of someone? _____
Was it a proud moment? _____

The story of Stephen is one of the most gripping in all of scripture. It is troubling to see someone falsely accused and the injustice of it stirs the heart. As one of the newly chosen deacons, Stephen took his commitment to Christ and his responsibility to the congregation seriously. He had been doing signs and wonders and many were following Christ. The religious crowd tried to argue with him but could not cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Word of it spread to the Temple Council and amid false testimony and an angry mob, he stood before them. They all saw it, his face shone like that of an angel, and still they interrogated him. Relatively new to the ministry, one would think he would be addled by this vicious attack on his character, but instead he answered by way of a sermon, detailed and compelling. He took his time, and strangely they listened as he recounted the Jewish history, their history. Tempers flared, however, when he exposed them as stiff-necked, and uncircumcised of heart, betrayers and murderers of the Christ. His last words as they stoned him “Receive my spirit,” and “Do not hold this sin against them,” bear a striking resemblance to the words of our Lord as he hung on the cross, “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,” and “Into thy hands I commit my spirit.” Stephen was fully devoted, his identity was his Christ, and he did indeed walk in His steps. Stephen was given a glimpse into heaven as he stood there. The picture of Jesus not seated at the Father’s right hand, but standing there, as if in honor of this faithful servant, is powerful. The by-standers probably saw it as Stephen’s defeat, the stench of death, but God saw it as victory, a fragrant offering, a pleasing aroma.

Our lives are to be representative of our Lord as well. When we walk into a situation, we should have a scent of grace, a fragrance of holiness to those we are around. Our impact on those who are receptive to spiritual things is the fragrance of Christ. We help them to draw near to God and He will draw near to them. Conversely, like Stephen, to those who have rejected the Lord, we are the aroma of death, we convict them, we expose them, and they sentence themselves by their refusal to draw near to God. We are to bear the image of Christ to a lost and dying world; they should understand that He loves because we do. They should see that He changes lives, because we share how He changed us.

Apply: Do you have opportunities this week to engage with those who do not have a relationship with Christ? Can you think of a way to gain an opportunity? Pray that the Lord would give you the chance to bear the aroma of Christ this week and be aware of the fragrance you present as you go through your week.

Praying the scripture: Father in heaven, we want our lives to be poured out as an offering to you (Phil 2:17) and to be a sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him every place we go (2 Cor 2:14). Help us to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives (Is. 61:1) and in doing so to be a pleasing aroma to You. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer (Ps. 19:14). Express your thoughts to God below.

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