

Unexplainable

January 9-10, 2021

2. Prayer and Power

Welcome to week 2 of our message series on the book of Acts. We're calling this series *Unexplainable* for two reasons:

- Because so many of the events in the Acts are unexplainable apart from the power of God.
- Because the book of Acts reveals that God wants our lives to be unexplainable, too... That there would be no way to explain the changes in our lives, the way we love and serve, the unusual coincidences that happen --- apart from God.

So if you have your Bible or app, please open to Acts 2.

The book of Acts starts with Jesus giving his followers a strategy for making disciples. He said, "be my witnesses." As I said last week, at Crossroads we live out that strategy by equipping every believer to be a disciple-maker and every small group having a mission. But strategy alone is not enough to change lives or communities. That's why before Jesus ascended to heaven, he gave his followers these vital instructions.

Acts 1:4-5 *On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

Why did Jesus give his followers a mission and then tell them to wait? Because he knew that they couldn't carry out the mission on their own power. So he told them to WAIT for the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:8 *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."*

The disciples waited like Jesus told them to. They stayed and prayed in an upper room for 50 days. Finally, on the Jewish festival of Pentecost, the promise was fulfilled and the Holy Spirit came in power.

Acts 2:1-4 *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

After the Holy Spirit filled those first believers, they were able to be witnesses to Jesus. Peter preached to a large crowd and 3,000 people put their trust in Christ. That kind of response is not normal! It's unexplainable – apart from the power of God. And after the Holy Spirit filled those believers, they were transformed personally. Just weeks before his first sermon, Peter was too afraid to admit to a servant girl that he was a follower of Jesus. Yet, after the Holy Spirit filled him, he stood up in front of thousands of people to declare that Jesus had risen from the dead.

That kind of transformation is unexplainable apart from the power of God. You and I need the power of the Holy Spirit, too. We can't fulfill our life's purpose without it. When we try to live on our own power instead of on God's, we can't love, forgive or serve people like Jesus. We can't have the influence and impact we are created for. We can't find deep peace or resilient joy without the presence of the Holy Spirit guarding our hearts and minds. Without the Holy Spirit our lives are very explainable.

But WITH the Holy Spirit our lives are unexplainable; because God will do more than we can ask or imagine. As pastor here over the years I had a front row seat to see people changed deeply by Jesus. Self-absorbed people have become servants who give their time and effort to help people rebuild after hurricanes or mentor students. I've seen critical, hard-hearted people change and love others sacrificially; unfaithful spouses have become committed to loving like Jesus. I've seen people who never cared about God transformed and stand with arms raised in heart-felt worship. That's the power of God at work. I've seen God work in so many unexplainable ways through this church.

- When we planted Crossroads, it was believed that if a church doesn't start with over 200 at its first service it would never grow beyond that. We didn't have 200 people at the Tonidale Restaurant, but we grew far beyond that anyway. That's the power of God.
- Later when we planned to build our first facility, we couldn't get a construction loan. So volunteers graded the hillside, built a public street, and constructed the building without the loan. That's God's unexplainable power at work.
- Experience shows that if a church doesn't plant a new church within its first 3-5 years it never will. We didn't plant until we were a decade old, but now we've planted churches on 3 continents with plans for more.
- Twelve years ago our country was in the grip of the Great Recession and fear reigned. And yet, during that time Crossroads members stepped up in faith and gave millions of dollars to build at North Fayette and to start a new campus. That's unexplainable apart from the power of God.

Jesus says to us – “Wait for the power of the Holy Spirit, then you'll be able to live for me.” Why did Jesus tell the disciples to wait? – why couldn't he just return to heaven and send the Spirit immediately? Because obeying Jesus and removing distractions creates an openness for the Spirit to move. We have a role to play in the purposes of God. Mark Batterson says, “If we want God to do the super, we need to do the natural.”

This passage shows us three actions which welcome the Holy Spirit.

To welcome the Holy Spirit:

Take time to Pray – because we need God's power

Acts tells us that the Church was born in a prayer meeting. The disciples were gathered together for weeks, praying. Then the Spirit fell, Peter preached and the Church was born. People took time to pray before the Spirit came. The Methodist Church was born out of prayer meeting too. In May of 1738 John Wesley came to personal faith in Christ; he experienced in his heart what he had known in his head: that Jesus died for his sins and gives new life to those who trust him. About 7 months later, Wesley gathered with about 60 other people on New Year's Eve to pray in the new year 1739. At 3 am the Holy Spirit came to an all-night prayer meeting in Fetter Lane, London. John Wesley wrote in his journal: "The power of God came mightily upon us, so that many cried out for exceeding joy and many fell to the ground."

Just like the first Christians were propelled out of the upper room in Jerusalem to preach the gospel, John Wesley was propelled out of that prayer room in London. After that night, Wesley went on to preach the gospel for over 50 years, traveling 250,000 miles on horseback across the nation. His brother Charles Wesley began writing 6,000 hymns. Together they were tip of the spear for a spiritual revival which changed England so powerfully that it prevented a revolution like the one that happened in France. And their friend, 25 year-old George Whitefield was there that night too. He went on to cross the Atlantic to help ignite America's First Great Awakening, which not only transformed countless lives, but changed the course of American history. And it all started in a prayer meeting.

Again in 1906 Christians throughout Los Angeles were praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And it happened! A poor African American preacher at a small church on Asuza Street sparked a revival that became movement of God's Spirit which has spread across the world. Today nearly 700 million Christians trace themselves back to that mission revival. And it started in prayer.

Today across the world there are many disciple-making movements in progress. The one thing they all have in common is extraordinary prayer. We don't earn an outpouring of the Spirit by logging enough hours in prayer. But prayer puts us in a position to receive the Holy Spirit. The fact is, the 120 original disciples were together in prayer in the Upper Room. What if they had been out shopping or playing cards or arguing politics instead of praying? Would the Holy Spirit have fallen on them? I don't think so.

The Spirit fell on Wesley and his friends at 3 am! What if they had been sleeping instead of praying? There were thousands of other Christians in London who were

partying on that New Year's Eve, but the Holy Spirit didn't come upon them. The Spirit came and filled those at Fetter Lane who were seeking him in prayer.

The Holy Spirit fills those who are hungry. When we are hungry for more of God, we pursue him in prayer. Wesley had been a Christian for just a few months before attending that all-night prayer gathering. He was hungry for more. The first believers had just seen Jesus risen from the dead less than two months before. They were new in Jesus. They were hungry for more. If you want more of God, here's good news: There is more! Whatever you have experienced of God so far – there is more, He is infinite – we can't get to the end even in binge worship. There is always more!

Tomorrow we begin 21 days of Prayer and Fasting as a church. We set aside these 3 weeks each year to pursue God as individuals and as a church because we need God. We need his guidance, his direction, and his power. In the Bible, people who were seeking God often fasted. Fasting is going without food for a spiritual purpose. As I said recently, I hate fasting; most of the time I don't feel spiritual - I just feel hungry. But I do it because I love the results it brings.

To participate, sign up on the Crossroads app or online. When you sign up, you'll get a daily morning email with scripture and an audio prayer guide. You can also find information on different types of fasting. Crossroaders all over the region are going to be seeking God and praying together for the same direction. I'm excited about how God is going to be building us up, answering prayer, and influencing lives.

Protect our Unity – because we need one another

The early church considered themselves a family. They called each other brother and sister. They enjoyed an unexplainable unity. But they weren't united because of their common language, skin color or background. Right from the start, the Church was multi-cultural – it was made up of people from many different nations and languages. It was multi-racial, made up of people of a variety of skin colors. There were many political persuasions.

v. 9-10: Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

They became a family for one reason; because they all trusted Christ and had been born again into a new family with God as their Father.

We've all seen the shocking and sad scenes at our nation's capital last week. None of us could have imagined that our country's division could come to that. As I said last week; the world at its worst needs the Church at its best. And Acts 2 shows us the Church at its best; filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and **unified in love**.

Acts 2:1 says the 120 disciples were TOGETHER in the upper room. If they had been separated into camps, with the pro-Roman faction on one side of the room and the free-Israel camp on the other side, I don't believe the Holy Spirit would have come on them.

History shows that when believers divide, the work of the Holy Spirit stops.

Division ended the Asuza Street revival.
Division stops spiritual awakenings.

That's why **Ephesians 4:1-3** says,

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ **Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.***

We receive the Holy Spirit with an open, up-turned palm, not with a clenched fist. When believers divide over politics or any other reason, it grieves the Holy Spirit. If we dispute with other people instead of loving them, we get out of step with the heartbeat of heaven. It prevents the Holy Spirit from moving in our lives. We can't receive the Holy Spirit with clenched fists.

So as your pastor, I urge you, guard unity. We have been born again into a new family, with God as our heavenly Father. Whatever political convictions you have, leave them at the church door. I urge you to see one another as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, not as Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals. Don't miss out on an unexplainable Spirit-filled life by fighting for a temporary human ideology. Jesus said seek the kingdom first. Nothing else has higher claim on our loyalty.

The church on earth is to be the embassy of heaven! When people step inside, they should experience love like in heaven, a foretaste of God's presence. Verses 42-47 tells us that is exactly the kind of community the early disciples experienced. When people see us love, respect and serve one another regardless of politics or race, it will surprise them. It will be unexplainable. And they'll say, "I want that." That is God's will for us, and that can even change a nation.

Repent – because the Spirit will change us

When Peter preached to the crowd, the Holy Spirit convicted thousands that they needed Jesus. They asked Peter, "What do we do?"

***Acts 2:38** 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."*

Peter didn't say, "Just pray this prayer and you'll go to heaven." No, he said, "Repent."

Repent = Change

Change is hard for us adults. We hate to admit we were wrong; it takes a literal act of God.

When Jesus began preaching, the first thing he said was “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17) He was saying, “be ready to change.” Jesus is not an add on to upgrade our lives; he is the foundation of our lives. To come to Christ is to change foundations from ours to his. And then he will transform us through the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s why Peter said, “Repent and be baptized.” Baptism marks as belonging to Jesus. It’s also an image of being buried and raised to new life. It means change. Look at what verse 38 says will happen when we repent and are baptized. 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.

As we start 2021, let’s ask ourselves, will I allow the Spirit to redirect me? Does he have permission to change the way I deal with money, the way I respond to those who have hurt me, to alter what consumes my thoughts? Will I let the Spirit deepen the way I love others?

Let’s take a moment now to invite the Holy Spirit to fill us.