

THEY ALL JOINED TOGETHER CONSTANTLY IN PRAYER

Acts 1:12-26

Key Verse: 1:14

“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”

Last week, in the first lesson of Acts, the Risen Christ said to his disciples, “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” (Ac 1:8). At that time, the apostles looked weak. It was hard for them to stay in Jerusalem without running away. But the Risen Christ spoke to them as the Commanding Officer of world mission, who had already won the victory before fighting. He saw that they would surely spread the gospel to the whole world. It would not be done in their human strength, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would make them his witnesses. As his witnesses, they would reveal Jesus to others through the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. They would reveal Jesus through their transformed lives. They would reveal Jesus to the ends of the earth. Likewise, we are weak. But the Holy Spirit is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The Holy Spirit enables us to reveal Jesus where we are, and to pray for the people of all nations, including Muslim countries and North Korea.

Today’s passage teaches us how the early church prepared to carry out the task of world mission. They joined together constantly in prayer. To have united prayer, they consecrated themselves to the holy mission of God. To have united prayer, they honored the word of God in the first place in their fellowship. May God help us to learn how to join together in prayer for the task of world mission.

First, the vessel of the Holy Spirit formed through prayer (12-14).

After the Risen Christ ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives, the disciples returned to Jerusalem. Humanly speaking, it was not easy to stay in Jerusalem where Jesus’ enemies were. But they were not afraid. They returned to Jerusalem with joy and their hearts were full of praises to God. They had met the Risen Christ. They had accepted his message of the kingdom of God in their hearts. They could obey his direction to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. They were beginning to change from mundane men into spiritual men.

When the apostles arrived in Jerusalem they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. This might have been the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, which was used by the Jerusalem Church on other occasions (Ac 12:12). 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 (13). These are the Eleven, Jesus’ chosen disciples, spoken of in the gospels. In the past, they had a hard time living together. Partially, it was because they were different. For example, Matthew the tax collector thought Simon the Zealot was a foolish idealist, while Simon the Zealot despised Matthew for selling his sense of honor for money. They could not really accept one another or work together well. Mostly, it was because their hopes were earthbound. They had thought about Jesus’ kingdom as if it were a human or earthly kingdom. They were slaves of human ambition, hampered by a sense of competition. Because of this, Peter really didn’t like the sneaky James and John who were always trying to bump him out of the position of top disciple. And James and John really didn’t like Peter who seemed to be bossy and pushy. But after meeting the Risen Christ, the kingdom of God became real to them. Their hopes

were changed. They found that the things of the world are temporal, but the kingdom of God is eternal. They found that the things of the world are imperfect, but the kingdom of God is most holy and beautiful. They began to be free from selfish ambition and the desire for worldly glory.

What did the apostles do at this time? Look at verse 14. “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” In this verse we learn several things. In the first place, the apostles began to pray. Before this, only Jesus had prayed. When the disciples should have been praying, they slept instead (Lk 22:46). But now, they began to pray. Prayer is the act of a spiritual man. Prayer is dependence on God. Prayer is the expression of faith. After meeting the Risen Christ, the apostles began to pray.

What did they pray for? They must have prayed to be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. They must have prayed, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come” (Lk 11:2). Though the task of world mission was too big for them, they did not reject it. They accepted it by faith and began to pray for God’s help. Sometimes we feel that the task of making North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is too big, not to mention evangelizing Muslim countries and North Korea. But we learn from the early Christians that by faith we must accept the task of world mission and pray. They must have prayed also for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in Luke 11:13, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” The apostles did not just sit down waiting for God to give them the Holy Spirit. They asked for the Holy Spirit fervently in prayer.

In the second place, they joined together in prayer. To join together is to become one. These eleven men—who had distinct personalities, and who had struggled with one another for ascendancy—joined together in prayer. This was possible when they saw each other from God’s point of view, in light of God’s mission for them. The world mission command was something they had to accomplish together. It would require the wholehearted devotion of all of them. When they saw each other in light of the world mission command they realized they were members of the same team, not competitors. They could appreciate each other. They could be one in spirit with a common cause.

Throughout history, when men join together with life commitment to a common cause, they become an irresistible force. America’s Independence Day looks back to the signing of the Declaration of Independence by our founding fathers on July 4, 1776. At that time, the majority of colonists in America were not in favor of declaring independence. About one-third wanted independence, one-third wanted to remain loyal to England, and one-third were undecided. But fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence with life commitment to a common cause. They concluded, “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” Afterward, one of the signers, Benjamin Franklin, said, “We must indeed all hang together, or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.” When they joined together with a common cause and were willing to sacrifice their lives they overcame impossible odds and gained independence.

The Eleven looked small compared to the establishment power of the Jewish nation, not to mention to the Roman Empire. But when they joined together constantly in prayer, a vessel was formed among them that God could use mightily. When Jesus’ people gather together in his name and pray to obey the world mission command, nothing is impossible for them. Jesus’ deepest prayer is for the unity of his people. Jesus prayed in John 17:20,21, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will

believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

In the third place, they were all there. Some of the apostles listed in verse 13 are famous, such as Peter, John, and James. But there were others who are relatively obscure, such as Bartholomew, James son of Alphaeus and Judas son of James. They seem to be like background music, which generally goes unnoticed unless it is missing or contains mistakes. But they were part of the vessel God was building. To God, each member is absolutely essential. It is only when we all join together that the vessel of the Holy Spirit is complete.

In the fourth place, they prayed constantly. The word “constantly” teaches us their devotion in prayer. Their main activity was to pray together. They must have prayed two by two, three by three, fellowship by fellowship, and all together. When they finished one round of prayer, they would begin another round of prayer. Their prayer meeting lasted ten days. No doubt, some of them dozed from time to time. Nevertheless, their prayer was constant. This kind of devotion requires sacrifice. This kind of devotion requires commitment. It is not one of our activities, but our main activity. Now we are preparing for the Regional Summer Bible Conference 2003. It is time for us to put aside civilian affairs and join together constantly in prayer. May God bless this devotion and carry out the mighty work of the Holy Spirit among us.

In the fifth place, the women and Jesus’ brothers joined them. St. Luke does not miss the fact that the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers were there, praying together, in the upper room. Throughout his gospel, Luke mentioned the important role that women had played in Jesus’ ministry. Here again, Luke mentions the importance of godly women uniting in prayer with the apostles. In Chicago UBF there are a number of powerful mothers of prayer. It is probably not a good idea to try to list them all. Anyway, they know who they are. Only when these godly women join together in prayer can the vessel of the Holy Spirit really be formed among us.

Second, the Scripture had to be fulfilled (15-26).

While the early believers were praying together, Peter stood up among them. Peter stood up by faith, overcoming himself, trusting only in the grace of Christ and the holy purpose of God. Thus, Peter took the cross of leadership for the early church. It was for the sake of solving a painful problem that was hindering their united prayer. Look at verses 16-17. “...and said, ‘Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry.’”

Here we learn that they were still suffering from the tragedy of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal. They had experienced a number of painful events: Jesus’ suffering and death, as well as their own personal failures to follow Jesus to the cross. Through Christ’s resurrection they found God’s victory over the power of sin and death. Through the Risen Christ’s appearances to them they each received his saving grace and restored their love relationship. But one thing remained unsolved. It was the problem of Judas’ betrayal. This was difficult for them to digest for several reasons. For one thing, they had a strong human attachment to Judas. He had been with them for more than three years. They had trusted him and shared sufferings together with him. Then, without warning, he not only left their fellowship, but became a betrayer and died tragically. They had to overcome their humanism. Sympathy for Judas would ruin the purity and harmony of their vessel. There was also a problem of spiritual doubt. Since Jesus had chosen Judas, how could he become a betrayer? Did Jesus make a mistake? If so, they could

doubt their own calling. They could not really trust each other. Moreover, Judas' tragic death had become a scandal known all over Jerusalem. It became the fodder for the devil's work. If they were to be truly one in spirit and purpose, they had to resolve this problem. But it was painful. No one wanted to deal with it. Then, by faith, Peter stood up.

Peter said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." Peter found the solution to Judas' problem: it fulfilled the Scriptures. It is amazing that Peter uses the words, "the Scriptures had to be fulfilled...." These were the same words that Jesus spoke over and over again in explaining his suffering, death and resurrection (Lk 18:31; 22:37; 24:44). Peter learned from Jesus how to see and understand everything that was happening through the word of God. When he brought the painful problem of Judas before the word of God, God gave him a solution from heaven. Look at verse 20. "'For,' said Peter, 'it is written in the book of Psalms, "May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it," and, "May another take his place of leadership."'" Through his own Bible study Peter corroborated what Jesus had said—that Judas' betrayal was according to the Scriptures (Lk 22:22). Though it was a difficult pill to swallow, Judas' betrayal was to fulfill the will of God. Judas had failed. But God had not failed. In fact, Jesus had warned them several times that Judas would betray him, especially in John's gospel. They did not need to understand why, but only to accept God's sovereign rule in the matter and renew their trust and faith in God. On this basis they could trust one another and commit their lives to the Christian fellowship. Their fellowship was not a human fellowship. Their fellowship was governed by the word of God and existed for the glory of God. Even such a painful event as Judas' betrayal was for the glory of God.

Judas serves as a warning. The vessel of the Holy Spirit is very important in God's redemptive history. The betrayal of this vessel is the most serious sin and it deserves just punishment. We must know that praying together for the work of God is not just another meeting, like a business appointment. It is forming the vessel of the Holy Spirit for the salvation work of God. These days many people come late to the Friday leaders' meeting. They must repent their careless attitude toward the vessel of the Holy Spirit. We must honor the vessel of the Holy Spirit.

To press forward with world mission, the apostles had to fill the place of leadership left by Judas. Jesus had chosen twelve apostles. They had to maintain this number as the foundation of the new salvation work of God (Eph 2:20-21). They had to choose someone who had been with them the whole time Jesus was among them, from his baptism by John to his ascension, to be a resurrection witness with them (21-22). They found two candidates, Joseph and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and Matthias was chosen. There was no hint of humanism in their fellowship. There was no discord. They were one in spirit, focused on God's world mission purpose.

Today we learned that the early Christians began to obey the world mission command with prayer. They also asked for the Holy Spirit in prayer. Like them, we must join together constantly in prayer. We must listen carefully to God's word. We must honor the vessel of the Holy Spirit. When we do so, may God make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and to spread the gospel of Jesus to Muslim nations and North Korea and to the ends of the earth.