

“Desperate, Concerted Prayer”

Acts 1:14; Zechariah 8:21

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Acts 2:1-47 (excerpts)

“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. ⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?... **To verse 11** We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” ¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days... **to verse 22** “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him...

³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." ³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 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. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call." ⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

The late Lewis Smedes wrote, "We ordinary people cannot fit our lives into preformed, Styrofoam boxes. We cannot manage life as well as we would like, at least not in our secret places. We cannot get all the strings tied; it won't wrap up the way we want it. For us, **survival** is often the biggest success story we dare hope for. Ordinary people feel too tired a lot. They come to church and listen to words about a grace that has made all right at the core. But they are often so muzzled by self-pity, so shackled by anger, and so paralyzed by their own real hurts that they cannot find the extra reserve of power to open their hearts to the reality of Jesus Christ and the fact of his grace. God needs to open the door."

Very appropriately people don't wear their hurts on their sleeves all of the time; they don't bleed all over us every time they come to church, but inside they are deeply wounded.

I don't want to overstate it, but there are marriages in our church that are crumbling and others that show cracks.

There are children going to school fearful that when they get home, one of their parents will be gone.

A recent experience illustrates this somewhat dramatically:

The man and woman and their then elementary aged daughter were infrequent attendees of our church for several years but two years ago moved from the area.

The husband sat in my office two and one half weeks ago vacillating between anger and self-recrimination as he told me that his wife of 14 years was separating from him.

Three days later his 14-year-old daughter had her aunt call me.

Just hours before the call, this husband had murdered his wife and set the house on fire.

The 14-year-old girl was virtually orphaned in one act of desperate anger.

Yes, I know that is extreme, but it is real and it wasn't in New York, it was here.

There are many, many wounded people.

There are many here this morning, who are suffering silently or as Smedes said it in the quote from earlier – “can't manage life in their secret places”.

There are men and women in our church who are struggling daily with powerful sinful habits that are savaging their own souls and destroying their relationships.

The guilt and powerlessness they experience have them teetering on the edge of despair.

There are too many among us who have grown so soul-weary that suicide is a considered option.

And those are the Christians!

And they feel like they have tried everything to correct the situation and alleviate the pain.

They've tried being more regular in church attendance, getting into a Bible study, or accountability group.

They've tried classes, programs, counseling and therapy.

But nothing seems to bring permanent change. I do not for a minute minimize the importance or denigrate the effectiveness of the programs and ministries of our church.

But we are fools if we think those programs and ministries are going to make any real difference in people's lives apart from the supernatural intervention of the Spirit of God.

And that becomes apparent when we meet anyone who isn't emotionally healthy, socially acceptable or economically self-reliant.

Have you ever noticed that diet advertisements are made by people who look like they've never had to diet in their lives?

Sometimes it looks that way in the church.

It's easy to do church with people who don't really need help.

But when we meet people who don't have the emotional, spiritual or financial resources to make it, our programs, on their own aren't sufficient.

And when the "healthy," among us, encounter a crisis and reach the end of their resources, they too find that "church-as-usual" doesn't meet the need.

Unless God infuses us and our ministries with life-giving power we may look good but we are helpless to make any real difference.

I use the following illustration from Scripture carefully.

The Apostle John wrote in the book of Revelation to one of the churches in Asia Minor.

I have no leading from the Lord to call our church a Laodicean church.

But to the extent that we rely on our programs and human wisdom to bring about real change in our and others lives, the following applies:

Revelation 3:17-18 "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."

Using the analogy of financial wealth to describe spiritual vitality, Jesus says, “I counsel you to buy from me...”

We must have God’s immediate, supernatural intervention in our lives or we are powerless to change and powerless to serve.

That kind of renewed dependence on God, I call revival.

Last week, as I finished my sermon I said that the problem behind our lack of evangelism as individuals and as a church, for example, is not a lack of knowledge, lack of conviction, or lack of inspiration but is a lack of desire.

The truth is that for too many of us, our hearts have grown cold.

We don’t love our God enough to lament over the neighbors or co-workers (or the millions of others) who don’t give our God the glory he is due.

And we don’t love our neighbors or co-workers (or the millions of others) enough to care about the pain in their lives and the terrible destiny that awaits them.

I said that I believe what we need is for God to revive us – to bring us to life again – to give us the perspective and the spiritual energy to truly care about and act on the things that matter to God.

I said and I say again, I don’t think we can whip that up within ourselves – we need God’s Spirit to do a work in us.

There are churches all over this country and in nearly every community.

- Where is the power that results in changed lives, changed priorities and changed minds?
- Where is the power that results in victorious living instead of God’s people just “hanging on?”
Oh, there is a trickle of good being done, of people being saved, and of lives being rescued, but where is the flood?
- We preach, we teach, we organize, we plan, we build, and we promote, but for all of the effort, it seems that so few lives are being truly changed, including our own.

- We are still more invested in recreation than regeneration, more concerned with self than souls and more occupied with income than outreach.
- For all of our buildings and programs, our communities are still largely unaffected and even unaware of our presence.
- For all of the Christians living in the neighborhoods of our communities and working in their businesses, most people don't know there is a powerful God who makes a difference in our lives.

I'm not scolding, I'm lamenting!

We need God's Spirit to revive us.

It is for that reason that I titled this message, "**Desperate**, Concerted Prayer."

In the Gospel accounts of the aftermath of Jesus' death, we learn that his disciples were greatly discouraged.

They were also so fearful, probably that they would meet the same fate as Jesus, that they locked themselves in a room.

It is not a courageous group of Christ-followers that we find after the crucifixion!

When Jesus rose from the dead and showed himself to them, they still had trouble believing.

So Jesus was very clear that these followers of his were to wait until the promised Holy Spirit was given to them.

It is noteworthy to me that in spite of the time they had spent with Jesus, in spite of the miracles they had witnessed, even in spite of the resurrection of Jesus himself, these followers **needed what they did not yet have** in order to be and do what Jesus was calling them to.

They needed the Holy Spirit of God to empower them.

Look at Acts 1:12-14:

"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying... ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."

There in verse 14 is the point of my message today:
 “They all joined together constantly in prayer...”

We have already read in Acts 2 of the great revival of God’s people that took place at Pentecost.

Look at the results noted in verses 42-47:
 “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Their love for the Lord, for his Word, their love for each other and others was evidenced in their actions.

This was what Jesus had in mind when he thought of his church.

That revival has been repeated many times throughout history.

Now I know there is a uniqueness in the Pentecost experience regarding the baptism of the Spirit.

But the experience there, that recurs throughout the NT and church history, is that **they were filled with the Holy Spirit** and their lives were different and their world was impacted.

And it is that fullness of the Spirit, that resulted in love for one another and others, a joy in their relationship with God, and a boldness in witness, that we need.

And that came in overflowing measure as the Spirit of God filled their lives.

I want that for us, for this church, for this city.

And I want it for Jesus’ sake; he deserves to be so honored, loved and obeyed.

But back to verse 14, what **means** did God use to pour out his Spirit in that way?

It was the united, persistent, prayer of his people!

In the first 13 chapters of Acts prayer is mentioned seven times. And in five of them it specifically says they met **together** to pray.

In this day of individualized Christianity, we don't pray **together**.

- Husbands don't pray with their wives.
- Families don't pray together.
- We don't gather together as the church to pray.

Oh, I know some pray for each other's illnesses, jobs and conflicts and that is good.

But where are God's people coming together to storm the gates of heaven asking God to pour out his Spirit, asking God to advance his kingdom, and asking God to tear down the walls of resistance to the Gospel in people's minds and hearts?

Where are those who tell God, as Moses did, that they won't go from here unless God goes with them!

Many years ago Leonard Ravenhill wrote, "Poverty-stricken as the church is today in many things, she is most stricken here, in the place of prayer. We have many organizers but few agonizers; many players and payers, few pray-ers; many singers, few clingers, lots of pastors, few wrestlers; many fears, few tears; much fashion, little passion; many interferers, few intercessors; many writers but few fighters.

Failing here, we fail everywhere." (*Why Revival Terries*, p 5, Chapter Two "Prayers Grasp Eternity.")

250 years ago Jonathan Edwards wrote an article entitled, "*An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth.*"

In other words, he wanted to get God's people to agree to come together for extraordinary prayer that God would revive us and advance his kingdom.

Back in the mid-1700's a group of Scottish pastors began meeting together in prayer that God would revive them and their churches.

They called their prayer times, "Concerts of Prayer."

After they had met for two years they wrote to American pastors and encouraged them to join them in that kind of prayer.

It was from that appeal that Edwards made his appeal for concerts of prayer.

They were called "concerts" because God has called his people not just to solo prayer but to come together to offer up a symphony of prayer as one people.

As Acts 1:14 says, "They all joined together..."

In Edwards' appeal to his people to come together to pray he referred to Zechariah 8.

In verses 14-15 and then in 20-21 we read,

"This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Just as I had determined to bring disaster upon you and showed no pity when your fathers angered me," says the LORD Almighty, ¹⁵ "so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid... ²¹ And the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let **US** go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.'"

Just as in Acts, God promised to bless his people.

And the means that he would use was the desperate, **concerted** prayer of his people.

Listen to Jeremiah on this subject:

Jeremiah 29:11-13

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

If we want God to revive us, to restore to us the joy of our salvation, to empower us for faithful living and fruitful service then we are called on to pray.

Look again at Zechariah 8:21

“Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and **seek the LORD** Almighty
And notice **the object** of our prayer: “The Lord.”

When we realize that the remedy for our weakness, our fear, our weariness, and our sinfulness is none other than God himself, then we will seek **him**.

We don't seek just an answer; we seek God.

Paul knew that when he prayed.

Ephesians 3:17 “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may **know him better**.”

But again I want you to see that it is “concerted” prayer that God calls us to.

Zechariah 8:21 “Let **us** go at once to entreat the Lord...”

- When Daniel faced a trial he called on his friends to join him in prayer.
- When Esther was threatened with the holocaust of her people, she called on all together to pray.
- Our Lord himself made much of concerted prayer when he said, Matthew 18:20 “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

And in his prayer to the Father he asked that the Father make us one, one in heart for the things of God.

And how can that be unless we come together to share our hearts and pray in agreement?

I know the argument we are tempted to make: “I'll just pray on my own!”

- First of all, most of us don't.
- Secondly, we pray in repetitive ways without the stimulus of others.

- Thirdly, we tend to pray in self-centered ways without the guidance of others.
- We need each other.

The Bible declares and the disciples demonstrated that we are to come together to pray – desperate, concerted prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to revive us.

When will we pray that way?

In our ineffectiveness and silent pain, when will we be desperate enough to come together to seek the Lord?

Are some of us so weary of trying and failing that we hardly dare to believe that it can be different?

Come pray with us – let others hold up your hands of faith to God.

Are some of us so lukewarm about the things of God that we frankly don't care if God pours out his Spirit – we don't feel any personal need?

Come join us in prayer that God may thaw our cold hearts and fill us with the warmth of his love and a desire for him.

Are some of us so faithless, so shortsighted that we can't even dream of a life on fire for God; we can't imagine the church alive in genuine worship of Jesus; we can't see a community and a world markedly changed by the Gospel?

God's intentions for us and our world aren't small!

Come join us in prayer and let the Spirit of God enlarge your vision –learn to see and dream God's picture of the future.

David Bryant has written, "When Christians reach the point where they are convinced there are some things (in their lives,) in the church and in the world that God will not do until they pray, then miracles begin to happen." (Concerts of Prayer)

What would it look like if God chose to flood us with his Spirit?

Lewis Smedes, whom I mentioned earlier, said it this way:

“Sometimes people are sure that everything is all wrong and they are tired of trying to make it right. Then God comes quietly to tell them that he is around them, above them, under them, in them, and ahead of them, and that with this surrounding shield of strong love, they are going to be all right.

“Sometimes people are in the grip of anger that chokes their hearts, stifles their joy, and smothers every intimate relationship. Then God comes in to break the chain of anger and liberate an ordinary person for a new try at love.

“Sometimes people live in quiet terror of their own death. Then God comes in to give them a reason for being very glad to be alive just for today.

“Sometimes people brood over a depressing memory of some rotten thing they did and cannot forget or forgive themselves for. Then God comes in to open their hearts to receive the gifts of other ordinary people’s forgiveness and so come to forgive themselves.

“Sometimes ordinary people wrap themselves like mummies in the suffocating sackcloth of their own self-hatred; and God comes to open their eyes to the extraordinary wonder of their great worth.”

(quoted on p 24, [Concerts of Prayer](#))

What would revival look like for us as a church?

- I believe there would be a powerful sense of the presence of God – a deep awareness that God is and he is here.
- There would be a conviction of sin that though it was excruciatingly painful as the Spirit looked deep into our souls, it would yield sweet forgiveness.
- There would be a repentance of sin that involved restitution and radically changed lifestyles.
- Much that used to fascinate and entertain us would be dull by comparison to discussions of our Lord and service together.
- I believe that worship would be more attractive to us than movies or many of our CDs.
- Our relationships with one another would be very important – we would want to be together with God’s people.

- There would be a deep sense of the mercy and grace of God that would compel us to want others to know Jesus.
- There would be a real compassion for those who don't know Jesus.
- There would be a strong sense of justice that would cause us to look for ways to help the disadvantaged and to change any system that discriminates against people.
- There would be a loss of covetousness for the things of the world and a burning desire God's kingdom and his righteousness.

Are we willing for God to do a life-changing work in us and others?
Do we want it, need it; are we desperate for it?