

September 22, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Full of the Holy Spirit and Faith

Acts 11:1 – 30

The Holy Spirit, is all over the pages of this book. He dominates the narrative. Sixty times in this book, Luke talks about the Spirit and forty times He specifically says, 'The Holy Spirit'. Everything revolves around Him. And if you read the whole book, you begin to see that the means of energy, vitality, and momentum in the church is the Holy Spirit Himself. How is it that a ragtag band of fishermen, farmers, servants and slaves turned the world upside down in a matter of a few years? How is it possible that Christianity became the official religion of the greatest Empire the world had ever seen in a little over two hundred years? How can it be that since that time, millions of Christians have willingly laid down their lives for the sake of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, counting their sufferings as joy and their sacrifices as pleasure, and their losses as gains? The answer can only be that something, or more precisely someone, invaded their lives and changed their minds and transformed their living, namely, the Holy Spirit.

And Acts gives us the account of the work of this person. Jesus, the risen Savior, was sent by the Father to this earth to accomplish the redemption of the world, and He did that on the cross. After His resurrection, He appeared to the disciples and others over a period of forty days, along with, Luke says, '*many convincing proofs*', speaking and teaching them many more things about the kingdom of God, and giving them a mission, '**You will be My witnesses**' and leaving them a charge, '**Wait for the promise**'. And then He leaves them. Everything that comes after directly follows the fulfilling of that promise – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church, and the rest of the book is about the work of the Holy Spirit. Christianity is not about organizations, or philosophies of life, or gaining the moral high ground, or a guide to a better life – Christianity is about the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men and women, making sinners into saints, rescuing fallen, lost humanity from the snare and curse of sin into the glorious freedom of the sons of God. No teaching will do this, no philosophy will work here, no moral living is sufficient to take hell-bound sinners and utterly transform them into heaven bound saints.

I think that's why Luke keeps pointing us to the work of the Holy Spirit all through this book. In chapter one we have the promise of the Spirit – in chapter two we have the fulfillment of that promise. In chapter three we see a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit in healing a lame man – in chapter four when Peter is confronted by the religious opposers Luke says he is filled with the Holy Spirit – and when the church prays at the end of chapter four, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. In chapter five, church discipline is carried out through the Holy Spirit. In chapter six men were chosen to oversee the serving of the widows on the basis of being full of the Holy Spirit. And in chapter seven, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, preaches a sermon that ends in his death but also sends the church out into the world to spread the gospel. In chapter eight the Holy Spirit is poured out on the believers in Samaria; and Philip gets snatched away by the Holy Spirit. In chapter nine we witness the conversion of Saul; and when Ananias prays for him he is filled with the Holy Spirit; and the chapter ends with the fact that the churches in Judea and Samaria and Galilee were going on and increasing in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. In chapter ten we see the Holy Spirit being poured out on the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius.

And here in chapter eleven, Peter is telling the story of Cornelius and the selling point of the whole thing is when Peter says: *As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'* Acts 11:15-16 And the response of the leaders was to glorify God because this meant that God had granted repentance that resulted in eternal life for the Gentile as well as the Jew. In other words, both Peter, and in telling the story, Luke, **link the falling of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household with genuine faith**. The mark of a disciple of Jesus, Peter says, is that they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Later on in chapter 19 Paul encounters some disciples in Ephesus and the question he asks is not 'Are you saved?' but 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'. The unique characteristic of genuine believers is that they have received the Holy Spirit. And not that they have just received the Holy Spirit, but His work and power are evident in their lives. And as we go through the rest of this story in chapter eleven, this is what we see – the absolute necessity of the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

Luke turns now from his lengthy story of the spread of the gospel from the Jewish world into the Gentile world with an account of the establishment of the first predominantly Gentile church. That is a church which arose from the proclamation of the gospel not primarily to Jews, but to Gentiles: *Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.* Acts 11:19-21

When the persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, many believers were providentially scattered like seed into the rest of the world. Some, Luke says, continued to go only to the Jews. And that made sense because first of all they were Jews and still had that Jewish separatist mentality that would have made consorting with Gentiles culturally uncomfortable. But some – men of Cyprus and Cyrene, made their way to Antioch and preached to the Greek-speaking Gentiles there. That's what is meant by 'Hellenists' in verse 20. And this was amazing! Jews, reaching out to Gentiles! Jews, overcoming their centuries old prejudice and even hatred of anything Gentile – preaching the Good News of salvation. And Luke emphasizes that 'the hand of the Lord was with them'. I find it interesting that he did not say the same of the Jews who went only to the Jews. But here he says, the hand of the Lord was with them.

What is that? What does he mean by 'the hand of the Lord was with them'? If you look at that expression in the rest of the Bible, you find that expression is used frequently to describe the mighty manifestations of the power of God on behalf of His people. In Exodus, pharaoh's magicians couldn't reproduce the miracle of the plague of gnats and they told pharaoh - '***This is the finger of God!***'. In other words – 'This is the hand of God – this is the manifestation of His power and we can't duplicate that'. And in Ezekiel, the writer links the hand of God with the falling of the power of the Holy Spirit, as in '***...the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me...***' in parallel with the coming upon him of the Holy Spirit. And to bring this idea full circle, Jesus tells the Pharisee's, who accuse Him of being in league with the devil to perform miracles, that on the contrary, He casts out demons ***by the finger of God.*** And the parallel passage in Matthew Jesus tells us clearly that '***I cast out demons by the Spirit of God!***'

So the point is, the fact that the hand of the Lord was with those who were preaching to the Gentiles in Antioch, meant that their preaching and their proclamation was Spirit-born and Spirit-empowered. The Holy Spirit was all over their work. The hand of the Lord was with them – the power of the Holy Spirit was on display – the finger of God was at work through the believers and it was utterly transforming the Gentiles. Charles Spurgeon, writing on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers said: ***"It is not possible for us to promote the glory of God or to bless the souls of men, unless the Holy Ghost shall be in us and with us. Those who were assembled on that memorable day of Pentecost, were all men of prayer and faith; but even these precious gifts are only available when the celestial fire sets them on a blaze. ... [E]ven these favored and honored saints can do nothing without the breath of God the Holy Ghost. ... [I]f so it was with them, much more must it be the case with us."*** C. H. Spurgeon

You need to know something about Antioch to really appreciate these almost off the cuff comments by Luke. Antioch, at that time was either the third or fourth largest city in the Roman Empire with a population of over a half-million. Of all the cities of that time, it may have been the one most like our modern cities today. It was located on the Orantes river, close enough to the Mediterranean for trade, but far enough inland to serve as a command post for Syria. By the time of the apostles, it was not only the provincial capital, but a sort of microcosm of the world, serving as a global center for business and trade where the East met the West. Trade goods coming in from China and India on their way ultimately to Rome and vice versa. It was a center for diplomatic missions and a city that saw armies march through on their way to further conquest. As a result, this was as cosmopolitan a city as any that exist today. There were Jewish, Greek, Syrian, Arab, Latin and even African neighborhoods in the city. And not surprisingly, it was a marketplace for religions – temples to Zeus and Apollo and the whole pantheon of the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome. There were mystery religions from the East and astrology and the occult. Even the ancient Caananite religions were practiced there – the worship of Moloch and Baal and the cults of the Mother goddess. Almost every religion was represented there and there was an atmosphere of religious pluralism and toleration that we don't find until really this century in the cities of our world today.

In addition to this, Antioch was morally corrupt. Even among the pagans it had a reputation for lewd and licentious behavior, including an outdoor center for religious prostitution, both male and female. The moral reputation of the city was so bad, that when the Roman historian, Juvenal commented on the moral decline of Rome and tried to explain how it had happened, he said famously, 'The Orantes has flowed into the Tiber'. So when the disciples came to Antioch, they came to a city that in many respects was much like the great urban centers of the world today. A city that was cosmopolitan, urbane, sophisticated, religiously pluralistic, but morally compromised, feeding off many cultures and religions and ideas and philosophies.

And into that incredibly worldly mix comes the gospel. It was as if the Holy Spirit spoke to some of those refugee believers from the persecution and said, 'Go to Antioch – it's ripe for harvest'. And it may have been because these disciples were from places like Cyprus and Cyrene that they were particularly suited for this mission to Antioch. Cyprus of course is an island off the coast of Asia Minor, over 200 miles northwest of Jerusalem; and Cyrene was a beautiful city founded by Greek colonists in North Africa about 800 west of Jerusalem. And since Luke makes a point in chapter two of describing some of the people who received Peter's message on the day of Pentecost as being from those areas, the disciples who ministered in Antioch were very probably converts from that event.

Interestingly enough, it was Simon of Cyrene who was tasked to carry the cross for Jesus when He collapsed under its weight on the way to Calvary; and there were Jews from Cyrene who joined in the stoning of Stephen back in chapter eight; and in chapter thirteen a Roman named Lucius was one of the prophets or teachers in the Antioch church and came from Cyrene. Cyprus was the home of Barnabas who later comes to the infant church there in Antioch to oversee things. But it was the disciples who came from these two places that seemed to be particularly suited to begin the missionary work in Antioch. First of all, these were Hellenistic Jews who would have been exposed to a much more multi-cultural racially diverse and multi-lingual world, unlike the Jews that had grown up in Jerusalem and Judea. They would have been familiar with the widespread polytheism that characterized the large urban centers of the Roman Empire.

So they come to Antioch, preaching the Lord Jesus, and because the hand of the Lord was with them, because they were empowered by the Holy Spirit, a great number believed and turned to the Lord. If you step back and look at the context here – there was absolutely no earthly reason why one more religion added to the mix there at Antioch should have succeeded so magnificently. These people had no biblical background, they had no cultural references that would help to build a gospel bridge, so to speak. These guys worshiped everything under the sun but they had no place in their religion or philosophy for a poor, itinerant preacher from an obscure, backwater province who claimed to be God. And what we should understand, and what Luke takes pains to make clear, is that the only reason the gospel came in to transform that city was because of the power of the Holy Spirit.

These guys didn't rely on evangelistic programs or cleverly contextualized sermons or massive gospel crusades. Luke says that they came preaching the Lord Jesus – and the Holy Spirit worked through their preaching to convert these pagans. What this says to the church today is that our main need in evangelism and outreach is the power of the Holy Spirit. We need Spirit-empowered living; Spirit-empowered preaching; we need the continual filling of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In speaking of the real need of the church, C.H. Spurgeon wrote: ***Do not say that we want money; we shall have it soon enough when the Spirit touches men's hearts. Do not say that we want buildings, churches, edifices; all these may be very well in subserviency, but the main want of the Church is the Spirit, and men into whom the Spirit may be poured.***

Pretty soon the news of what was happening reaches Jerusalem and they send Barnabas to see what is going on. And Luke could have said a lot of things about Barnabas, but what he chose to say was that Barnabas '*... was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith...*' The important qualification for Barnabas was the fact that he was a man full of the Holy Spirit and faith. Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith. The word is ***pleres*** (*play race*) and it means to be filled up thoroughly, every part permeated with the Holy Spirit. It is the adjective form of the verb ***pleroo*** (*play ro o*) that Paul uses in Ephesians five where he tells the Ephesians that they need to be filled with the Spirit. And Paul puts that idea of being filled in the present tense as an imperative – which means this is not a one-time thing but an ongoing process. ***Be being filled*** – let this characterize your life – always be being filled with the Holy Spirit. What this says is that our lives are to be filled up with God. A life that overflows with the Holy Spirit.

Look at what happens when the Holy Spirit is filling His church. Twice Luke mentions the fact that considerable numbers of people are being saved. Literally, the city is being transformed by the gospel – because the hand of the Lord was with them – and because there were men like Barnabas who were full of the Holy Spirit. The church was being disciplined – Barnabas went and got Paul and they spent a year there teaching and discipling the believers. The witness of the church in the city had a great impact. Luke says that it was in Antioch that the believers were first called Christiani – Christians – followers of Christ. The gifts of the Spirit were alive and working in the church. Luke tells us that Agabus, a Christian prophet, stood up to prophesy about a coming famine. And the love of God that had been poured out in these Gentile hearts overflowed in love to their Jewish brothers. When they understood that a famine was coming, they sent a love offering to their brothers in Judea to help with relief. What Luke doesn't mention is the fact that Antioch was going to feel the same deprivations of this famine as those in Judea – but that didn't stop these brothers from overflowing in generosity.

The early church was made up of simple men and women. The leaders were former fishermen and tax collectors who fled in fear when Jesus was arrested and needed them most. They weren't courageous and faithful. In fact, they lacked faith and courage. They were the least likely to be put in charge of any Christian enterprise. Yet after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out, those same nobodies were suddenly transformed. With courage and faith, they turned Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Antioch, and eventually the world, upside down. It wasn't a result of their seminary training; they didn't have any. They couldn't hand out copies of the New Testament; it hadn't been written yet. It wasn't because they were wealthy and had the greatest sound system and light show at their church; they were poor people without a church building. To the existing Jewish religious establishment, those early Christians were mocked as unlearned and ignorant people with few resources. To the Roman Empire they seemed fanatical and strange. But one thing they did possess was the power of the Holy Spirit.

What we need saints, is the power of the Holy Spirit invading our lives and transforming our community. This is what we need to pray for. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray in Luke 11, He gives them a prayer outline, tells them a story, and then gives them the practical application. And if this sermon has a practical application – this is it. Jesus tells them to ask, to seek and to knock. In fact He says 'Don't stop asking, don't stop seeking, and don't stop knocking, because Your heavenly Father wants to give good gifts to His children and prayer is the means through which He does that.' And then He gets to the content of their asking: *"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!**"*

What our Father is wanting to do is to pour out His Holy Spirit on His church. Why else would Jesus tell His disciples to ask for the Holy Spirit? What He isn't saying is that believers haven't already been filled with the Holy Spirit when they believed. What He is saying, I think, is that we need to ask for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit – the ongoing filling that Paul was talking about. I don't believe that Jesus ever intended that His church operate without regular visitations and outpourings of the Holy Spirit. Why would He tell us to ask for the Holy Spirit? Why would He send another Helper if not to help us? Just look around at our world. Don't you see the obvious need of fresh wind, fresh fire from God to overcome the evil in the world and rescue the souls of men?

There is a distinct promise to us that our heavenly Father will give us the Holy Spirit if we ask for His power; and that promise is guaranteed by His sovereign might. But he says, "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" He makes it a stronger case than that of an ordinary parent. The Lord must give us the Spirit when we ask Him, for He has by His word bound Himself to do it. He would bring dishonor on His own name if He did not give the Holy Spirit to those that ask Him. Oh, then, let us ask Him at once, with all of our hearts. In the words of Spurgeon: 'Come, Holy Spirit now! You are with us, but come with power and let us feel Your sacred might!

Our gracious God and Father,

Our cry and our prayer this morning is that we would be filled to overflowing with Your Holy Spirit. We are too often cold, indifferent, empty – we are weary of prayerless prayers and praiseless praises, joyless service and powerless witness. We long to be full of passion and fire for the things of God and for Your purpose. We want lives that are transformed and vibrant; lives that proclaim the excellencies of Christ in every place. Magnify to us Your glory by being magnified in us. Fill us we pray, with power to expel every rebel lust; reign supreme and keep us Yours, so that with our lives and with our lips we would manifest Your saving power to lost and dying people around us. Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down in power on Your people. 'Come, Holy Spirit now! You are with us, but come with power and let us feel Your sacred might! We pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord who promised to give when we ask. Amen.