

Prayers

Opening prayer

It is wonderful, heavenly Father, to know that You have surrounded us with thousands of witnesses to Your faithfulness and Your love. You have given us thousands of angels who stand guard to protect us, and thousands of fellow believers who testify to Your love and inspire us to greater things. Heavenly Father, in these and many other ways, You have given us all we need for fellowship, support and protection, and we praise You! ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: PREJUDICE

1. For yourself

Confess to God any prejudices you know you have and ask Him to help you uproot any other prejudices that get in the way of your witness as one of God's people

2. For your friends and family

Think carefully about whether you have any favourites amongst your family; who benefits from your affection, and who does not? Come before the Lord to sort out any ungodly attitudes you may have developed towards others in your family

3. For the church and its work

Pray against prejudicial attitudes within the church, and seek the Lord's forgiveness for His people

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for any in your neighbourhood or country who are the victims of unnecessary prejudice

Meditation

As we begin our work today;

Give us a heart to seek peace with each other;
Give us a mind to seek the truth with each other;
Give us the strength to work well with each other;
Give us the hope to have confidence in each other;
Give us such love that is ready to forgive one another;
Give us a desire to share fully with one another;
Give us compassion to care properly for one another;
Give us the emotions to truly feel for each other;

And so may we honour You this day.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 2: 43-47

⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, for many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles in Jerusalem, and great fear came over them. ⁴⁴ All the believers kept together and held everything in common; ⁴⁵ they sold their possessions and goods, and divided everything up as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ By agreement, they met together daily in the Temple, but they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Review

The result of the first day of Pentecost was that the church grew both in number and also in quality. From that day to this, Christians have marvelled at the unanimity of life and purpose of those who were saved; the first church sounds rather like a commune but with Christ at the centre!

This is surely one of the most happy and delightful passage of Scripture! It tells us that after the tumultuous events of the first day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was powerfully at work to unite God's people in their devotion and also to inspire them to care for one another. In the midst of the complexities of life in the Christian church today, the simplicity of this passage speaks volumes to us. The Holy Spirit was abundantly at work in the midst of the Christian community (2:43), the believers lived together in agreement and common purpose (2:44), food and wealth was shared for the common good (2:45), worship was held daily, including the breaking of bread (2:46), and the result was that the church had a good reputation, and grew (2:47).

The first observation we can make is that the first church in Jerusalem was a miracle of God's grace, and the power of the Holy Spirit. To begin with, our report describes frequent '*wonders and signs*' (2:43), which although done by the Apostles, were the direct result of the Holy Spirit working through them (2:1-4). Ever since the Holy Spirit was first given at Pentecost, miraculous events have taken place wherever God has been at work to break down barriers and establish his church. For example, God showed himself to the Emperor Constantine in a miraculous vision just before a famous battle at the Milvian Bridge (312 AD), and as a result, the Roman Empire became officially Christian; God has also worked through many other less dramatic miracles that have been responsible for bringing faith to many people. So, just as this passage of Scripture says, God is always at work in miraculous events to make himself known in the world and build His church.

This now sets the pattern for how we read this passage. We discover next that first the Christians attempted to live in what we might call a 'commune'. The Greek text of verse 44 is not as clear as we would like (see notes below in 'going deeper'), but the principle is set down here that all possessions and wealth were held in common to be used for the common good (2:44,45). Now this is a high ideal, and one that people have struggled to put into practice throughout history, moreover, the early church did not manage to do it for long. Not three chapters on from Acts 2, we read the tragic story of Ananias and Sapphira, who sinned by keeping part of their wealth aside for themselves and paid the ultimate price for their rebellion (5:1-13). Nevertheless, when the Apostles set about reporting the first Pentecost, they felt it right to record that the first Christians tried to live by this ideal. It is in Scripture for a purpose, and it stands as a godly challenge to all Christians, who, if they wish to follow Christ absolutely, must place everything at His disposal. The challenge never goes away.

Verse 46 moves on to describe what seems like a round of almost constant worship. It says that the first Christians did two things to worship God as a consequence of their new-found faith and baptism; they '*met together daily in the Temple*' (2:46), they '*broke bread in their homes and ate together*' (1:46). Moreover, their praise and worship was not entirely private, for people around them noticed what they did, and positively, (1:47). Now it is likely that this round of worship consumed a considerable amount of time, and although it was possible for Jewish people at a time of festive worship in Jerusalem, it was hardly practicable for working people throughout the Roman Empire. For this reason, we can take advice from this ideal of Christian worship, but to try to be a slave to it may lead to problems. Christian people today will not be able to meet together as much as they would like, and weekly may be practically as much as can be done. However, the wording of this passage leaves open to us the idea that any one Christian can live a life of devotion and worship, whilst meeting with other Christians and sharing 'bread and wine' as often as possible. Scripture begs us to be slaves of Jesus Christ, not to forms of religion.

At the very end, this powerful passage tells us that if God's people are alive in the Spirit and the signs and wonders of God, if they yield all things to their Lord and to His people the church, and if they worship Him and share fellowship with all who own the name of Jesus Christ, then remarkable things happen. Just as happened in the life of the first Christian church after Pentecost, other people gain a good impression of Christians and what they believe in, and as a consequence, the church grows.

What more could we want for the life of the church? On the one hand this passage of Scripture seems to describe an ideal that is unattainable, but on the other hand, if God's people seek to follow this blueprint, then God's will is done on earth and the Kingdom of God is established to God's praise and glory!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Verse 43; 'signs and wonders' in Jerusalem
- Verses 44,45; Communism?
- Verses 46,47; true worship
- Verse 47; the blessing of the Lord

Notes on the translation of the passage

V43 'were being done by the apostles in Jerusalem, and great fear came over them.'

Other translations:

'were done by the apostles (NIV)

'were being done through the apostles' (English Standard)

There is a very big difference between the five or six most important ancient manuscripts of the Greek text here, roughly half of them conclude the verse after the words *'done by the apostles'*, but the rest include some form of the words *'in Jerusalem, and great fear came on them'*. I have accepted the longer text, against the flow of modern scholarship, because it makes sense, and gives a proper conclusion to the Greek sentence.

V44 'the believers kept together ...'

Other translations:

'the believers were together ...' (NIV)

'all who shared the faith kept everything in common ...' (New Jerusalem Bible)

The most common translation of this phrase is that found in the NIV *'the believers were together ...'*. However, this phrase by itself means little. I suggest that the best way to translate it is to say 'kept together' because this is specific, and it is a reasonable translation of the Greek phrase here, 'epi to auto'.

There is one ancient manuscript from the third century AD, which shortens the whole sentence by removing this phrase 'epi to auto' (together), and this makes for an abbreviated verse, as translated by the New Jerusalem Bible (above)

Verse 43; 'signs and wonders' in Jerusalem

In truth, the Holy Spirit is here doing a work of recreation; God is doing something new by creating His church. But notice that God does this work through the Apostles, and as a consequence of this *'great fear came over them'*. The Apostles were aware that God was doing something radical and new through them, and as a result, they felt awe and wonder. This is a natural feeling for those who begin to feel self conscious because of what God is doing through them. Sometimes today, Christians speak of 'awe' as something to be experienced in worship, perhaps something like a feeling. The 'awe' described here is the holy awe that is more like terror, in this case, the terror of knowing that God has come close to you, and you know you are a sinner. This is the kind of awe that generates the impetus towards radical faith, as described in the remaining verses of this passage.

Notice that everything that happened on the first Pentecost was done in Jerusalem. To that extent, what happened was unique, because the Festival of Pentecost was still going strong (it was a festival that lasted seven days), and the Temple was at hand as a gathering place for worship. Now the first great wrench experienced by the Christian church was the wrench away from Jerusalem. When Christians spread outwards into either the towns and villages of Judea or the cities of the Roman Empire, it was no longer possible for Christians to gather in a Temple to do their worship. They had to improvise, and the evidence from the letters of the New Testament is that people began to worship God in their homes. That is, until they became too small, and records from the late first century and the second century A.D. tell us that by then, Christians were beginning to build buildings as meeting places for worship.

Verses 44,45; Communism?

Verses 44 and 45 of Acts chapter 2, have long been recognised as something close to a communist manifesto. They speak of people sharing all their possessions and dividing things out according to need. But these verses are best read as an encouragement to God's people to engage in true fellowship. When we read about Christian fellowship in the Bible, it is not about meeting together once a week or once a fortnight for Bible study and prayer. Christian Fellowship is about being willing to give sacrificially for the good of others, especially those in immediate need.

Now, the difficulty we face in the church today is that most people who attend church have no idea about the needs of others in church, and most people have never shared or made known the full extent of their wealth so that it can be called upon. Most people would feel coy about each aspect of this scenario; either of divulging their real wealth (either in money or other human resources), or revealing their deepest needs. You will undoubtedly feel that this is somewhat extreme, but I venture to suggest that no real Christian fellowship exists within a church until people open up and begin to engage with these issues, either formally or informally. At the very least, we must begin to learn to trust one another with money and with feelings. True Christian fellowship is more than just a begrudgingly sharing out of human resources; it is a desire to lay all things before God and also place them unashamedly in full view of other people, both what is needed, and what can be given.

Verses 46,47; true worship

The bare minimum requirement for worship is to gather together, and to break bread. This definition of what God requires in the form of worship is so far short of what some believe is necessary for worship today it seems almost laughable. But if God required more of the early Christians than he would have said so, and he would have said what it was, and the Holy Spirit would have given it. Unfortunately, the church has evolved over the centuries with patterns of worship that people have begun to believe are in some way essential if God is to be worshipped, yet this is mostly a lie. Singing hymns and songs, preaching, reading Scriptures, praying for the people, and much more, including all the different forms of sharing of bread and wine that are found within the church today, all of these are regarded as essential by some for worship. Yet they must be set against the example of worship found here in this passage of Scripture, which describes the worship of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem.

Most Christians will readily accept that there is something very precious merely in the act of coming together in order to worship God, whatever is done. It seems to me that God blesses and regards as worship our 'gathering together'. This demonstrates that we have taken the decision to set aside time to honour God, and the decision is in itself, crucial. Everything that goes into enabling us to sing a song or enter into the atmosphere of worship is but a tool, and if we do not recognise this then we are guilty of treating something with holy respect that does not deserve it.

God has blessed one feature of our worship, which is the 'breaking of bread'. This is one of a number of important passages in which the 'Lord's supper' is mentioned in Scripture, and it is important because it is a celebration of all that Jesus said and did, especially in His death on the Cross and his resurrection. From the first day of Pentecost to this, the celebration of what is often called 'the Lord's supper', is the one thing that binds the vast majority of Christians together. The meal is celebrated in a very large number of different ways, and if we open our eyes beyond the practice with which we are familiar, we will discover that Jesus makes himself known in the 'breaking of bread' in so many more ways than we imagine.

Verse 47; the blessing of the Lord

the Lord God blessed the early church by making it grow. Much research has been done on the growth of the early church, because what happened at the first Pentecost is indeed astonishing. From that day onwards, the church grew in an extraordinary way, until in 312 A.D., the Emperor Constantine declared Rome a Christian state, and by then, millions of people were Christians. It seems that the Christians of the early church were not as self-conscious about growth as we are today. Perhaps if we set our eyes upon the principles of this passage of Scripture, then we will discover the truth about how God grows churches. He does it when God's people are obedient to Him and His ways, and He does it without it having to be talked about, planned, or become the subject of church lunches or the raising of money. These are our ways of doing things and God can indeed bless them, but not in the way we are talking about here. For if we are obedient to Him in taking this Scripture seriously, then we will know God's blessing.

Discipleship

Application

Living by faith and in the flow of the Holy Spirit

We all know how hard it can be to sustain Christian fellowship today, because of the many different ways in which people like to worship God, and deep differences over theology and church life. Now there are some important issues to be discussed here, but surely, the Christian church needs to take hold of what God has said to it about how to be His children and become His church. Today's passage of Scripture does not tell us everything we need to know about how to be God's people today, but it is an excellent starting point. We can hardly go wrong by taking the vision of these verses and building on them according to God's guidance.

Perhaps the starting point for us all must be to allow the Holy Spirit free rein to do His great works in our midst. If everyone who calls on the name of Christ will truly expect God to work in power and wonder in our midst, then we will see it. My own experience of life is that Christians whose eyes are open and welcoming to all that God will do, soon discover that He is always at work doing powerful signs and wonders all around. It is too easy, especially if we have been followers of Christ for many years, to think we have seen it all, but this is the path of blindness and we need not succumb to it even in old age. We will only receive healing when we ask the Lord to remove the scales of this sin of the heart, so that we can see again.

A picture of worship

In preparing this study I have been struck by the way in which this passage describes Christian worship as firstly meeting together, and secondly 'breaking bread' in people's homes. If we ask people today about organising Christian worship, they will often come out with a list something like this; get a preacher, organise a worship group, sound desk, and audio visuals, preparing counselling team, and so on. Too often, we are bogged down in organisational details, instead of seeing the heart of worship. The heart of worship is people who truly want to meet together to worship God; indeed, I would go as far as saying that little else is required. Such people will always find a way of worshipping God whatever the outward circumstances.

Then, Scripture also speaks about eating meals in people's homes, and I fancy that it does in fact mean sharing the Lord's Supper, but not in the highly ritualised manner most people know it today, even in relatively 'free' churches. Why do we allow the structures of our churches to impose such conditions upon the sharing of 'bread and wine', that people are scared to do it without asking permission? When God's people meet together to share food, and in that context break bread and remember that Jesus had died for them, then I think the revolution will have come that breaks apart the hardened traditions of the 'Lord's supper' and set us free in worship. I heartily long for it.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group whether it is possible for the church to live by the principles outlined in this passage of Scripture. If not, what value does this Scripture have?
2. Within the group, take each verse in turn, and discuss what it can teach us about what it means to be God's people, the church.
3. What does this passage of Scripture teach us about what God wants from us in worship, and how do we deliver that as God's people today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Ask yourself the direct question, where does this passage of Scripture challenges amongst? Is it in the description of signs and wonders that accompany God's work? Is it in the way that all Christians are asked to give all their possessions for the common good? Is it in the description of regular and wholesome worship, including communion? Make sure you know where this passage of Scripture touches you most acutely, for that is where God is speaking to you, and you need to hear it.*
- *Pray for the church of God, which so often seems to be a religious institution far short of the dynamic example in today's passage of Scripture. Ask God to help you become someone who does not merely reject the church because of its faults, but someone who lives according to God's Word and who demonstrates its truths. You will then find peace in your heart.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we are truly grateful for all You have taught us through Your Word. We ask You to help us remember the truths we have learned today, so that we may grow in grace and godliness, and do your will. We long to be fruitful for you and a delight to your eyes; we praise you, Hallelujah! Amen
