

THEY 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.”

In Acts 1:8, the Risen Christ gave us his world mission command: “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!” Jesus commanded us to be his witnesses to the world with the help of the Holy Spirit. In today’s passage, we learn how his disciples prepared to carry out the mission. They didn’t know what to do with the great command. But there was one thing they could do. They joined together constantly in prayer. May God help us to join together in prayer to obey the world mission command of our Lord Jesus!

I. THEY JOINED TOGETHER IN PRAYER (12-14)

Look at verse 12. *Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city.* After Jesus ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives, the disciples returned to Jerusalem. Jesus had told them to remain in Jerusalem (1:4). It wasn’t easy for them to stay in the city where their enemies were. But they obeyed the word of Christ. The Risen Christ had given them the world mission command with a promise to send them the Holy Spirit. They obeyed his words and stayed in Jerusalem. They waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Where did they go when they returned to Jerusalem? Verse 13 says that they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. This “upper room” was in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. The room was used by the Jerusalem Church on other occasions (Ac 12:12). Those present were the Twelve disciples of Jesus, minus one (Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James). In the past, they did not get along with one another even as they followed Jesus for more than three years. Partly it was because they were different. 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 with open hearts. Mostly, however, it was because of their immaturity. They were humanly ambitious and full of jealousy and competition. Peter didn’t like James and John who tried to bump him out of the top position. And James and John really didn’t like Peter who was brash and outspoken. Whenever they had an opportunity, they argued about who was the greatest among them. But we see signs of change in this passage. They were together in one room. There was no hint of competition. Their hopes were changing. The hope of the kingdom of God became more real to them. They began to overcome their selfish ambition and the desire for human glory.

What did they do as they gathered in the upper room? Let us read verse 14. *“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”* We can learn several things from this.

First, the apostles began to pray. This was a remarkable change. The disciples were not known as prayer servants. They did not pray when Jesus prayed and encouraged them to pray. Even when Jesus offered his intense prayer in Gethsemane, they didn’t join him in prayer. They fell asleep instead (Lk 22:46). But now, they joined together constantly in prayer. Prayer is an act of faith. Prayer is an expression of faith. Prayer is our spiritual breathing. Prayer is to say to God we need him everyday. After accepting the world mission command of Jesus, the disciples began to pray. They didn’t have a pity party when they huddled in the upper room. They didn’t talk about the liberation of their country from the evil empire. Instead, they joined together constantly in prayer.

What did they pray for? Jesus’ command was on their minds, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses” They must have prayed to be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The task of world mission seemed unrealistic to them, but they did not dismiss it. They accepted it by faith and began to pray for God’s help. We pray for America to be a Bible-believing, missionary-sending nation. We pray for Muslim countries and North Korea. These prayer topics seem unrealistic too. But we learn from this passage that by faith we must pray for them. The apostles must have prayed also for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told them to wait for the Holy Spirit. They didn’t just sit around passively, waiting for God to give them the Holy Spirit. Instead, they asked for the Holy Spirit in prayer. And God answered their prayer in a spectacular manner as we will learn in chapter 2. We should also pray 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!”

Secondly, they all joined together. The disciples joined together in prayer. They were in one heart and one mind. They were united in prayer. How was this possible? How could they overcome their differences? How could they set aside their spirit of competition? This was possible because they put the word of God above everything else. They probably hung a big sign in the upper room that read, “You will be my witnesses!” They made a decision to obey Jesus’ command at all cost. When they saw each other in light of God’s mission, they realized that they were precious coworkers for the same purpose. They were members of the same team, not competitors. They could appreciate each other. They could be one in spirit with a common cause. The world mission task was something they had to accomplish together.

When a group of people pray together with commitment to obey Jesus’ command, God can use them greatly, beyond their imaginations. In August 1806, five students of Williams College gathered in a field in Williamstown, Massachusetts, to pray for world mission. Historians call their gathering “The Haystack Prayer Meeting.” This small meeting was the beginning of a great mission movement in America. Thousands of missionaries were sent to Asia. The movement continued into the next century, giving

rise to several ministries, including InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Student Volunteer Movement. Mother Barry said that she signed a missionary pledge with the Student Volunteer Movement. We should not underestimate the prayer meeting of a small group when they join together to obey the word of God.

The disciples were a bunch of hillbillies compared to the powerful Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire. But when they joined together in prayer, a vessel was formed that God could use for his redemptive work. When God's people gather together in his name and pray to obey the world mission command, they can accomplish impossible tasks for God. That is why Jesus prayed for the unity of his people 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."

They all joined together in prayer. They were all there, including women, Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers. Some of the apostles listed in verse 13 are famous, such as Peter, John and James. But there were others who are relatively unknown, such as Bartholomew, James son of Alphaeus and Judas son of James. They were like background music, which generally goes unnoticed unless it is missing. But they were part of God's ministry. To God, each member is precious.

St. Luke does not miss the fact that women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, were there to join the united prayer in the upper room. In Luke's gospel, he mentioned the important role that women played in Jesus' ministry. Here again, Luke mentions the godly women joining together in prayer with the disciples. They completed the vessel of the Holy Spirit. We should never underestimate the importance of women in a ministry! May God raise up many women of prayer among us!

Third, they prayed constantly. The word "constantly" tells us about their devotion in prayer. Their prayer was not some extra-curricular activity. It was their main activity. They must have prayed two by two, three by three, in large groups, and all together. They must have prayed silently sometimes and cried out in loud voices other times. When some finished one round of prayer, others would begin another round of prayer. Their prayer meeting lasted ten days. No doubt, some of them dozed off from time to time. Nevertheless, their prayer was constant. This kind of devotion requires sacrifice and commitment. Prayer is not to be merely one of our activities, but our main activity. I pray that God may help us to join together constantly in prayer. May God help us to learn to depend on him through prayer as we struggle to obey Jesus' world mission command!

II. THE SCRIPTURE HAD TO BE FULFILLED (15-26)

While they were praying, Peter stood up to address a painful problem that was hindering their united prayer. Standing up as a leader at that time was not easy for Peter. Yes, he was the top disciple of Jesus. But he had failed miserably. After bragging that he would even die with Jesus, he denied Jesus three times before a servant girl on the night Jesus was arrested. He had to overcome himself to stand up by faith. He was

no longer a brash and impulsive disciple. He was a humble and thoughtful leader. He said in verses 16-17: *“Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”*

Peter brought up a topic that left a deep scar in their minds—the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. They had experienced a number of painful events. They saw how Jesus suffered and died on the cross. And they failed to follow him to the cross. They had abandoned him. It was difficult for them to forgive themselves. But the love of Jesus did not fail. The Risen Christ appeared to them to restore their love relationship. Their wounds began to heal. Still, one thing remained unsolved. It was the problem of Judas’ betrayal. This was difficult for them to shake off the problem. For one thing, Judas had been with them for more than three years. He was one of their number and shared in their ministry. They shared joys and sorrows together with him. Then, without warning, he not only left their fellowship, but became a betrayer and died a tragic death. They also had a problem of self-doubt. Jesus had chosen Judas. How could he become a betrayer? Did Jesus make a mistake? If so, who could be the next one? Moreover, Judas’ tragic death had become a scandal all over the city. It became a fodder for gossip against their group. If they were to be truly one in spirit and purpose, they had to resolve this problem. They couldn’t just sweep the problem under the rug and pretend that everything was okay. Still it was a painful subject. No one wanted to talk about it. So, by faith, Peter stood up.

Peter said, *“Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas ...”* Peter found a solution to the problem in the word of God. Judas’ betrayal fulfilled the Scriptures. Peter said, *“the Scriptures had to be fulfilled....”* Amazingly, Peter used the same words that Jesus used repeatedly to explain his suffering, death and resurrection (Lk 18:31; 22:37; 24:44). Peter finally learned from Jesus how to see and understand things through the word of God. This is important for us to learn as we study the Bible. Our God is the Lord of the universe. Nothing happens without his acknowledgment. Let us pray that we may grow to be spiritual people who can see things through the word of God.

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 Bible study Peter confirmed what Jesus had said--that Judas’ betrayal was according to the Scriptures (Lk 22:22). Judas’ betrayal fulfilled the will of God. Judas had failed. But God did not fail. In fact, Jesus had warned several times that Judas would betray him. 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. Based on God’s word, they could trust one another and commit their lives to the fellowship. Their fellowship was not a human fellowship. Their fellowship was anchored on the word of God and existed for the glory of God.

At the same time, 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 a serious sin and it

deserves just punishment. We must honor the vessel of the Holy Spirit. We must repent our attitude if we do anything to hinder the vessel of the Holy Spirit.

To obey Jesus' world mission command, the apostles had to fill the place of leadership left by Judas. Jesus had chosen twelve apostles, but now one seat was empty. They had to choose someone to fill the gap. God's ministry was to be built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20). And who would be qualified? They had to find 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" (24-25). 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. Likewise, we must join together constantly in prayer. May God help us to form a vessel of the Holy Spirit through prayer!