

Preparing
Acts 1:4-26
John Breon

When I was in seminary, one day we were having a test in our Bible class. The tests were handed out and we were getting started. I looked over at a friend of mine. He had a look of shock and panic. Either he was unaware or he'd forgotten we were having a test. He was not prepared.

This section of Acts shows us the need to prepare, to get ready for the work we're called to, and to be ready for what God is going to do. But it also shows us that our preparation alone is not enough. Our intelligence and ability aren't enough to get us where we need to go or to do what God wants done.

In the 1960s, when I was a little kid, the U.S. space program was exciting and popular. I liked hearing about the rockets taking off, launching cargo and people into space and, eventually, to the moon. Years later, the space shuttle program was kind of cool, but space launches almost became routine. But imagine one of those Gemini or Apollo rockets or the space shuttle on the launching pad. There was plenty of equipment. The astronauts knew their mission and had been trained for it. Everyone was ready for the launch. But then imagine that there was no power getting to the engines. It couldn't launch. It couldn't go on its mission because it had no power.

Or, at a simpler level closer to home: When I started mowing lawns in junior high, I got a new riding mower—a Swisher. The first time I used it, I was busily working on a yard and was about done when the mower died. I pulled and yanked on the starter cord, but I couldn't get it going again. I went for help and my friend discovered the problem. You've probably already guessed it. The mower was out of gas. I hadn't thought to check the gas tank. Without fuel, there was no power and I couldn't finish the job.

The church can have all kinds of things going for it—talented people, great facilities, organization, programs. But without God's power we can't be all that God wants us to be; we can't do all that God wants us to do; we can't go where God wants us to go.

In Acts 1, the earliest followers of Jesus had a lot going for them. These people had been personally trained and taught by Jesus for three years. They were first-hand witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. They had a sense of hope about the future. Their task was clear and they had unity of purpose. They had impressive leadership and organization. They were wise enough to have 120 people in their group. That was the smallest number permitted under Jewish law to form a synagogue and have its own council.

The group was inclusive. Along with eleven Apostles were "the women"—most likely the women Luke mentioned in his Gospel. They accompanied Jesus during his ministry and were present at the cross and empty tomb. Also in the group was "Mary the mother of Jesus" along with his brothers, who apparently came to believe in him after his resurrection.

This diverse group joined together in constant prayer.

Their decision to replace Judas shows their great faith that the ministry would continue. They recognized the need and they trusted God to guide them.

They had confidence rooted in the Scriptures.

What more did they need? They seemed ready to take the world by storm. Yet, the risen Lord Jesus told them to wait. There was still something they needed before they could be and do all he intended.

I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Lk 24:49)

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:4-5)

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. (Acts 1:8)

The first Jesus followers weren't yet ready to launch the church on its lasting journey through human history. They weren't ready to preach a

crucified and risen Messiah. They weren't ready to go to all the nations. They were to wait for the promise of the Father, the promised power of God. They needed to wait until the power fell from on high and they were baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Their future, the church's future, required God's direct action. It needed God's fire in the personal and corporate lives of Christian believers. Human effort alone wouldn't be enough to get the job done. There had to be an ongoing experience of God's presence and power in and among them (See William Abraham, "Awaiting the Promise" in *Suddenly from Heaven*, ed. Mark Rutland, 4-16).

Those earliest disciples needed God's power in the Holy Spirit to do what Jesus told them to do. So do we. Let's see what we can learn from Acts 1 about preparing for Pentecost and being ready to receive God's power.

The New Testament describes the person and work of the Holy Spirit in a variety of ways. John's Gospel shows that the Spirit is Christ's continuing presence in the church. Paul teaches that the Spirit creates in us the Christian life and equips us with gifts for ministry. For Luke, the Holy Spirit empowers the church for our mission in the world. Luke also shows the Holy Spirit moving the church into areas where we wouldn't go on our own and into activities we wouldn't do on our own.

God's Spirit keeps us living on the edge. The Spirit keeps leading us into new ventures. That can be frightening and unsettling, but we can't do without it. The Holy Spirit isn't an option in Christian living. We need to claim Pentecost as part of our inheritance. It's a vital part of what it means to be the church. We may get nervous about "Pentecostal" talk because of some excesses in the contemporary Pentecostal movement. Let's experience the power God has for us and be aware of potential abuses of power.

How do we prepare personally, and as a church, to receive what God gives in the Holy Spirit? Let's look again at the disciples in Acts 1. One major difference is that they were waiting for the initial sending of the Holy Spirit upon the church. We don't have to wait for that. God is already giving the Spirit. The Spirit is poured out, present, available. But we may need

some preparation to enter life in the Spirit, to get ready to receive God's continued outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

We need to expect God to keep promises. When someone you trust makes a promise, you can count on it. It gives you confidence and fills you with expectation and hope. The earliest followers of Jesus trusted him. They knew he would keep his promises. They trusted the God and Father of Jesus, so when he told them to wait for the promise of the Father, they could confidently expect it to be fulfilled. Jesus promises that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit and that they'll receive power when the Spirit comes upon them. After Jesus goes into heaven, they hear another promise. Angels tell them that the same Jesus they have known—who lived and died, rose and ascended—will come again. So the power of these promises gave hope and confidence to those Jesus followers as they waited for the fulfillment.

God's promises give us hope and confidence as we wait for God's direction, as we anticipate fresh experiences of God's Spirit, as we long for Jesus to return. Here are a couple of great and encouraging promises:

God says, "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28-29)

Jesus says, "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!" (Luke 11:13)

Prayer is a vital part of participating in what God is doing and preparing for what God will do. Those early disciples joined together and devoted themselves to prayer. In those days following Jesus' ascension, they were constantly praying. Prayer opens us up and widens our hearts to receive God's presence and power.

They also prayed for God's wisdom and direction as they looked for someone to replace Judas. I sense something wistful, a kind of longing or

regret in what Peter says about Judas: "He was one of our number and shared in our ministry." I believe if Judas would have repented and returned to Jesus after the resurrection like Peter did, there'd be a story in the Gospel about his forgiveness and restoration. But his regret over betraying Jesus and then realizing that Jesus wasn't going to fight to overthrow the Romans led Judas to his death.

Still, Jesus had chosen twelve disciples to be apostles who represent the twelve tribes of Israel. God's purpose for Israel is fulfilled in Jesus. They needed a twelfth apostle to complete the symbol and sign of renewed Israel. So they nominated two people who had been with them all through Jesus' ministry. That indicates that there were a lot of people who followed Jesus that we don't know about. The other requirement for being an apostle was to be a witness of Jesus' resurrection. His resurrection must always be at the center of who the church is and what our mission is.

The early disciples lived in the Scriptures and drew on them for insight. That guided their praying, their life together, and their decision making. We still search the Scriptures, study them, learn them, draw on them for our lives and for our life together as the church. We pray according to the Scriptures, not just for anything we happen to want. Our experiences of the Holy Spirit don't take us out into some weird left field. Our experience of the Spirit is rooted in what God has revealed in the Bible, in the events and teaching we find in Scripture.

As we prepare to enter into the life God wants for us, we can trust God's promises. We do what we know to do and don't just sit passively. We search the Scriptures, we pray, we arrange things as best we can with God's guidance. And we receive God's Spirit and the power to go and do, to be witnesses, to be the church, to fulfill God's purposes.

I once wrote a newsletter article that drew on the theme in Acts 1 of waiting for God's power to do God's work. The senior pastor I worked with at the time said, "Here I am, trying to get this church going and you're telling them to wait!" Who was right? Well, we both were. We need to go and do, but we need to depend on God's energy and power to enable us to go and do.

Lloyd Ogilvie is a pastor and author. He tells about how a man in his church came to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. The man saw deep joy and contagious love in some people he knew. He wanted what they had, but he didn't know the key to their abundant life. They had that kind of life because they were unreserved in their commitment to the Lord and putting him first in their lives. The man thought that spiritual power came through having the right "experiences." Ogilvie helped him see that surrendering our wills, our relationships, and our responsibilities opens us to receive the Holy Spirit's power. He led the man through an inventory of his life, including attitudes, prejudices, and broken relationships. They looked at his marriage, money, job, and plans for the future. The man discovered that he was running his own life and wasn't attempting anything big or adventurous enough to need the Holy Spirit's power. That surprised him. But the same Spirit he was longing for was at work, and the Spirit helped him through this process. He had to check his decisions about time and money that kept him from considering the Lord's will. Ogilvie concludes: "I am happy to say that his preparation for Pentecost worked. He did receive what he was looking for—and so much more: a freedom to live a daring life of adventure in the kingdom. The King's power is for the kingdom people!" (*The Communicator's Commentary: Acts 32-33*).

Are you ready for an adventure? To launch out in the direction God is leading? Are you willing to try something that you'll fail at if God's doesn't give the power and resources? Will you at least take the first step toward that kind of dependence on God's Spirit? Ask the Lord to show you what you need, to cleanse your heart, to fill you with the Holy Spirit, and to lead you wherever God wants to take you. You'll be prepared to receive God's gift, God's life, God's power.