

## Led by the Spirit

Acts begins with an emotional roller coaster ride from the cross to Pentecost, as the horror of the cross is translated



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into the powerful outpouring of God's Spirit. In this book, Luke continues the epic story of God's grace that began with his gospel account and now confirms the uncompromising truth of humanity's single spiritual hope. With the resurrection of Jesus from the grave and his ascension to heaven, God's grace will do more than simply crush the actions and obstacles of evil. The battle for truth had just begun in earnest.

After preaching a few years ago, a woman in the congregation greeted me with: "Well, you had some good things to say, but I suppose you felt it necessary to include the negative." The book called "Acts of the Apostles" does not shy away from the realities of life ... it confronts every obstacle with the promises, hope, and power of God's grace. Indeed, Acts 28:30 concludes with a description of the Apostle Paul's ministry: "preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, **unhindered** [emphasis mine]." That single word "unhindered" is defined by boldness and trust in the grace of God no matter the barriers and threats believers of every generation will encounter.

The first Christians lived with the horror of the cross, the incredible evidence of Jesus' resurrection, his ascension to heaven, and the powerful outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost. The New Testament knows nothing about a Christian life shaped by the world's power, wealth, easy circumstances, or immunity to difficulties.

After the miracles of Pentecost (Acts 2-3) Peter and John were arrested by the same Sanhedrin guards who had arrested Jesus. But those two apostles refused to submit to the Sanhedrin's pressure: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen

and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). The text we study today includes a remarkable prayer that faces the "Gentiles' rage and the people's imagine vain things ... rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah ... (all) have gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you (God) anointed ... now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants boldness to speak your word with all boldness" (vv. 26-29).

Does their reaction mean they know no fear or uncertainty? No! They chose what would be their foundation for living, their purpose, their plan, and that was to trust in the God who had become real through the life and ministry of Jesus. They connect with the promise of King David's Psalm 2:1-2, as they face the truth that serving God in a hostile world is an ongoing reality.

What is their request of God? Courage. Strength. Their need (and our need) is the strength and guidance of God the Holy Spirit in the challenging circumstances of life. The contemporary ideas of faith in God brushing aside all the sadness and suffering of life or guaranteeing wealth and happiness for those who believe are not found in the New Testament.

Looking back over a life of ministry, I remember the devastation of death, the endless questions about illness and tragedy, the feelings that God is somehow absent. Sometimes there are no clear easy answers. But, we always have the assurance that Jesus came into this world as one of us, that Jesus died on a cross and came back from that darkness so we can live forever in the unequalled love of God beyond the limitations of this world.

After the boldness of the apostles' prayer, what happened? God answered! "The place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (v. 31). The world's ideas and obstacles often make it hard for us to remember God is with us as surely as God was with Christ in the agony of the cross, and God will continue to be with us in every circumstance.

Perhaps we can learn from this experience Luke has preserved for us. The apostles' prayer can be divided into three parts: 1) an acknowledgment of God's power above any authority or circumstance in this world; 2) a reflection on what God has given us through the life example and death and resurrection of Jesus; and 3) a request for strength and guidance as we face real life. The New Testament is a remarkable encouragement for every generation, following Jesus' resurrection and the spread of Christian faith around the world. We are now the church visible, witnesses to God's love and grace, examples of what can be when we are held safe in the grace of God.

There is ample evidence of God's love and power if you pay attention. I have seen it in at an infant's funeral in a chilly windswept cemetery in southeastern Oklahoma, when two young parents, through their tears, thanked God for their little girl who had lived only one year. I have seen God's love in the simple faith of an aged woman who chose to believe in Christ because she witnessed the dramatic change Christ made in her adult daughter. I have seen it in a college friend who asked me to pray for him and later asked me to baptize him because he saw how my Savior gave me strength in a hard time. Our text speaks of those earliest disciples finding strength when God shook the earth, but there are so many signs we can see if we just pay attention and trust God in our world.

What is the focus of your prayers? Healing for a loved one or friend? That the good news of Jesus Christ will help our nation or world break free of injustices, hatred, prejudice, and racism? The needs seem endless. Perhaps we should begin by praying for self ... that God's Spirit will empower us to see through the eyes of Jesus and live as an example of a person who knows the freedom and joy of God's grace. And don't forget about the institutional church, that it will not pretend to be God, but, instead, will actually pattern its decisions and approach to ministry on Jesus Christ. A simple, honest, passionate prayer will suffice: *Jesus, help me to be more like you!*

*Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.*