

## The Birth of the Church

Isaiah 52:7; Matthew 28:16-20  
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It was the Festival of Shavuot, the Festival of First Fruits, an agricultural celebration on the Jewish calendar. It marked the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. It was a celebration that was commanded by God. Turn in your pew Bible to page 66 and follow along as I read.

“Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to Me. You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread;

as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. (That is the celebration of Passover.)

None shall appear before me empty handed. You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. (That is the feast of First Fruits that happened at the time of Pentecost.)

You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God. This is the Feast of the Harvest.” (Exodus 23:14-16)

Jews and God-worshiping Gentiles from every nation of the known world were gathered in Jerusalem to observe the Festival. They have come to Jerusalem to worship and to offer their sacrifices of grain from their fields. Festivals were a time of covenant renewal with God and a time of renewing the bonds that held the people of God together. The Festival was one of solemn joy and thanksgiving for the fact that God had watched over the land and brought in the harvest. The Feast Day of the Festival always fell on the day after the Sabbath, or Sunday, as we name it. The Festival was brought to a close with a communal meal to which the poor and the stranger, and all of the religious leaders attended together. It was a weekend when the population of Jerusalem swelled by the thousands. Because these people had come from many nations, there were people in the city who spoke in many languages. It must have been a wonderful cacophony in the streets.

Meanwhile, cloistered in an upper room above the city of Jerusalem were about 120 men and women who had gathered there after the ascension of Jesus. They had been told to go there and wait and pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. On this day that we celebrate Pentecost there was heard throughout the city of Jerusalem the sound of a mighty wind and in that upper room something that looked like tongues of fire came and settled on the heads of those present. It was the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

A multitude of people in the city streets gathered around the house from which the sound of the wind seemed to be coming. They began to ask, “What does this mean?”

Just as the baptismal waters of John had immersed them physically, so the coming of the Holy Spirit would envelop the 120 people gathered in that upper room totally with God’s presence and power in their lives. The Holy Spirit’s Presence was something beyond anything they had ever experienced and the Holy Spirit would produce results beyond anything that the world had ever known. The 120 people

from the upper room would become the nucleus of the missionaries and the evangelists who would carry the Good News of Jesus throughout the ages. By the power of the Holy Spirit those Galileans would be given the ability to pray and witness and interpret the sermon that Peter would preach to the people in languages that they had never studied. They were speaking in the languages of the multitude gathered in the city from all nations of the known world.

It was to this multi-ethnic, multi-cultural crowd that Peter preached one of his greatest sermons. And on that day 3000 souls were saved and baptized and became followers of Jesus. It was the birth of the Church.

Because of the power of the Holy Spirit, these Galileans would send through these new believers the Good News of Jesus Christ back to every nation represented at that Festival in Jerusalem. The powerful presence of the Spirit of God would unbalance their world.

- Their traditions would be altered.
- Their religious rituals would be upset.
- Their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to meet with God would be remembered as an experience of awesome power.
- They would become the evangelists, the bearers of the Good News of Jesus, back to their homelands.

These pilgrims had come to Jerusalem to bring the First Fruits of their harvest as an offering to God. They, themselves, became the First Fruits of the Christian witness.

Back to the question that was asked, “What does this mean?”

- What did it mean that those 120 people could manifest such ability to communicate with clarity and power?
- What did it mean that there was a sudden lack of fear?
- What did it mean that they were effective in their witness?

If we could have gone with them into that upper room in Jerusalem after the Ascension of Jesus and participated with them in all of those days of waiting in prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, we would have at least some of the answers to those questions. What the visitors to Jerusalem experienced on the street was made possible by what happened during those days of waiting and praying in solitude.

During those days of solitude and prayer

- they had come to terms with the actions of Judas and his betrayal of Jesus;
- they had talked through and prayed through their disappointment about the act of Judas;
- they had realized that life in their little group had forever changed;
- they had chosen Matthias to replace Judas;
- but most importantly, they waited and prayed.

Have you ever wondered what they prayed about? If you had been through the experiences that they had shared during the last three years, and especially those experiences since the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, what would have been the content of your prayers?

We can only surmise, but perhaps they prayed

- for a spirit of acceptance of what had happened – one who had been so much a part of the group, one whom they had trusted, had betrayed Jesus, and them;
- to move emotionally and spiritually beyond where they were so that they could be useful disciples;
- for understanding about what was really happening to them – no one else had ever experienced what they were experiencing;
- for continued faith – so much of their lives was dependent on simply trusting what Jesus had told them.

Perhaps they also prayed

- with praise and thanksgiving for the grace of God which they were beginning to understand;
- with love for one another because of their common love of God and God's Son;
- with the realization that they were on the threshold of being instruments of God's grace to the entire world.

How could they even have begun to imagine what it would be like to be empowered by the Holy Spirit? It is always the Holy Spirit, through co-operation with us as humans, that God is able to bring about a new thing. Perhaps those 120 reflected upon the words of the Prophet Isaiah who had delivered the message of God so many centuries before.

That message of God to the people of all ages, including us, is

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it.” (Isaiah 43:18)

It was the ability of those gathered in the upper room to trust their future into the hands of God that

- allowed the Spirit of God to descend upon them;
- freed them from their fears of what might happen to them if they went out into the crowd;
- filled them with a passion that they had never before experienced;
- gave Peter a simple message that he preached with such power that 3000 souls became not just God-worshippers, but Jesus-followers that day.

What people in the community see in us as followers of Jesus is a reflection of the time that we spend in our personal “upper rooms” with the Lord. Intentionally spending time with the Lord makes us into a new creation.

The purpose of the Festival of First Fruits, and of Pentecost, is

- a time when we renew our covenant with God through Christ;

Right now, where you sit, I invite you to remember that decision that you made to follow Jesus, and also to renew that covenant, your commitment, that you will love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

- and the second part of the commandment is to love others as we love ourselves.

Love is a verb, not just an emotion, not just a tingly feeling. Sometimes it is easier to love God whom we cannot physically see than it is to love someone that we know and see.

But this is Pentecost! This is the day that it has been made known to us that we can become more than we ever dreamed or imagined. This is the day that it has been made known to us that we can be freed up from fear and anything else that restrains us, and that the passion of Jesus himself can send us wherever He needs us to go and enable us to do whatever He needs us to do.

May Pentecost be a time of personal renewal and personal commitment to Christ for each of us.

Amen.