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The Miracle of the Church

Acts 2:37-47

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In the Book of Acts, when describing the church, it says this:

> **Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those that had believed were together, and had all things in common.** (*NASB, Acts 2:43-44)

Pretty magnificent words if you think about it that describe the church, that describe the feeling that people had about this new organization, this new group of people that were bonded together—the church. As they were coming together, as they were fellowshipping together, there was this sense of awe, this sense of incredibleness. How often do you feel that sense of incredibleness, that sense of awe in being a part of God's church?

I think sometimes it's easy to just kind of get into the rut of life and there's so much swirling around us and there's so much going on in life that we kind of run here and there. And we pop in on Sunday morning and we desire to know God and yet we know in our heart of hearts that life has just kind of got us. And we forget I think sometimes—I know I do—that we're living the miracle of being a part of God's church. We're living a miracle that God brought about and that these people were celebrating, rejoicing, and in awe of what God had done.

Or maybe your story this morning is somewhat like my story. Growing up I was part of a church where the people that were there sincerely loved Jesus and we sincerely wanted to follow Him with our lives. We're trying to live out the truths of the gospel and do the right things. You know we were doing the potluck thing: families coming together and sharing food together and sharing life together. We'd do things like go to the city mission and we ministered there and ate there and fellowshipped there with people that were living circumstances very different than our own. As a church we'd go to the care center and we'd minister to the elderly and try to encourage them and touch their lives. I would say as a group we were sincerely trying to do the things that God would call us to do. I would say that we were good fundamentalists—and yet there was something wrong. I can tell you growing up, in my own heart, I had this kind of sense of doom when thinking about God. I had this sense of fear of what God might do to me if I stepped out of line, if I didn't follow the rules as I understood the rules to be, and that really my relationship with God was based on me following those rules and keeping God happy. I didn't have that sense that He really loved me. I know people talked about it and they told me God loved me but I had more of a sense that He *had to*. You know He made me, so what choice did He have? And that sense of questioning in my own soul, that sense of fear, was much of what described my understanding of God and the day by day concern for, "Am I living by the rules? Am I doing okay today? Is God still smiling on me?" But it just wasn't *my* life; it permeated the life of the church. This pastor talks about a sense of **awe** and of **wonder** of what the church had. Not my church! It was more of a sense that we wanted to see God *do* something; we wanted to see that He was moving in our midst; we wanted to see a movement in our body and what was happening in our city. But the church just kind of kept rolling on and on and nothing really much happened.

This pastor said that they had this sense of commonness, that they were connected to each other with a sense of, "We're in this together". That would describe my church if it had the sense that you argued for that point. I mean there was just fighting all the time. It was church leader fighting church leader. It was spouses fighting spouses. It was rule after rule and my sense was the rules were more about keeping people out of specific roles in the church. They would use terminology like, "We're just trying to protect the flock," but in reality what it did was it kept people from being able to exercise their gifts and their own joy in serving God. For a great deal of my early life, that experience really formed how I saw God. And I would not say that I understood this thing that people got excited about in the New Testament church.

So I don't know the circumstances by which you've come here. Maybe you relate to my story, maybe not. Maybe you're more just here and going through the motions. But, for a little bit of time here, what I would like to do is refresh our memory, refresh our understanding of why was the church so excited? Why was there this sense of awe? What was the miracle they were connecting with that utterly changed their lives? So if you have your Bibles today, I would like you to turn to the book of Acts, Chapter 2, and we will be starting with verse 37:

> **Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent, each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."**
> (Vs. 37-39)

Now the passage starts, "**Now then they heard this..."** there was a response. Well, what had they just heard? Just to refresh your memory, we are at the day of Pentecost. This is really the official beginning of the church. And if you remember the church—the group of believers were in the Upper Room and there was a rushing of wind and the Holy Spirit came upon them. And they began to share with one another and they began to celebrate. And if you remember the Jewish people that were there, they began to see what was going on and they said, "You know we think they're drunk. It's early in the morning and those people are drunk." Peter stands up and says, "No, that's not the case. Let me tell you what has happened." And then he gives an incredible message, this sermon where he talks about who Jesus is and how Jesus was the fulfillment of what the prophets of old had said. What they said was what the people should be looking for. And as he continued his message, he kept bringing to this crescendo that Jesus was the response of what they had been looking for. And the people began to respond and began to understand that this is what we've been looking for. Remember this was a Jewish audience; they knew the Old Testament. They knew what the prophets had said and they had a longing in their heart, "When will the Messiah come? When will the One who will make everything right again, when will He come?" And Peter was saying, "He has come. He came. It was Jesus Christ." And it says here that **"...they were pierced to the heart."** You know that has the idea of just being stabbed; you know it just went into them. They had to have a response to what Peter was saying. And they said, "**...what shall we do?"** And Peter said, **"Repent and each of you be baptized.**" You know that idea of repent; you probably know what that talks about, but it has the idea of going in one direction with my life and coming to a realization and then I turn and now I'm going to go in a new direction—a complete change of my heart, a complete change of really understanding of how life works. And that's what's happening to them—that Jesus was the answer, that Jesus was the response that God had for us. And in doing so, Peter tells them, "Repent. Repent of your life and then be baptized as a public proclamation that

says, 'Yes, I am a Christ follower. I am committing myself before everybody who will watch. I am saying I am going to be a follower of Jesus Christ.' "

This was radical for them. In that culture this was a radical step. And then Peter says, **"You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the promise is for you and your children."** Think about that for just a moment, what Peter was saying. This was radical because what he was saying is, "You placed your belief, your trust, in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit—God Himself—will come upon you." The restoration, the relationship with God, will happen. The promise will be fulfilled.

I think to really understand what Peter was saying we need to go all the way back to the book of Genesis and reflect upon what really happened there. And, if you remember, we had the Garden of Eden; we had this wonderful, wonderful place where Man and Woman have this perfect relationship with God. And we had that wonderful picture where, in the cool of the evening, God Himself shows up and talks with Adam and Eve and there's this sense of this close, personal relationship that Man and Woman have with God. Then sin enters and *The Fall* happens, and Man and Woman make their terrible choice. And what really I think comes out is that a sense of their own pride wells up; their desire is to be like God themselves. And so they make their choice and there is a disruption in their relationship with God. No more can there be that intimate relationship that once was. And I think an incredible hole grew in the heart of Man because it was a hole that God had made in us, designed to only be filled by Him. But even in that dark circumstance, even in that terrible time, there is hope. God makes a promise that He is going to restore what has been done. He is going to restore the relationship with Man. He is going to take the steps necessary to restore the miracle of a relationship with God. Then, as we track through the Old Testament, one of the things that's interesting to kind of weave, to watch through, is this thread that goes through; there's a couple of them.

One of the things is our response, this constant response of mankind, to try to be God ourselves, to try to fill that hole in our lives ourselves...and our constant failure to do so. But also this thread that weaves through is God's response: the promise, the promise that keeps coming forward, "I will be the One that restores the relationship. I will be the One to fill that hole in your heart." You see it through the covenants; you see it through Noah and Abraham; you see it in the covenant with Moses and David. Over and over and over again God is saying, "I am making the promise. I will bring about the restoration. I will bring about repairing this relationship and restoring mankind to the place where we can have that intimacy again" —to the point we get to the New Testament—and Jesus comes on the scene and Jesus miraculously, miraculously is the fulfillment of what the prophet said, "This is who to look for. When God is about to fulfill His promise, this is who to look for." And Jesus Himself says at the beginning of His preaching, "The time is now. The time is complete. The kingdom of God is at hand. I am the answer. I am God's response. I am the fulfillment of the prophet, the promise that God gave and what all the prophets foretold."

Think about what the prophets had longed for in the Old Testament. It said they longed to know how God was going to do this. And Jesus is saying, "I am that response." And then He goes to the cross and He dies on the cross—for my sins, for your sins. And Peter is preaching this message saying, "God has completed what He said He was going to do. God has completed His promise. And through Jesus Chris you can have that relationship with Him. Jesus Christ is the One. He is; He was; He will always be the bridge by which we can have a relationship with God." And as Peter is proclaiming this message, as I said, the people begin to respond.

Verse 40:

> **And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."** (Vs. 40-42)

The people began to respond. And Peter says, "**Be saved**." And he's already told them, "Repent; turn to God; trust in Him and believe in Him, and the people are responding to that. They are being baptized and they begin to commit to each other and commit to the teaching that the apostles were giving. And it wasn't a couple dozen; it wasn't just a few hundred; literally thousands of people hearing this message are responding to what Peter is saying and they're living the miracle that they can now have a relationship with God. Coming *out of* that old covenant, coming *out of* the law that was so oppressive, coming and stepping *into* the knowledge, the understanding, the wonder, the awe that God has made a way for us to have relationship with Him, through His Son Jesus Christ.

In capping this off I think Luke, who writes the book of Acts, then kind of gives us this capstone of what really the people were experiencing. How really did it affect their lives? Was it a one-time thing, kind of, "Yeah that's great and it was a great weekend," but then Monday came along and it was back to the old. Let's see how the people responded.

Verse 43:

> **And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began to sell their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved"** (Vs. 43-47)

What an incredible, incredible picture that Luke shows what happened when people come to the understanding of what Jesus has completed. I mean they had this sense of awe, this incredibleness in their lives. It says that as they were believing together they **had all things in common.** It began to work into their lives and how they responded to each other and people began to live not selfishly but selflessly. They began to share their food and the things that they had. People went as far as to sell property in order to provide for the needs of those that were there. I mean we are talking radical transformation in these people's lives. And as they were doing so, day by day it says they would**... continue with one mind in the temple.** And scholars tell us they were probably meeting in what's called Solomon's Court. It's probably the only place big enough that would hold this many people, where they were fellowshipping together and listening to the apostles' teaching, growing together and living this new truth. And they were taking meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart and praising God and having favor with all the people. As the people watched what was going on in Jerusalem, as they came in contact with these radical new Christ followers, they wanted to know what was going on. They were interested to know, "What is motivating these people? What has changed their lives?" And the response is that Christ has changed their lives. Christ has touched

them; they're living the miracle. And so compelling is what is going on, it says, **"Day by day the Lord is adding to their numbers."** People were responding day by day to this message.

I don't know what your story looks like today. I do think it's very easy in the hubbub of life and everything that kind of swirls around us, to kind of lose sight that we're living a miracle. I know in my life I can get so wrapped up in what's going on in the day to day basis that I can forget to step back and remember this is an incredible happening. This is life transforming. But maybe your story is a little bit like my story growing up. As I said before, that throughout my youth and even into college, my life really was a life of wondering, "Am I doing enough to please God? Is God happy with me today?" But then a change happened in my life and a couple of things had a great deal to do with that.

One of them was this church. You know it's funny to me that on this Sunday it would be the college group that is leading worship—because I would say that the college ministry here at Lincoln Berean was pivotal in changing my life. I had people around me who encouraged me to begin to really wrestle with who God is and what this message of grace is about. There were some books that I was reading and there were some things that I was studying and I remember this awakening in my own soul that maybe life isn't about just following the rules. Maybe there's something more to this. Maybe God really does love me. Maybe it's not just because He made me that He loves me. And maybe it's not that He's checking off the rules' list but that He wants to empower and come alongside me in my life and have a relationship with me. I remember that summer going on a mission's trip with the college group and ministering to children in the inner city of Los Angeles and just the impact that that made on my life. As I saw God's love being poured out on these kids' lives I allowed God to pour some of that love into my own life. And I would say it was a radical change that came to my life. I can honestly say I began to see life with a little bit more awe, a little bit more incredibleness of, "Wow, what might God do?" Then seeing God's hand at work, I am so thankful for this church and how it ministered into my life in that period.

Maybe you have a similar story today and you're wrestling in your own life, not knowing does God love me or not? What is this thing about a relationship with Him? I just want to encourage you to please talk to somebody. Wrestle through the Scriptures because it's life changing. When we come to the point of understanding that it's not about the rules but it's understanding the miracle that happened and how God has reached out to us. But for those of us who understand that and are just kind of caught up with the day to day grind, let me just encourage you—you're living a miracle! I know that, on a given weekend, we have people from all walks of life coming on Friday nights to Celebrate Recovery and they are finding healing and they're finding hope here. On a given weekend we have literally thousands of people who are coming here to worship together, who are celebrating the transformation of what God is doing in their lives. But even more than that, we have people going out all over into the community with a heart and a desire saying, "I want to touch my community with the love of Christ." And story after story I have heard of people in the community who interact with people in this body saying, "There's something going on. There's something happening and I want to understand that because it's transforming their lives."

That's happening, but it's even more than that. There are things happening in this church that are touching people around the world. Think about it. There are thousands and thousands of people in India being touched because of this body and the church planting movement and the leadership development that is happening there and continues to happen. And as that movement continues to grow, we think about the team that is in Poland and the impact that they are making and the connections they are starting to grow and the impact of a church planting there and the generations

that will be affected by this body. And the team that is preparing to go to Spain and we're praying for the same thing to happen there. You're living the miracle! And I think that sometimes we just have to reflect on that. We have to refresh ourselves that this is a miracle. This is what people throughout the ages have longed to know—that God would have a relationship with us!

So I'd like to encourage you with a couple of things. I'd like to ask you to think about a couple of things this summer. You know summer is a time where most of us take some time to kind of refresh physically and mentally. We take some time apart and we do some things we enjoy. But let me encourage you this summer to also take some time to re-live the miracle. I would encourage you to get in your Bible this summer and read the Gospels. Reflect again on what Jesus said and did and how He really did complete what God had said He promised to do—and how it changed people's lives. I would encourage you, if you haven't heard all the messages that Bryan gave on *The Seven Churches of Revelation*, or even if you did, I would encourage you to get those transcripts or those audio recordings. I would encourage you to listen to them again. I think they are some of the best messages that he's given. As we reflect on what they go through, this is what God says the church should be. This is how we should be living. It would be a wonderful study for this summer. There are classes that are going to be offered this summer. Maybe you're one of those people that during the regular year, the school year, it's hard to pull away and take a class. I would encourage you: there's a class we're having about being *the church* and other great classes. I would encourage you to take part in those. Make this summer a summer not just about physically renewing yourself. Make this summer also a summer where you reconnect with the miracle that God brought about in Jesus Christ and growing in your own sense of the awe, the wonder of what God has done.

Father, I just appreciate and rejoice in what You have done in sending Your Son Jesus Christ. Father, I do believe Jesus was and is and will always be the bridge by which we can have a relationship with You. And I pray, Father, that You would help us to continue to reconnect with the miracle that You brought about. I pray that we would take time in the busyness of life to listen to Your voice, to maybe look anew at the wonder, the awe of the relationship that we can have with You because of your Son. But, Father, also my prayer is for those here this morning that have a similar story that I have, that they have wrestled with and been under the tyranny of constantly wondering if I am doing enough to please You. Lord, I pray You would move in their lives and show them Your great love, Your great joy in them, and the grace that each of us can experience. I pray this in Your Son's name, Amen.

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