



## 3 Week Series

### Week 1: You're in Trouble if the Fire Goes Out

#### Acts 2:14-21

For my thirtieth birthday my spouse surprised me with a hot-air balloon ride. Very early on a Saturday morning, we arrived at the launch site to see a beautiful hot-air balloon inflated and waiting for us to go. As a private pilot, I love to fly. I'd been up in many types of small aircraft but never in a hot-air

balloon. This was a first. We climbed in the wicker basket and our pilot asked us if we were ready to go. With an affirmative answer, he told the balloon handler to cast off. Suddenly he pulled the trigger and a huge flame fired into the hot-air balloon. The noise was loud and shocked me. As the fire continued to burn, we soon lifted off the ground. When we got up to about one thousand feet, he turned off the fire and we floated along in a very eerie, strange silence. It was so beautiful and it gave us a whole new perspective of the world. You couldn't help but feel inspired and excited. After a while, however, we began to lose altitude and he had to turn on the fire again. We floated back up and the view was amazing. I asked our pilot, "What happens to us if the fire goes out?" He just looked at me for a moment and then he smiled and said, "You're in trouble. If there's no fire, we're going down."

The same thing is true about life. When we let the fire go out in our lives, when our spirits burn out, we go down. We get depressed, tired, and lethargic.

In our scripture lesson, we read about the day of Pentecost, the day when God poured out God's Holy Spirit on the disciples in Jerusalem. It's fascinating that Luke would describe that day by writing, "It was like God poured out tongues of fire on the disciples." The Holy Spirit was described as fire because the spirit lifted them up. It inspired them. It empowered them. And when that happened, they stood up to preach. Peter said to all, "When the Lord pours out spirit on all flesh you shall see visions and you shall dream dreams."

That was the power of the Holy Spirit. It enabled the disciples to stretch their minds, to think in new ways, and to be open to new ideas. Having seen the risen Christ, they were now open to new possibilities in life. They weren't going to set limits on what God could do. They were fired up. To be normal means to conform to an accepted model, pattern, or standard.

To be original means never having existed before, created independent of already existing ideas. When God poured out the Holy Spirit on the disciples in Jerusalem, God was not asking them to be normal, to live by an accepted model or standard. God was calling them to be original, created independent of already existing ideas. When we open our hearts and minds to experience the power of God's Holy Spirit then we, too, get fired up. We begin to look at life with new eyes and see new possibilities. We find ourselves inspired with a hope in the future and that gives us a new power in the present.

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to go to a church growth seminar in Orlando, Florida. My spouse went along with me because she said she wanted to go to Disney World. Neither one of

us had ever been to either Disneyland or Disney World but to tell the truth, I wasn't really all that excited about it at the time. One day when we had a little free time, my spouse was adamant that we were going to go. Was I ever glad we made that decision! Disney World was one of the most incredible experiences I've ever had. I think my favorite ride was at Epcot. It was called "Journey into Imagination." If you've ever been on that ride, you'll remember how you get in a little car and it enters into a whole new world. You see a flying machine that looks half like an airplane and half like a hot-air balloon. The man who is flying it is called "Dreamfinder." As you meet Dreamfinder, suddenly out of this machine pops a purple dragon whose name is Figment—figment of your imagination. As you move along through the ride, Dreamfinder tells you about imagination and about people who have dreamed, and how imagination has changed the world. Dreamfinder and Figment keep telling you that if you dream it, you can do it. When we got off that ride, I couldn't help but think that one of the greatest gifts God has given human beings is the gift of imagination—the ability to ask, "What if?" "Why not?" and "Wouldn't it be great if . . ." Too often we put limits on what God can do in our lives. We put limits on the dreams we allow ourselves to dream.

The disciples had been with Jesus. They saw him crucified, they saw him buried, and then they met the risen Christ, raised from the dead. They never dreamed that would happen in a million years. They came to realize that if God can raise Jesus from the dead, then why put limits on what God can do in our lives? They had no idea how God was going to lead them but they were open to the power of the Holy Spirit. If you and I are not careful, the fire can go out and we become depressed, tired, lethargic, and we go down. The promise is that God will pour out the Holy Spirit on all flesh no matter how young or how old. God will pour out God's spirit to give us a vision, to give us new dreams, if we will open ourselves to possibilities. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that will give us hope in the future and power in the present day.

## **Week 2: Building Bridges So That Others May Follow**

### **Acts 3:1-10**

I couldn't believe that it was time for my child to go off to college. That August the university had an orientation session for freshman students and their parents. As my child was learning about life in the dorms and class schedules, I was learning about how to pay for college. During part of our orientation, we heard from a man and his wife who were endowing a scholarship for students, and they explained why they were doing it. It turned out that the man was a successful physician. He had grown up in a family that was very poor. He said that his family gave him everything that was really important—they loved him, they encouraged him, and they helped him dream great dreams. They gave him everything that really mattered but they were not financially well off. When he got into high school, he decided he wanted a great education, so he applied to a private, elite university. He got back a letter stating he would be put on a waiting list. He was not accepted but he was not rejected, they simply said maybe. When it came September, he still had not heard from them. It was almost time to begin school, so the man decided to take matters into his own hands. This was in 1966. He packed up his bags, got on a train, and went to the big city. There he caught a taxicab and he went to a large hotel downtown. He went up to the front desk and said he needed a room. The front-desk manager looked at him and said, "Do you have a reservation?" The young man replied, "Can you do that?" The front-desk manager asked, "Where are you from, kid?" He said he didn't know you could make a reservation at a hotel. He had never traveled. The manager explained that this was Labor Day weekend and they didn't have any rooms but he said the young man could stay in the back with the bellman where they had a cot. He didn't want to see an eighteen-year-old kid from the country standing out on the street corners of downtown. The young man said he would never forget the kindness of that front-desk manager.

The next day he showed up at the admissions office to see the dean. He didn't have an appointment. He just announced that he wanted to see him and that he wasn't leaving until he did. He said all he wanted was an opportunity and he promised to excel if he was given that chance. The dean was so impressed with his tenacity that he looked up his file and said, "OK, you're in." The young man started school in the fall of 1966 and he did excel. He graduated, got into medical

school, and went on to be a very successful physician. This young man, now in his 50s and reflecting on his life, said he had far fewer sunrises in front of him than he had behind him. He said, "I believe in life that first you learn, then you earn, then you return. It is important to build bridges so that others can come after you."

Now he and his wife wanted to build bridges, and that is why they wanted to establish a scholarship in honor of his mother and father, a front-desk manager of a hotel, and a dean. Then he made an interesting statement. He said, "I've always believed what the Bible says, 'To whom much has been given, much will be required.' "

That statement comes from Jesus and is found in Luke 12:48. Jesus tells Peter, "To whom much has been given, much will be required." Quite often when we read that statement we think about money. If someone has made a lot of money then he or she should give a lot of money. Although I believe this statement is true, I don't believe it is solely limited to that understanding.

What had the disciples received from Jesus? They certainly didn't receive money. Instead, they had the opportunity to see amazing things, they had experienced his unconditional love, and they felt forgiven and blessed. They had seen the risen Christ. They had been given much and now they had something to share. In the scripture lesson, we read about how after the resurrection Peter and John had gone up to the temple to pray. When they came to the temple there was a beggar asking for alms. They went and stood in front of him and Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6 NKJV).

The man who spoke at my son's orientation said that he been blessed. He had made a lot of money and so he felt he needed to share that money to build bridges to help other kids get the same opportunity that he had. I believe that is good.

But I also think that all of us, individually and collectively as a church, have something important to offer. The disciples were given a message—a message about God's love and about God's amazing grace. It was a message that gave a lame beggar hope in the future and power for the present. It was a message that empowered him to get up and walk. It gave him a new beginning. The disciples went out to share the power of that message because they felt blessed by the grace of Christ, and built bridges so that others could come after them. Now it is our responsibility to keep building those bridges for others. We have received the message that gives us hope in the future and a power in the present, and to whom much has been given, much will be required. It's how we help change the world.

## **Week 3: Tuning the Orchestra to A**

### **Acts 6:1-6**

My spouse and I love going to the theatre, and we especially love going to musicals. We had season tickets to the music hall when we lived in Houston and we were fortunate because we had second-row seats, dead center. I liked it because when the people performed on stage we could see the sweat on their brows. We could see them huffing and puffing as they were singing. We could see the expression in their eyes. I always enjoyed getting there early because we could look into the orchestra pit and see behind the scenes as people were showing up, getting their instruments, and warming up. When it was time, the first violinist stood up, called them to order, and then looked at the oboe to sound an A. I was talking about this with my staff when my children's director said that this was her job when she played the oboe in the university orchestra. She said everyone would tune to the A being played on her oboe and for a while you would hear chaos. Everyone was tuning up so it sounded like a bunch of noise. But then slowly it became more and more coherent until finally the conductor came out, rapped on the stand, and called everyone to order. It was time, and now they could make beautiful music because they were all tuned to the A.

The task of the church is to try to help people hear the same note; to hear the same message from Jesus; to tune our hearts to Jesus' heart. Once we all hear the same note, although we are all

different, we can come together to make great music.

That is what the scripture lesson is really about. When the early church came into being, it quickly confronted many struggles. In this passage we see a multitude of people trying to come together to hear the same note; to get their hearts with Jesus' heart and to figure out who they're going to be. In the first line of our scripture lesson, Acts 6:1, it reads, "Now during those days, . . . the disciples were increasing in number." That was good news but it also made circumstances difficult. It was hard enough to get twelve disciples on the same page, but now there were many more followers. Remember, Jesus had sent out the seventy to carry his message into the world. Then, of course, there were the women at the cross and the many who followed and funded Jesus' ministry. On the day of Pentecost when God poured out his Holy Spirit, three thousand were baptized. In Acts 2:47 we are told that people joined the church every day. Now the church needed to get organized. People had needs. The church had to discover what it meant to be a caring community of faith, how they would help the people find hope in the future through the good news in the resurrection and find a new power in the Holy Spirit for confronting their daily problems. The church had to get clear on their message and tune their hearts with the heart of Jesus. The church really believed that they could give people a hope in the future and power in the present through a faith in Jesus Christ. But to come together as a family of faith, they would first have to see everybody as a child of God. People were different, but each person had to be seen as equal in the eyes of God. Everybody had to be special.

In the early church we are told that when the people came together they had many needs. In the patriarchal society where men ruled, the people who had the most needs were women and children. If you became a widow, who was going to take care of you? If you were a child and lost your parents, who would take care of you? Women and children were at risk. The Jews understood that and made a commitment to take care of the widow and the poor and the orphan.

In the story of Naomi and Ruth, we remember how each had lost her husband and came back to Bethlehem. Ruth went into the field of Boaz and as he was harvesting the grain he said, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also put out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her" (Ruth 2:15-16). The Jews knew the needs of the widow and the poor and were committed to taking care of them.

In the earliest incarnation of the church everyone was Jewish, but we soon had different factions. For example, we had the Hellenist. Alexander the Great had conquered Israel years before and introduced the Greek culture. The Hellenist embraced this culture, spoke Greek, and became known as liberals. We also had the Hebrews. The Hebrews said no to the Greek culture and they spoke Aramaic. They held onto the Jewish traditions and were conservative. So we had the Hellenist Jews and the Hebrew Jews and now they were all trying to be followers of Christ. In the early church, the Hellenists complained that the Hebrew widows were getting more than they were—and it was probably true. The church struggled right at the beginning with the question, How are we going to treat people? Some things haven't changed in two thousand years. How easy it is to discriminate. How easy it is to be prejudiced. How easy it is to put labels on people—liberal or conservative; Democrat or Republican; gay or straight; Catholic or Baptist; Presbyterian, Lutheran, or Methodist; black, white, red, or brown. When we throw out labels we begin to treat people differently.

So what does it mean to say that we are all children of God? Until we can remove all the labels, until we stop automatically judging people, we can never become a family of faith. Here we see how the early church was trying to tune its heart to the heart of Jesus by hearing Jesus say, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The issue is not, "You are my follower if you have love for the Hellenist Jewish Christians, or if you have love for the Hebrew Jewish Christians, or if you love the liberal, or if you have love for the conservative." The statement is, "If you have love for one another then we are all God's children, and that means we can be a family of faith." The church has a message that can help people have hope in the future and find the power to live their lives today, but it is a message that only rings true when it is a message for everyone.

