



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

There is a particular aspect to the story of Acts that we need to navigate, the extraordinary interactions between God and the believers. Interactions like tongues of fire and speaking in other languages when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, healing miracles (even from shadows and handkerchiefs), raising the dead, visions and voices, Philip being teleported from one place to another, miraculous escapes from prison, and dropping dead for not telling the truth about the price you received for land you sold. God is active and obvious in ways that we have a hard time relating to our lives. One commentator observes, “For some, it’s acceptable to grant that Jesus could have had such experiences and been a miracle worker (after all, he was Jesus); but when Acts says that his followers did the same things, it might imply this kind of stuff lies within the reach of any and all Christians – past, present, and future.....Some Christians claim Acts describes what we should all expect. But what about those of us who find the action in Acts more alien or incredible?” Very few, if any, are able to relate to all of the experiences I listed above. They are simply too extraordinary. But many are able to relate to experiences in their own lives when God is more obvious and direct in His dealings.

The quote above captures some of the difficulty that people have with this aspect of Acts and how it relates to their own lives. I think a particular phrase in this quote is revealing, “within the reach.” This focuses on the ability of a Christian to gain or attain these dramatic experiences of God’s presence. It is as if these encounters with God are available for those who are able to reach out and grasp them. Consider what may follow from this perspective.

What if I do not have the extraordinary experiences when I do reach out, ask for them, long for them, or pursue them? If they are within reach, then it is my fault. I am not only disappointed, but am feeling inadequate for not measuring up as Christian. I am simply not able to gain the experiences with God that I long for. In that case, you can understand why I would much prefer to conclude that these types of experiences are not within reach. That they were only for that time and the early believers to establish the church. If God is no longer working in that way, then I am not missing out on something that I should be experiencing. This alleviates my feelings of inadequacy and disappointment.

On the other hand, if or when I do have these extraordinary experiences, I have done something right to gain or attain them (I was desperate enough, prayed hard enough, was spiritual enough, etc.). It is within the reach of all Christians and I was able to gain it because I reached out in the right way to experience it. In this case, there is the danger of spiritual pride because I have somehow earned the experience by attaining what is within reach.

We need a different perspective. It is not a matter of whether these things are within our reach or not. It is a matter of whether God wants to grant them and work through them. You see how this places these experiences not in the hands of believers who reach out and experience them, but in God who decides to work through them. It is not in our control but His. Think about the issue of control. This perspective eliminates both spiritual pride and feelings of inadequacy. It does not, however, eliminate the feelings of disappointment because when we understand that it is God who chooses when to work in this way, we also face the fact that he does not do it as often as we would like. Extra-ordinary is the term because these

types of experience are not the norm. And they could be if God wanted them to be. When we shift our focus away from how we can attain such experiences and understand that they are God's choice to grant and work through, we are left with a different question. Why doesn't God choose to act in this way more often? (Why not 10 or 100 or 1000 Saul conversion experiences?) That becomes the mystery that we wrestle with.

I think the answer has to do with faith. God values faith and faith is defined in Hebrews 11 as "the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen." And later in the same chapter "And without faith, it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." If we believe that God exists and that He rewards those who seek Him only when we have experiences of His reality in our lives, then we are not operating out of faith. We do not need faith during those times. This might explain why we do not see a steady diet of God working in our lives in direct and obvious way. He is interested in building up faith and that involves things not seen. (Luke 18:8 when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?)

But extraordinary experiences are a part of building up our faith. They give our faith content. We need more than what we believe about God and His love and purposes for us. We need experiences that do not replace faith, but strengthen and encourage our faith. We should pursue God for these experiences, trusting in His wise provision. The desire and pursuit of such experiences is a good part of discipleship as long as we do our best to persevere in faith while we are waiting for God to grant them. And we can be strengthened and encouraged in our faith when God grants these experiences to our brothers and sisters in Christ. I hope that your faith was encouraged and strengthened by the testimonies of Monique and Tim and their recent extraordinary experience of God in their lives. And I hope your faith was encouraged by remembering Christ's love and sacrifice on our behalf in our celebration of communion together, feeding into His life.

Pastorally Yours,

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