

Tension in the Upper Room



Gary Wilkerson May 20, 2019

Going to Difficult Places to Do Greater Works

When Christians hear the phrase “Upper Room,” one of two biblical scenarios comes to mind. For charismatics and Pentecostals, the predominant sequence happens in Acts 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, the disciples gathered in the upper room of a house, and “with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (*Acts 1:14, ESV*). Then, in Chapter 2, things get really dramatic.

“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (*2:1-4*).

This was Pentecost, and it was incredible. The miracle of tongues was just the beginning. A crowd of people in Jerusalem watched what was happening, and Peter stood up to preach to them with great anointing from the Holy Spirit. When he finished, “Those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (*2:41*).

Christians love this story of the Upper Room because it demonstrates a great move of God and the immediate impact of the Holy Spirit. When we think of this Upper Room experience, it’s one we’d like to have.

Yet this sequence in Acts 1-2 is actually the second Upper Room experience mentioned in the New Testament. The first Upper Room experience arrives earlier, in John 13. It takes place on the night before Christ’s crucifixion, and it also involves a sermon, this one delivered by Jesus himself.

Jesus knew this was his last night with his friends, the disciples, before his death. He opened up his heart to them in an intimate way. For him, it was a night to do spiritual business: he spoke straight to their hearts with hard words of challenge and correction. Jesus confronted them about betrayal, denial and refusal to accept his death, and he said it all in love. As the Psalmist writes, “Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being” (*Psalms 51:6*).

What a contrast this is to the other Upper Room experience in Acts, which took place after Jesus’ resurrection. That second experience was one of God’s palpable presence, salvation, celebration and joy. This one, by contrast, was difficult. Having this kind of hard experience is just as important to a Christian as having the celebratory kind. In fact, sometimes it has to come before a joyful Upper Room experience can happen. In the first Upper Room, Jesus deals with us the way he did with his disciples: doing business with our hearts, calling us to be honest with him and aligning our hearts with his. It’s all part of his greater purpose for us.

Jesus calls us to the first Upper Room so that nothing will prevent us from experiencing the second Upper Room.

None of us willingly enters the first Upper Room type of experience. We all want the second kind. We’d much

rather see God move in powerful ways than be confronted with his discipline. This was certainly true of the disciples. They had seen miracles, healings and blessings, and naturally they wanted to experience more. These things spoke to them of God's living presence in the world, and when Jesus told them he was departing, it signaled the end of all that.

In Matthew's gospel, when this subject came up, Peter refused to hear of it. Jesus' rebuke to him was harsh. "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man'" (*Matthew 16:21-23*).

Most of us hope never to have this kind of meeting with Jesus, yet it's meant to happen again and again in our walk with him. It is not a one-time event. It wasn't the only time it happened in Peter's life. Even after the miracles of Pentecost, the headstrong disciple was still confronted with difficult challenges and holy rebukes. Throughout our lives, we experience both Upper Rooms in cycles; that's the way it's supposed to happen. However, the second experience happens only to those who are willing to experience the first kind again and again, having their hearts continually changed, healed, transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit's loving hand.

Maybe you're living in this tension right now. Your life doesn't reflect a second Upper Room experience, but maybe that's because you aren't willing to undergo the first kind. You hunger for the things of God to come alive to you, but you won't let go of certain things that prevent that. If so, there's only one thing to do: pray for Jesus to meet you in the first Upper Room.

There is always tension in the first Upper Room, by design.

When Jesus' words began to sink in with the disciples, there was fear, uncertainty, tension. What would their lives look like without the glorious kingdom Jesus had brought? The thought of this must have disoriented them. They had seen disabled people healed and hungry throngs fed with a few baskets of scraps. They had even seen Jesus walk on water! What would their world look like now without those things? What did it say about the Father that these miracles might now be absent from the earth? What would happen to their faith?

Jesus was presenting the disciples with hard truth. Earlier in his ministry, his difficult sayings caused crowds to turn away from him. At one point, he had turned to the disciples and asked, "Do you want to go away as well?" (*John 6:67*). He could easily have asked them the same question now, at the Upper Room before his crucifixion.

Thankfully, even with the most difficult truths, the Lord never leaves us in a place of despair. After speaking those hard things to the disciples, Jesus fed them words of life: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going" (*14:1-4*).

What amazing promises! There is no greater hope under heaven than these words Jesus speaks to those who follow him. We're not to be troubled, because he goes before us. Not only has he prepared a place for us in eternal glory, but he also prepares our steps here on earth. He faithfully gives us the particulars of how to walk the life he calls us to. Consider his amazing prophecy to the disciples: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father" (*14:12*).

What a turnaround in the conversation. In the midst of all that tension, Jesus told his followers they would do greater works than he did. How would this happen? Jesus said it would be so "because I am going to the Father" (*14:12*).

Jesus exemplifies how to undergo a first Upper Room encounter so we can experience a second.

Think about what Jesus meant when he said, "I am going to the Father." He wasn't just talking about a location,

meaning the Father's presence in heaven. He was also talking about a process: his crucifixion, death and burial. Jesus knew he wouldn't be instantly translated to heaven. His own path forward was the way of the cross, including a crown of thorns and a torturous scourging. He faced all of this before ascending to the Father. Now he told the disciples, in essence, "The works that I do over the next two days will allow a new work that has never been done before."

Isaiah prophesied about this: "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (*Isaiah 53:5-6*).

As I read these words, I find myself praising Jesus for the works he did. Because of the cross, I've been empowered to say to person after person throughout my life, "You've been lost in darkness. But Jesus loves you, saves you and delivers you from all that." Those simple, humble conversations have amounted to thousands of real-life miracles.

As I think back on those miracles, I'm brought to my knees before Jesus. I cry out to him, "Lord, take me to the Upper Room and speak to me about my heart. I am humbled by Isaiah's testimony, to see all that you did for me. Speak to me now about anything that needs to change in my heart. I want to have the first Upper Room with you, that I may also experience the second Upper Room where thousands await the truth of your gospel. Take me there, Lord, that I may do greater works that you have created for me already." Amen.

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