

The Upper Room (Part 1): Opening Observations

Introduction

The Text

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ¹⁶ "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."
(Acts 1:12–17)

Digging for Gold

- A. This morning's sermon is going to progress simply as a series of observations. I just want to travel verse by verse and help us uncover and apply whatever's there.
 - 1. Most times I try to have one unifying thread in a sermon that I'm connecting everything else to.
 - 2. This morning there are a lot of threads I want to tug on and consider with you. I just want to see what's here. I don't want to miss it.

- B. I want to approach the Scriptures like a man with a shovel digging for gold.
 - 1. What's in this verse? Let's dig! What's in this verse? Let's dig! What's in this verse? Let's dig.
 - a. So get out your shovels . . . and let's dig!

Observation #1: "The Mount Called Olivet" (v. 12)

Passing through the Olive Press

- A. Look at v. 12: "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away."

- B. This is the first time, in the book of Acts at least, that we're actually given the location of the ascension.

1. It's all gone down on the Mount of Olives.
 2. [Luke 24:50](#) tells us it was somewhere in "Bethany" in particular, which was a small village on the eastern slope of the mountain.
 - a. It seems a relatively unimportant little detail at first glance, but, nevertheless, it caught my attention. And here's why . . .
- C. Do you remember what was taking place on the other side of this mountain just a few weeks ago?
1. The Garden of Gethsemane is also located on this Mount of Olives.
 - a. And Jesus was there in the darkness so stressed he was sweating blood. And he was pleading with the Father time and time and time again—begging that the cup might pass, that he find another way to save the human race from the soul-stain of sin, that he forego the cross, if at all possible.
 - i. He's struggling at the thought of it. He doesn't want to go through with it.
 - b. But it wasn't possible to save us any other way. And so the Father led the Son from there—humbly, willingly, obediently—to the cross.
 - i. It seems all is lost. The Father has forsaken the Son.
- D. But then, three days later, he flips the script!
1. The cross gives way to the resurrection.
 2. And then, another 40 days later, and we have from this very same mount a recounting of the ascension.
 - a. Where once there was only agony there is now only victory!
- E. And I suppose this is the sort of thing we should come to expect from a place called the Mount of Olives.
1. After all, it gives us a perfect image of this sort of thing does it not? What do you do with these olives? You press them, you afflict them, and from there the pure olive oil gushes forth.
 - a. Without the affliction and the tension and the pressure, you don't get the blessing and the anointing and the life.
 - i. Adding to the image, it's no coincidence I think that Gethsemane, in case you forgot, in the Aramaic, means "oil press."
- F. I wonder if, after the resurrection, Jesus walked on by the Garden of Gethsemane on his way to Bethany on the eastern slope. I wonder what would have passed through his mind as he considered the place of his pleading and bleeding.

1. It seemed so terrible there, so hopeless, so dire. But God would make a way. God has made a way. God has turned the curse to blessing, the darkness to light, the sorrow to joy, the death to life.

Our Own Personal Gethsemanes

- A. And so I would apply this to us. Some of you may be in your own personal Gethsemanes right now, struggling with God. Life has you in the dirt. You wonder what he's doing, where he is, why he won't answer.
 1. You cry and you cry, but it doesn't change. It doesn't get better. The miserable providence just proceeds on anyway. And you want to give up, you want to quit.
- B. But here we see: ah, the Garden of Gethsemane is located in this same mountain region as the place of ascension and rise.
 1. It's how God so often works. He crushes you to the dirt that he might lift you to the skies. Our God is in the business of flipping scripts. That's what the gospel is.
- C. Some of us, like Jesus, can now walk past our places of personal Gethsemane and say: "Yes, it is true. God used those miserable midnights to serve and shape and bless me in the end."
 1. And, listen, even if you're not there yet, even if you're still on your face, wait on him, trust in him. Soon enough you shall see the same. God is working. God is blessing. God has not abandoned you.
 - a. "Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head."

Observation #2: "The Upper Room" (v. 13)

What We Don't and Do Know

- A. For this now we turn to v. 13: "And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying . . ."
- B. Now, we don't know much about this "upper room."
 1. Was it the same upper room Jesus had readied for their partaking of the Passover, which we now refer to as the Last Supper ([Luke 22:12](#))?
 2. Was it located in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where the disciples are later shown to be gathered and praying in [Acts 12:12](#)?
 - a. We don't know with any certainty. I'm sure if you visit the Holy Land there is someone there who would be willing to claim they've found it and you can visit it—for a price of course—but, truthfully, no one really knows where this upper room is.
- C. What we do know, beyond any shadow of a doubt, is what these disciples are doing there.

1. Look down at v. 14: “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer”
- D. Now, let’s do some quick math just so we can try to figure how long they were in this space.
1. We know from Passover to Pentecost in the Jewish calendar it was fifty days.
 2. We know that between Jesus’ death and resurrection, it was three days.
 3. And then we’re told back up in Acts 1:3 that Jesus presented himself alive to his disciples and appeared to them throughout the course of “forty days.”
 4. Fifty minus 43 leaves us without about a week here.
 - a. Here we have, then, what the disciples were up to through the course of about a week as they waited for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
- E. And what we gather is that when these disciples weren’t “in the temple [praising] God” as Luke tells us in Luke 24:53, they were in this upper room praying to God.
1. And they were devoted to it. That word translated “devoting” there is, in the Greek: *proskartereō*. It means they were persistent in prayer, persevering in prayer, holding fast to prayer.
 - a. It’s the same word Paul uses elsewhere to describe the kind of prayer lives you and I should have:
 - i. Rom. 12:12: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant [Gk. *proskartereō*] in prayer.”
 - ii. Col. 4:2: “Continue steadfastly [Gk. *proskartereō*] in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

Filling in the Gaps

- A. Now, I find this to be a very helpful little scene—the picture of these disciples together in the upper room praying as they wait on God.
1. Because you see, technically, when you look back, Jesus told them to go to Jerusalem and wait for the promised Spirit, but he didn’t necessarily tell them what to do while they waited. So I love this. It fills in the gaps a bit for us.
 - a. These disciples get it exactly right. In the space between promise and fulfillment, when God seems to be delaying, when we’re trying to wait for his help and action, what do we do?
 - i. We head to that upper room—we get together with other likeminded brothers and sisters and we devote ourselves to prayer.
- B. I could think of two extremes we’d otherwise be tempted towards in these moments of delay:

1. On the one hand, we're tempted to forfeit—you may just give up on God. He's not coming. He's not doing what we want. He's not working on our timetable. Forget Jesus, forget God. He's still not here. I'm done. We just walk away. We leave the faith.
 2. But on the other hand, we're tempted to manufacture—you don't want to give up on God, but you aren't willing to wait for him either. So you try to manufacture the fulfillment of his word yourself. Do you know what I mean by this? We get tired of waiting so we attempt to force things forward on our own, we try to fulfill his promises for him, we take matters into our own hands.
 - a. This is Abraham with Ishmael. Or Peter with that servant of the high priest in Gethsemane. "I'll protect my Savior, I'll fight!" But Jesus says: "You're missing it. The true fulfillment will come. The purpose of God will prevail. Wait for it."
- C. But what do I do while I wait? Pray. Here's the answer that cuts right down the middle.
1. In the delay, I don't give up on him altogether—prayer is pursuing him; but I also don't take matters into my own hands either—prayer is looking for him to do it, not me.
 2. I don't forfeit, neither do I manufacture . . . I pray.

Do You Have an Upper Room?

A. Let me ask you: do you have an upper room?

1. Now, of course I'm not talking about a literal room here necessarily—an upper room with a good view or something.
2. I'm talking about it in a spiritual sense.
 - a. When the fulfillment of God's promises seem delayed in your life, where do you go? Do you make space to fight for faith and cry out to God? Do you have those people that you call on like this, who will be of one mind with you, who will pray in a persevering way alongside you?
 - i. If you don't, you need it!

Observation #3: "All These" (v. 14)

Profound Unity + Surprising Diversity

A. Now we turn to [v. 14](#), and I want to draw your attention to those two little words at the start: "All these . . ."

1. In [vv. 13-14](#), Luke goes out of his way to give us a sampling of the kinds of people that are present in this upper room, and I wanted to look a little more carefully at it all with you.
- B. Now, we know there's a unity among this group. As we've seen they're of "one accord", they're devoting themselves to prayer, and all this.

1. And my guess is, as I was just asking if you have people you call on when you really need prayer and things, you probably imagined calling on people who are like you, who you just naturally get along with. These are my friends.
 - a. We tend, even in the church, to gravitate towards those people we like, with similar personalities or preferences or lifestyles, etc.
 - b. And we put up with, but we wouldn't call on and bring in close, those who are a bit different and rub us the wrong way, right?
- C. But here's what's so awesome about the "all these" in this upper room: while there's profound unity, there's also surprising diversity. Let me give you just a couple of example . . .

Example #1: Men and Women

- A. For one thing, if you noticed, there's men and women in this group.
 1. You say: "Well that doesn't make any sense, of course there was!"
 2. But you're seeing the text through your modern lens. You don't realize how surprising, how revolutionary, how even disturbing such a community would be for the people of Jesus' day.
- B. So, for example . . .
 1. We know "the rabbis refused to teach women and generally assigned them a very inferior place" (TNTC).
 2. And we know that "Rabbinic sayings [of the day] are not complimentary [esp.] with respect to rabbis speaking to women. Thus, 'Talk not much with womankind. . . . He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at last will inherit Gehenna" (m. Abot. 1.5). Likewise, . . . 'A man should not discourse with a woman on the street, even with his own wife, and certainly not with another woman, because of human gossip' (Str-B 2:438)" (PNTC).
 3. And, of course, we know that "according to the rabbinic [literature], . . . a Jewish man prayed three benedictions each day, including one in which he thanked God that he was not made a woman (t. Ber. 7.18)" (DJG).
 - a. All of this serves, perhaps, as background to that little scene in John's gospel where Jesus is talking with the Samaritan woman alone in the heat of the day, and then we read: "Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman . . ." (John 4:27a).
 - i. Why did they marvel? Because no respectable Jewish male, let alone a Rabbi, would do such a thing!
- C. But here they are now in this upper room, men and women together, of one accord, praying, worshipping, on mission for King Jesus.
 1. And so it should be. For both men and women have been made in God's image (Gen. 1:27) and hold a special place in his heart.

- a. Don't you see? Jesus is not interested in reinforcing the stereotypes, superficialities, and corruptions that often fester within patriarchal societies.
- b. He's come to redeem, renew, and rebuild a people around himself—profoundly united, but surprisingly diverse.

Example #2: Matthew and Simon

A. Luke goes out of his way to identify one of the original twelve disciples here as “Simon the Zealot” (v. 13).

1. Scholars have debated a bit what precisely this means. But, more likely, this man Simon is referred to as a “Zealot” because he was connected in some way to the party of the Zealots who were in play there in Israel at the time.

a. Quick background: this Jewish sect was founded by a guy referred to as Judas the Galilean. And he was known for leading a revolt against Rome in 6 A.D. These Zealots didn't want to be under Rome. They wanted the theocracy back as God would have it. And, as such, they also opposed the payment of tribute by Israel to a pagan emperor on the ground that this was treason to God, Israel's true King.

i. They didn't like Rome. They didn't want to pay taxes to Rome. They wanted to overthrow Rome.

(1) And that's something of Simon's backstory. Those are the boys he's run with.

B. And then Jesus calls him into this fledgling community. And he sets him alongside Matthew, who also appears there a little earlier on the list.

1. And Matthew as what, do you remember? A “tax collector” (Matt. 10:3). Jesus actually finds him while he's sitting there in his tax-booth and calls him to come follow (Matt. 9:9).

a. Now, a tax collector at this time, in case you forgot, worked for who? Rome. They collected taxes from those under Rome's authority for Rome's purse.

i. So, seen from one angle, Matthew is a Jewish man who's sold out on his people. “I can make some money even though it's fleecing my own.” He's not just paying taxes. He's imposing and collecting them.

C. And now let's be clear: on the one side, you have a nationalist, an Israeli patriot of sorts—a man willing to fight against Rome for his own people (Simon the Zealot). And on the other side, you have a political compromiser, a financial opportunist—a man willing to work with Rome to tax his own people (Matthew the Tax Collector).

1. And then along comes Jesus and he brings them both together!

- D. What in the world is Jesus doing? It's like bringing spark to tinder. It's like playing with a match on a windy September day up in the dry hills of the Bay Area. You don't do that. You'll start a wildfire. You'll lose control. Things will explode. What's he doing?
1. He's doing just what he's come to do: he's redeeming, renewing, and rebuilding a people around himself—profoundly united, but surprisingly diverse.

Brothers and Sisters

- A. This is what the cross accomplishes.
1. It breaks down “the dividing wall of hostility” between us (Eph. 2:14).
 - a. People who were once diametrically opposed to one another—whether with gender, politics, skin color, personality, profession, etc.—are now on level footing and coming into the family of God as brothers and sisters . . . in Christ.
- B. You know, it's interesting, in v. 15, we're told that Peter stood up “among the brothers . . .”
1. The Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers” here) may refer either just to brothers or to brothers and sisters. It seems clear to me that “brothers and sisters” are in view here, for, as we just saw, we know women were in the mix.
- C. But whatever the case, here's what I want you to understand: one commentator points out that here in this verse we actually have the first use of this word *adelphoi* with reference to Christians.
1. And what does this mean? I'll tell you what it means: It means that, when you come to Jesus by grace through faith, you come into the family of God.
 - a. And, therein, not only is God your Father, but fellow Christians—however different they may be from you—are your brothers and sisters. You have an unbreakable bond in the Spirit. You're going to grow together as grace gets in the mix.
- D. But I've got to ask you: Are you living in light of this?
1. Do you look at the church and see family members that you're committed to no matter what?
 2. Or do you see a buffet of sorts. Where you go through and you pick “your people”—those you agree with, those you relate to, those you like?
 - a. Listen to me: You cut yourself off from blessing when you do that. You doom yourself to immaturity and instability when you do that.
 - i. Is it hard sometimes to hang with folks who rub you wrong and are different than you, yes.
 - ii. But in that you experience the heart of Jesus. You learn how to love like he's loved you. And you slowly start to see wisdom and strength and blessing in

them where you once only saw nuisance. It makes us all stronger. It makes us all better.

Observation #4: “In All about 120” (v. 15)

Nothing Is Too Small for Him

A. Here now I want direct your attention to the number that’s given there in v. 15.

1. It’s interesting, we’ve seen the kinds of people that made up this initial gathering.
2. Now we see how many, in fact, were there: “[In those days Peter stood up among the brothers \(the company of persons was in all about 120\) . . .](#)”
 - a. Now, we may discuss some other potential reasons for drawing attention to this number next time, but for this morning, I simply want to follow one train of thought with you for a moment . . .

B. Do you want to know what struck me as I first read that? It’s not that many people. Not at all. This is what Jesus has to show at the end of his life for all that he’s done? There’s a ragtag group of about 120 disciples?

1. Now, to be clear, I don’t think this group necessarily composes all of his disciples at this point. For example, we know that Paul says at one point or another, after his resurrection he “[appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time](#)” (1 Cor. 15:6).
 - a. Nevertheless, here at the start, at the core of this new movement, at least in Jerusalem, there’s about 120 people it would seem.

C. And do you want to know what I took away from this?

1. On the one hand, we know that nothing is too big for Jesus, right?
2. But, on the other hand, what we see here is nothing is too small for him either.
 - a. I mean, give it a week, Peter’s going to preach, and this little group will multiply some 30 times—from 120 to 3000+ people . . . in a day . . . with bumbling Peter at the helm.
 - i. Jesus, the Son of God, spent years ministering in and around Jerusalem, and here there’s a meager 120 at the end of it all. Seriously?!

D. What strikes me here is the stunning humility of our Savior.

1. Nothing is too small for him. No one is too insignificant. He’d give his life for 3000; he’d give his life for 120; he’d give his life for one; he’d give his life for you.

Is Anything Too Small for Me?

- A. You know, if I could just be painfully honest, sometimes as pastors we're tempted to measure our worth by how big churches are.
1. So you go to a pastor's gathering and everyone's asking: "How big is your church? We've been exploding over here. 77 baptisms last week. That's a biblical number. God's clearly in it. We've got to build a new sanctuary to fit everyone. What a blessing, right? I'm so humbled. But, anyways, enough about how big and awesome my church is. Tell me about you and yours?"
- B. There are times where I can buy into this. I can be like: "Really, I'm going to come in and preach to a small roomful of people? I put all this energy into preparing these 'undeniably brilliant' sermons, and for what? For you? Where's the crowd? Where are the masses? That's what I want. That's what I deserve."
1. Hmm. Does that sound like Jesus to you? Not at all. That's disgusting. That nonsense needs to be killed in me.
 - a. One person was enough for Jesus. One person was worth his time and energy and life.
 - b. So why isn't one person enough for me. It is. Oh my goodness it is!
- C. You spend enough time with Jesus and just like there's nothing too small for him, soon there'll be nothing too small for you.
1. What do you need? Stack chairs? I'm on it. Sweep the floor? Sure. Wash some feet? Why not.
 - a. The Son of God, the one before whom the angels bow in adoration, spent his life on 120. Nothing was too small for him. You're not too small for him.
 - b. So don't walk around acting like anything is too small for you. Oh, Lord help us grow in this. And start with me!

Observation #5: "Peter Stood Up" (v. 15)

Nothing's Changed + Everything's Changed

- A. I've got time for just one more observation this morning. And it again comes from [v. 15](#), this time it's right there at the beginning: "In those days Peter stood up . . ."
- B. If you know Peter at all, at first glance you might say: "Nothing out of the ordinary here. Peter's the first to stand up and speak? That's nothing new. He was doing that all throughout the gospels—always putting his foot in his mouth, honestly."
1. But I think that's just it. It seems to me Peter pretty much swallowed his foot whole at the end there with those denials.

- a. "I'll never deny you."
 - b. "Okay maybe I will, once, twice, three times."
 - i. I think at that point he was done. We're told that he went out after that and just wept bitterly. He's not the man he thought he was. My guess is he thought it was over for him.
- C. So what we have here with him standing and addressing the disciples, it isn't just par for the course with Peter. It's a profound picture of grace and hope and restoration.
- D. I never get over Peter's story. And I never tire of retelling it. I'm not quite sure why. Maybe because I find I relate in some ways. Maybe you do too.
- 1. You make a fool of yourself. You have vain self-confidence. You think you're something.
 - 2. Then you realize you're nothing. You blow it big time. Your sin is grievous.
 - 3. And yet Jesus isn't done with you . . .
 - a. The story doesn't end with Peter's shame. It ends with his restoration.
 - b. It doesn't end with his going out into the night, with his tail tucked between his legs, weeping bitterly, alone. It ends with him standing up among the brothers and sisters and speaking for Jesus.
- E. Peter is the first to stand up and speak? At first you say nothing's changed. But then you look a little closer and you realize everything's changed.
- 1. The impulse before was from self-reliance and self-righteousness.
 - 2. But now he's seen what's in himself, Jesus has held his head to the mirror as it were and not let him blink. He saw what he was truly made of outside the high priest's chambers in the courtyard there.
 - a. And Jesus saw it too. You remember the look. Jesus turned and looked at Peter. And we think if looks could kill, surely that one would have. But no. There Peter was exposed, naked and ashamed, and yet I believe this was a look of hope.
 - i. Now Peter, now that you've come to the end of yourself, here's where I can truly begin.
 - b. And he restores him.
 - i. After the resurrection, Peter is the first apostle pursued, visited by Jesus ([1 Cor. 15:5](#))—no doubt, for this reason: to reassure him that he hadn't disqualified himself, that Jesus already knew what was in him, and he needed him to know it, so he could let him reshape and rebuild by grace.
 - ii. And later, Jesus pursues Peter in particular by the Sea of Galilee there, and restores him and calls him to leadership: "[Do you love me? . . . Feed my sheep](#)" ([John 21:17](#)).

- F. And so here now Peter stands up to speak. Again, it may look the same on the outside, same old Peter, quick to talk, but everything has changed on the inside. He stands up to speak now with a heart that's been rebuilt by grace.
 - 1. It's like those guys who love to work on cars (that's not me!). But they have old cars, and you think what is under the hood, but they've rebuilt the engine. They've brought in all these new and improved parts.
 - a. It looks the same on the outside, but on the inside there's a new power. That's what's happening here. It's the wonder of the gospel.

A Couple Lessons for Us

- A. And I think there are a couple lessons in this for us.
- B. For one, self-reliance gets you nowhere but backwards.
 - 1. Let Jesus hold your face to the mirror, let him show you what you're truly made of, the junk in there. Don't run from that.
 - a. When things go wrong in your life and you're thinking Jesus must be against me, he's not. He's helping you see: you aren't all you think you are. You need him more than you think you do.
- C. Second thing, Jesus isn't done with you.
 - 1. Whatever mess-ups you've made, however bad you've been. Jesus isn't done with you.
 - a. Your mama may be done with you. Your daddy may be done with you. Your spouse may be done with you. Your friends may be done with you. Your boss may be done with you. Your coworkers may be done with you. The whole world may be done with you.
 - b. But Jesus isn't done with you. He loves you. He's got a plan and a purpose for you. He wants to rebuild you by grace. He wants to restore you to something so much bigger than yourself. He's got good works prepared beforehand for you to walk in.
 - i. And he's going to help you stand up and step into that.

Conclusion

- A. So, listen, I don't know which of these observations you may have needed most this morning . . .
 - 1. Maybe you feel like you're in your own Gethsemane and God is just running you through the olive press.
 - 2. Maybe you need to carve out space for yourself to go hard after Jesus in that upper room in prayer.

3. Maybe you're struggling with relationships in the church, people that are different or annoying.
4. Maybe you feel too small for God or like some tasks are too small for you.
5. Maybe you feel like God's done with you.
 - a. Whatever it is, grab hold of it. Engage with God in these moments. Jesus is here, his Spirit is here, and he's up to good. Trust him. Surrender to him. Let him have his way with you.