

# A PASSIONATE START

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION  
OF THE CHURCH.**



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Acts 2:42-47  
3rd Message  
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*Acts 2:42-47*

There is a current song that my whole family has grown to love. It's by a unique band called Twenty-One Pilots and the lyrics go like this:

*I was told when I get older all my fears would shrink  
But now I'm insecure and I care what people think*

*Wish we could turn back time, to the good old days  
When our momma sang us to sleep but now we're  
stressed out*

*Wish we could turn back time, to the good old days  
When our momma sang us to sleep but now we're  
stressed out*<sup>1</sup>

It's amazing to me how much this song has universal appeal. No matter how many days you've had—40 years of them or 10 years—you can always find some “good old days” to look back on. There's always some way in which things were better back then.

We're in the third week of a series working through the book of Acts that we've called SENT: Living the Mission of the Church. We feel a strong sense that this book has a message for us as a church at this point in our history. We want to look back at the early church in the first century to find guidance for what it means to be the church today.

I've said that Acts was written around AD 80, after one full generation of the church had passed. Following Jesus was no longer a brand new idea. Churches had become established with formal leadership structures. This book was given to them at a critical juncture in their history so that they could look back at the very first church in order to know how to move forward.

Today we come to a passage that could be described as the “good old days” of the church. It's found in Acts 2:42-47. Many people look to it as *the* model for what the church ought to be. Countless sermons have been preached examining these words for the recipe of a perfect church culture.

We will see that these verses describe a remarkable time in the life of the early church. In last week's message we heard about the Spirit of God being poured out on the apostles. Peter preached a convicting and liberating sermon about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Three thousand people became Christians overnight. This time was crazy and exciting. Our passage this morning will describe this season of the church as a passionate start.

We want to look back at this period and see what we can learn. But at the same time, we want to be careful about slipping into a naïve sense of nostalgia.

Do you know that feeling when you watch a romantic comedy and afterward you just feel terrible? You've seen a story of some cute and inspirational romance and it just makes you feel awful. Maybe you're in a romantic relationship and you feel like it doesn't compare to what you've just seen. Or, maybe you're not in a romantic relationship and now you feel even lonelier than you felt before the movie.

We want to be careful of reading these verses about the early church and feeling terrible about ourselves. We don't want to slip into a wistful attitude of what things were like in the “good old days” that leaves us completely dissatisfied with what we have today. These verses are going to describe a unique period in the history of the church. Our goal is to understand what they have for us here, today, in our culture.

What can we learn from the passion of the early church?

**Acts 2:42-47:**

**And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And**

**day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.**

This is an idealized picture of the early church. That doesn't mean what is written isn't true. This is merely a snapshot of the best parts of this community. We are seeing what the church 40 years later needed to remember.

It's not a perfect church. It's as if we're seeing a newlywed couple on their honeymoon. Their new love and fresh relationship is passionate and exciting. The honeymoon is great. But you can't look at the honeymoon as a picture of what the whole marriage is supposed to be. Fifteen years later, the marriage won't look the same.

The passion that characterized the honeymoon could have faded into a wistful memory, crowded out by stress and misunderstandings and conflict. Or, that honeymoon passion could have deepened and been seasoned by times of pain and forgiveness, hurt and reconciliation. It could have grown and settled into something richer and more textured.

Our goal as we look back at this passionate, early church is to discover how we can be refreshed and inspired and motivated. Our church won't look exactly like this group of people. Our goal is not to imitate them. But we can learn some things about what is most critical in a Christian community from what we see here.

According to the novelist E.M. Forster, "Ecstasy doesn't last. But it can cut a channel for something lasting."<sup>2</sup>

What lasting channel can these words cut for us?

In order to help us visualize these ideas, I'll be using the image of a tree: one of my favorite themes in Scripture. We're going to talk about how this early community resembled a tree. We'll think about how trees are rooted, connected, and fruitful. We'll see how this was true for these early believers in the first century. Then we'll see what we can learn and apply in our own setting

## Rooted

A tree begins when a seed starts to extend roots into the ground. There's a tree near my house that I frequently walk by with huge gnarly roots that are exposed above ground. They are beautiful because we don't normally see the roots of a tree, but we know they are there for a healthy tree.

Think about this group of people that is described in Acts 2. Overnight, their group went from 120 people to 3,120 people. The Spirit of God, which the prophets had been promising for literally hundreds of years, had finally been poured out on God's people.

These people didn't consider themselves a church yet. They still attended the synagogue. We don't hear the word church until Acts 5. They didn't consider themselves Christians yet. They were Jews who had been changed by Jesus. We don't hear the word "Christian" until Acts 12.

We have a large group of Jews who had just recently understood that the crucified and risen Jesus was their long-promised Messiah. They had experienced something powerful. And they knew it meant that everything had to change. They wanted to know and understand this Jesus and what it meant to believe in him. They began by establishing roots in their relationship with Jesus. They were rooted in their relationship with Jesus.

Our text says that they began by an intense devotion to several things. First of them was "the apostles' teaching." This was a careful choice. The people could have returned to their synagogues to have the Jewish leaders teach them. Jesus was, after all, a Jewish Messiah. They could have relied on their own understanding. They could have chosen to trust the Holy Spirit within them to teach them everything that they needed to know. God gave them truth through the words of the apostles.

This is why we turn to the words of this book. If you are a follower of Jesus, then there is a truth that defines you. We are a people who believe that certain ideas are true. We are a people who believe that these true ideas are recorded, as well as we need them to be, in the words of the Scriptures. We are convinced these words, which the church identified and verified and collected during her first few centuries, are the only guaranteed source of truth. There is no other definitive source of truth available to us.

That isn't to say that you can't find truth from other sources. There is truth spoken in movies and songs and books, and from friends and parents and teachers and bosses. The Bible isn't the *only* place that you can find truth. But it's the only place that you can be *sure* of finding truth.

If you've been at PBC a while, you know I'm fond of showing movie clips to illustrate sermons. But always I try to be careful to show clips that help us to understand our problems, not to find the solutions. I don't want to suggest that we ought to turn to Hollywood to know how to live. Movies can be incredibly helpful in diagnosing and exposing and illustrating what is really wrong with us. But only the Scriptures can point us to the cure.

That's why this early group of new followers of Jesus began by dedicating themselves to the teaching of the apostles. But that isn't all they did to root themselves. The text says that they were also devoted to "the prayers" and that all these actions resulted in their "praising God."

There shouldn't be anything really surprising about this combination, but it's helpful to remember. The earliest church, just after receiving Jesus for the first time, found three primary ways of relating to God that sustained them: they listened to the apostles' words; they praised God in worship; and they prayed.

In the Scriptures, God speaks to us. In worship, we speak to God. In prayer, we have a conversation: we pour out our hearts to God and we listen for his guidance. These actions have sustained Christian spirituality for thousands of years—from the earliest days of the church, to the earliest days of life, to the final acts at death's door. Scripture, prayer, and worship. These are the building blocks of your spiritual life.

Are you rooted? Is there some area that you can grow in? How do you need to be rooted?

You may want to find the cool new thing. You may be looking for the book that gives you that edge you've been missing in your Christian life. But it just isn't that complicated. Being rooted in relationship with God really comes down to these three things: Scripture, prayer, and worship.

They can be combined and divided and switched up. You can do these things in private, you can do them in small groups, you can do them in large groups, you can do them every day or every week. You can pray

from liturgical prayers or from the heart. You can keep a prayer journal, or use a software application, or track your prayers on a spreadsheet.

I love to-do lists. I have to confess that I sometimes spend more time finding the perfect to-do application for my phone than I do actually doing the things I'm supposed to be doing. But these kinds of activities aren't meant for a to-do list, to check off and complete. This is involves relating to Jesus. With all the activity around here, with so much to do in your Christian life, it can be easy to forget that all of this is about your relationship with Jesus.

Don't do that—don't forget. Nothing good happens apart from our relationship to the Triune God. We need to be rooted in relationship with God.

## Healthy

A tree begins with its roots. Everything starts with the soil and its ability to draw nutrients from the ground it lives in. But as you scan up the tree, you see the trunk and the branches, the leaves and the flowers. A tree must be rooted, but a good tree is also healthy.

The early church was rooted in relationship with God. But this rootedness isn't all that these verses describe. That small community was also deeply connected through healthy relationships in community.

Immediately after referencing the apostles' teaching, we hear how this community was "devoted to the fellowship." This is a powerful word in the New Testament. It is the Greek word "*koinonia*." While "fellowship" is a good translation for this word, it doesn't begin to capture its full meaning.

The word "*koinonia*" has its origin in the idea of sharing. It refers to being connected deeply to other people through common interests and needs. One scholar points out that the word doesn't refer to close relationships. It refers to the kinds of activity that result in close relationships. These early disciples were committed to doing the things that connected people in deep healthy relationships.

We see some of those actual activities in the other verses of this passage. They enjoyed "breaking bread in their homes" and "they were together." It seems people met every day in some capacity or another.

People were also connected practically and financially. They “had all things in common.” That doesn’t mean that personal property didn’t exist. It just meant that everyone held their possessions with an open hand. They would sell their own belongings in order to distribute the money to others who had need. Everyone was always willing to share.

Here is a community that met together every day. They helped each other with everything. No one had a material need that went unmet. This was real “*koinonia*”—the intimate, connected sharing of life together.

This picture becomes that much more remarkable when we remember who these people were. They are from different parts of the ancient world. They speak different languages. They share a Jewish heritage, but they have vast cultural differences. This was an incredibly diverse group who has found deep relational connection with each other; not because of their shared interests, but because of their relationship with Jesus.

People didn’t keep meeting together every day for long. They didn’t share all their possessions all the time. But this honeymoon type of relationship deepened into something sustainable and intimate. They met regularly, they shared generously, they opened their homes to each other. They became a family.

One of my friends once described a church staff they were a part of. They said that their weekly goal was to put all their efforts into making their Sunday morning service the best 75 minutes of every single person’s week. The job of the professionals was to wow people each week for 75 minutes. So... are you wowed!

It’s not that Sunday morning isn’t important. But this isn’t about the professional church staff finely crafting an experience for you to consume. We aren’t here for the experience. We are just a group of people who gather regularly to worship the God who gives us life. The church is a community first, not an event. The church is a community, not an event. The church is a family.

We have regular events that help to shape our community: weekly times of worship; gatherings for women and men and children and youth. But we cannot mistake attendance at these events for involvement in the community. If you want to be part of this church that is sent out into the world, it starts by being connected in relationships with each other.

Does that describe you? Are you connected through healthy relationships? Are you in places where you are learning and receiving and giving and growing? How do you need to be connected?

Getting plugged into a community is not always easy. Every group of people wrestles with the tension of going deep with people you already know and being welcoming to new people. It’s easy to feel like there is an inner circle and you aren’t a part of it.

But there’s usually a simple solution: it’s called time. That’s what we see here in Acts. At the beginning of this church, people spent a lot of time together. There is simply no replacement for spending time with people in order to be connected.

We had a great launch of Road Crew, our Wednesday morning men’s gathering this past week. I’m excited to see that become more and more of a community like we see in Acts. Women’s ministry has kicked off opportunities to be involved on Tuesday nights and Thursday mornings. Rolana Smith and Paco Lopez are doing an incredible job of inviting junior high and high school students into this kind of a group. The opportunities are there. It’s just a matter of spending the time.

But remember one thing about relationships: spending time with people doesn’t always mean things go well. People are complicated. We rub each other the wrong way. We don’t always pay attention and listen. We hurt each other and say stupid things. This group of people that gathers together every day in Acts 2:42 will start to see some of these things as well. As we continue reading in Acts, we’ll hear about divisions and hurt feelings and personality conflicts. All of that is simply what it means to be part of a family.

All that complexity is not things to avoid, or get past, or deal with. The conflict and miscommunication and general messiness of life in community is part of why God puts us together in groups like this. If I never spent any close time with anyone else, I’d come to the conclusion that I’m a pretty great person all-around. It’s when I try to relate to other people that I realize that I can be petty and irritable and jealous and insensitive.

Being connected through healthy relationships in community doesn’t mean everything is great all the time. But it does mean that God will be at work.



## Fruitful

Let's return to our image of a tree. We've thought about the roots of the tree. We saw how this early community of Jesus followers were rooted in their relationship with Jesus. We've thought about the trunk and branches and leaves of a tree. We've seen how this group was connected by healthy relationships in community.

There is one more important thing about a tree. Every tree has some way of reproducing itself: pine cones or pollen. But my favorite trees are the ones who reproduce themselves with fruit: fruit trees.

This is the final point we'll notice about our early Jesus crowd. They were fruitful, inside and outside.

I have a very young peach tree in my yard that I've never quite been able to help thrive. It has yet to produce a peach. If I were insistent about getting fruit from this tree, I wouldn't start with the flowers, or the branches, or the leaves. I would start with the things that I've already looked at. Is the tree in good soil and getting the nutrients that it needs from the ground? Is the tree healthy and protected from insects and disease?

Only a tree that is rooted well and healthy will produce fruit. We've seen that to be true of this early church. So what kind of fruit are they producing?

The answer to that is in phrases like "awe came upon every soul," and "they received their food with glad and generous hearts." Amazing things were happening to them as individuals. They were becoming thankful and joyful and filled with awe. They were fruitful within the community.

This is what happens when a community of Jesus followers is healthy: it bears fruit.

But fruit was also very clear in the world around them. We are told that they had "favor with all the people." And most importantly, that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who being saved." The world around them noticed these people. They were looked upon favorably. More and more people, were joining them. They were fruitful outside of the community as well.

This is what happens when a community of Jesus followers is healthy: they bear fruit.

I remember a debate I had with a friend in seminary. He insisted that if a church isn't growing, then something is wrong. Since then, I've heard several people use the phrase, "healthy things grow." The implication is that if you are "doing it right," then your church or ministry or mission work or campus fellowship will see numerical growth.

This statement sounds compelling, but mostly because as Americans we are so focused on numbers and popularity and brand management. Yes, it's true that sometimes healthy things grow. But sometimes they don't.

My body is pretty healthy right now. I'm in decent condition. But if I start growing, that would actually be a sign that I'm getting less healthy. Trees grow, but some of them for a season and then they stop.

It's a much better biblical analogy to say that healthy things are fruitful rather than saying that healthy things grow. Healthy things are fruitful. This is what we see in these verses. A healthy church, rooted and connected, that is bearing a certain kind of fruit.

But here's the thing: you get different fruit in different seasons.

In these verses, awe came upon everyone. But soon the early church will face confusion and theological questions and personality disputes. In these verses, the church had favor with all the people. But it won't be long until they are arrested, chased out of towns, and stoned to death. After Peter's first sermon, 3,000 people accepted Christ. But after one more mass conversion, all the other sermons in Acts have mixed responses. Some believed. Some didn't. Some weren't sure.

If we think these verses describe the fruit that we are supposed to see in every season, then we are going to be constantly disappointed by every church that we are a part of. It wasn't that this early community found the perfect recipe, and if we could just follow it, then we would see their fruit. It was God at work. God was doing something unique that place at that time.

It's not up to us to make fruit happen. What we do is to try and discern what unique thing God is doing in our place at our time.

So the question for us to ask is "How are we bearing fruit?"

When we ask that question, we need to remember that if we aren't bearing fruit in the way that we want, it might be the case that God has us in a different season of life. God brings fruit, not us.

But if we aren't bearing fruit at all, then we need to ask about what is wrong. The solution is not to try harder for the fruit, but to return to the things that made this community healthy: return to being rooted in relationship with God; return to connectedness with each other. When those things happen, the tree is in a position for God to bring the kind of fruit he wants, when he wants it.

One of the ways we've seen God making us fruitful is through the upcoming Harvest Fest. I've already pointed out how God has sent us out to host this event on the campus of East Palo Alto Charter School because of our remodel construction at PBC. We've been seeing God at work everywhere as the plans have been coming together. The city has waived the need for a permit and offered free police support. Vendors have offered free services that we weren't sure how to arrange. The principal has been incredibly gracious and generous.

Gina Siegle, who is organizing most of the event, commented, "Every time I'm worried about something we need, God ends up providing even more." That's the kind of fruit that only comes with the Spirit at work. We can't make that happen. And we can't always control what fruit we're given.

There are different seasons of fruit. There are different churches who tend to yield different kinds of fruit. No one person, or church, or group bears fruit through every season. And none of them bear the exact same kind of fruit. That's the beauty of the body of Christ. Each local church is made up of different individuals working together in a community. Together, each church contributes to the body of Christ as a whole, contributing toward the kingdom of God. Together, we all combine into a vibrant tree—rooted, healthy, and fruitful.

## Conclusion

As good as the good old days are, they always fade away.

*Wish we could turn back time, to the good old days  
When our momma sang us to sleep but now we're  
stressed out*<sup>3</sup>

It does sound nice to be sung to sleep by momma. We are stressed out: busy and worried and frenzied. But I don't think the answer is to look back at the good old days.

We can learn something from these first followers of Jesus in Acts. We can learn about being rooted in relationship with Jesus. We can learn about being connected through healthy relationships. And we can look around us to see what kind of fruit God is bearing through us.

But there's one last thing I want to point out about these people in Acts 2. They had this amazing season of rich, spiritual experience, intimate fellowship, and remarkable fruit. But remember who they were. They were Jews from all over. They spoke different languages. Acts 2:5 described them as "devout men from every nation under heaven."

Three thousand of them accepted Jesus. They experienced this passionate start. But they didn't stay in Jerusalem long. This wasn't their church experience forever. They didn't build a huge building and settle in. They had this incredible experience at first, but then God scattered them.

We'll get there in a few weeks, but in Acts 8:1, we will read "there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria."

This is where the first part of the book of Acts is headed. This is the first hinge in the story. If we're going to learn about the honeymoon, we should remember what the marriage was like. And the marriage wasn't about them being the perfect church where everyone's needs were met.

Could it be that these early disciples were experiencing something incredible as preparation? Could it be that God gave them this unique season – this honeymoon—because he knew something else was coming? Could it be that all of this is preparation for God's ultimate purpose for the church: to be sent?

Let's be rooted in relationship with God. Devoted to the Scriptures, to prayer, and to worship. Let's be a healthy community, spending time with each other and being generous with our resources. Let's pray that God would make us fruitful – bringing his fruit in his timing according to his purposes.

And let's be ready to be scattered. Sent into all the world to bring the kingdom of Jesus to the people who need to hear of it. We don't need to return to the good old days. This is the day that God has given us. Let's be the church today.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Joseph, Tyler. "Stressed Out" Blurryface. mp3. Fueled by Ramen. 2015

<sup>2</sup> Forster, E.M. Quoted in *The Pastor: A Memoir* by Peterson, Eugene H. HarperCollins Publishers. New York. 2011. 208.