

The Story (25) – The Early Church

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I. Introduction

A. With Jesus' death and burial, the disciples were crushed. You can feel the despair in the disciple Cleopas's (or Clopas's) statement in Lk. 24:21. He said to the unrecognized Jesus on the road to Emmaus that they "*had hoped* that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel," the implication being "but they crucified him so he could not have been."

B. As I said near the end of last week's class, most ancient Jews believed that God would raise his people bodily from the dead at the last day, the day on which he judged and remade the world. What they did *not* expect was that this end-time resurrection, this rising to immortal life (no longer subject to death), would happen to someone *in advance of God's remaking of the world*. That was not part of their theological landscape. So when Jesus was killed, that in their eyes was the end of it.

C. But as Luke records in Acts 1:3, Jesus "presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about *the kingdom of God*." At the end of that forty-day period, he ascended back to heaven as they watched him on the Mount of Olives.

D. Through those multiple appearances and the empty tomb, the disciples came to know for certain that Jesus had risen bodily from the tomb and thus that the end-time resurrection had begun with an individual in the midst of history, while the world continued on. In that conviction, they became a group of witnesses that could not be silenced. The lesson today is titled "The Early Church."

II. From the Ascension to Pentecost

A. Volume 1 of Luke's inspired writing is known as the Gospel of Luke. Volume 2 is known as the Book of Acts. Acts, of course, is the story of the church from Christ's ascension back to heaven up to the end of the Apostle Paul's first Roman imprisonment in the mid-60s, a roughly 35-year span. We'll be looking specifically at Paul's life in the next two lessons; this morning the focus is on the church from the Ascension up to the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 13. So it's essentially a flyover of the first 12 chapters of Acts, skipping Saul's conversion in chapter 9, which will be addressed later.

B. During his time with the apostles in Jerusalem, Jesus told them to stay in the city until they received the promise of the Father, by which he meant their being baptized in or with the

Holy Spirit. At his Ascension, he told them they would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them and they would be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

C. Acts is the unfolding of this mission of witnessing to Jesus, which Acts 8:12 says involved the disciples preaching the "good news about the kingdom of God [also 19:8, 20:25] *and* the name of Jesus Christ." You see these same two poles – the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ – in Paul. In Acts 28:23 he was testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus; in Acts 28:31 he was proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. The good news is that the long-awaited kingdom of God had in fact arrived, albeit with the unexpected twist that its presence overlaps for a time the ongoing old age or order. The new age had broken into the present, and though it is now less than obvious, it will come to completion in the fully healed creation that is labeled the new heavens and new earth.

2. The kingdom was ushered in through the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, especially through his atoning death, and was signaled most definitively in his resurrection to immortal life, his ascension to heaven, and the outpouring of the Spirit. So they preached the good news of the kingdom and the great name of Jesus as the one who brought it.

D. The Lord through the casting of lots chose Matthias to replace Judas as the 12th Apostle. As the 12 sons of Israel were the fountainhead of the nation of Israel, so the 12 Apostles would be the fountainhead of New Israel, the church, those called out of biological Israel and the world and into a new Spirit-filled community. (Paul is, of course, later called to be an apostle outside of this symbolism.)

III. Pentecost

A. The Spirit comes on the Day of Pentecost with great markers of his presence. There was a sound like a tremendous wind, something like tongues of fire rested on the people, and they were all filled with the Spirit and miraculously began declaring the wonders of God in foreign languages they had never known.

B. Peter preaches to the crowd that Jesus' death was part of God's plan – that God allowed him to be crucified by wicked men – and that Jesus had been raised from the dead and taken up to heaven where he reigns at the Father's right hand. Jesus is the promised Messiah, God's ultimate anointed one, his ultimate servant in healing the sin-sick world, and he is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

C. When the people were cut to the heart, meaning they were convicted of the truth about Jesus and their culpability in his death, whether by action or inaction, they asked what they needed to do. And the Spirit-filled Peter told them they needed to repent and be baptized in the

name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who having now been poured out was available to all.

D. As they trusted in Jesus as the one Peter described, turned from their sin in loyalty to Jesus, and expressed their new devotion by being immersed in water on confession of their faith, God forgave all their sins and added them to the community of the forgiven, the church. The church is those who are participants in the kingdom that Jesus inaugurated, those who have accepted the reality of Jesus and his work and who are being renewed and transformed toward the completed state of that kingdom, toward the person of Christ. And about 3,000 were baptized that day!

IV. From Pentecost to the Stoning of Stephen

A. The members of this new community in Jerusalem devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. They shared material things with each other, ate in each other's homes, and the apostles were doing many signs and wonders. The group had favor with the people, and the Lord continued to add to their numbers.

B. Peter, in the name of Jesus, healed a man over 40 years old who had been crippled from birth, and the people were amazed. Peter again testified to Jesus' resurrection, called the people to repent, and declared in Acts 3:21 that Jesus must remain in heaven until the time God chooses to restore all things. Jesus will return in God's time to consummate the kingdom, to judge mankind and give creation the ultimate makeover, to "heavenize" it.

C. In chapter 4, Peter and John are arrested by the Sadducees and their allies because they were proclaiming *in Jesus* the resurrection from the dead (4:2).

1. The Pharisees, like most ancient Jews, believed in the resurrection of dead people at the final judgment, but the Sadducees, who did not believe it, never used police force to silence them. So why do so with the disciples?

2. The difference, as Craig Keener points out, was that the apostles were preaching the resurrection "in Jesus." In other words, they were not just saying that the resurrection was a theoretical hope for the future when God judged and remade the world but that it had already begun in the resurrection of Jesus, the firstfruits of the end-time harvest. Being raised to immortal bodily life was no longer speculation that the Sadducees could deny; it had already happened! So the standard Sadducee arguments were no longer effective.

D. Peter and John are warned not to speak in the name of Jesus, but they tell their accusers they must listen to God rather than them. Upon their release, Peter and John gathered with the disciples, they all prayed for boldness, and they continued to speak fearlessly. Acts 4:33 says that "with great power the apostles were giving their testimony *to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*" Years later, in Acts 17:18, we see Paul preaching *Jesus and the resurrection.*

E. They continued sharing generously with one another, and in Acts 5 Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, were killed for lying to the Spirit by claiming falsely that they were donating to the community all the proceeds they had received from selling some land. And here we see God's special identification with the church such that lying in that context was a more direct form of lying to the Holy Spirit.

F. The apostles continued performing miracles, and more believers were added *to the Lord* (5:14). People even laid their sick in the streets hoping Peter's shadow might fall on them.

G. The high priest and Sadducees were filled with jealousy and arrested the apostles.

1. An angel opened the prison doors at night and told them to go preach in the Temple, which is what they did beginning at daybreak. The leaders had them brought back and reminded them that they had given them strict orders not to teach in Jesus' name. But they apostles said they had to obey God rather than men.

2. They wanted to kill the apostles, but a highly respected Pharisee on the Council named Gamaliel, who was Paul's teacher, talked them out of it. So they had the apostles beaten and told them again not to preach. Acts 5:41-42 states: *Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.*⁴² *And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.*

H. In Acts 6 there was a complaint in the community that the Greek-speaking Jewish widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

1. The apostles told the group it was not right that they be diverted from preaching the word of God, their optimal use in the kingdom, to wait on tables. Seven men of good reputation and full of the Spirit were chosen to handle that task.

2. It is not coincidental that v. 7 states "And the word of God continued to increase . . ." The apostles were freed to function in their optimal role within the body, preaching the word of God, the gospel, and that word grew in influence and acceptance as a result so that the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and many priests accepted it.

V. From the Stoning of Stephen to Paul's First Missionary Journey

A. Stephen was one of the seven men put in charge of the problem involving discrimination against the Greek-speaking Jewish widows, all of whom appear to have been Greek-speaking Jews. Stephen was preaching the gospel to other Greek-speaking Jews, and when they could not refute what he was saying they decided to silence him by means of false charges. Stephen was taken before the Council, and in chapter 7 makes a lengthy speech about Israel's history that ends with his saying they always resist the Holy Spirit and kill God's messengers.

B. Stephen is stoned to death, an action approved by Saul. This spawned a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, with Saul aggressively throwing men and women into prison. But since the apostles remained in Jerusalem, it seems the focus of the persecution was the *Greek-speaking* Jewish Christians. Recall that Jesus said the disciples would be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." They started in Jerusalem, and Luke notes that with this persecution they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

C. Philip proclaimed Christ in Samaria, where Simon the magician was among those who believed and was baptized, but contrary to expectations, they did not receive the Spirit when they were baptized. Peter and John were dispatched to Samaria, and the people received the Spirit when they laid hands on them. I believe there is a theological reason for this seeming anomaly, but I cannot go into it now. Simon wants to buy the power he sees associated with the apostles, and he is sorely rebuked for it.

D. In the second half of chapter 8, Philip is sent on a rendezvous with the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch who is reading Isaiah 53. From that text, Philip explains the good news about Jesus and baptizes the eunuch. Philip is then carried away by the Spirit to Azotus and subsequently ventures to Caesarea.

E. In chapter 9 we have the amazing story of Saul's conversion on the road and in Damascus, his proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues, his escape from Damascus, and his visit to Jerusalem. We'll look at that next class.

F. In the last part of chapter 9, Peter, when in Lydda, healed a paralyzed man named Aeneas who had been bedridden for eight years. He also raised Tabitha (Aramaic; Dorcas in Greek) from the dead while in Joppa.

G. In chapter 10 the Roman centurion Cornelius sent two servants and a soldier to Joppa to invite Peter to come to his house in Caesarea. Cornelius had invited Peter, pursuant to an angel's instruction, with the expectation that Peter would present a message from the Lord by which Cornelius and his household would be saved (Acts 10:22, 33; 11:14). Peter obliged, as recorded in Acts 10:34-43 (cf. Acts 15:7). There is much to be said here also, but no time to say it. In one sentence, this is God demonstrating that under the new covenant there was no place for a Jewish nationalism that would withhold baptism from believing Gentiles until they submitted to circumcision.

H. In the first part of chapter 11, Peter explains and defends his actions to the brothers in Jerusalem. In the second part, we see other Gentiles, especially in Antioch, receiving the gospel. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, and he then found Saul in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch. The Christians there then decided to send financial support to the saints in Judea for a prophesied coming famine, and they sent it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

I. In chapter 12, Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great, was reigning over Judea. He had the apostle James, the brother of John, killed and then arrested Peter during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Peter was sprung from jail by an angel and met up with the saints at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. He then left for another place to stay ahead of Herod, and after a time, Herod returned to Caesarea, the region's administrative center.

J. The last part of chapter 12 reports that an angel "struck down" Herod for not giving glory to God when people were saying he was a god and not a man. The description seems to be death by some kind of bowel disease, so it need not mean he was killed instantly. The chapter ends with Barnabas and Saul returning to Antioch from Jerusalem after having delivered the famine relief. Next class we will look at Paul's life and ministry.