

# **THY KINGDOM COME**

## **6. Acts – Part 1 The Birth of the Church**

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**A Teaching Commentary  
of the New Testament**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.</b>	<b>THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>THE CHURCH PRE-PENTECOST .....</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1	THE ASCENSION.....	2
2.2	THE REPLACEMENT OF JUDAS .....	3
<b>3.</b>	<b>THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AT PENTECOST.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>KOINONIA.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>PETER HEALS A LAME MAN .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>THE ORIGINAL CHURCH GROWTH SEMINAR .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>THE FIRST DEACONS .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>9.</b>	<b>THE MARTYRDOM OF STEPHEN .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>10.</b>	<b>PHILIP IN SAMARIA.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>11.</b>	<b>PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>12.</b>	<b>THE CONVERSION OF SAUL.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>13.</b>	<b>PETER HEALS AND RAISES THE DEAD.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>14.</b>	<b>PETER AND THE CONVERSION OF CORNELIUS, A GENTILE.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>15.</b>	<b>BARNABUS AND SAUL IN ANTIOCH .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>16.</b>	<b>JAMES IS MARTYRED, PETER IS ARRESTED .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>17.</b>	<b>THE DEATH OF HEROD AGRIPPA I.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>18.</b>	<b>THE EMERGENCE OF PAUL .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>19.</b>	<b>TOPICAL INDEX.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>20.</b>	<b>INDEX OF SCRIPTURE REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>33</b>

# 1. The Birth of the Church

It may be surprising to realize that Jesus did not personally set up the church. During his time on earth, he never led a building campaign or conducted a stewardship drive. He never found his congregation getting so big that he had to go to two Sunday morning services. He never conducted Advent services and he never put on an Easter musical extravangaza.

Jesus' intent was never to amass a huge following. He had the opportunity. He was a popular speaker. People seemed to want to follow him, but he resisted their desire to set him up as the leader of a movement. While he was here, his attention was focused on a small group of people – particularly on the twelve. He knew that he had a fixed amount of time to spend here. If he spread it out among thousands of people, then none would get very much of his time. None would be adequately equipped to carry on once he departed. His message was much too important to let that happen.

Thus Jesus surrounded himself with a small group of followers and invested himself fully in them. He left the job of organizing the church to them. According to Matthew, his departing words to them were the Great Commission. His desire was that they take what he had given them to the world. He planted the seed of the church in their lives. The harvest would come after his ascension.

The Book of Acts tells of the birth of the church. It shows the transition from the time when the disciples were cowering in fear in the upper room to the point where full-scale missionary activity was occurring all over the known world. It is an important history for us. The task of the modern church is no different than the task of the first century church. Often the problems faced by the modern church are no different than those faced by the first century church. We need to understand their story so we can understand our own.

Acts 1:1 opens with "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach." This indicates to us that the author of Acts wrote another book. Examining the beginning of the book of Luke (Luke 1:1-4) we see:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

The introduction to the two books links them together in such a manner that they are generally believed to have the same author. That author is believed to be Luke, the physician and traveling companion of Paul. Luke is not actually named in either book (Luke or Acts), but terminology in Acts indicates that it was written by a companion of Paul (certain sections are written in first-person plural – we did so-and-so). Correlating this with the letters of Paul where he names Luke as his companion (see Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11, and Philemon 24) lead us to believe that "we" refers to Paul and Luke. This indicates that he is the author of both books. Tradition also supports the view that Luke wrote both books.

Both books are addressed to Theophilus. This may or may not be an actual person. In Greek, "Theos" means "God" and "philus" comes from a word meaning "to love." "Theophilus" means "one who loves God." The book could be addressed simply to those people who love God. On the other hand, there could have been a real individual named Theophilus, to whom the books

are addressed. We do not know and it does not really matter. If this is a specific individual, then we know nothing further about him.

The Book of Acts has two main parts. Chapters 1-12 narrate the early history of the church under the leadership of Peter. Embedded in Chapter 9 is the story of the conversion of a man named Saul. The church is very much a Jewish institution at this time, although Chapter 10 does tell of Peter bringing the Gospel to a Gentile named Cornelius. In Chapter 13, the focus of the book shifts to the ministry of the man Saul, who changes his name to Paul. Chapters 13-28 focus primarily on the missionary activity of Paul, who is used by God to extend his Kingdom to the Gentiles.

## 2. The Church Pre-Pentecost

Acts 1

### 2.1 *The Ascension*

Acts 1:1-11

The book of Acts begins by talking about the ascension of Jesus into heaven. We learn that after the resurrection, Jesus spent forty days on earth among his disciples, convincing them that he had indeed resurrected and giving them further teaching. In Acts 1:4-5 he told them,

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

In verse 8 he promised them,

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

After the forty days, he was standing with his disciples when he was taken up into heaven, into a cloud. The disciples stood watching, understandably dumbfounded by the event. As they stood there, two angels (identified in the text as two men) appeared among them. They said in verse 11,

Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.

Why is this section important?

- Jesus has demonstrated to his disciples that his bodily resurrection is genuine. Death has been defeated.
- The disciples have been given the promise that the time when the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon them is imminent. They have been told to remain in Jerusalem to wait for it to happen.
- They have been told that when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, they will be sent out as witnesses for Jesus, first to Jerusalem (the home town), to Judea (the home state), to Samaria (a neighboring but hostile state) and unto the ends of the earth. This is basically a

restatement of the Great Commission. Missionary activity would soon begin, both at home and abroad.

- They have been promised that Jesus will one day return in the clouds, just as he has departed in the clouds.

## **2.2 The Replacement of Judas**

Acts 1:12-26

After the ascension, the disciples returned from the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12 is where we learn that the ascension occurred on the Mount of Olives). They went to Jerusalem as Jesus instructed and went "upstairs to the room where they were staying" (1:13). It is generally assumed that the disciples waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit in the same upper room where the Last Supper took place.

Acts 1:14 says that they remained in this place, joining together in prayer. They were joined by other believers, totaling around one hundred and twenty people. This included some women who had been followers of Jesus (they are not named, but this probably includes Mary Magdalene and perhaps the sisters Mary and Martha). They were also joined by Mary the mother of Jesus and by the brothers of Jesus. This is significant. During his time on earth, the brothers of Jesus were not followers of Jesus. There is an incident recorded in the Gospels where Jesus' family believed him to be out of control and they tried to come and take charge of him (see Mark 3:21). Somehow his brothers found faith in him. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to **James**, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

The "James" referred to in this passage is James, the half-brother of Jesus, who became a leader in the church in Jerusalem. He is the author of the Book of James. During his forty days on earth after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his brother. The experience left James a believer. Jude, the author of the Book of Jude, was the brother of James and the half-brother of Jesus. He, too, became a believer and a prominent figure in the church, although not as prominent as James.

At this time, Peter was the leader of the apostles. While these people were gathered together, Peter suggested that a successor to Judas Iscariot ought to be appointed. Acts 1:18-19 tells of the death of Judas:

With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.

This is a bit curious, because Matthew 27:5-8 says:

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

Matthew and Luke tell slightly different stories about the death of Judas. They agree that the money (the thirty pieces of silver) that he was paid to betray Jesus was used to buy a field. The field became a burial place. One says that Judas fell in this field and his body burst open. The other says that Judas hanged himself. Who knows why the discrepancy exists? It is possible that both things happened. Whenever he came down from the rope which he used to hang himself, his body could have fallen in such a way that it burst open.

Whatever happened, the end result was that the twelve had been reduced to eleven.

In reference to the death of Judas, Peter cites Psalm 69. This is one of the psalms that are prophetic about the events of the crucifixion. Verses 1-28 say:

... Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold.  
... Those who hate me without reason  
outnumber the hairs of my head;  
many are my enemies without cause,  
those who seek to destroy me.  
... For I endure scorn for your sake,  
and shame covers my face.  
I am a stranger to my brothers,  
an alien to my own mother's sons;  
for zeal for your house consumes me,  
and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.  
... But I pray to you, O Lord, in the time of your favor;  
in your great love,  
O God, answer me with your sure salvation.  
... Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless;  
I looked for sympathy, but there was none,  
for comforters, but I found none.  
They put gall in my food  
and gave me vinegar for my thirst.  
... Pour out your wrath on them;  
let your fierce anger overtake them.  
May their place be deserted;  
let there be no one to dwell in their tents.  
For they persecute those you wound  
and talk about the pain of those you hurt.  
Charge them with crime upon crime;  
do not let them share in your salvation.  
May they be blotted out of the book of life  
and not be listed with the righteous.

The first part of this describes the distress in which Jesus found himself at the cross. The latter part of it describes the fate of those who subjected Jesus to this pain. Peter understood this to be the fate of Judas. His place will be deserted. There would be no one to dwell in his tent. He would not have a share in the salvation of Jesus. His name would be blotted out of the book of life. In Acts 1:25, Peter refers to the fact that "Judas left to go where he belongs." There is almost an attitude of "good riddance" expressed.

Peter then cites Psalm 109:8:

May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership.

He interprets this to mean that a successor to Judas should be appointed. He suggests this to the people who are gathered in the upper room. In verses 21-22, Peter says:

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.

Two men from among them were suggested, Joseph (also called Barsabbas or Justus) and Matthias. They prayed that God would show them the one "to take over this apostolic ministry." Then they cast lots and determined that Matthias was to be the new twelfth apostle.

This raises several questions.

- What is "apostolic ministry?"
- What is this business about casting lots?
- Why did they feel it necessary to appoint a successor to Judas? What was significant or necessary about having twelve apostles? What significance does it have to the church today?
- Who was Matthias and what else do we know about him?

Verse 1:25 makes the reference to "apostolic ministry." The New American Standard translation renders this "to occupy the ministry and apostleship..." This is closer to the Greek. The verse actually begins "λαβειν τος τοπον της διακονιας ταυτης και αποστολης". If that is all Greek to you, don't worry about it. The two key words are "διακονιας" and "αποστολης", which transliterate as "diakonias" and "apostoles". They are the words from which we get "deacon" and "apostle."

Greek has a number of words with the basic meaning "to serve." It has one word which implies "to serve under subjection," as in slavery. It has another meaning "to serve out of obligation or respect," like the priests who serve at a temple. It has another which means "to serve for wages," as a hired hand. The root word for "deacon" means "to render personal service, motivated out of love." This man who was being selected to replace Judas would render personal service to the church, motivated out of love for the people whom he would serve. A deacon is a loving servant. Note that this use of the word "deacon" occurs before this was an office of the church.

So what is an apostle? "Apostle" comes from the Greek verb "apostello," which means "to send." An apostle is one who is sent, i.e. a missionary. There is a subtle transformation that occurs to the twelve as they transition from the Gospels to Acts. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the twelve are almost consistently referred to as "the disciples." In Greek, "disciple" is a word which means "learner." A disciple is an apprentice, one studying under a master teacher. In the Gospels, the twelve are only called "apostles" in:

- (Matthew 10:2) These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon...
- (Mark 3:14) He appointed twelve – designating them apostles – that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach
- (Mark 6:30) The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.
- (Luke 6:13) When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles:
- (Luke 9:10) When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done...

- (Luke 11:49) Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, ...
- (Luke 17:5) The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"
- (Luke 22:14) When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table.
- (Luke 24:10) It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.

John never uses the term "apostle." Contrast the list above with over two hundred uses of the word "disciple" to refer to the twelve in the Gospels. In the list above, the use of the word "apostle" can be assumed to be an anachronism (the Gospels were written after the events in Acts took place, when the twelve had been known as "apostles" for some time). In Acts and the books subsequent to Acts, the word "apostle" is consistently used to refer to the twelve. The word "disciple" is used, but it never refers to the twelve. Instead it is used to refer to other followers of Jesus – those who are now apprentices of the apostles.

A generalization of the usage is illustrated in the following chart:

	Disciple	Apostle
Gospels	Usually refers to the twelve. It is also used to refer to other followers of Jesus.	Almost never used. When it is used, it is an anachronistic reference to the twelve.
Acts - Revelation	Always refers to followers of Jesus <u>other than</u> the twelve.	Is consistently used to refer to the twelve and to Paul. In these books, they are <u>only</u> called apostles, never disciples.

So what is the point of this? When Jesus was alive, the twelve were disciples. After his ascension, they became apostles. The mantle was passed to them the night of the Last Supper. That night, Jesus prayed the High Priestly Prayer, as recorded in John 17. John 17:6-18 says:

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

Jesus prayed this for the eleven. The last part of it says "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." This is when they received their commission. This is when they were sent (apostello). This is when they became apostles.

There were many apprentices (disciples). There were many loving servants (deacons). Those with "apostolic ministry" had a special commission, however. They were sent – charged with spreading the teachings of Jesus throughout the world.

Do we have apostles today? Yes and no. Yes, we have apostles. An apostle is one who is sent. Someone commissioned of God to be a missionary is an apostle. No, we do not have apostles in the sense of the twelve. These special apostles were "men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up" (Acts 1:21-22). We do not have men meeting that criterion any more.

These twelve with "apostolic ministry" had a special standing in the church. They had authority. They were commissioned as special eyewitnesses of everything Jesus did, from the beginning of his ministry through the resurrection. They could testify firsthand to everything that he did.

This is the role that Matthias was selected to fill. He was a commissioned, first-hand witness, sent out to spread the gospel. He was a loving personal servant to the Body of Christ, who was selected by casting lots.

Now what is this business about casting lots? That sounds a bit like hocus-pocus or some form of divination. Was this new apostle selected by a game of chance?

Casting lots has a solid foundation in the Old Testament. It is also a practice that seems to have terminated with this event (this is the last record of the process being used in the Bible.) We see references to this in the following Old Testament verses:

- (Leviticus 16:8) He is to cast lots for the two goats – one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat.
- (Joshua 18:6) After you have written descriptions of the seven parts of the land, bring them here to me and I will cast lots for you in the presence of the Lord our God.
- (Joshua 18:8) As the men started on their way to map out the land, Joshua instructed them, "Go and make a survey of the land and write a description of it. Then return to me, and I will cast lots for you here at Shiloh in the presence of the Lord."
- (Joshua 18:10) Joshua then cast lots for them in Shiloh in the presence of the Lord, and there he distributed the land to the Israelites according to their tribal divisions.
- (1 Chronicles 24:5) They divided them impartially by drawing lots, for there were officials of the sanctuary and officials of God among the descendants of both Eleazar and Ithamar.
- (1 Chronicles 24:31) They also cast lots, just as their brothers the descendants of Aaron did, in the presence of King David and of Zadok, Ahimelech, and the heads of families of the priests and of the Levites. The families of the oldest brother were treated the same as those of the youngest.
- (1 Chronicles 25:8) Young and old alike, teacher as well as student, cast lots for their duties.
- (1 Chronicles 26:13) Lots were cast for each gate, according to their families, young and old alike.
- (1 Chronicles 26:14) The lot for the East Gate fell to Shelemiah. Then lots were cast for his son Zechariah, a wise counselor, and the lot for the North Gate fell to him.
- (1 Chronicles 26:16) The lots for the West Gate and the Shalleketh Gate on the upper road fell to Shuppim and Hosah. Guard was alongside of guard:
- (Nehemiah 10:34) "We – the priests, the Levites and the people – have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law.

- (Nehemiah 11:1) Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns.

In each of these, a decision needed to be made. There were alternatives available, all of which met God's standards. The people wanted to know which of the alternatives was God's will. Thus a priest or some other leader would cast lots, relying on God to determine the outcome. God's will would be revealed to them in a very tangible manner.

Note that there are other references to casting lots in the Old Testament as well – referring to a practice that is neither guided by God nor seeking to determine his will. Consider:

- (Job 6:27) You would even cast lots for the fatherless and barter away your friend.
- (Psalm 22:18) They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.
- (Ezekiel 21:21) For the king of Babylon will stop at the fork in the road, at the junction of the two roads, to seek an omen: He will cast lots with arrows, he will consult his idols, he will examine the liver.
- (Joel 3:3) They cast lots for my people and traded boys for prostitutes; they sold girls for wine that they might drink.
- (Obadiah 1:11) On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them.

In some of these, casting lots seems to be a game of chance, but we also see that it could be a form of divination, condemned by the Bible. Like so many things, when it was submitted to God, it was permitted. When submitted to idols, it was condemned.

Why did the practice of casting lots cease? Who knows?

Why did the remaining apostles feel it necessary to appoint a successor to Judas? What was significant or necessary about having twelve apostles? What significance does it have to the church today? Some have suggested that having twelve apostles was significant because it represented the twelve tribes of Israel. That explanation does not seem solid. The church was not intended to be an organization outside and distinct of Judaism. The apostles were not intended to found "tribes" of believers which would supplant the twelve tribes of Israel.

So why did they feel the need to round the number back out to twelve? The only clue that we really have to this is the fact that Peter cited Psalm 109:8:

May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership.

Peter believed that Scripture required that "another take his place of leadership." He believed that this verse referred specifically to Judas and that it mandated that a successor be found for him. There did not seem to be anything urgent about keeping the number at twelve. We conclude this because not long after this the apostle James is martyred and he is not replaced. In fact, the majority of the apostles were eventually martyred, but successors were appointed for none of them. So what significance does "twelve apostles" have to the church today? Should the church today have twelve apostles? No.

Who was Matthias and what else do we know about him? In fact, Matthias is never mentioned in Scripture outside of Acts 1:23-26. That may seem strange, but remember that Andrew, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot are never mentioned again after Acts 1:26, either. This hardly means that they were insignificant or inactive. We just have no scriptural record of what they did (except we do know that Matthew did a bit of writing).

We do not know who Matthias was. We do not know what he did. We simply know that he was chosen to replace Judas.

### 3. The Coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

Acts 2:1-41

It is hard to assess the importance of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Would it be accurate to say that it is the most important event in the history of mankind since the creation? That is difficult to say. I would never want to minimize the significance of the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection, but I would suggest that those events climaxed in the coming of the Holy Spirit. When this happened, it ushered in a new order of relationship between Creator and creation. Perhaps it would be accurate to say that it restored the original order of relationship.

In the beginning, God walked with man in the Garden of Eden. That is the way he wanted it all along. The fall of man created a chasm between God and man. Our holy God could not exist in the presence of sinful man. The end result of this was that the presence of God was confined to the Holy of Holies in the temple, separated from man by the veil. When Jesus died on the cross, the veil was torn miraculously from top to bottom.

The sacrifice of Jesus took care of the sin problem. Those who would accept the benefit of the cross could once again dwell with the Spirit of God. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church, the individual believer once again had personal access to God.

God's plan of salvation did not stop at the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, or even the ascension. It reached its peak at Pentecost.

Recall from chapter 1 that Jesus instructed his followers to remain in Jerusalem until they had received the Holy Spirit. We infer from the text that the upper room became their headquarters until the Spirit came. They spent time in that room, praying and recovering from the events surrounding the crucifixion.

Consider the timing of the events. All of them coincided with the Jewish feasts laid out in Leviticus.

**Table 1 - Timing of Pentecost**

Feast	Timing	Jewish Significance	Significance in Christianity
Passover	14th day of Abib (first month of the year)	Observance of the event of the Passover in Exodus. Those who came under the protection of the blood of the sacrificial lamb were spared from death.	Jesus was crucified on Passover. He became our ultimate sacrificial lamb. Those who come under the protection of his blood have victory over death.
Firstfruits	The Sunday following Passover	Firstfruits was observed to celebrate the richness of the harvests that God gave the people once they were settled into the	The resurrection occurred on the day of Firstfruits. Jesus became the firstfruits of those who have fallen

		promised land.	asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:20)
Pentecost	Seven weeks after Firstfruits (It was 50 days after the Sabbath [Saturday] following Passover. The term "Pentecost" comes from the "50".)	Pentecost is the feast of the spring harvest (or first harvest). It included offerings of the first wheat harvest.	Pentecost was the first harvest of the church. It was on this day that Peter preached the sermon that brought 3000 new people into the church – the Spring harvest.

Pentecost occurred seven weeks, or forty-nine days after the resurrection. Acts 1 tells us that Jesus remained forty days on earth between the resurrection and the ascension. Thus there was only a little over a week when the believers remained huddled in the upper room waiting for the Holy Spirit to descend. Also note that Firstfruits (the day of the resurrection) was a Sunday, Pentecost was seven weeks after that, which puts Pentecost on a Sunday as well. It is easy to see why Sunday became the important day in the Christian calendar rather than the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday).

Pentecost was an important day on the Jewish calendar. Being one of the feasts of Leviticus, it was a time when people would have come to Jerusalem from all over the world. (Remember that this is after the period of Babylonian and Assyrian captivity. Jews were living all over the known world.)

When Acts 2 opens the believers are gathered together in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:2-12 says:

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

The Holy Spirit made a dramatic entrance. There was a sound like a mighty wind. Something that looked like "tongues of fire" rested on top of each of the who were gathered there (there is no indication that the manifestation was limited to the apostles). They began speaking in other languages.

There are (at least) three different phenomenon commonly called "speaking in tongues." This is one of them. In this case, the men (and perhaps women) supernaturally found themselves able to speak in natural languages that they have never learned. They were not speaking ecstatically. Some were speaking Hebrew, others Latin, others in the language of the Medes, the Egyptians,

etc. They were proclaiming the wonders of God in such a manner that each of the members of the multinational and multilingual crowd could understand what they were saying.<sup>1</sup>

A second form of speaking in tongues is that discussed in 1 Corinthians 12-14, e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:10, "to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues." Here, the Holy Spirit causes utterance in a language unknown to the hearers and to the speaker as well. This spiritual gift is akin to the gift of prophecy, with one distinction. When the Spirit gives this gift, it should be accompanied by a gift of interpretation. The Holy Spirit will cause someone else present to understand the meaning of the utterance, equipping him to interpret the message.

The third phenomenon that is often labeled "speaking in tongues" is that discussed in Romans 8:26 and other verses, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." This is also called "praying in the spirit" or "singing in the spirit." This is a private utterance to God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It requires no interpretation, because God already knows what it means.

The Holy Spirit does what makes sense in the context. At Pentecost, nobody would have been particularly impressed by ecstatic but unintelligible speech. What did happen grabbed their attention, however. These uneducated Galileans were miraculously speaking in other languages. God had their attention.

The people wanted to know what was going on. Peter said that prophecy was being fulfilled in their midst and then quoted Joel 2:28-32:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Having established the Scriptural basis for what was happening, Peter then preached the first great evangelistic sermon of the young church.

He testified:

- that Jesus died and God raised him from the dead.
- that Jesus, the descendant of David, perfectly fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of David.
- that, as promised, Jesus was pouring out his Holy Spirit on his followers.
- that Jesus – whom they had crucified – was the promised Messiah and the only hope of Israel.

This proclamation of the Gospel was accompanied by a demonstration of its power – specifically the speaking in other languages. God provided this miracle as a testimony to the truth of what

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<sup>1</sup> There has been some debate about how this actually occurred. Some have suggested that the men were all speaking Hebrew, but that the Holy Spirit enabled the people present to hear and understand the message as if it had been spoken in their native languages. Others have suggested that the men actually spoke in the other languages. My only response is "What difference does it make?" The end result is the same. A clearer interpretation of the text is that they actually spoke in the other languages.

Peter was saying. It pricked the hearts of those who heard it. They asked Peter what they should do. In Acts 2:38-41 he instructed them:

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call."

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

And thus was born the Church as we know it. Prior to this, there were about one hundred and twenty followers of Jesus left, cowering in the upper room. Their numbers were multiplied by twenty-five with this one sermon. Important also is the fact that those present that day were from all over the world. When the Pentecost celebration was over, they would go home and take their newfound faith with them. That day a sower scattered seed – all over the world. Three thousand seeds found good soil in many nations. Roots formed, blossoms followed, and fruit resulted.

What transformed Peter from the coward who denied Jesus three times to the bold evangelist at Pentecost? Forty days with the risen Christ and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Try it.

#### **4. Koinonia**

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Being a Jew implied a sense of belonging, but it was more a feeling of nationalism than family. These new followers of Jesus, however, had a real sense of identity with one another. They belonged to each other as members of a family belong to one another. They knew each other. They spent time together. They cared for the needs of one another, almost in a commune-type setting. The text says that they continued to meet daily in the temple courts. It may seem strange to think of this Christian church meeting right there inside the Jewish temple, but remember that these people did not identify themselves as Christians. They were Jews who happened to be followers of Jesus. The temple complex was the logical place for them to have their religious meetings. When they met together to proclaim the message of Jesus, the Holy Spirit made sure that the proclamation was accompanied by demonstration of the Kingdom. Signs and wonders accompanied their message.

So we see that they:

- devoted themselves to teaching.
- devoted themselves to one another.
- cared for each other's needs.
- praised God continually for the things that he was doing in their midst.
- saw signs and wonders of God empower their lives.

And the end result of this? "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." So maybe if we have churches where the people are devoted to teaching, are devoted to each other, care for each other's needs, praise God continually for the things that he does in their midst, and have the signs and wonders of God empower their lives, we would have churches that grow dramatically. Lost people in a hurting world long for such an experience. We can offer it to them. First, however, we must walk in it ourselves.

## 5. Peter Heals a Lame Man

Acts 3:1-4:31

Acts 3:1-8 says:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer – at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money.

Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.

He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

Thus Peter and John were used by God to perform a healing in the presence of a large crowd of people. The man who was healed was ecstatic. The people who witnessed the miracle were impressed because they had seen this man begging at the gate for years. A large crowd of people gathered and Peter used this opportunity to preach another sermon. He testified to the fact that:

- Jesus died and was raised from the dead.
- the healing that they just witnessed was through faith in Jesus – it was his ministry and his authority being exercised in the lives of his believers.
- Jesus perfectly fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and was the long-awaited Messiah. Those who rejected him would be cut off from God.

Again, we have a proclamation of the Kingdom of God accompanied by a demonstration of its power. It brought about two reactions.

First of all, many people believed and became followers of Jesus. The number of men who were believers increased to about five thousand that day.

Second, it aroused the anger of the Jewish leaders. The Sadducees in particular took offense at their teaching. One of the beliefs of the Sadducees was that there was no resurrection of the dead. What the apostles were teaching directly contradicted that.

They used their authority and had Peter and John arrested and held until morning. The next day the high priest, the elders, teachers, etc., met together and summoned Peter and John. They asked them what authority they had to do what they did. Peter used this opportunity to again

deliver a sermon. He firmly told them that he operated in the power and authority of the risen Jesus.

The Jewish leaders did not know exactly what to do about this. They knew that these men had been disciples of Jesus. They saw the courage of the men, in spite of the fact that their teacher had been executed just a little over seven weeks ago. They also knew that the crowds had witnessed a miracle performed by these men and thus their treatment of Peter and John would be quite visible to the masses. The biggest problem that they had was that the man who had been healed was there in their midst. They could not deny that the miracle had taken place.

They concluded that they would release Peter and John, but forbid them to speak any further about Jesus. They told this to the two men. Their response was that they had to do what God told them to do, even if it contradicted the orders of the Jewish leaders. The leaders threatened them a bit more and then let them go.

Peter and John went back to the other believers and told them what had happened. They remembered Psalm 2:1-2:

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.

They took comfort in the fact that the Scriptures had prophesied that they would encounter persecution. Indeed, Jesus himself had told them that they would encounter persecution for being faithful (see the Beatitudes and the Olivet Discourse). His words were coming true. They prayed that God would empower them and make them bold. They prayed that he would work signs and wonders through them, again giving them demonstration of the Kingdom to accompany their proclamation of the Kingdom. The text says that the Holy Spirit filled the place and the very room was shaken. The people were filled with the Spirit and went out and boldly proclaimed the Gospel.

## **6. Ananias and Sapphira**

Acts 4:32-5:11

We have already addressed the fact that the believers had a sense of community. They shared their resources in such a manner that nobody had need. This section continues on that theme.

From time to time, members of the community would sell possessions, such as land or houses, and give the proceeds to the apostles, to be used to care for the community. The section cites a particular individual who did this. His name was Joseph, and he was a Levite from Cyprus. People called him Barnabus, which means "Son of Encouragement." This is the first introduction that we have to Barnabus, who was a companion of Paul on his first missionary journey.

It is important to realize that nobody was forced to sell possessions and to give proceeds to the apostles. It was a voluntary act of love and service.

There was a couple in the fellowship, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. They sold a piece of property. With Sapphira's knowledge, Ananias went to the apostles and gave them part of the proceeds, but held back some for himself. There was nothing wrong with that. There was a problem, however. Ananias told the apostles – probably the entire congregation – that he was contributing the entire amount. There was only one reason that he would do this. He was seeking the admiration of men rather than obediently seeking the approval of God. When Ananias brought this to the apostles, Sapphira was not with him.

Peter had a word of knowledge about the situation. The Holy Spirit revealed to him what was going on. Acts 5:3-5 says:

Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.

One would assume that it is a bit of an understatement to say that "great fear seized all." It got their attention. Peter was probably as stunned by what happened as anyone. Once they got over the surprise, they carried him out and buried him.

About three hours later, Sapphira came in, with no idea of what had transpired. Acts 5:8-10 says:

Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

This is all reminiscent of a story in Joshua Chapter 7. When the children of Israel defeated the city of Jericho, God gave them specific instructions not to take any plunder from the city. A man named Achan could not handle the temptation and he took a few fineries that he found from the town. Joshua 7:24-26 tells what happened once the disobedience was discovered:

Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor.

Joshua said, "Why have you brought this trouble on us? The Lord will bring trouble on you today." Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day.

This seems like harsh punishment, particularly in light of the terrible sins of the nation that seemed to go unpunished later in history. The sin of Achan was dealt with swiftly and surely because the nation was new. The people were "in training" on how to be the people of God. At this critical juncture in their history, God had to make an example of the price of disobedience.

At the time that Ananias and Sapphira committed their sin, the church was new. The people were "in training" on how to be the people of God. At this critical juncture in the history of the church, God had to make an example of the price of disobedience to the Holy Spirit. Thus Ananias and Sapphira were dealt with swiftly and surely.

The lesson is simple and straightforward. Obey the leading of the Holy Spirit. Do good to seek the approval of God and not man. Do not lie to God; it is not a good strategy.

## 7. The Original Church Growth Seminar

Acts 5:12-42

Acts 5:12-16 says:

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

The followers of Jesus met regularly and openly in the temple complex. They ministered to anyone who sought their help, and people flocked to them because God punctuated their ministry with miracles – the demonstration of the Kingdom. Their empowered proclamation of the Gospel brought an increase to the Kingdom, as it always does.

The Jewish leaders did not take kindly to all of this. They had the apostles arrested, but at night an angel released them from prison. They promptly went back to the temple court and resumed their preaching. The next day the Jewish leaders sent to the prison to summon the apostles and were quite puzzled to discover that they were not there. Someone pointed out that they were out preaching again in the temple courts.

The apostles were summoned to a meeting of the Sanhedrin – the ruling body of Judaism. The high priest reminded them that they had been forbidden to preach about Jesus. The apostles reminded the high priest that they had stated plainly that they had to follow the leading of God and not of men. Peter looked the high priest in the eye and pointed out:

- The high priest and his “cronies” had executed Jesus.
- God had exalted Jesus and made him the Savior of Israel, bringing forgiveness for sins.
- The apostles are witnesses of these things. As well, the Holy Spirit testified to these things. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit had been given freely to those who follow Jesus.

This did not set well with the Sanhedrin. Peter had called them murderers. He continued to declare that Jesus – whom they had killed – was the Messiah. Furthermore he claimed to be endowed with the Holy Spirit, which up to that time had empowered only a few select men, such as David. To the Sanhedrin, all of this was arrogant blasphemy. Their response was a desire to execute the apostles.

A member of the Sanhedrin named Gamaliel stood up and brought some sanity to the meeting. He pointed out that if this movement was from God, then they had better join it. If not, then persecuting it would only cause it to spread. A better course of action would be to ignore it and let it rise or fall based on God's leading. He persuaded the Sanhedrin to let them go. Still, in a show of power they had the apostles flogged. Again they forbade the apostles to further preach about Jesus.

The apostles left the proceedings feeling honored to have been counted worthy to suffer for Jesus. They continued preaching and teaching the Gospel in the temple courts and the church continued to grow.

## 8. The First Deacons

Acts 6:1-7

Acts 6:1-4 says:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Remember that the believers are living a semi-communal lifestyle. Those who had resources contributed them to the apostles so that they could be used to care for the needy. The apostles personally administered the resources.

We see in this passage a bit of racial tension breaking out in the community. Grecian Jews (which were probably Gentile converts to Judaism who were now Christians) complained that their widows were not receiving the same sort of provisions as the Hebraic Jewish widows. They brought a complaint to the apostles.

This passage is a bit reminiscent of Exodus 18:13-23:

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws."

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

There was a point in the history of Israel when Moses tried to do everything himself. He was incapable of bearing this burden. On the advice of his father-in-law, he put a hierarchy of men in place to help him administer the affairs of the community. These men were selected on the basis of character. They were selected to serve.

In like manner, the apostles found themselves in a position where they could not do everything by themselves. Although the administration of benevolence was important, it was not the best

use of the apostles' time. The apostles had a special calling to ensure the spread of the Gospel. Others in the community could administer the service to the widows.

Thus they decided to select seven men. As was true in the selection of judges by Moses, the men were selected based on character. They looked for men full of the Spirit and wisdom. These were the first deacons. We discussed the meaning of the word "deacon" in Section 2.2, "The Replacement of Judas," on page 3. A deacon is a loving servant. The responsibility of these men was to wait tables – to ensure that the widows of the community received proper care. It was not a position of authority, but of service.

Acts 6:5 lists the men who were chosen:

- Stephen, who is identified as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit
- Philip
- Procorus
- Nicanor
- Timor
- Parmenas
- Nicolas from Antioch, who is identified as a convert to Judaism

Procorus, Nicanor, Timor, Parmenas, and Nicolas are never mentioned again in Scripture. We know nothing else about these men. There are a number of references to Philip in the remainder of Acts, but we are not sure whether they refer to Philip the apostle, Philip the deacon, or some other Philip altogether.

Stephen died in Acts Chapter 7, becoming the first known Christian martyr.

When the men were selected, the apostles prayed for them and laid hands on them. This sort of laying on of hands is a prayer that the Holy Spirit will equip the men – release gifting in them so that they can better serve the community. The deacons then offloaded administrative duties from the apostles so that the apostles could focus on the preaching of the Word of God.

The section concludes with Acts 6:7:

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

## **9. The Martyrdom of Stephen**

Acts 6:8-8:4

Stephen, the newly elected deacon, seemed to stand out among the believers. The power of God was evident in his words and deeds, and God worked signs and wonders through his ministry. He attracted enough attention to also attract the ire of the Sanhedrin (the ruling body of Judaism).

Some of the leaders of the Jews arranged for Stephen to be falsely arrested and tried. He was falsely accused of denouncing the temple, the law, Moses, and God himself. He was asked to defend himself.

The text says that when he responded, his face shone like an angel. Like Peter before him, Stephen used this opportunity to preach a sermon to his accusers. He began by tracing the history of the Jewish people. He said that:

- God originally called Abraham and promised him a land.
- He warned Abraham that his descendants would live as strangers in a country not their own and would be enslaved for four hundred years.
- God would lead them out of slavery into their own land and they would worship God there.
- Circumcision became the sign of the covenant and the covenant was passed down from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob to the twelve sons of Jacob.
- Out of jealousy, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Because of a famine, his family eventually followed him there. Eventually they became enslaved there.
- God raised up Moses as a Hebrew, growing up in the house of Pharaoh. Eventually he was forced to flee his home and go to a foreign land. Forty years later God appeared to him in a burning bush and called him into service. Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt and continued to lead them during forty years of wandering in the wilderness.
- God gave Moses the law to give to the people. The people were rebellious and did not follow the law. Even during their wandering in the desert, they made and worshipped a golden calf.
- Before Moses died, he told the people that God would send them another prophet like Moses from among their own people.
- Moses gave them the tabernacle as God's dwelling place among them. It remained until the time of David.
- Solomon built the temple as a permanent dwelling place for God among them.

The speech continues in Acts 7:48-53:

However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?" says the Lord. "Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?" You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

Stephen had moved out of the "history lesson" section of his speech to the "you stiff-necked and perverse, murdering people" section. His audience did not appreciate his assertions. The text says that they were furious at him.

Stephen, however, looked to heaven and saw a vision of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. Acts 7:56 says:

"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

The crowd rushed him, dragged him beyond the gates of the city, and proceeded to stone him to death. Acts 7:59-60 records Stephen's dying words: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them." It was much the same manner in which Jesus died.

On this day and with this event, persecution against the church erupted. It was no longer safe for the believers to associate freely in the temple. For the first time, their words and actions could lead to death. The nature of being a follower of Jesus changed that day.

This section introduces another new character. Acts 7:58-8:3 says:

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul... And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out

against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

A young man named Saul was a fervent Jew. In an effort to purge the world of this unhealthy influence, he began to champion the cause of official persecution against this religious movement. He probably believed that he was serving God, but his desire was to destroy the church. Under the authority of the Sanhedrin, he took it upon himself to imprison men and women for being followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

Interestingly enough, this attempt to snuff out this movement only caused it to spread. The section concludes by pointing out that people fled for their safety – were scattered – but they were faithful to preach the Gospel wherever they went. Without the persecution, people would probably have stayed comfortably in Jerusalem. They would have built church buildings with big steeples and family recreation buildings. They would have had stewardship drives and Wednesday night suppers. They would have formed committees to talk about the Great Commission.

Unfortunately they did not have that luxury. Instead they had to go out and do the Great Commission.

## **10. Philip in Samaria**

Acts 8:5-25

A believer by the name of Philip was affected by the persecution that erupted with the martyrdom of Stephen. This could be the apostle Philip, the deacon Philip, or another Philip altogether. The text does not make it clear which Philip this is. Whoever he was, he too was scattered by the persecution. He left Judah and found himself in Samaria.

As was true of these scattered believers, he preached the Gospel wherever he went. The people in Samaria were receptive of his message. Philip's proclamation of the Gospel was accompanied by signs and wonders. People were healed and demons were cast out. There was great excitement about what was happening.

In particular, there was a man by the name of Simon who was a sorcerer by trade. Apparently he was quite clever in his sorcery and had impressed the people. He had a great following. When the people saw Philip, however, they turned from following Simon and became followers of Jesus. Simon himself was impressed by the power of Jesus as demonstrated in Philip's ministry. He, too became a believer. These Samaritans were baptized.

This outreach of Philip's posed an interesting situation to the young church. Up until this time, the church had been a fraternity within Judaism. The members of the church were practicing Jews. Now Samaritans – who were considered unclean by the Jews – were coming into the church. How should the church deal with this?

In spite of the persecution in Jerusalem, it was still the headquarters of the church. When word reached Jerusalem that these Samaritans were becoming followers of Jesus, Peter and John were dispatched to Samaria to assess the situation. Acts 8:15-17 says:

When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

There has been a debate in the church for some time over the question, "When does a believer receive the Holy Spirit?" Does the Holy Spirit come on a believer at the time he becomes a believer or is it a separate event? Although it is not a widely-held belief, there are those in charismatic circles who suggest that the salvation process is not complete until the believer has manifested the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues.

Most Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is appropriated to the believer the instant he becomes a believer. If this is indeed true, how does one reconcile it with Acts 8:15-17? In this passage, it clearly states that there was a group of believers, baptized and following Jesus, but the Holy Spirit did not come upon them until sometime later when the apostles laid hands on them.

There are (at least) three possible explanations for this passage:

1. The normal mode is for the Holy Spirit to come upon the believer as soon as he or she becomes a believer. The situation in this passage is not normal, however. Samaritans coming into the church was a major transition. It would have raised many questions in the minds of Jewish believers. In order to demonstrate to existing church members that it was the will of God to extend the Kingdom beyond Jewish walls, these Samaritans received the Holy Spirit directly through the laying-on of hands of the apostles.
1. A second possible explanation is that receiving the Holy Spirit is indeed a separate experience from becoming a believer and the norm is for it to occur at a separate time. It is a real stretch, however, to translate this into an doctrine that says your salvation is not complete until you have spoken in tongues. Although Scripture shows that some people speak in tongues when they receive the Holy Spirit, there is no Scriptural or experiential justification to say that this is a universal experience.
1. A third possible explanation is that there are two different ways in which the Holy Spirit is received. When a person becomes a believer, the Holy Spirit becomes part of his or her life instantly. The salvation experience is complete. The person has available to him or her the full benefit of the Holy Spirit. There are times, however, when the Spirit comes upon believers in power. This experience occurs to people who are already believers. It is often called the "filling of the Spirit" or the "baptism of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit ministers to a person in power such that physical phenomenon take place, which may include shaking, falling, laughing, speaking in tongues, on any of a number of other phenomenon. This is a repeatable experience in the life of a believer and not a one-time event. In the Acts 8:15-17 passage, this group of believers had the initial appropriation of the Holy Spirit, but none of them had experienced the subsequent filling. This occurred when the apostles laid hands upon them, perhaps (as suggested in explanation 1) as a sign from God to the church that the Samaritans were welcome into the Kingdom.

To me, the third explanation is the most plausible and it is the one that jives with personal experience.

Whatever happened, the Holy Spirit came upon the Samaritans in such a way that there was physical evidence that it took place. The text does not indicate what sort of manifestation occurred. Whatever it was, it was powerful enough to impress Simon, the reformed sorcerer. He saw this power as something that would be of great use to a man of his background. He had made a living by impressing people with the power of magic. This was better. He really wanted to be able to lay hands on people and have them react like they did when the apostles laid hands

on them. In fact, he offered to buy this power from the apostles – indicating that he did not have a clue about what was actually happening.

Acts 8:20-24 records what happened when he asked to buy this power:

Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

The desire to buy or sell the free gifts of God has never ceased. In fact, the concept has entered the English language. The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition (@ 1991 by Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston) defines "simony" as "the buying or selling of ecclesiastical pardons, offices, or emoluments." The term was coined after the incident above, being named after the character "Simon." The fact is that people throughout history have tried to turn the free gifts of God into personal gain. Recent church history has given us far too many examples of this. God does not like it.

This section concludes by noting that Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel throughout Samaria on their way.

The Kingdom had grown beyond the walls of Judaism to include the Samaritans. These people were also descendants of Jacob. God had not forgotten them.

## **11. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch**

Acts 8:26-40

Acts 8 continues with the experiences of Philip. An angel directed him to go to a road that goes between Jerusalem and Gaza. Once there, he was directed to go strike up a conversation with a particular man. This man turned out to be an Ethiopian. In fact, he was an important official (a eunuch) in the Ethiopian government, in charge of the queen's treasury. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship and was on his way back home.

One might wonder why an Ethiopian had been in Jerusalem worshipping. The Jews were not known for their outreach programs. Had they sent missionaries down to Ethiopia? How did this man come to know about God such that he would want to go to Jerusalem to worship?

We are not sure how this man came to know God. There is group of Ethiopian Jews today who claim to be direct descendants of Solomon (many have recently migrated to Israel). Based upon the exploits of Solomon as recorded in the Bible, it is entirely plausible that he could have fathered a significant number of children by Ethiopian mothers. This man may have been a Jew by heritage rather than a convert to Judaism.

Whoever this man was, his devotion to God was strong enough to drive him to travel to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. As he was riding back in his chariot, he was reading the Scriptures. This was the setting when Philip approached the man.

The Holy Spirit directed Philip to approach the chariot. He heard the man reading from Isaiah 53. Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading. The man said that he did not and invited Philip to join him in the chariot so that Philip could explain the prophecy to him. Philip told the man about Jesus and how he fulfilled the role of the suffering servant, described in the Isaiah passage.

Upon hearing what Philip told him, the man wanted to become a follower of Jesus. They came to a point where there was a body of water – perhaps a river or a lake – and the man asked Philip to baptize him.

After baptizing the eunuch, the Holy Spirit transported Philip miraculously to the city of Azotus. This is a very unusual miracle. One moment Philip was there and the next he was somewhere else. It is a miracle that some still today claim to have experienced in unusual and select circumstances, typically to deliver someone from a dangerous situation. There is no indication of what purpose it served in the life of Philip. After being transported, he traveled to Caesarea, preaching the Gospel wherever he went.

The eunuch went back to Ethiopia, rejoicing as he went. Although the text does not say, it is reasonable to assume that this man was instrumental in spreading the Gospel in Ethiopia because of his position of influence in that nation.

## **12. The Conversion of Saul**

Acts 9:1-31

The history of the world changed in Acts Chapter 9.

In Chapters 7-8 we were introduced to a man named Saul. This young man had a fervor and a heart to serve God. As best he knew how, he was out trying to win the favor and the approval of his creator. At the time, he carried this out by crusading for the purity of Judaism. Judaism needed to be ridded of this radical movement which espoused Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. Saul took it upon himself to spearhead the effort to purge the world of this movement. It was his persecution that caused the disciples to scatter from Jerusalem.

At the beginning of Chapter 9, Saul went to the high priest and asked him for a letter granting Saul authority to go to Damascus and to arrest any followers of Jesus there. They would be brought as prisoners to Jerusalem.

One might wonder why the high priest – a clerical figure and not a political authority – in Jerusalem, which was part of Judea, had the power to grant Saul the authority to arrest people in Damascus, which was in Syria. This would be a little like the president of the Texas Southern Baptists sending one of his deacons to arrest Presbyterians in Oklahoma. In fact, the high priest did not really have political authority. There was an agreement, however, between Rome and the Jews that Rome would let the Jewish authorities operate with a degree of autonomy as long as there was peace. The letters that the high priest wrote were to the synagogues in Damascus, not to the civil authorities. The high priest requested the leaders of the synagogues in Damascus to hand over to Saul any followers of Jesus in their congregations.

Saul took his orders and headed off to Damascus. Acts 9:3-7 tells what happened along the way:

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

God had his attention.

Saul stood up, but when he opened his eyes he discovered that he was blind. This man who had been trying to serve God in spiritual blindness now found himself in physical blindness. His companions led him to Damascus and he remained there for three days without eating or drinking.

There lived in Damascus a believer by the name of Ananias (obviously a different Ananias than the one in Chapter 5). God appeared to Ananias and told him to go to a certain house in Damascus. There he would find Saul of Tarsus. The Spirit said that Saul had been given a vision that a man named Ananias would come and pray for him and restore his sight.

Ananias was quite concerned at this information. He knew about Saul. He knew that Saul had come there specifically to persecute the church. He expressed this concern to God. His reply is found in Acts 9:15-16:

Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.

Saul would become a messenger for the Gospel and a special ambassador to the Gentiles. He would suffer for the sake of Jesus.

Ananias did as the Spirit directed. He went to the house. He prayed for Saul and something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. His blindness – physical and spiritual – was gone. He got up and was baptized, becoming one of the followers of Jesus that he formerly persecuted. He ate to regain his strength and spent some time with the other believers in Damascus.

Saul immediately took the zeal and energy that he once used to persecute the church and used it to serve Jesus instead. He began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Messiah. His audience was surprised and somewhat skeptical. People knew that this was the same Saul who persecuted the church. Those who were believers suspected that he was pretending to be a follower of Jesus in order to gain entrance into the fellowship and cause further havoc. Those who hated the church hated Saul for joining the enemy. He caught grief from both sides.

Saul persevered, however. His preaching became more powerful and he began to convince many that Jesus was the Son of God. The Jews who were once his allies now saw him as a turncoat and a threat. They conspired to kill him. Saul found out about their plans. His followers lowered him in a basket through an opening in the city wall of Damascus at night and he escaped.

After leaving Damascus, Saul returned to Jerusalem. There he tried to befriend the apostles, but they did not trust him and were afraid of him. Barnabus befriended Saul. He also interceded for Saul. He brought him to the apostles and told them Saul's story. They accepted Saul as a disciple and he fellowshiped among them for a time. While in Jerusalem, he continued to preach about Jesus. Some Grecian Jews there tried to kill him. To protect him, some of the

believers took Saul to Caesarea and sent him back to Tarsus, his hometown (which is now in the modern nation of Turkey).

For a time, the church enjoyed peace. It was nurtured by the Holy Spirit and grew in numbers and in faith.

### **13. Peter Heals and Raises the Dead**

Acts 9:32-43

Peter continued to travel about. He came to the city of Lydda and encountered a man who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Peter spoke healing to him and the man was healed.

He then went to the city of Joppa, on the Mediterranean. This is a suburb of the modern city of Tel Aviv (the suburb is now called Jaffa). There was a woman there named Tabitha (also called Dorcas) who had just died. The disciples in Joppa learned that Peter was in Lydda, which was not far away (it is the modern city of Lod, between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem). Peter came to Joppa and the friends of Tabitha took him to the room where her body had been laid. He sent the people out of the room and began to pray for her. Then he turned to her and told her to get up. She did so. He took her downstairs and presented her to the believers, alive and well. As a result of this miracle, many people in Joppa became followers of Jesus (the proclamation accompanied by the demonstration of the Kingdom has power).

Peter remained in Joppa for a time and stayed in the home of Simon the Tanner. (Today in Jaffa the traditional home of Simon the Tanner remains and may be visited.)

### **14. Peter and the Conversion of Cornelius, A Gentile**

Acts 10:1-11:18

Caesarea is a city on the Mediterranean Sea in the northern part of Israel. In the first century it was a major city, being the Roman capital of Israel.

In the first century, there was a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius who lived in Caesarea. He was a Gentile, but he worshipped the God of the Jews. The text says that he and his family were devout people who gave to those in need and who prayed regularly to God. God chose to pour out his favor on this man and gave him a vision. One afternoon Cornelius was visited by an angel. The angel told him that his prayers and his gifts to the poor had pleased God. He instructed Cornelius to send someone to Joppa, to the home of Simon the tanner. There they would find a man by the name of Simon Peter. They should bring him back to Cornelius.

Cornelius did exactly as the angel instructed. He sent three men to Joppa to find Peter.

Meanwhile Peter was off minding his own business in Joppa. He was serving the Lord as a good Jew who was a follower of Jesus. Like any good Jew, he had nothing to do with Gentiles. According to his understanding, they were unclean and were to be avoided. Somehow God had to let Peter know that all of this was about to change.

The next day Peter was on the roof, praying. That may seem very strange to us, but homes were built in that time with flat roofs. Stairways were built to the roofs so that people could go up there and sit. Especially in the evenings, the roof was a cool place to relax. Visitors today to the

traditional home of Simon the tanner can go up to the roof of the house. It overlooks the Mediterranean and benefits from the cool breezes that blow in from the Sea.

Acts 10:10-16 tells what happened to Peter when he was praying:

He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Leviticus 11 spells out the dietary laws for the Jews. There are a number of animals that the people were forbidden to eat. In Peter's vision, these animals (actually it could have been a mixture of clean and unclean animals) were presented to him and a voice told him to kill and eat the animals. Peter objected, since his religious training forbade him to do so. The voice replied "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Why was God telling Peter to eat animals that God's own law forbade him to eat? The dietary law, as well as the laws regarding ceremonial cleanliness, sacrifice, etc., were given to the Jews to help them deal with the sin condition. Jesus fulfilled those laws and defeated the sin condition. These requirements no longer had any hold over the followers of Jesus. Believers should live in victory over sin, not under the requirements of the law regarding the sin condition. These very laws would have restricted Jewish believers from associating freely with Gentiles.

As Peter was contemplating the meaning of the vision, these three unclean Gentiles appeared at his door. The Holy Spirit spoke to Peter and told him that the three men were coming for him and that he should not hesitate to go with them.

Peter came down from the roof and greeted the men. They told him why they had come. Peter invited the three men into the home to be his guests – an invitation that a Jew would not issue to a Gentile. The next day they headed back to Caesarea, accompanied by some of the believers from Joppa.

When Peter arrived at the home of Cornelius he found it to be full of friends and relatives that Cornelius had gathered for the purpose of meeting Peter and hearing what he had to say. Peter told them that a Jew would not normally enter the house of a Gentile, but that God had told him not to consider any man unclean. He asked why Cornelius had sent for him.

Cornelius told Peter about his vision and that an angel had instructed him to send for Peter. Peter realized that God was knocking down the Jewish walls of the church and extending the Kingdom to the Gentiles. Peter spoke in Acts 10:34-43:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and

caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

While Peter was speaking to the people, the Holy Spirit fell on those who were listening. The believers from Joppa who had come with Peter were astonished to see these Gentiles displaying the phenomenon of the Holy Spirit, even speaking in tongues. Peter saw to it that they were all baptized. He remained with them for several days.

Word reached Jerusalem about what had happened. There was an instant negative reaction. They had already grappled with the issue of letting unclean Samaritans into the church. Now Peter had gone all the way, baptizing Gentiles. Was nothing sacred? Were there no longer any standards? At least Samaritans observed circumcision. What were they going to do about these Gentiles?

Peter went to Jerusalem to address the concerns. He told them about the vision that he had. He told them how the Holy Spirit had instructed him to go with the men to Caesarea. He told them about Cornelius' visitation by an angel. He told them how the Holy Spirit fell upon the people as he spoke. Acts 11:18 says:

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

The church started out as a Jewish fraternity. In time, God added Samaritan believers. In spite of the tension between Samaritans and Jews, Samaritans were descendants of Jacob. They revered the books of Moses. They practiced circumcision. They were distant cousins of the Jews and so the Jewish Christians could somehow rationalize their acceptance into the church.

With the conversion of the household of Cornelius, things changed. Throughout history, God's purpose had been to reconcile the world – all of it – to himself. The Jews were chosen to be a nation of the priests, teaching the rest of the world about God. They had resisted that mission and had failed to carry out their purpose. Eventually God chose one from among the Jews – his own Son – to fulfill the task that had been given to the nation. With the baptism of the household of Cornelius, the Kingdom of God began to leak out to the non-Jewish world.

It had to happen, because it was God's will. It would soon pose problems for the young church. At this point, they still believed that following Jesus was a Jewish activity. Thus a believer needed to be a practicing Jew – circumcised, observing dietary law, etc. Absorbing these uncircumcised Gentiles was going to be a task. God still had some work to do on their understanding of things. It would come.

## **15. Barnabus and Saul in Antioch**

Acts 11:19-30

Acts 11:19-21 says:

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also,

telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Again, the inclination of most believers was to carry the Gospel only to Jews. There were some who began to preach to Greeks (Gentiles) in Antioch. Antioch is a city north of Israel, in Syria. A great number of people – including a great number of Gentiles – became followers of Jesus.

The church leaders in Jerusalem heard about what was happening in Antioch and felt like they had better dispatch someone to keep an eye on the situation (they still did not know how to deal with these Gentiles and wanted to control that situation). They sent Barnabus to take charge of the situation.

When Barnabus arrived, he was pleased with what he found. He sensed God's presence among these believers. His desire was to encourage and build up this community. He also felt that he could use some help, so he thought of an old friend.

Years earlier Saul had been sent back to Tarsus for his own protection. As a new believer, he had a zeal and a fervor for God that had impressed Barnabus. Barnabus probably wondered whether or not Saul still had the fire in him. He knew that Saul's zeal needed to be focused and unleashed. Thus Barnabus traveled to Tarsus, found Saul, and brought him to Antioch, where this young and largely Gentile church needed help.

Barnabus and Saul remained with the church in Antioch for an entire year, teaching among the people there. Acts 11:26 says that it was at Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians," a term which means "little Christs."

At some point during that year, a prophet by the name of Agabus traveled to Antioch from Jerusalem. While he was there, the Holy Spirit prompted him to prophesy that a famine would break out over the entire Roman world.

The believers in Antioch began contributing regularly to the needs of the believers in Judea. One might wonder why. If the famine broke out over the entire Roman world, then why were the believers in Syria in a position to support the believers in Judea? Both are in the Roman world. Both would have been experiencing famine. It is possible that the famine was worse in Judea than in Syria. It is also possible that the persecution experienced by believers in Judea cut them off from support systems (welfare of some kind) that were available to believers in Syria. The text does not really address this question. We simply know that both groups would have been in a state of need and we assume that the people in Judea were in more dire need than those in Syria. Despite their own need the people in Syria contributed to the needs of the people in Judea.

The outcome, however, was that the believers in Antioch (again, largely Gentile) began contributing regularly to the needs of the believers in Judea (almost entirely Jewish). The famine may have been necessary to teach these Jews that the Gentiles were brothers that they needed. Putting them in a position where their lives depended upon the faithfulness of these Gentile believers must have reshaped their attitudes about the worthiness of the Gentiles.

## **16. James is Martyred, Peter is Arrested**

Acts 12:1-18

At the beginning of Chapter 12, persecution against the church erupted once again. Herod Agrippa I was the king of Palestine. He had arrested James the apostle (the brother of John)

and had put him to death. The Jewish leadership expressed great appreciation for this, and Herod thought he had found a way to appease his subjects. He intended to continue this persecution.

Next on his list was Peter. He had Peter arrested during the time of Passover. His intention was to execute him after the Passover celebration had concluded. In the mean time, Peter was kept in prison, guarded by Roman soldiers. By the way, the penalty to a Roman soldier for letting a prisoner escape was death, with no questions asked.

The believers in Jerusalem were praying for Peter's safety. Peter was in prison, sleeping between two soldiers and bound with chains. Two sentries guarded the entrance to the prison. It was not a very hopeful situation.

God answers prayer. An angel appeared to Peter. A bright light shone in his cell. The angel woke Peter and told him to get up. The chains fell from his body. The angel told Peter to put on his clothes and shoes and to follow the angel out of the prison.

Peter did as he was told, but he had no idea what was happening to him. He assumed he was having a vision of some kind. Following the angel, Peter strolled right past the guards and straight through the iron gates, which opened as he approached them. The angel escorted him a safe distance from the prison and then disappeared.

It was only at this point that Peter figured out what was happening; he was free! He went to the home of a woman named Mary, who was the mother of John Mark (the author of the Gospel of Mark and a traveling companion of Saul and Barnabus). Believers were gathered there at that time, praying for Peter's release.

Peter knocked on the door of the home. A girl named Rhoda answered the door. She recognized Peter's voice on the other side of the door and became so excited that she ran back to tell everyone that Peter was there – without opening the door to let him in. When she told everyone that Peter was at the door, they told her that she was crazy (funny how we can pray for things but not believe that God would make them happen). Peter, still outside, kept knocking on the door. Someone finally let him in and all of the people were astounded to find him out of prison.

Acts 12:17 says:

Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

The "James" referred to in this passage is James, the half-brother of Jesus and the author of the Book of James. James the apostle had been executed. James the half-brother of Jesus was now a major figure in the church in Jerusalem. As an authority of the church, Peter wanted to make sure that he was informed of what had transpired.

Knowing that the Romans might still try to arrest and execute him, Peter left "for another place."

The section concludes with Acts 12:18:

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter.

You had better believe that this caused "no small commotion" for the soldiers.

## 17. The Death of Herod Agrippa I

Acts 12:19-23

Herod did not fool around. When he figured out that Peter was gone he had the guards executed. Herod then went to Caesarea, the Roman capital of Palestine.

One day he was dealing with some people from Tyre and Sidon. Acts 12:21-23 says:

On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

It is hard to say exactly what it looks like when "immediately" one is struck down, eaten by worms, and dies. It does not sound pretty. The details are not that important, however.

Herod was struck down because he let men praise him as if he were a god. He took praise that belonged to God. The fact is, however, that this was not uncommon. Regents during that time often believed themselves to be divine. Why is it that God struck down Herod for this and let other people get away with it?

It is hard to say. God is God and he does what he wants. Every pompous king with a deity complex deserved the same fate. Who knows how many of them met a similar end for similar behavior? God calls us to account on his own timetable. Herod's was up. The fact that he had begun to make martyrs of believers could have accelerated this.

## 18. The Emergence of Paul

Acts 12:24-25

Acts 12:24-25 says:

But the word of God continued to increase and spread. When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

With this passage, the book of Acts primarily becomes a chronicle of the missionary activities of Saul, who assumes the name of Paul in the next chapter. His early partners in ministry are Barnabas and the young man John Mark.

The events that we have seen thus far have effectively given birth to a church that penetrated the world.

- The Holy Spirit empowered believers at Pentecost, equipping them to deliver to the world a proclamation of the Kingdom of God accompanied by a demonstration of the power of the Kingdom.
- Through this proclamation and demonstration, the numbers of believers increased dramatically.
- Growth in numbers caused a hierarchy of servants to be put in place to administer the church properly.

- Persecution broke out against believers. Martyrdom became a reality. This caused believers to “leave the nest.” Fleeing for safety, believers left Jerusalem and spread out over the Roman world, taking the message of the Gospel with them as they traveled.
- Samaritans were added to the Kingdom.
- Gentiles were added to the Kingdom.
- Saul was called by God to be a missionary, particularly to the Gentiles.
- The church in Antioch of Syria became an important base for Christianity. It was there that believers were first called Christians.

The man Paul would become a world-traveling ambassador for Christ. His writings would give definition to the important doctrines of the church. His tireless efforts would cause the church to become a worldwide force that survives and changes the world even today.

## 19. Topical Index

Agabus.....	27
Ananias.....	14, 23
Antioch.....	27
Apostle.....	5
Apostolic Ministry.....	5
Ascension.....	2
Baptism of the Holy Spirit.....	21
Barnabus.....	14, 27, 29
Casting Lots.....	7
Christians, Name.....	27
Cornelius.....	25
Deacons.....	5, 17
Dietary Laws.....	25
Disciples.....	5
Ethiopian Eunuch.....	22
Filling of the Holy Spirit.....	21
Firstfruits.....	9
Gamaliel.....	16
Herod Agrippa I.....	28, 29
Holy Spirit.....	8, 15, 20
Baptism.....	21
Filling.....	21
James.....	3, 28
John.....	13, 20
Judas Iscariot.....	3
Jude.....	3
Luke.....	1
Mark.....	28, 29
Matthias.....	8
Moses.....	17
Passover.....	9
Paul.....	29
Pentecost.....	8, 9
Peter.....	11, 13, 20
Raising the Dead.....	24
Philip.....	17, 20, 22
Samaria.....	20
Sanhedrin.....	16, 18
Sapphira.....	14
Saul.....	19, 22, 27, 29
Conversion.....	22
Stephen.....	17, 18
Tarsus.....	24
Theophilus.....	1
Tongues.....	10, 20

## 20. Index of Scripture References

### SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

1 Chronicles 24:31-----	7
1 Chronicles 24:5-----	7
1 Chronicles 25:8-----	7
1 Chronicles 26:13-----	7
1 Chronicles 26:14-----	7
1 Chronicles 26:16-----	7
1 Corinthians 12:10-----	10
1 Corinthians 12-14-----	10
1 Corinthians 15:3-8-----	3
2 Timothy 4:11-----	1
Acts 1-----	2
Acts 1:1-----	1
Acts 1:11-----	2
Acts 1:1-11-----	2
Acts 1:12-----	3
Acts 1:12-26-----	3
Acts 1:13-----	3
Acts 1:14-----	3
Acts 1:18-19-----	3
Acts 1:21-22-----	4, 7
Acts 1:23-26-----	8
Acts 1:25-----	4, 5
Acts 1:4-5-----	2
Acts 1:8-----	2
Acts 10:10-16-----	25
Acts 10:1-11:18-----	24
Acts 10:34-43-----	26
Acts 11:18-----	26
Acts 11:19-21-----	27
Acts 11:19-30-----	27
Acts 11:26-----	27
Acts 12:1-18-----	28
Acts 12:17-----	28
Acts 12:18-----	29
Acts 12:19-23-----	29
Acts 12:21-23-----	29
Acts 12:24-25-----	29
Acts 2:1-41-----	8
Acts 2:2-12-----	10
Acts 2:38-41-----	11
Acts 2:42-47-----	12
Acts 3:1-4:31-----	12
Acts 3:1-8-----	12
Acts 4:32-5:11-----	14
Acts 5:12-16-----	15

Acts 5:12-42	15
Acts 5:3-5	14
Acts 5:8-10	15
Acts 6:1-4	16
Acts 6:1-7	16
Acts 6:7	18
Acts 7:48-53	19
Acts 7:56	19
Acts 7:58-8:3	19
Acts 7:59-60	19
Acts 8:15-17	20, 21
Acts 8:20-24	21
Acts 8:26-40	22
Acts 8:5-25	20
Acts 9:1-31	22
Acts 9:15-16	23
Acts 9:32-43	24
Acts 9:3-7	23
Colossians 4:14	1
Exodus 18:13-23	17
Ezekiel 21:21	8
Isaiah 53	22
Job 6:27	8
Joel 2:28-32	11
Joel 3:3	8
John 17:6-18	6
Joshua 18:10	7
Joshua 18:6	7
Joshua 18:8	7
Joshua 7:24-26	15
Leviticus 11	25
Leviticus 16:8	7
Luke 1:1-4	1
Luke 11:49	5
Luke 17:5	5
Luke 22:14	5
Luke 24:10	5
Luke 6:13	5
Luke 9:10	5
Mark 3:14	5
Mark 3:21	3
Mark 6:30	5
Matthew 10:2	5
Matthew 27:5-8	3
Nehemiah 10:34	7
Nehemiah 11:1	7
Obadiah 1:11	8
Philemon 24	1
Psalms 109:8	4, 8
Psalms 2:1-2	14
Psalms 22:18	8
Psalms 69	4

