

THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

Chapter 28: New Beginnings

Key Question: How does the Holy Spirit work to bring a harvest of people to God?

The Holy Spirit Arrives

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When Jesus spoke in the temple during Passion Week, throughout Palestine wheat stalks were bowing under heavy seed heads. He said, “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”³³⁸

On Friday, the Kernel died. On Sunday, HE AROSE.

Over the next forty days, Jesus appeared to over 500 people chosen to witness his resurrection and tell others about it.³³⁹ These put their faith in him, and the Kernel of wheat which had returned to life produced seeds.

Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for a special gift.

1. (a) For what did Jesus tell them to wait (Acts 1:4–5)? (b) Why did they need this gift (1:8)? (c) What does this teach us about the Holy Spirit? (d) Where would the witnesses of his resurrection testify about what they’d seen (1:8)? (e) What have you witnessed Jesus do in your life?

Then Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives into heaven before the apostles’ eyes.³⁴⁰ The apostles returned to Jerusalem to pray with 120 other believers gathered there.³⁴¹

³³⁸ John 12:24.

³³⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:6.

³⁴⁰ Luke 24:50–51. Bethany was on the Mount of Olives.

On Sunday ten days later, Jews from all surrounding nations³⁴² gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost³⁴³ by offering God a portion of the grain they'd harvested between Passover and Pentecost. The believers whom Jesus had harvested between Passover and Pentecost gathered too, and bowing in prayer, offered themselves to God.

2. (a) What happened when Jesus baptized his followers with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–3)? (b) Who enabled them to speak in the languages of the people within hearing (2:4)? (c) What did the Jews visiting from other nations hear (2:11)?

Peter, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, stood and addressed the crowd. Three thousand people turned to Jesus that day. The harvest grew.

The Lame Man Healed

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The Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to do more than preach powerfully. One day Peter healed a well-known lame man. As a crowd quickly gathered, Peter spoke.

3. (a) How did Peter explain what happened (Acts 3:12, 16)? (b) What can we learn from this? (c) Why did God heal the man (3:13)?

³⁴¹ Acts 1:15.

³⁴² After the exile officially ended, the majority of Jews chose not to return to Palestine.

³⁴³ Jews celebrated this feast fifty days after Passover. It was a day of thanksgiving marking the end of the grain harvest. It was also called the day of first fruits, for they offered God new grain from the harvest taken between Passover and Pentecost. See Leviticus 23:15–22; Numbers 28:26–31.

Peter said this fulfilled prophecy,³⁴⁶ for Jesus was “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone”—the most important stone of the building.

7. (a) What else did Peter say about Jesus’ name (4:12)? (b) What can we learn from this? (c) How might you explain what the Bible teaches to someone who says all religions lead to salvation?

Though the Jewish leaders couldn’t deny the lame man could walk, they refused to believe Peter’s explanation. The seed of the gospel fell on the path where it couldn’t take root.³⁴⁷ They commanded the apostles to stop teaching in Jesus’ name.

The Church Persecuted

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The disciples prayed for boldness and miracles, and received both.³⁴⁸ The miracles attracted crowds, but the sight of the crowds infuriated the jealous Sadducees.³⁴⁹

The Sadducees jailed the apostles, but an angel freed them that night, saying, “Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life.”³⁵⁰ They obeyed.

The Sadducees ordered the apostles before the Sanhedrin and demanded to know why they had disobeyed their orders to cease teaching in Jesus’ name.

8. How did the apostles respond to the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:29)?

³⁴⁶ Psalm 118:22.

³⁴⁷ Matthew 13:19.

³⁴⁸ Acts 4:23–31.

³⁴⁹ The Sadducees were aristocratic priests who did not believe the dead could be resurrected and whose teachings were therefore in conflict with the apostles’ message.

³⁵⁰ Acts 5:19.

When the apostles proclaimed Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation to God's right hand, many called for their death, but they settled for flogging the apostles.

9. (a) How did the apostles react (5:41–42)? (b) If possible, describe a time you chose to obey God rather than men. If you suffered for it, write out a response similar to the apostles'. (c) Prayerfully consider if there is anything you're resisting God about out of fear of retribution.

The church continued to grow over the next few years. The apostles expanded the church leadership to include more godly men, such as Stephen.

10. (a) What did Stephen do (Acts 6:8)? (b) Why were the Jews who argued with him no match for Stephen (6:10)? (c) What does this teach us about the Holy Spirit? (d) Briefly describe a way the Holy Spirit has helped you share the gospel.

The defeated debaters found liars willing to accuse Stephen of blasphemy. Standing before the Sanhedrin, Stephen reminded them of the Israelites' history of persecuting prophets.

11. (a) Whom did Stephen say these Jewish leaders were like (Acts 7:51)? (b) What were they doing to the Holy Spirit (7:51)? (c) How should Stephen's next words have been a warning (7:52)?

The Jewish leaders stopped listening to Stephen.

12. (a) How did the Holy Spirit prepare Stephen for what was about to happen (7:55–56)?
(b) Describe a time the Holy Spirit strengthened you.

Furious, the Jewish leaders dragged Stephen out of Jerusalem and stoned him to death.

Saul

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After Stephen’s martyrdom, the Jewish leaders waged war against the church.

13. (a) What happened the day Stephen died (Acts 8:1, 4–5)? (b) How did the persecution further the fulfillment of Jesus’ command to them (see question 1d)? (c) Describe a difficulty in your life which brought a greater good.

The harvest field grew.

Meanwhile, Saul—a young, zealous Jew who had witnessed Stephen’s death—set out to destroy the church. He searched door to door for Christians and imprisoned all he found, sending many to death.³⁵¹

About AD 35, Saul’s life changed.

³⁵¹ Acts 26:9–11.

14. (a) What happened to Saul as he traveled to Damascus³⁵² to persecute Christians (Acts 9:3–6)?
(b) When people persecute Christians, whom else are they persecuting (9:4–5)? (c) How can remembering this help when we are persecuted for our faith in Jesus?

The heavenly light blinded Saul, and in that time of physical blindness he came to know his spiritual blindness. Three days later, the Lord sent Ananias to pray for Saul.

15. (a) What did the Lord say about Saul (Acts 9:15)? (b) What was he going to show Saul?

Just as he had prepared the prophets of old, so God prepared Saul for the difficult mission before him.

16. (a) How would Saul's knowing that his mission would be painful strengthen him? (b) If possible, describe a time you did something right knowing there could be unwelcome repercussions.
(c) How did knowing potential consequences help you?

When Ananias prayed for Saul, God healed Saul's eyes and filled him with the Holy Spirit. Saul immediately began preaching in synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God and the resurrected Messiah.

³⁵² Damascus was Syria's capital city.

The Gospel Spread

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The disciples preached the gospel to Jews in synagogues everywhere. It was time for the harvest field to expand again.

One day Peter saw a vision in which a voice told him not to call creatures unclean which God had made clean. While Peter puzzled over the meaning, the Holy Spirit told him to go with three men who had just arrived, for he had sent them. The men were Gentiles—non-Jews.

They brought Peter to the house of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion whom an angel had directed to Peter.

17. (a) What did Cornelius do when Peter arrived (Acts 10:25)? (b) How did Peter react (10:26)? Explain.³⁵³ (c) A large gathering of Gentiles awaited Peter. How did Peter now interpret the vision (10:28)?

Peter told them about Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation, and that the prophets said everyone who believed in Jesus would have their sins forgiven.³⁵⁴

And then—the Holy Spirit descended on the Gentiles. Peter now realized God offered the gift of salvation to everyone. He told the other apostles what had happened.

The church grew, but so did persecution. Around AD 44, King Herod beheaded the Apostle James.

18. (a) Whom else did Herod plan to kill (Acts 12:2–3)? (b) What happened instead (12:7)? (c) Does the fact that James was martyred and Peter was rescued mean Jesus favored one of them? Explain.

³⁵³ Jesus allowed people to worship him because he was God (John 1:1).

³⁵⁴ Acts 10:39–43.

19. (a) How did the believers' remaining true to Jesus despite the death of an apostle demonstrate the strength of their belief? (b) How did Peter's miraculous rescue demonstrate God was still in control, despite James's death? (c) Give an example of someone whose faith through difficulties has inspired you.

The believers' determination to keep preaching the gospel despite suffering and death threats gave credence to their testimony. Everyone knew Pilate had crucified Jesus—that wasn't in doubt. But these disciples claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his execution. Herod and the Jewish leaders believed they lied and—knowing liars don't make good martyrs—they threatened many with death.

But by the power, wisdom, and boldness of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' followers were willing to suffer and die rather than recant their testimony that they had seen Jesus alive.

20. Write a prayer asking for the Holy Spirit's power, wisdom, and boldness.

The Holy Spirit continued to work, and the harvest continued to grow. Next week we'll see how Saul—who will become known as the Apostle Paul—took the gospel to the Gentiles.