



THE EARLY CHURCH

The Acts of the Apostles

A Bible Teaching Commentary
for personal or group study
by Fred Morris



ACTS Part 1
Chapters 1 to 12

THE EARLY CHURCH

Acts Part 1, Chapters 1-12

- **God sends the Holy Spirit**
- **Early followers of Jesus**
- **Thousands join the churches**

- **Miracles of healing**
- **Persecution and church growth**
- **Miraculous escapes from prison**

THIS BOOK teaches about the early followers of Jesus nearly 2000 years ago. The Good News that Jesus Christ is the Son of God quickly spread to many countries of the world. The followers of Jesus preached the Good News with great power. The power of God's Holy Spirit strengthened the followers of Jesus. Wonderful things happened in the early Christian churches which encourage believers today.

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THESE BOOKS will help you to understand the truth from Almighty God. He is worshipped by millions of Jews and Christians worldwide. These books will also help you to receive salvation and eternal life through God's Son, Jesus the Christ who is Israel's Messiah. They will help you to talk about your faith in God and to pray to Him. They will help to guide you from going the wrong way in life. They will help you to live a life that is pleasing to God through the love and power of His Holy Spirit. This was promised to all believers after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus who believe He is the Son of God.

WE PRAY that you may have a new peace and purpose in life as you trust in God, read the Bible and use these commentaries. As you study the Old and New Testament truth from God, think about what Jesus taught and suffered 2000 years ago for your salvation and what He is calling you to say and do today to prepare the way for His return.

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Think about this: Where you see this, the question requires more time for personal meditation.



Ruled text boxes: Where you see this, the information gives additional Bible teaching mainly for students, teachers and preachers.

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Acts Part 1: Chapters 1-12

INTRODUCTION

The book THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, or Acts, was written by Luke. Luke wanted his friend Theophilus to know about Jesus, so he first wrote the book called the Gospel of Luke. His gospel is the third book of the part of the Bible that we call the New Testament. It is one of four Gospels which tell the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The book of Acts begins with the last few days of Jesus on Earth after His resurrection from death on the cross. The beginning of the Church of Jesus soon followed. First, Luke tells us that Jesus went back to His Father in Heaven, which we call His ascension. Read about it in Mark 16:19, Luke 24:51 as well as Acts 1:9. Luke then wrote about the ministry of the disciples of Jesus later called apostles.

Luke was a doctor. He became Paul's friend and went with Paul on some of his missionary journeys to tell others about Jesus. Paul called Luke his 'dear friend Luke, the doctor' (Colossians 4:14). Luke's family were Greeks, so he was not a Jew.

Luke knew about Jesus from reading Matthew's and Mark's gospels. He also talked to some of the apostles and people who had met Jesus and His followers. Luke was well-educated. As a doctor, he checked every story very carefully. When Luke wrote the book of Acts, the story of the beginning of the Christian Church, he spent time with some of the apostles.



Evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus

After rising from death, Jesus appeared at least 12 times to His followers:

1. Mary met Jesus (Mark 16:9; John 20:14-17).
2. Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James saw Jesus (Matthew 28:1, 8-10).
3. Jesus spoke to Peter (Luke 24:34).
4. Jesus spoke to some of His followers on the road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12; Luke 24:13-32).
5. Jesus appeared to the waiting disciples (Luke 24:36-49).
6. Jesus re-appeared specially for Thomas (John 20:26-29).
7. Jesus appeared to seven disciples at the Sea of Galilee (John 21).
8. Jesus taught the eleven disciples on a mountain (Matthew 28:16).
9. Jesus met His followers for a meal (Acts 1:4).
10. Jesus appeared to 500 followers (1 Corinthians 15:6).
11. Jesus appeared to James, His brother (1 Corinthians 15:7).
12. Jesus appeared for the last time at His ascension to heaven (Luke 24:50-51).



What Jesus said to His disciples before going to Heaven

Ask God to help you to understand and to believe these things:

1. He said that all authority in Heaven and on Earth was given to Him (Matthew 28:18).
2. His followers will go to all countries and make more followers of Jesus (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8).
3. His followers will baptise believers in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).
4. His followers will teach the things that He taught (Matthew 28:20).
5. He will be with His people at all times (Matthew 28:20).
6. People who believe in Jesus will be saved, but those who do not believe in Jesus will be punished (Mark 16:16).
7. Those with faith who preach the Gospel (Good News) of Jesus will see signs and wonders from God (Mark 16:17-18).
8. Everything written about Jesus, the Messiah, in the writings of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms will come true (Luke 24:44).
9. His followers will tell people about Him and teach them to turn away from their sins and be forgiven (Luke 24:47).
10. People from every nation will hear about Jesus (Luke 24:47).
11. His followers will begin this work in Jerusalem (Luke 24:47).
12. The disciples must wait until God sends them His Holy Spirit power from Heaven (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4).



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 1



Learn about this: *What happened in the forty days after the death and resurrection of Jesus (verses 1-3); His last command (4); His promise of Holy Spirit power (5-8); His ascension into Heaven (9-10); the promise from the angels of His return (11); the life of His followers before the Holy Spirit came (12-15, 21-26); the death of Judas (16-20).*

JESUS RETURNS INTO HEAVEN

After rising from death, Jesus met his followers many times in 40 days (Acts 1:3). He taught them many things, especially things about the Kingdom of God.

Before Jesus left His disciples He promised to send the Holy Spirit to be with them. "I will not leave you as children without parents," He told them. "I will come to you" (John 14:18).

He also said, "Do not leave Jerusalem. Wait for the gift My Father promised. You have heard Me talk about it ... in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4, 5). The Greek word 'with' here means 'in' or 'into' the Holy Spirit.

The disciples then wanted to know if Jesus would restore the Kingdom of Israel to the Jews (1:6). At that time Israel was ruled by the Romans. Jesus said that God will set the time and date of this (1:7).

“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” (1:8).

When Jesus was ‘taken up into heaven’ (1:9) two angels told the followers of Jesus: “He will come back in the same way as you saw Him go” (1:11). This is why Christians believe that Jesus will come back again one day soon.

Then the Apostles obediently returned to Jerusalem and went up to the room where they were staying. Here, they were in constant prayer along with the women and the mother of Jesus and His brothers (1:12-14).

They prepared for the day when Jesus established His church. They chose Matthias to take the place of Judas as an apostle, ‘to join us in telling others that Jesus rose from the dead’ (1:22-26). (Tradition says that Matthias took the Good News of Jesus Christ to North Africa.) They were united in prayer and love and purpose and action.

Their prayers prepared the way for a worldwide ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. This ministry has lasted for nearly 2000 years and has changed the lives of billions of people who have repented and put their trust in Jesus, the Son of God.



Before God sent the Holy Spirit

Acts 1:12-26 tells us how the followers of Jesus met together *before* Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to them:

- The believers, both men and women, met together often (1:14).
- They met together in unity to pray (1:14, 24).
- Peter was a leader among them (1:15). See Matthew 16:17-19.
- They read the Old Testament scriptures together (1:20).
- They chose an apostle to take the place of Judas (1:21-26).
- They asked God to help them choose the right person (1:24).



Talk about this:

1. How many people saw Jesus after He rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:5-7)?
2. What did Jesus teach before He went back to heaven (Acts 1:3)? Why?
3. What command did Jesus give His disciples (Acts 1:4)? Why?
4. What did the angels tell the disciples (1:11)? What does this mean?
5. Who met in Jerusalem to pray (1:12-15)?
6. Why is it important for believers to be united spiritually (1:14)? What happens when believers pray together in unity?



Think about this: Why did Jesus instruct the disciples to preach the Good News in Judea and Samaria as well as in the rest of the world? Do you meet regularly to pray for the salvation of others? Do you believe you have received Holy Spirit power to preach in the name of Jesus?



Pray about this: Faith to pray for spiritual revival and converts.

Bible reading: Acts Chapter 2

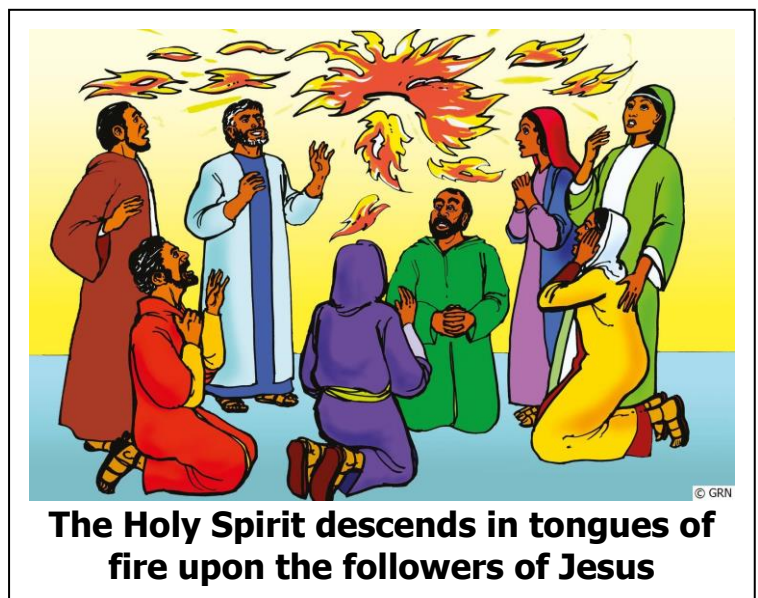


Learn about this: *What happened when the Holy Spirit power first came (verses 1-3); the followers speak in different languages (4-11); how the crowds responded to the Holy Spirit (12-13); Peter preaches to the crowds from the Old Testament scriptures (14-31); he tells them about Jesus (32-36); examples of what happens when the Good News of Jesus is preached (37, 41); how people are saved from their sins (38-40); how the Holy Spirit changes us (42-47).*

JESUS SENDS HIS HOLY SPIRIT

Ten days after the ascension of Jesus into heaven, early in the morning, the 120 believers were waiting and praying. A strange thing happened. They heard a noise and saw what looked like flames of fire. The flames rested on the head of each man and woman. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in languages that they had never learned (2:4).

It was the Feast of Pentecost when the Jews came together to thank God for the harvest. Many Jews came to Jerusalem from other countries (Acts 2:9-11) to worship God. Thousands of Jews filled the streets of the city.



These people heard the followers of Jesus praising God in different languages. Each person heard the 'wonders of God' in their own language (2:8-11). They were amazed and asked each other, "What does this mean?" (2:12). The Holy Spirit gave the disciples power to speak boldly. They remembered that Jesus told them, "In a few days you will be baptised by the Holy Spirit" (1:5). Now it was happening.



Talk about this:

1. Who is the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17)?
2. Why did God send His Holy Spirit (Luke 12:11-12; Acts 1:8; 1 John 2:20)?
3. Did the Holy Spirit come to every believer (2:3, 4)?
4. What difference did the Holy Spirit make to the followers of Jesus (2:3-4)?
5. What difference did the Holy Spirit make to the crowds (2:6-7; 11-13)?

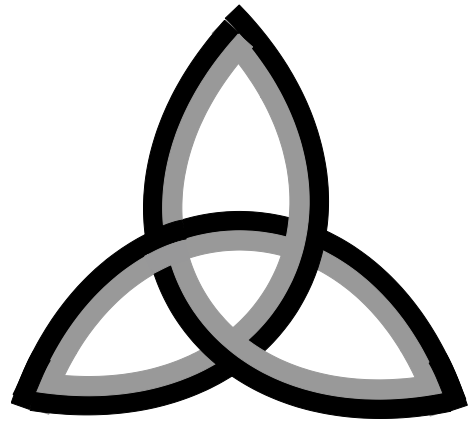


Think about this: What is your answer to the question, "What does this mean?" (2:12). Have you received the Holy Spirit? What difference does the Holy Spirit make in your life and church?



The Holy Spirit is the third person of the TRINITY

- The Bible does not use the word 'Trinity' but it does tell us of the three persons that are one God. (See Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 3:16-17; 4:1; 28:19; Acts 2:33; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 1:3, 13; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Revelation 5:6-10).
- A three-in-one God is a mystery that many people do not understand. Pray for spiritual wisdom to understand the teaching of the Trinity and to help others understand.
- The Holy Spirit was with God the Father at the beginning of the world (Genesis 1:2). Jesus was also with His Father at the beginning of the world (John 1:1-4; 1 Corinthians 8:6).
- God's Holy Spirit was sent to enable followers of Jesus to live holy lives (Luke 24:49; John 14:16-17; Acts 1:4-5; Romans 8:9). God gave this promise 600 years before it happened (Ezekiel 36:27; 39:29). John the Baptist also said it would happen (Matthew 3:11).
- God promised to give His Spirit to all believers who ask (Luke 11:13; Acts 2:38). The Holy Spirit is at work all the time.
- The Holy Spirit shows people their sins. He points people to Jesus Christ, who is their Saviour.
- The Holy Spirit shows His power in signs and wonders (Acts 2:2-4; 4:31; 8:6-8).



**Celtic symbol of the
Trinity of God**

PETER SPEAKS TO THE PEOPLE

Peter spoke to the crowd of people in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit gave him the power to do this. These people knew the Old Testament scriptures, so Peter used the words of the prophet Joel (2:16; Joel 2:28-32).

Peter told the people that God had kept the promise He had made through Joel. He had sent His Spirit. Peter also told them these things:

- God was pleased with Jesus and enabled Him to do miracles (2:22)
- It was God's plan that Jesus should die (2:23)
- The Old Testament spoke of Him (2:25)
- God raised Jesus from death (2:32)
- Jesus is now with God the Father (2:33)
- God sent the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus (2:33).

Then Peter told them: "You nailed Jesus to the cross. But God has made Him both Lord and Christ" (2:36). Peter told them that Jesus was the Christ, the

promised Messiah, who came to save the world from sin. They thought they had killed Jesus by nailing Him to a cross, but they were wrong! Many felt ashamed (2:37). They wanted to know what to do to be saved from the power of sin in their lives.



The Prophecy of Joel: Acts 2:17-21; Joel 2:28-32

Peter pointed out that the prophet Joel said God would pour out His Spirit on ALL people, young and old, men and women alike (Acts 2:17-18). To the Jews, the fact that all believers, old and young, men and women, Jews and non-Jews, were now equal in the eyes of God was astonishing and against tradition.

THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION: SET FREE FROM OUR SINS

Many people believed what Peter said. They believed that Jesus died because of their sins. They believed that this was God's plan. They believed that Jesus was the Christ, God's Messiah (2:37).

Then Peter told the people to repent and be saved. "All of you must turn away from your sins and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then your sins will be forgiven. You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38).



Baptism

Jesus told His followers that there were two kinds of baptism. "John baptised with water. But ... you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8; Acts 1:5). Peter tells the people this (Acts 2:38).

Baptism in water. The New Testament first speaks of this baptism when John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus (Mark 1:4). He told the people to repent and turn away from their sins and be baptised for God to forgive them. It was common for Jews to baptise their new believers. Jesus told His apostles to baptise His believers in water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). They did what Jesus asked (Acts 2:41). When we repent and go under the water it shows our old life of sin has been 'buried'. Then, when we rise up out of the water, we receive a new life through the power of the resurrection of Jesus.

Baptism in the Spirit. This first happened in Acts 2:2-4 at the Feast of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came down like flames of fire onto the believers who were praying. After this, Peter told new believers that they too could receive the gift of Holy Spirit power (8:15-17).

On this same day when the Holy Spirit came down, the apostles baptised the new believers in water (2:41); about 3, 000 of them. Each believer was baptised.

Peter then added, "This promise is for you and your children ... It is for all whom the Lord our God will choose" (2:39). All people can be saved, not just the Jews and their families. It is for all people everywhere who know that the Spirit of God is calling them.

About 3000 people were saved that day (2:41). This happened after God came down with power and with fire (2:2-3). God's Spirit was given to ordinary men and women who believed in Jesus and knew they needed a Saviour.

This salvation of God through Jesus was for the people of all nations and languages including the Jews. This fellowship of new believers was blessed by God.

THE CHURCH AFTER THE HOLY SPIRIT CAME

In Acts 2:42-47 we read how the new followers of Jesus met together after Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to them. They met each day in public in the Temple courtyard area in Jerusalem (2:46; 3:1).

- They prayed together to know God's ways for their lives (2:42).
- They shared their lives together and enjoyed the friendship and fellowship of other Christian believers (2:42, 44).
- The apostles led them and cared for them (2:42-43).
- The believers studied the Word together from the Old Testament (2:42).
- They shared what they had with each other or sold their things to help other believers (2:44-45).
- They shared bread and wine together in believers' homes; remembering the death of the Lord Jesus as He asked them to do at His Last Supper (2:42, 46; Luke 22:19).
- They knew God was near them. They were amazed at what God was doing (2:43).
- The apostles did many miracles in the name of Jesus (2:43).
- They met daily in public places and in homes (2:46).
- They were happy and humble (2:46).
- They praised God together (2:47).
- Other people thought well of them (2:47).
- Every day more people believed in Jesus and met with them (2:47).



Talk about this:

1. What did the people feel and say (2:37)?
2. What two things did Peter say that they must do (2:38)?
3. What two things did Peter say that God would do (2:38)?
4. Who can receive the gift of God's salvation (2:39)?
5. How did the new believers live (2:42, 44-47)?
6. What happened to the new believers (2:43, 47)?



Think about this: How and why did Peter focus on Jesus, to explain to the crowds what God had done? What did Peter teach about the life of Jesus on Earth and God's power over sin and death? In what ways were the believers different before and after the Holy Spirit came?



Pray about this: The difference Holy Spirit power makes in church meetings like the ones described in Acts 2:42-47.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 3



Learn about this: *Miracles done in the name of Jesus through Peter and John (verses 1-8); what happens when people are healed (9-11); preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ (12-26).*

PETER AND JOHN GO TO THE TEMPLE

The people who believed in Jesus had no church buildings, so they met in houses or in the Temple courts to worship God (2:46).

One day Peter and John went to the Temple. A lame man sat at the Temple gate asking for money (3:1-2). Because he was lame and a beggar, he was not allowed to go into the Temple.

Peter told him, "I do not have silver or gold [money]. But I will give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!" (3:6).

'Peter took him by his right hand and helped him to stand up. At once His feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. He went with Peter and John into the Temple. He walked and jumped and praised God' (3:7-8). He was healed! He was now allowed to go into the Temple. He could stop begging.



Everyone heard about him and soon people came running to see what had happened. They knew the man very well and they were amazed that he was walking. God welcomes disabled people into His Kingdom.



Disabled people worshipping God

The Jewish rulers did not allow disabled people to go into the Temple at Jerusalem. A disabled priest could not make a sacrifice (Leviticus 21:17-24). But Jesus told them that soon the Temple would be destroyed (Mark 13:2). A time would soon come when people would not worship God on that special mountain in Jerusalem (John 4:21). People would worship God 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:23-24). This is why all people are now free to worship God anywhere and at any time; people like you and me; sinners who know God has forgiven them through Jesus. Disabled people are welcome. The lame beggar in Acts 3:8 was full of joy that he was healed and that now he could walk into the Temple to worship God. He was no longer kept outside. In the Christian Church, everyone is invited, whether sick or well, foreign or friend. Jesus Christ calls all people to himself. No one who loves and follows Jesus is shut outside. "I will make the disabled my faithful people" (Micah 4:6-7). Does your church make it easy for disabled people to worship God? Remember that God does not look on them as disabled. If we bring the disabled to our meetings, some may be healed and saved, through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the midst of God's people. God will do this in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ for all who repent.

Peter asked, "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? ... The God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has done this ... This man was made strong by faith in the name of Jesus. Faith in Jesus has healed him completely" (3:12-16). Jesus has the power to do this because He is the Son of God.

Peter continued, "God gave a promise through all the prophets ... So turn away from your sins. Turn to God then your sins will be wiped away ... Jesus is appointed as the Christ for you ... [God] promised this long ago through the holy prophets" (3:18-21). All their prophets had told how the Christ (Messiah) would first suffer and die before God raised Him from death (Acts 3:18, 24).

Peter then quoted the prophecy of Moses in the Old Testament laws. "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me. He will be one of your own people. You must listen to everything He tells you" (3:22; Deuteronomy 18:15, 18, 19; Matthew 17:5).

Under the Law given to Moses, sinful people should die, since 'the wages of sin is death' (Romans 6:23). But Jesus came and died in our place. He promised life, new life, not death! Jesus could only save people from sin by dying in their place.

JESUS DIED TO SAVE THE WORLD

Peter used this healing to tell people the Good News of Jesus Christ, and encouraged them to repent. "Turn away from your sins. Turn to God. Then

your sins will be wiped away” (Acts 3:19). “God raised up Jesus...to bless you. He wanted to turn each of you from your evil ways” (3:26).

Nearly 2000 years before this happened, God made a promise to Abraham: “I will make you into a great nation [Israel and the worldwide Church] ... and all nations on Earth will be blessed because of you” (Genesis 12:2-3). Now Peter saw this promise coming true. People from all over the world were in Jerusalem to worship God (see map). They heard the Good News of Jesus Christ, His Son. People from all over the world were saved and blessed. And this has happened every day since the first day of Pentecost. God’s grace and saving power do this. If we preach the Good News of Jesus Christ, the power of God’s word can change people’s lives. God is merciful. He will forgive the sins of people through the sacrifice of Jesus if they repent and believe.

The message is for us too. Jesus died to save us. We too can tell others the Good News of Jesus Christ and see the power of God change lives! We too can be witnesses for Jesus wherever we live ‘from one end of the Earth to the other’ (1:8).



The message of Peter

Peter was an apostle of Jesus. ‘Apostle’ means ‘messenger’. The message of Peter in Acts chapters 2 and 3 was the Good News (or Gospel) of Jesus Christ:

- Jesus died and rose from death (2:23-24; 3:13-15).
- The Old Testament prophets said that this would happen (2:25-35; 3:18).
- Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah (2:36; 3:20).
- God forgives the sins of those who repent and believe in Jesus (2:38).
- They will receive the Holy Spirit (2:38).

Why did the people listen to Peter’s message? It was because they saw the power of the Holy Spirit at work. The apostles spoke words of God in different languages. God healed people through their faith in Jesus. The crowds were amazed at these signs and wonders (3:10). They repented (they confessed their sins). They said that they were sorry and stopped doing wrong things. They wanted to come back to God and God forgave them because Jesus died for them. Then they were baptized and joined the other believers. They received the Holy Spirit. They praised God. More people became followers of Jesus every day (2:47; 4:4).

We should ask God to give us His Holy Spirit in our lives so that we have power to worship, preach and witness. We need the Holy Spirit, not just to give us joy and to show us what is right. We need the Holy Spirit to bring God’s salvation, healing and righteousness to our nation.



Talk about this:

1. Who did the apostles mix with after Pentecost and where did they meet (3:1)?
2. How did Peter follow up the healing miracle with preaching (3:2-26)?
3. How did he explain that salvation is through repentance (3:26)?



Think about this: Think about the faith of Peter and the faith of the lame man in this miracle. What was more important; healing or silver?



Pray about this: Ask God to increase expectations of amazing signs and wonders in your church and town.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 4



Learn about this: *People disagree with God's truth (verses 1-7); how the Holy Spirit makes us bold to preach the Good News (8-13); speaking in the name of Jesus (14-22); praising and praying to God under persecution (23-30); the Holy Spirit at work among the believers (4, 31-37).*

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS TRY TO STOP THE GOOD NEWS

Peter and John taught the crowds at the Temple. They told the people that Jesus rose up from death. This made the Jewish leaders angry. The Sadducees were priests who did not believe in life after death. They came with the Temple guard and arrested Peter and John. They did not want trouble from the Romans soldiers.

They put the apostles in jail. At this time there were about 5000 men who believed (4:4) and many women as well. This happened because one person was healed. His testimony enabled Peter to preach to the crowds. As a result, many believed the Good News about Jesus.

Next day they brought Peter and John to the Jewish Sanhedrin court. The high priests Annas and Caiaphas were there (4:6). It was Annas and Caiaphas who sent Jesus to Pilate to be crucified (John 18:24, 28). They asked two important questions about the healing of the lame man. "By what power did you do this?" they asked. "And through whose name?" (Acts 4:7).

These questions helped Peter to tell them about Jesus. He boldly answered, "You nailed Jesus Christ of Nazareth to the cross. But God raised Him from death. It is through the name of Jesus that this man stands healed in front of you" (4:10).

Peter then gave the same message that he preached before. He was bold because of the power of the Holy Spirit in him (4:8). He told them that God made Jesus to be the 'most important stone' or 'cornerstone' (Psalm 118:22, 23). Zechariah prophesied that Christ the 'cornerstone' would come from the tribe of Judah and from the family line of King David (Zechariah 10:4; Luke

1:32). They refused to believe their Messiah, Jesus the Christ, and they killed Him. And now they refused to believe what Peter told them.

Peter warned the court, 'You cannot be saved by believing in anyone else. God has given us no other name under Heaven that will save us' (Acts 4:12).

The Jewish leaders saw how bold Peter and John were. "What can we do with these men?" they asked (4:16).

They could not find any unlawful answers to their questions. So they told Peter and John not to teach or speak in the name of Jesus again (4:18).

Peter and John said, "What is right? Should we obey you or God?" ... We have to speak about the things we have seen and heard" (4:19-20).

'The leaders warned them again. Then they let them go ... They knew that all the people were praising God for what had happened' (4:21).

THE CHURCH AT PRAYER AND AT WORK

Peter and John were allowed to join the believers. They prayed and praised God together.

Hundreds of years before this, King David wrote of Christ's coming. He said rulers and nations would be angry because of Jesus (4:25-26; Psalms 2:1-2). God always knows what will happen. He showed King David what to write. We need not be afraid! God knows all things. He is in control.

When the believers prayed, they were happy, not sad; at peace, not worried; bold not afraid:

- They praised God in their prayers (4:24).
- They read the Old Testament scriptures (4:25-26).
- They remembered how God anointed Jesus to be persecuted and punished (4:27).
- They rejoiced that God was working out His plans (4:28).
- They asked God to make them very bold (4:29).
- They asked for more miracles in the name of Jesus (4:30).

The believers were not afraid of persecution. 'After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They were bold when they spoke God's word' (4:31).

All this time, the Jewish Christians were meeting in homes. They were all caring for each other and sharing what they had. They all agreed together. The Holy Spirit began to make them kinder and more loving (4:32). Some sold their land and brought the money to the apostles (4:36-37). This was so that they could help those believers who were poor or unable to work (4:35). Jesus said, "You have received freely, so give freely" (Matthew 10:8).



Praying to God in times of trouble: Acts 4:24-31

God blessed the early church fellowships. It grew very strong. But there was trouble for the believers (4:16-18). The Jewish leaders told the apostles not to teach in the name of Jesus. They treated (persecuted) them badly. Church growth and persecution often happen at the same time. Study these 6 ways in which the believers prayed when these troubles began:

- *They praised God, the Creator (4:24)* and put their trust in Him. They spoke words of faith and knowledge to show that they believed in God: He made the world and everything in it.
- *They read from the Old Testament (4:25-26)*. God said (in Psalm 2) that rulers and leaders would make trouble for Jesus and His followers.
- *They knew the Old Testament prophecies had come true (4:27-28)*. Things had happened because God planned them. They were certain that God was in control. The prophecies had been fulfilled in and by Jesus.
- *They told God about their troubles (4:29)*. They believed that God already knew about them. They reminded Him of their problems but did not blame Him for them.
- *They asked God to enable them to do the work that Jesus called them to do (4:29)* and they believed God answers prayer. They knew they were praying for what God wanted. They were praying 'in His will'.
- *They asked God to do even more miracles as they preached (4:29-30)*. They trusted in the power of the name of Jesus. They knew the religious leaders and rulers would be angry, but they knew they had to preach boldly. It was a work of God and He had called them to do it.



Talk about this:

1. Why were Peter and John arrested? (4:2)?
2. What did the Jewish leaders tell them not to do (4:18)?
3. Did Peter and John obey God or the leaders (4:19)?
4. Why did the court try to stop this teaching about Jesus?
5. What encouraged the believers to pray to God (4:23-24)?
6. What did they read together, aloud (4:25-28)?
7. What was special about using the name of Jesus (4:30)?
8. What happened when they prayed (4:31)?



Think about this: Describe in your own words the life of these early Jewish Christians (4:32-37). How do we show love and care today?



Pray about this: The risks of witnessing about Jesus.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 5



Learn about this: *Lying to God and offending the Holy Spirit (verses 1-11); how we should worship, witness and work (12-16); what to do about envy, fear and persecution (17-28); how to be bold and blessed when persecuted (29-42).*

GOD PUNISHES SIN

Sin separates us from God. He sent Jesus to die for sinners so that we can be saved by God through the punishment Jesus received in our place. When we repent and receive a new life we should leave our old lives and bad habits behind us.

Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold some land. They took some of the money to Peter. They told him it was all the money they got for their land, but it was only part of the money. They lied. This is called 'deception' and it is a sin. Peter did not say that keeping some of the money was wrong, but telling a lie about it was wrong. They could do what they wished with the money, but they could not lie to God (5:4).

Peter said, "Satan ... made you lie to the Holy Spirit ... You have lied to God" (5:3-4). When Peter said this, Ananias fell dead at his feet.

Three hours later his wife came in and told the same lie. "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?" Peter asked her. She, too, fell down dead (5:9-10).

'The whole church ... were filled with fear' (5:11). We all deserve punishment when we sin against the Spirit of God. He wants us to repent (1 Peter 3:10-12).

GOD SENDS HIS ANGEL TO SET THE APOSTLES FREE

Every day more and more people believed in the Lord Jesus. The believers met together in the Temple courtyards near the Porch of Solomon on the east side of the Temple in Jerusalem (5:12). Many people came from far and near to hear their teaching and to see miracles of healing by the apostles in the name of Jesus. This made some of the Jewish leaders very angry and jealous, so they put the apostles in prison (5:18).

During the night, God sent an angel to them. He opened the doors of the jail and brought them out (5:19). The angel told them, "Go! Stand in the Temple courts and tell the people all about this new life" (5:20). They obeyed and went to the Temple courtyards early the next day to teach the people.

The Good News of Jesus gives new life to us all: we have all done wrong; we are all sinners (1 John 1:10; Romans 3:23). When people hear the message of God, and faith grows in their hearts, they confess their sins and turn back to God. They believe the Good News and God forgives them by His grace and

mercy (Romans 10:10; Ephesians 2:8-9). They are 'born again'. They become 'a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). A new person! We are forgiven when we repent because of the sacrifice of Jesus. He took the punishment for sin and died in our place.

That same morning the Jewish leaders met together in the courtyards. They sent officers to bring their prisoners from the jail, but they came back to say, "We found the prison locked ... The guards were standing at the doors. But when we opened the doors, we did not find anyone inside" (5:22-23). The apostles were found outside, preaching in the name of Jesus.

The apostles spoke boldly to the Jewish court. They had a very strong faith in Jesus (5:29). They understood very clearly the truth about Jesus and about God's plan for Jews and other nations (5:30-32).

The Jewish leaders wanted to kill the apostles (5:33). But one of the chief leaders, Gamaliel said, "Men of Israel. Think carefully about what you plan to do with these men... Let me give you some advice. Leave these men alone! Let them go! If these plans and actions are only human, they will fail. But if their plans come from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God" (5:34-39). These are wise words!

The court ordered the apostles to be whipped. Then they ordered them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus (5:40). They let the apostles go free, but they continued to teach. They were full of joy. 'Day after day, they kept teaching in the temple courts and from house to house. They never stopped telling the Good News that Jesus is the Christ' (5:41-42).

In many countries of the world, the Christian church has grown during times of persecution. Today many Christian believers are in prison. Many are tortured because of their faith. Some die and their spirits go to Heaven. Many survive and God brings revival with miracles of healing and deliverance and other signs and wonders.



Talk about this:

1. Why did God judge Ananias and Sapphira?
2. Explain the meaning of 'signs and wonders' (5:12-16).
3. What miracles happened in prison (5:19)?
4. Why were the apostles very brave (5:29-32)?
5. How did the apostles behave when they were persecuted (5:41, 42)?



Think about this: How does the story of Ananias and Sapphira show us that as Christians, our faith should make us different from other people? How should we behave and witness under persecution? How is God at work today with revival, healings, deliverance and other signs and wonders?



Pray about this: Expect signs and wonders when we pray.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 6



Learn about this: *What to do when the church grows quickly (verses 1-7); men speak evil against God's truth (8-14); what people saw when Stephen was persecuted (15).*

PREPARING THE CHURCH TO GROW

More and more Jews were joining the Christian fellowships in Jerusalem (6:1). Soon they needed more people to help share food for the poor and the widows. This needed to be shared fairly to avoid complaints. They needed extra helpers and teachers to enable the church to keep growing.

The apostles asked the believers to choose seven men. Notice how they chose them:

- They understood that this work of serving others was important.
- They called a church meeting.
- They chose the men to do this work so that the apostles could be free to teach (6:2).
- They chose men who were wise and full of the Holy Spirit (6:3).
- The apostles laid their hands on the seven men they chose and prayed with them and for them (6:6).

The result of choosing church helpers who were filled by the Holy Spirit was:

- Everyone was pleased (6:5).
- God's message, the Good News of Jesus, continued to spread (6:7).
- The numbers of believers in Jerusalem continued to grow (6:7) and included many of the Temple priests.
- One of the chosen workers performed miracles among the people (6:8).

THE WORK AND WITNESS OF STEPHEN

God uses ordinary people to do wonderful things. When we preach the Good News, through the Holy Spirit, God calls and saves sinners. He delivers them from the grip of sins that hold them fast. God does 'signs and wonders', and He does them through anyone He chooses. He uses anyone He wants to use (Hebrews 2:4).

Stephen was an ordinary man, but 'full of faith and the Holy Spirit' (6:5, 8). He helped to share out the money so that poor people could buy food. God also used him to do miracles. Everywhere Stephen went he told people about Jesus and His power to save them from their sins. Some Jewish leaders believed and began to follow the teachings of Jesus (6:7).

Some of the Temple leaders opposed Stephen (6:9). Stephen's talk made them angry, but they could not deny his wisdom or the Spirit of God who spoke through him (6:10). So they went out and paid some men to tell lies about Stephen in court (6:11, 13). Satan often uses lies to attack the truth from God.

'We have heard him speak words against God's Law and this Temple', they said. Stephen was speaking *for* God, but they said he was speaking *against* God. 'Blasphemy' means saying evil things about God (6:11).

So the crowds and the Jewish leaders were angry with Stephen (6:12). Stephen remained calm: 'his face was like the face of an angel' (6:15).



The joy of preaching the Gospel

The apostles were happy to tell others about Jesus. The Gospel is the message of God's Good News about His Son, Jesus Christ, and His eternal salvation from sin. Paul says that 'the Good News shows how God makes people right with Himself' (Romans 1:17).

We are saved through the sacrifice of Jesus. He was punished for our sins in our place. He saves us from death and offers us new life. We don't deserve this. No one can earn God's forgiveness or His salvation. We are saved by God's grace alone; by His loving kindness and His mercy through the sacrifice of His Son. 'God so loved the world that He gave [sacrificed] His one and only Son' (John 3:16). We are saved when we repent and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who died in our place (Ephesians 2:4, 5, 8, 9).

- The Good News is God's answer and cure for sin.
- The Good News is God's message that He loves us.
- The Good News is that our sins can be forgiven if we repent.
- The Good News is the story of God's sacrifice in Jesus.
- The Good News is about Jesus taking our punishment for sin.
- The Good News means being saved from punishment.
- The Good News tells of God forgiving us when we repent and follow Jesus.
- The Good News is God's way to bring us back to Him.
- The Good News brings peace with God.
- The Good News sets us free from past sin.
- The Good News brings a holy way of living.
- The Good News brings hope of eternal life.

The Gospel is the Good News of what God did for us through Jesus. Our lives are totally changed. We are born again. We are happy to tell others the Good News about Jesus. God blesses the preaching of His Good News. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. This Good News was promised by God through Moses in the desert and on Mount Sinai (Acts 7:36-38).



Talk about this:

1. What did the believers do to make the church grow (6:1, 5, 6)?
2. What did the church leaders do to make the church grow (6:2-4, 6)?
3. What was the result of a well-organised church (6:7)?
4. How did Satan attack the believers in Jerusalem (6:11-14)?



Think about this: Is your church preparing to choose and train more teachers and more helpers? How can you encourage, not hinder, the Holy Spirit to bring successful changes and righteous people? Is your church ready for opposition to grow? Is your church ready to show love and wisdom towards others?



Pray about this: The need to prepare for church growth.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 7



Learn about this: *Stephen explains God's plans for the Jews (verses 1-50); he speaks against the Jewish leaders for crucifying their own Messiah (51-53); and arouses their anger (54-58); which leads to him being the first Christian martyr (59-60).*

STEPHEN SPEAKS TO THE JEWISH LEADERS

The High Priest ruled over the Court of the Jews. He asked Stephen, "Are these things true?" (7:1) Stephen answered him this way. He spoke about the history of the Jews; how God made promises to Abraham and Moses. He said that God gave laws to help the nation of Israel to know Him and to live to please Him. Stephen said that the Jews did not listen to the Spirit of God. When God sent prophets they killed them (7:51-52). They did not obey God's Law, but worshipped Molech, the idol of Ammon, and they sacrificed their children and worshipped the stars in the sky. Because of this, God let the Jews go as slaves to Babylon (7:43).

Stephen reminded the Jewish leaders what God had done:

- It was God who called Abraham to live in the land where the Jews were now living (7:2-4).
- It was God who promised Abraham that his family would live in the land (7:5).
- God also told him that for 400 years his family would live in a foreign land (Egypt) and would be slaves, but afterwards would come back to this land (7:6-7).
- It was God who saved baby Moses so that many years later he would lead the family of Jacob (Israel) to the Promised Land of Canaan (7:17-22).

- God waited patiently for many years to call Moses after he ran away to Midian (7:23-34).
- It was God who spoke to Moses at the burning bush. God used Moses to lead the Jews back to the Promised Land (7:30-35).
- It was God who told Moses about the Prophet who would come (the Messiah) (7:37).

Stephen told them that their ancestors did not obey God (7:51) and did not listen to Moses or the prophets of God from long ago (7:52).

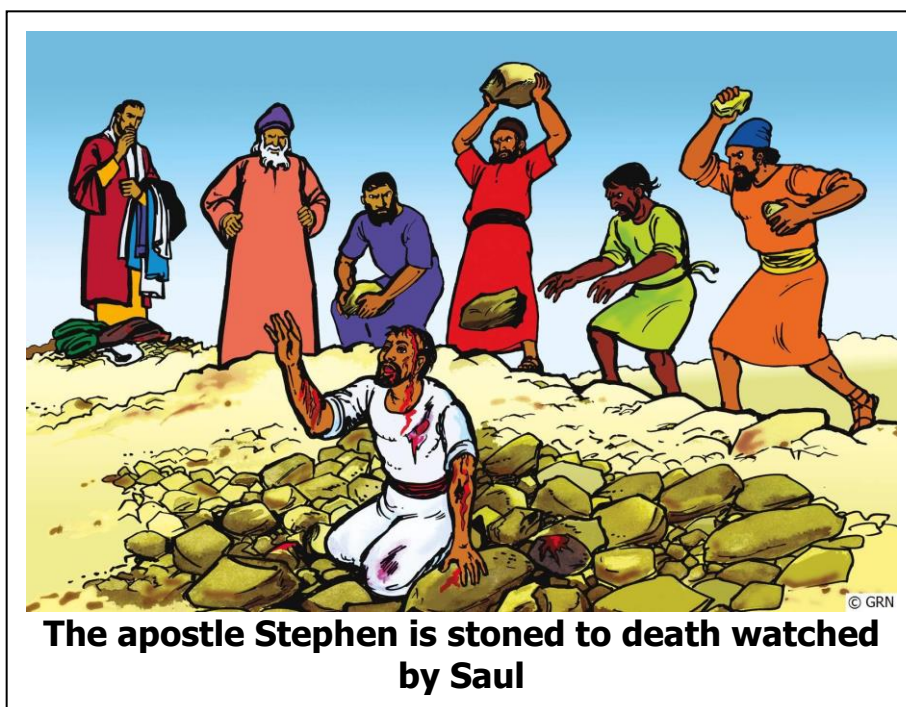
STEPHEN IS KILLED

Stephen told the Jews that they were like their ancestors, long ago, who killed the prophets. The prophets spoke about the coming Messiah, God's own special messenger. Then Stephen told them that they killed the Messiah (7:52). He meant Jesus Christ, God's Son, their Messiah.

Stephen's words made the Jewish leaders very angry. They shouted at him and dragged him out of the city to throw stones to kill him. While they threw the stones, Stephen prayed for them (7:60).

A Jewish leader called Saul watched. He agreed that Stephen should die (8:1). Saul was a clever and dedicated

Jewish leader. He knew the Old Testament scriptures very well but did not believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah.



Who was Saul?

Saul of Tarsus in Cilicia (south-east Turkey) was sent by his father to study Jewish law under the Pharisees in Jerusalem. God used him in an important way. He and his father were devout Jews and were also made citizens of the Roman Empire. Before meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul joined with others in persecuting the early Christians.



Talk about this:

1. Who was the Prophet Moses predicted would come (7:37)?
2. Who killed the prophets a long time ago (7:52)?
3. Who killed the Prophet that Moses spoke about (7:52)?
4. Who did not obey God's Law (7:53; 8:1)?



Think about this: God's plan for Moses was fulfilled when God brought him back to Egypt after many years (7:29-34). Do you believe that God has forgiven your past sins? Does the Holy Spirit help you to avoid old habits and decisions that lead to trouble?



Pray about this: How to put past problems behind you.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 8



Learn about this: *How God used persecution to spread the Good News to other places (verses 1-8, 25-26, 40); how sin imprisoned Simon in Samaria (9-24); the Holy Spirit used Philip to convert the Ethiopian palace official (27-39).*

THE CHURCH SUFFERS THEN SPREADS TO OTHER PLACES

While Jesus was with His disciples He told them "You will be handed over to be badly treated and put to death..." (Matthew 24:9). They were persecuted. After Stephen's death, the persecution of believers began in Jerusalem. At that time, Saul tried to stop people from believing in Jesus. He put some believers in jail, and killed others. Many other believers left their homes in Jerusalem and went to live in other places. They talked about Jesus everywhere they went (8:4). This persecution helped to spread the Good News to other places.

Christians are treated badly (persecuted) in many countries today. Jesus said, "If they persecute Me, they will persecute you" (John 15:18). We should not be surprised if we are persecuted. We must be brave. We must pray that those who are persecuted will not give up.

WHAT HAPPENED IN SAMARIA

The Good News of Jesus Christ began to spread from Jerusalem to other countries. Jesus said, "You will be my messengers in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and ... from one end of the Earth to the other" (Acts 1:8). In Acts chapter 8 we read how the Good News reached Judea (8:1), Samaria (8:1, 5, 25), Ethiopia (8:27) and other parts of Judea (8:40).

Philip was a leader in the Jerusalem fellowships. Jews did not like Samaritans, but Philip went to Samaria and preached about Christ, the Messiah, in their city. God was with him and he did many miracles in the name of Jesus

(8:7-8). The instruction of Jesus to preach the Good News in Samaria as well as in Jerusalem caused much rejoicing because of the miracles performed.

A man named Simon the Magician lived in Samaria. He showed the people evil magic. They called him 'the great power'. But people began to believe in the name of Jesus (8:12). Simon said he believed in the name of Jesus, so Philip baptised him with others who were sorry for their sins. They repented and believed.

The apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to see what had happened in Samaria. The apostles prayed for the new Christians and put their hands on them 'and they received the Holy Spirit' (8:15-17). Miracles followed and Simon saw what happened. He wanted this power for himself.

He wanted to pay money so that he could do miracles, too (8:18-20). But Simon's thoughts were wrong and evil.

"Do you think you can buy God's gift with money?" Peter asked. Simon had not truly repented and he did not have true faith. Peter told him that both he and his money should be destroyed!

God does not want anyone to be punished. He wants all people to repent and turn to Jesus (8:21-23; 2 Peter 3:9). Simon begged Peter to pray for him that he might be spared from the wrath of God for his sinful mistakes.

If your old life still controls you, it is a good thing to ask the church leaders to pray for you. You must also repent (James 5:16-20).

Note that Peter and John continued their preaching as they travelled back to Jerusalem (8:25).



Simon the witchdoctor: Acts 8

Simon Magus practised witchcraft and lived in Samaria, near Jerusalem. He amazed the people who lived there with his magic. Simon saw that when the apostles put their hands on people, the Holy Spirit fell on them. He saw this was a greater power and he tried to buy this power from the apostles. Peter told him this was very wrong. Simon was afraid. We are not told whether he said sorry to God for his wrong actions.

Behind every idol or wrong belief is an evil spirit. People who practise witchcraft amaze people because they use the power of evil spirits (Acts 8:9-11). But this power is not from God. They use fear to make people do what they want. Those who do these things are far from God. People who put their trust in spirits or signs or fortune-telling do not truly trust God.

We know that Simon was afraid when Peter rebuked him. He wanted Peter to pray for him. We know that if he truly repented, God would take away his interest in magic and spirits.

Remember that those who put their trust in God have nothing to fear from evil spirits. The power of Jesus is much stronger than evil spirits.

THE GOOD NEWS FOR ETHIOPIA

An angel came to Philip and said to him, "Go south ... down to Gaza" (8:26). Philip left Samaria and went south towards Gaza along the road to Egypt and Ethiopia. A chariot came along the road pulled by horses. Philip saw an officer from Ethiopia sitting in it. He served in the royal palace of the Queen of Ethiopia. The man was reading a scroll containing part of the Old Testament.

"Go to the chariot and stay near it", God's Spirit told Philip. Philip heard the man reading aloud from the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 53:7-8).

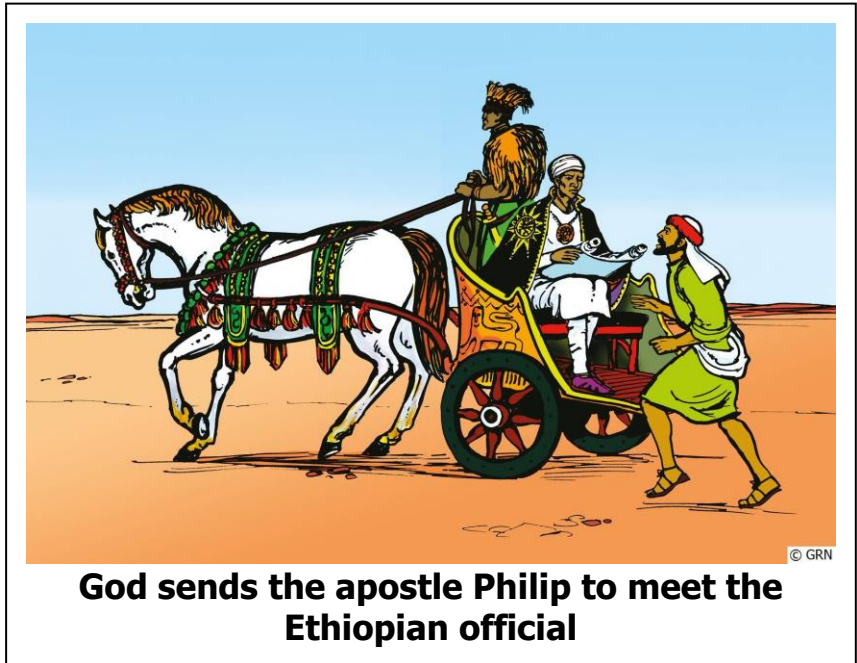
"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked him.

"How can I?" the man answered. "I need someone to explain it to me" (8:31).

Without the Spirit of God helping us, we cannot fully understand the Bible (1 Corinthians 2:14), so God gives us His Spirit to teach us His truth

(John 16:13-14). When you read the Bible, always ask God to help you to understand His truth and enjoy reading it (8:36-39). Ask Him for others to help you understand and share in the joy.

God sent Philip to help this man. He told him that Isaiah wrote about the Good News of Jesus even though he lived 700 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem.



God sends the apostle Philip to meet the Ethiopian official



The Good News comes to Africa: Acts 8:26-40

Notice how the servant officer of Queen Candace was saved by God:

1. He already believed in God and wanted to worship Him in Jerusalem (8:27).
2. He read the Old Testament prophets and wanted to understand it (8:28, 31).
3. The Holy Spirit sent someone to explain the prophecies of Isaiah about Jesus (8:32, 34).
4. The man believed the Good News about Jesus, confessed his sins, repented and was baptised (8:35-38).

As soon as the officer understood this, he believed that Jesus was the Son of God. He asked Philip to baptise him. After Philip baptised him, the Holy Spirit took Philip away. The officer went on his way back to Ethiopia. He had an important job there in the Queen's palace (8:27, 39).

This is the true story of the conversion of the Ethiopian who came seeking the one true God in Jerusalem and who read the Old Testament part of the Bible. He was not allowed to worship with the Jews because he was a eunuch but through conversion to Christ he returned to Ethiopia rejoicing in his salvation and baptism.

We believe that he was probably the first Christian in East Africa. He went back to his home country 'full of joy' (8:39) to tell others the Good News of

Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian came to faith through reading the words of God and receiving help to understand it.



Talk about this:

1. What happened when the believers were persecuted (8:1-8)?
2. What stopped Simon the magician from being a true believer (8:19-23)?
3. Do you tell the Good News of Jesus wherever you travel (8:25)?
4. What can people do to be saved (8:26-40)? What does God do to save them? What can we do to encourage them?



Think about this: When the Ethiopian returned home with joy in his heart, what would he say and do? Do you share with others the truth about Jesus in the Old Testament and New Testament? Do you ask the Holy Spirit to help you?



Pray about this: Protection from persecution and the power of evil spirits.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 9



Learn about this: *How Saul persecuted the Christians (verse 1-2); how Saul was stopped and converted personally by Jesus (3-19); Saul begins to preach the Good News of Jesus (20-22); but is persecuted himself in Damascus and Jerusalem (23-29); Saul moves away to preach in his home town of Tarsus (30); and the churches grow strong elsewhere (31); especially under the ministry of Peter (32-43).*

SAUL MEETS JESUS

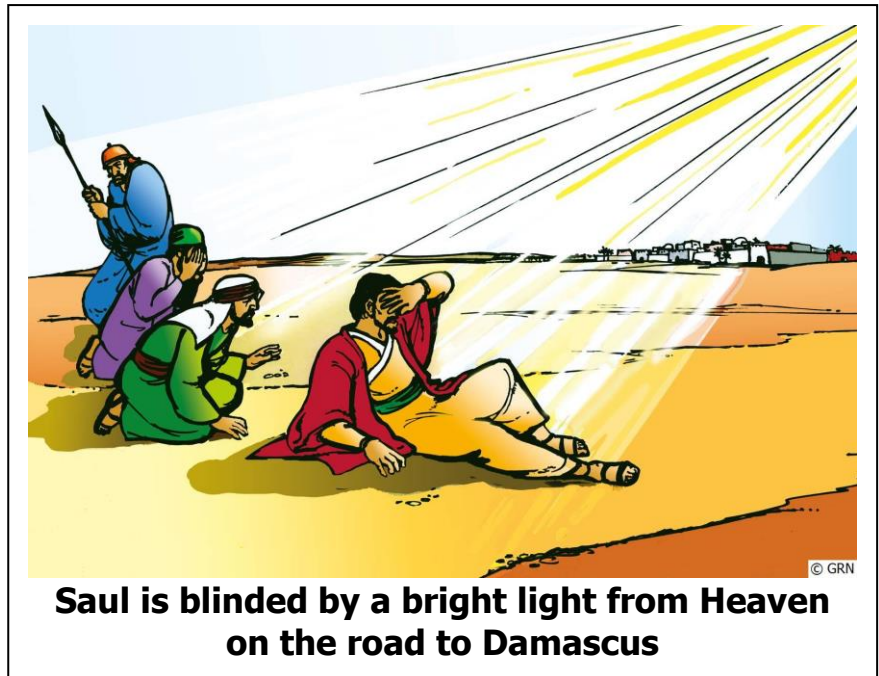
By this time Christian believers had travelled as far as Damascus in Syria. Saul, one of the Jewish leaders, asked for letters which gave him authority to put the believers in prison (9:2). They were afraid of Saul.

Saul was born in Tarsus (see map). He travelled north from Jerusalem to go to Damascus to find the Christians and put them in prison. No one could stop him. It would take a miracle from God to stop him and also to change him.

On the road to Damascus, a miracle happened. A bright light blinded him, and he heard a voice from Heaven say, "Saul, why are you fighting against Me?" He fell down on the road (9:3-5).

"Who are you, Lord?" he asked (9:5).

The voice spoke again. "I am Jesus. I am the one you are opposing." Jesus then ordered Paul to get up and go to Damascus and wait to be told what to do (9:5-6). His friends ran to him and picked him up. Saul could not see, so they led him into the city of Damascus. For three days Saul was blind. He was shocked. He did not eat, but waited for Jesus to show him what to do.



Saul knew that he had worked against God. He knew that he should say that he was wrong.

A believer called Ananias lived in another part of the city. Jesus spoke to him and said, "Ananias, go to the house of Judas... and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul..." (9:11).

Ananias knew that Saul had allowed Christians to be killed in Jerusalem so Ananias was afraid. Then the Lord told him, "Go! I have chosen this man to work for Me. He will carry My name to people who are not Jews, and to their kings. And he will bring My name to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer in My name" (9:15-16).

These words agree with the instructions Jesus gave to His disciples in Acts 1:8. This also confirms God's plan to save Israel AND the rest of the world through repentance and faith in Jesus.

Ananias found Saul, just as Jesus said, and prayed for him. "Brother Saul", he said. "The Lord Jesus, whom you saw on the road... has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." At once, Saul could see! He

now believed that the Lord Jesus Christ was the Messiah and the Son of God. He was baptised. Then he ate some food and was strengthened (9:17-19).

SAUL BEGINS A NEW LIFE OBEYING JESUS

Saul knew about God but he did not understand that the Old Testament words about the Messiah actually referred to Jesus. Then he met Jesus. This meeting was a miracle from God. From that moment, Saul believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah and the Son of God. Saul was saved through repentance and the grace of God. His faith in the Law of Moses was not enough to save him.

Saul went to the Jewish synagogue and spoke to the people there. He was a changed man. He told them "Jesus is the Son of God" (9:20). The people said he was now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy (9:21). His teaching became more and more powerful (9:22).

Some Jews in Damascus could not argue against Saul's strong words, so they made a plan to kill him. They watched the city gates to catch him leaving. The Christians heard this, so one night they let Saul down from a window in the city wall and he escaped (Acts 9:25). He then preached the gospel in Arabia. Saul tells his own story in Galatians 1:11-24, 2:1 and Acts 26:12-18.

Later, Saul went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples there, but they were afraid of him. Then Barnabas, one of the church leaders, brought him to the apostles. Barnabas told them what had happened to Saul on the road to Damascus and how Saul had been preaching in the name of Jesus. Saul needed to be humble to say that he was wrong.



The big changes Jesus makes: Acts 9:15-27

What happened to Saul when he became a Christian:

- Jesus told him to take the Good News to others (9:15).
- God warned that he would suffer because he belonged to Jesus (9.16).
- God filled him with the Holy Spirit (9.17).
- The believers baptised him (9.18).
- He stayed for several days with other believers (9.19).
- Soon after, he began preaching (witnessing) (9.20, 27; Galatians 1:17-24).

The other things about Saul's conversion:

- He knew about God but he didn't understand that Jesus was God (9:2).
- Jesus told him to wait until he had further instructions (9.6).
- For three days he did not eat or drink (9.9).
- He prayed to God (9.11).
- God told him His plan for his life (9.15-16).
- A disciple gave Saul a message from Jesus (9.17).

"He is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" (Galatians 1:23).

From that day, Saul 'spoke boldly in the name of the Lord'. He spoke without fear, and again some Jews tried to kill him. Some of the believers took him to the sea port of Caesarea and sent him by boat to his home in Tarsus (9:30).

At this time the Holy Spirit made the church fellowships in Judea and Samaria strong and brave. The believers had a period of peace and many people became Christians (9:31).

The community of churches grew both in faith and in numbers. They were also united in spirit.

PETER SHOWS THE POWER OF JESUS

Peter did not stay all the time in Jerusalem. One day he went to Lydda in the north-west of Israel. In this town Peter met Aeneas who had been sick for many years. Peter healed him in the name of Jesus. Then all the people who lived in that town believed in Jesus as the Son of God (9:34-35). They were mostly Jews.

Many people who lived nearby also believed. Dorcas lived in Joppa. She became sick and died. The believers sent for Peter urgently. Peter remembered how Jesus raised three people from death (Matthew 9:25; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:1-44). Peter came to Dorcas. He sent the crowds away and knelt down and prayed and she came back to life. After this, many more people in Joppa believed in the Lord Jesus (9:36-42). They were amazed and had great fear and respect for Him.



Peter stayed in Joppa for some time to teach the Jews about Jesus. While he was there, God told Peter to teach other nations as well.



Talk about this:

1. How did God change Saul (9:6-15)? How did he follow the example of Jesus (9:16)?
2. Why was it important for Saul to obey and understand the instructions of Jesus (9:6, 15)?
3. Why was it important for Saul to work with local Christians (9:19-21)?
4. Why did the Jews want to kill Saul (9:23, 29)?
5. How did Barnabas help Saul? (9:27)
6. What happened to Saul (9:30)?
7. How did the Holy Spirit work at first in Judea and Samaria (9:31)? Why were these churches at peace and united?
8. Describe the miracles that took place before the events which followed in Chapter 10.



Think about this: When Saul persecuted the early Christians, he persecuted Christ Himself (9:4).



Pray about this: How to overcome persecution and disunity caused by religious traditions.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 10



Learn about this: *The conversion of Cornelius and the lessons learned by Peter (verses 1-23); Peter's sermon to Cornelius and his family and friends (24-43); their conversion at the coming of the Holy Spirit (44-48).*

PETER VISITS SOMEONE WHO IS NOT A JEW

The Romans ruled Israel. Roman soldiers from Italy lived in the towns and the forts. The Roman army was divided into groups of 100 soldiers. The captain of a group was called a 'centurion' (Luke 7:2). A 'regiment' was a larger group, probably of 1000 men; each regiment had a name.

Cornelius was centurion in the Italian Regiment. He and his family were not Jews but they believed in God and prayed to Him (10:2). They did not know about Jesus but were kind and helped people in need.

One day, when Cornelius was praying, he saw an angel of God. What is it, Lord?" he asked. God gave him a message: "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up like an offering to God (10:4). Send men to Joppa to bring back a man called Peter. He is staying with Simon the leather-worker" (10:6-7). Cornelius obeyed and sent men to Joppa.

Peter was still in Joppa. While he was praying, he became hungry. He saw a vision from God. He saw what looked like a large cloth coming down from

Heaven. It had all kinds of unclean creatures in it, birds and animals, which the Jews were not allowed to touch or eat.

There was no angel, but a voice said, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"I never eat anything unclean", Peter replied (10:14). Then the voice said, "Do not say anything is not pure that God has made clean" (10:15).

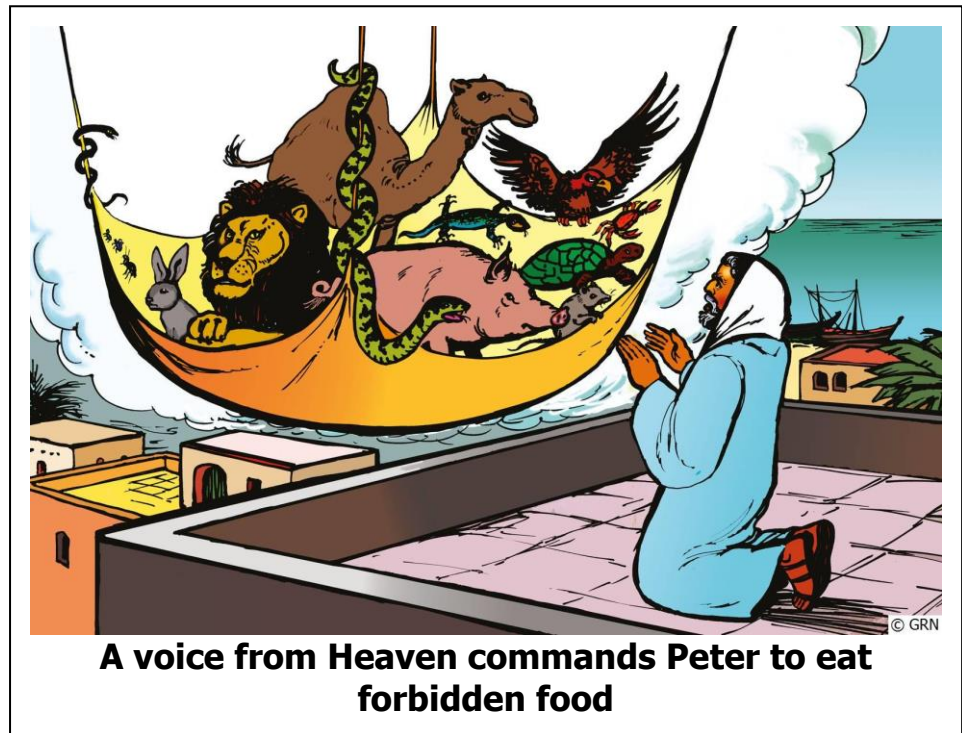
The voice from Heaven came three times. In this way, God prepared Peter to tell Cornelius, who was not a Jew, about Jesus.

Cornelius's servants came to Simon the leather-worker's house and asked for Peter (10:17-18). Then the Holy Spirit spoke to Peter: 'Don't be afraid to go with them, for I have sent them' (10:19-20). And so, Cornelius and his family heard about Jesus.

The next day, Peter went with them to Caesarea. The Jewish law said that Jews should not go into a non-Jewish house, but God had showed Peter that He can make anything clean (10:15, 28). God wants all people to be saved. He saved Saul. Cornelius could be saved by believing and following Jesus.

God wanted Cornelius and his family to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. Peter told Cornelius, "Now I know that God treats everyone the same. He accepts people from every nation" (10:34-35). God did not want Cornelius to reject the Jewish Messiah. God wanted Cornelius to know about Jesus. God also wanted to teach Peter new things in addition to the Old Testament covenant. So Peter preached the New Testament Good News of Jesus Christ (10:36-43). He confirmed that the Son of God came into the world as Judge and as Saviour (10:42-43). When Peter said these words, the Holy Spirit 'came down on all who heard the message' (10:44).

When Cornelius and his family all heard the Good News of Jesus Christ, they believed (10:46). The Jewish believers who were with Peter were amazed. They saw the Holy Spirit come upon believers who were not Jews.



Then Peter baptised the new believers 'in the name of Jesus Christ'. The Holy Spirit came on them as on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

On that day, Peter learnt that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, came to save from sin all people who believe. The plan of God is to offer salvation to people of ALL nations. We are called to do the same in the name of Jesus.

Then Peter stayed with them a few days (10:48). He had a lot to teach them and a lot to learn himself from God.



What did Peter learn from meeting Cornelius?

He learned that:

1. God accepts people from every nation who fear Him and do what is right (10:35).
2. God sent the Good News of salvation and peace with Him through Jesus Christ (10:36).
3. Jesus is the One whom God appointed to forgive sins in His name (10:42).
4. The Holy Spirit is given to all who receive the message of salvation (10:45).
5. Nothing should stop believers being baptised in the name of Jesus (10:48).



Talk about this:

1. Why did God save Cornelius? What was the result (10:34-35, 44-48)?
2. How did Peter respond to the vision and the voice (10:14, 21, 23, 28-29, 34-43)?
3. How did God change the religious traditions of Peter (10:14, 28, 35)?
4. Is the work of the Holy Spirit in 10:44-46 found in your church?



Think about this: Does God save anyone He chooses whatever their faith or position if they repent? Are you ready to obey God when He shows you what to do? Are you ready to change your religious traditions? Are you ready to ask the Holy Spirit to work freely in your life and church? Is He calling you to share Jesus with others?



Pray about this: Asking and receiving the power of the Holy Spirit.



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 11



Learn about this: *What the church leaders said to Peter about new believers who were not Jews (verses 1-18); how the church grew strong in Antioch, Syria (19-26); how the churches helped each other in times of need (27-30).*

PETER GOES BACK TO JERUSALEM

Some Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were not happy with Peter. "You went into the house of people who are not Jews and ate with them", they said (11:3). Their religious traditions caused them to criticise other believers. Their religious traditions hindered their faith in Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Peter told the church leaders about his vision which was given three times (11:5-10). He said, "The Holy Spirit told me not to let anything keep me from going with them" (10:12). He told them what happened in Joppa (11:13-15). He told them what John the Baptist had said before Jesus began to preach: 'He (Jesus) will baptise you with the Holy Spirit' (11:16; Mark 1:8).

Peter told the church leaders that the Holy Spirit came down on them 'just as He came down on us at the beginning' (11:15), even before he had baptised them. Then they all praised God together (11:18).

This was the promise of Jesus to all who believe His Good News (John 14:15-18; Acts 1:7-8). He also promised that many miracles would happen (as in Acts 9:34, 40).

So then the Jewish believers were happy to worship with the believers who were not Jews. Later on in the early church there were different problems because of religious traditions.

HOW THE EARLY CHRISTIANS SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS

At this time other believers travelled through the Roman Empire. At first, they preached the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Jews (11:19). Then some of them preached to other nations (11:20).

Believers from Cyprus and Cyrene (Libya) came to live in Antioch in Syria. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was here that the believers were called Christians for the first time (11:26). God was with them and many people believed and accepted Jesus as their Saviour (11:21).

The church leaders in Jerusalem heard of this. They sent Barnabas to Antioch to meet the new Christians. Through him, many more believed in Jesus and were saved from their sins (11:24). Barnabas then went to Tarsus to bring Saul back to Antioch to help him (11:25-26). It is still important today for new believers to understand their new faith. They do this:

- by listening to good teachers;
- by reading the whole Bible;

- by obeying the teachings of Jesus.

Agabus, a prophet from Jerusalem, also came to Antioch. The Holy Spirit spoke through him and told him that there would be very little food in the Roman Empire. This happened in the time of Emperor Claudius (41-54 AD). The church in Antioch wanted to help the people in need, especially the believers in Judea. So the Christians gave money to Barnabas and Saul to take as a gift to the church in Jerusalem. (11:29-30).

The church in Antioch became an important centre for teaching, evangelism and aid.



Talk about this:

1. Why did some Jewish Christian leaders criticise Peter (11:2)?
2. Are you ready to meet people of any race, colour or culture and speak about God to them and salvation in Jesus?
3. If God treats everyone the same, what should we do (10:34)?
4. How did Peter bring back peace and unity to the church in Jerusalem (11:17-18)?
5. What was God doing through the believers in Antioch (11:26, 29)?
6. Why is it important to read and study the whole Bible when we meet as a church?



Think about this: What is the mission work of your church? Do you pray to find out what God will bless in ministry? How do you find what hinders the growth of the Kingdom of God?



Pray about this: What is God seeking to do in your church?



Bible reading: Acts Chapter 12



Learn about this: *How King Herod tried to destroy the ongoing ministry of Jesus in Israel (verses 1-4); how God answered prayers for Peter in prison (5-19); and then punished Herod (19-23); which was followed by a time of church growth (24); and preparation for the future ministries of Saul, Barnabas and Mark (25).*

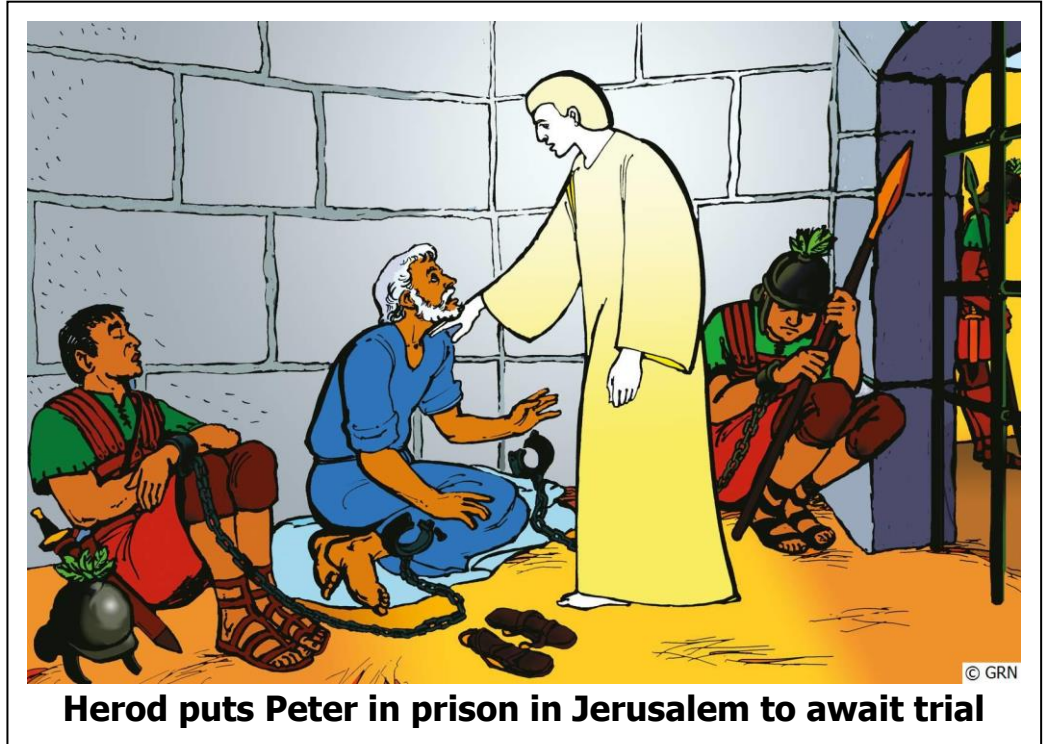
AN ANGEL HELPS PETER TO ESCAPE FROM PRISON

The Romans put Herod Agrippa in charge of Judea. He was a grandson of Herod the Great, who killed the baby boys in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus (Matt 2:16).

Herod Agrippa was a friend of the Jews but he was not a friend of the Christians. He put some Christians in jail and then killed James the brother of John (12:2). The Jewish leaders were pleased about this, so Herod took Peter and put him in prison. He wanted to bring Peter to trial after the Jewish Passover (12:4).

But God was in control. Later, He allowed James to be killed for his faith but chose to save Peter. Herod could not do anything to Peter unless God allowed it. God's power was greater than Herod's power (1 John 4:4). When believers are persecuted, some die early and some are saved. God is always in control. No plan of God can be defeated (Job 42:2).

In prison, Peter was chained to two soldiers. On the night before his trial, when Peter was asleep, suddenly a light shone in his cell. An angel woke him and said, "Quick, get up! Put on your clothes and follow me" (12:8).



At once Peter's chains fell off and he followed the angel. They walked past the guards and went out through the gate into the city. Peter did not know what was happening until the angel left him. Then he knew it was not a dream. He went to Mary's house where all the Christians were praying urgently for him (12:12). Mary's son John Mark was also there.

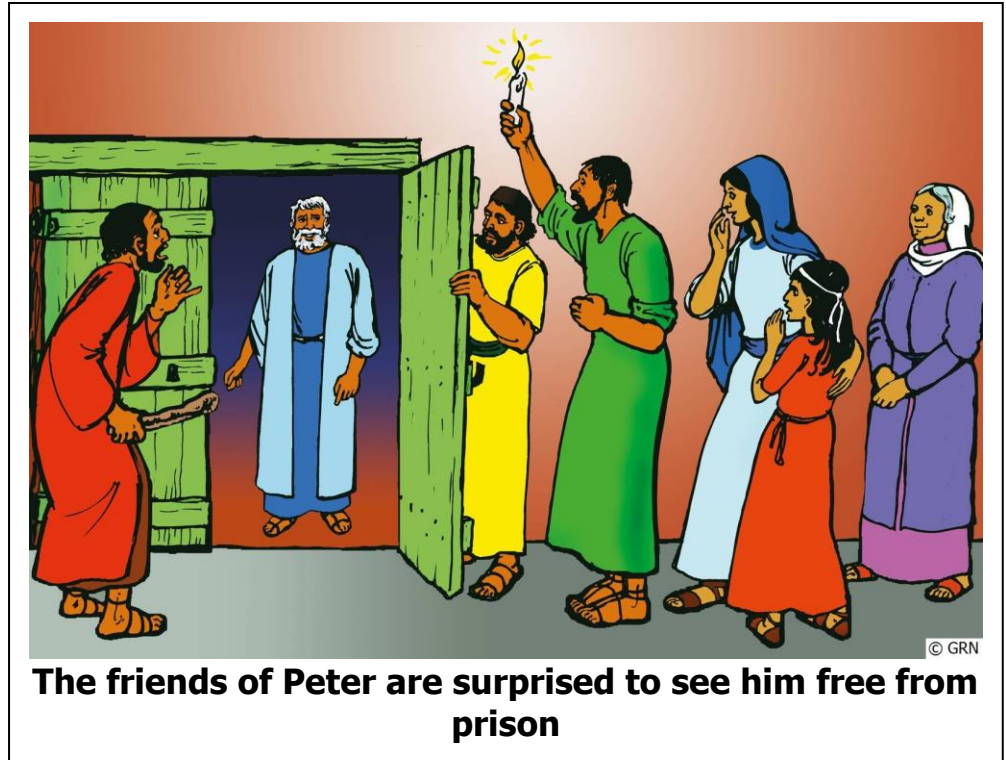
At first they could not believe that Peter was there and that their prayers had been answered (12:13-16). They laughed at Rhoda, the servant girl who found Peter standing outside the locked door. They asked for a miracle from God but did not believe the answer!

"Tell James the brother of Jesus and the Christian brothers and sisters about this", Peter said. Then he left them for a secret place (12:17).

Under Roman law, guards who let prisoners escape were killed. Peter had escaped and Herod was humiliated so he left Jerusalem for Caesarea, then he went to Tyre and Sidon on a state visit. He sat on his throne and spoke to a large crowd of people. He was dressed in royal robes (12:21).

“This is the voice of a god, not a man”, the crowd shouted. Then an angel of the Lord killed Herod because he did not praise God Almighty (12:22-23).

After that time, the Good News of Jesus Christ spread to many places (12:24). So the prayers for Peter were answered in an amazing way. Also, Barnabas and Saul moved freely between Jerusalem and Antioch. John Mark went with them (12:25).



The friends of Peter are surprised to see him free from prison



Talk about this:

1. What happened to Peter when he was in prison (12:6-10)?
2. How can prayer help people who are hindered in ministry?
3. How can prayer help people who are trapped by poverty and sickness and fear?
4. Why did God kill Herod (12:23)?



Think about this: What happened when Peter’s friends started to pray urgently for him (12:6-25)? Do you believe that God is working out His purposes today? Do you pray urgently to God when you see evil men and women trying to destroy the Christian faith? Are you praying for evil men and women to come to believe in Jesus Christ?



Pray about this: The need for urgent prayer.

CONCLUSIONS

The book of The Acts of the Apostles has often been called 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit'. Luke wrote it so that people would know about the great works of God and the power of His Spirit at work through the apostles after the first Pentecost.

In the early days of the Christian Church, the believers shared the Good News of Jesus Christ through the countries of the Middle East. Then Philip told the Good News to the Ethiopian, who took it to Africa. History books tell us that Mark took the Good News to Egypt and Thomas took it to India so that it spread there. Saul (who was later called Paul) took the Good News to Europe.

In the early days of the church, the Christians were persecuted at times but they were bold, loving and caring. They did not fight when there was trouble. Many moved away. Wherever they went, they spoke about the risen Lord Jesus, through the power of His Spirit.

They met Jews who believed in the true God, but who did not know that Jesus was the Son of God. Many of the Jews turned to Jesus. At this time, the believers were first called Christians. God's Holy Spirit worked in their lives. They were saved by God's grace through repentance and faith in Jesus.

We have also read about the three well-known people who were converted to follow Jesus at this time:

- ***The man from Ethiopia*** who believed in God but did not understand about Jesus Christ, the Messiah, written in the Hebrew Old Testament.
- ***Saul***, who believed in God but did not believe that Jesus was their promised Messiah.
- ***Cornelius*** who believed in God and worshipped Him but had not heard about Jesus.

God loved these men, and so the Holy Spirit led Philip, Ananias and Peter to them. When they heard and understood and believed the message about Jesus, they believed in Him and were saved.

In the same way, God wants us to tell others about Jesus. Do you know anyone who believes in God, but does not know how to be saved? Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you, so that you can tell them about Jesus.

We all have a part to play in God's plan to save the world. In every age or generation many have never heard the Good News about Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that each new generation must be 'born again' (John 3:3). Therefore, in every age, Christians must carry on the work of telling the world about Jesus to young and old. If we have put our faith in Jesus and have been born again, God wants us to tell others the Good News. We can be led and guided by the Holy Spirit, just as Paul was in the first days of the early church.

Today, over two billion people in the world call themselves 'Christian'. Every year there are many new believers. When they are 'born again' by hearing and

believing and applying the teachings of Jesus, they need to learn more about the life and writings of believers in the early church. They need to understand what truth is and what error is. We encourage you to read your Bible daily. Manna Bible teaching commentaries will help you to understand the Bible and help you to share God's truth with others.

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