

THE STORY

CHAPTER 28

Summary of Chapter:

Jesus had commanded his followers, just before his ascension, to not leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ten days after his Ascension, at Pentecost, while the disciples of Jesus were waiting in a house, a sound of the blowing of a violent wind was heard and the Spirit of God came upon them and they began to speak in different languages. God fearing Jews from every nation came and heard the good news of Jesus Christ spoken to them by the disciples in their own language.

Some people made fun of them and thought that they were drunk. Peter stood up and explained what they were witnessing and preached to them the gospel. After hearing this, many of them were convinced and believed in the message of good news. They asked Peter what they should do in response, and he said to them to repent, be baptised and receive the Holy Spirit as a gift from God. Three thousand were saved that day and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. The first Christians took care of each other's needs and shared all they had with one another.

On one occasion Peter and John were on their way to the temple to prayer, where they saw a lame man who sat at the temple gate called Beautiful and begged from those going to prayer. Peter looked at him and then in the name of Jesus Christ he commanded the man to get up. The man's legs and ankles became strong and he jumped to his feet and began to praise God for what had happened to him. All the people who saw this were filled with amazement and Peter explained to them the good news of Jesus Christ.

Opposition then began to arise from the religious leaders and they questioned Peter and John on what had happened. Peter explained to the religious leaders the good news and they were astonished at his courage and knowledge from an unschooled man, but they knew that these men had been with Jesus. They tried to convince Peter and John to no longer speak of the good news again, but Peter and John were compelled to do what is right in God's eyes and so they continued to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

The apostles continued to preach and teach the good news as well as perform many signs and wonders and God added to his church daily those who were being saved.

The opposition from the religious leaders grew and they arrested the apostles and had them imprisoned. During the night the Angel of the Lord opened the jail doors and took them to the temple courts where he commanded them to continue to tell people about the good news.

The religious leaders heard about this and brought them in and told them that they had given them instruction not to speak about this any more. Peter and the other apostles replied by saying that they had to obey God rather than men, and again Peter explained the good news to the leaders. The religious leaders had them flogged and sent on their way.

Now a follower of Jesus named Stephen, who was described as 'full of grace and power', performed many signs and wonders before the people, in Jesus name. Opposition arose from the religious sectors and they tried to argue with Stephen, but they were no match for the wisdom the Spirit gave him. They persuaded some men to falsely accuse Stephen of blasphemy and brought him before the Sanhedrin. Stephen defended himself by speaking and telling people of the good news of Jesus, from an Historic perspective. When they still did not believe, they stoned Stephen to death.

At the stoning of Stephen was a young man named Saul. He gave approval to the stoning of Stephen and began to persecute the early church. He went around imprisoning any men or women who followed Jesus in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, many Christians fled from Saul's persecution to Damascus, and when Saul heard of this he sought permission from the High Priest to go to Damascus and imprison the Christians there. On the way, Jesus revealed himself to Saul and questioned Saul on why he was persecuting Him. Saul was temporarily blinded and needed help to reach Damascus. Jesus sent a man named Ananias to help Saul see again and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Saul, an enemy of Jesus, became a devoted follower of His there in Damascus and immediately began to preach in the Synagogues about the good news of Jesus Christ.

The religious leaders of the day conspired to kill Saul. The disciples were not keen to take Saul in so instead, a man named Barnabas did. Barnabas and Saul proclaimed the good news but when Saul's life was in danger, they sent Saul to Tarsus for a while.

Most of the early Christians were Jewish, but the good news is for all people and God showed that to Peter by firstly giving him a strange vision of unclean food which he was commanded to kill and eat, and then by sending him to a Gentile man named Cornelius. And so the church began to spread across ethnicities and nationalities.

However, as the church grew, so did the persecution against it, and many followers of Jesus lost their lives. Peter again found himself in prison because of the opposition from King Herod. Again, the Angel of the Lord rescued Peter and freed him from his cell miraculously, and he went and told the followers of Jesus.

Saul and Barnabas however, spent a year speaking about Jesus in Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were called Christians for the first time. From there the Lord called them to be missionaries and to take His good news to the people in Asia Minor. It was during this time that Saul's name changed to Paul.

1. Why was Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost so effective?

The promised Holy Spirit arrived and empowered Peter and his fellow disciples to speak boldly for Jesus. Not only were they able to come out of hiding and proclaim the Good News but they were able to speak in the tongues of many different known languages of the day, and each person was able to hear the Good News in their own language. The Spirit of God not only empowered the disciples to speak and proclaim the Good News but the people were able to receive the message with believing hearts as we read "they were cut to the heart," meaning they were convicted that what Peter and the others had declared was true. Their conviction led them to ask the disciples as to how they should respond, and we read that many repented and believed and were baptised on that day.

And so why was Peter's sermon so effective? Because of the empowering and enlightening work of God's Holy Spirit in Peter's life, and in the lives of those who heard the good news.

2. Why did the Jewish religious leaders dislike the early Christians?

In the eyes of the Jewish religious leaders, these followers of Jesus were heretics. They were teaching and proclaiming a different way to be right with God than what they believed they had been given by God as the only way to be right with him. Their way was built on obedience to God's Law, whereas the early Christians were dependent on their faith in what Jesus had done for them as the Messiah. For the Sadducees, the early Christians' belief and proclamation of the resurrection from the dead was simply anathema to them. And so at the heart of their dislike for the early church was the fact the church was undermining their religious system and practice of it.

With all the numerous conversions to Christianity, jealousy also was at the heart of their dislike for the early Christians. The followers of Jesus spoke with such power and authority and were able to confirm their message through signs and wonders, that the religious leaders envied their influence over people.

With the effective work of God's Spirit through the proclamation of the good news by the apostles and unity and love amongst the early church for each other, jealousy from the religious leaders resulted in hatred towards them. Their influence and authority amongst their own people and amongst the Roman government was slowly but surely being compromised.

3. *What examples of Christian love and fellowship do you see in this chapter?*

The early Christians became devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to breaking of bread and to prayer. They spent much time together and had a common bond between each other (ie: they became family), and God added to them daily those who were being saved. Their love for, and fellowship with each other was seen, in that many sold property and possessions, in order to give to those amongst them who were in need.

We also see the love and fellowship of these early Christians in that with the growing numbers of the early church, came the growing list of needs which needed to be taken care. Christians were in one heart and mind with each other and shared what they had with one another to help with those needs and we also read how the apostles chose several men to help distribute and receive items so that each one would be taken care of, freeing the apostles to continue with teaching and preaching the message of the gospel.

Christian love and fellowship is seen across nationalities and cultures, like Peter sharing with the Gentile Cornelius. We also see Christian love and fellowship displayed as the church heard of Peter's imprisonment, and they prayed earnestly for him.

4. *What factors helped the Good News of Jesus Christ to spread quickly?*

There were no Bibles or books explaining Christianity during the early days of the Church and so it was spoken, and handed down by oral tradition.

The Roman Government had a law on the freedom of religion and so there was no state sanction against Christianity.

The Romans were renowned for their roadways, and so with the easiness of travel, and accessibility into other Roman colonies, the gospel was transported further afield without much fuss.

Obviously the lives and examples of those early Christians were a wonderful testimony to the love of God and the authenticity of the good news.

The Power and Authority given to the apostles to preach and teach and perform signs and wonders aided in confirming and affirming their message.

The religious festivals and celebrations of God's people in Jerusalem saw that many Jews came to Jerusalem at least once a year and there exposed to the good news. They would take it back to their town as they returned from their celebrations. With what had happened during Pentecost where the disciples were given the ability to speak in different tongues of known languages, people were able to hear the good news in their own languages.

5. *How were the early Christians able to remain faithful even in the midst of extremely difficult circumstances?*

I think they were able to remain faithful during these difficult times because they devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings, to fellowship, to breaking of bread and to prayer. Their devotion was as a result of believing completely in what Jesus had done for them.

If we believe in something completely, we too find ourselves being devoted to that something, no matter what.

With the help of the Holy Spirit's work in them, helping their belief in the Gospel, people were able to devote themselves, commit themselves, resolve themselves to remaining faithful no matter what.

We also read that the apostles, after being flogged at the request of the religious leaders and sent away, left with rejoicing, because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus. Christians were able to remain faithful because they considered it an honour to suffer for the sake of Jesus' name.

6. *What practical steps can you take to increase your faith?*

Devote yourselves to the study of the Word of God and it being preached and taught to you as often as you can.

Devote yourselves to being amongst, and spending time with those who have faith in Jesus regularly.

Devote yourselves to remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross, through observing communion regularly.

Devote yourselves to prayer, both private and corporate prayer.

7. *How do you explain the drastic change in Saul's (Paul's) life?*

Supernatural.

For Saul, who hated Christianity to the point of approving Christians being stoned to death for what they believe and forcing them to be imprisoned because of their belief, to suddenly change and become a Christian and leave his life to go and preach and persuade people all over the place that Jesus is the only way to please God, must have been a work of God.

God worked His salvation in Saul's life and opened his heart to his love for Him. His eyes were literally opened to the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done; and with the Spirit of God's help, caused him to believe and to follow Jesus above everything else.