

CHAPTER 28
New Beginnings

TIMELESS TRUTH: He Is Risen - Spread The News!

CHAPTER SUMMARY: (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

What could turn a group of gutless deserters into courageous, outspoken evangelists willing to be imprisoned and even die for their cause? They had witnessed the resurrected Christ. He had proved Himself alive for forty days to various people in a variety of circumstances and places. Just before His ascension, Jesus told the disciples to wait for the promised power of the Holy Spirit so that they could be witnesses to His resurrection in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Ten days later on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit stormed in like tongues of fire. He empowered each disciple to declare the gospel. Peter became the first mega-church preacher and that day three thousand new believers were baptized. This new community of believers embraced teaching and fellowship and enjoyed the favor of nearly all the people. All but the powerful Jewish rulers, that is.

The new church continued to grow rapidly. The apostles were even able to perform miracles similar to those Jesus had done! As the apostles spread the word of the resurrection in Jerusalem, they incited outrage and opposition from the Jewish rulers. Peter refused to be silenced and continued to speak in spite of orders to stop. Even a severe flogging could not curb his zealous proclamation that Jesus was the Messiah. Stephen's scathing sermon before the Sanhedrin showed how the Jews had repeatedly rejected God's prophets and resisted God's Spirit. The Sanhedrin dragged him outside of Jerusalem to stone him. He saw a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God and entrusted himself to the Lord.

Sparked by the martyring of Stephen, persecution drove Christians like Philip out of Jerusalem and into outlying areas like Samaria. While the opposition grew, so did the spread of the gospel message. A Pharisee named Saul made it his personal mission to defeat this movement once and for all, but his blinding come-to-Jesus moment on the road to Damascus really "opened his eyes." Meanwhile, God prepared Ananias to deliver God's marching orders to Saul: he had a mission to be God's witness to the Gentiles. As Ananias laid his hands upon him, Saul's sight was restored and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Within a few short days, this persecutor of Christ became a preacher of Christ. Needless to say, his turnaround was met with suspicion and doubt, but trusted Barnabas vouched for him to the apostles in Jerusalem. Saul soon found himself on the receiving end of death threats, so he too was sent away from Jerusalem. The church spread throughout Judea and Samaria as God used even persecution to achieve His Upper Story purpose of spreading the news that Jesus is the risen Messiah.

God's next move was so radical that He had to prepare both Peter and Cornelius for this new revelation. While an angel told Roman centurion Cornelius to send for Peter, Peter was given a vision of unclean animals on a sheet. A heavenly voice instructed him to eat this meat that was definitely not kosher. What Peter called impure, God now called clean. As Peter was trying to interpret the meaning of this vision, Cornelius' servants arrived and summoned him to their master's home. When he explained the gospel to a full house, the Holy Spirit was poured out on these Gentiles too! The Holy Spirit was now available to all who believed! Peter now knew his vision was not about food but about God's plan to declare all people "kosher" who would believe in Christ. Peter's ministry continued in Jerusalem where Herod Agrippa's persecution grew deadly. Peter was imprisoned but even prison bars could not stop God's plan. As his friends earnestly prayed for him, an angel miraculously freed him. Kings, rulers, and prison guards all found themselves fighting against God and helpless to stop His plan. While the Lower Story of persecution drove believers away from Jerusalem, the Upper Story of resurrection drove many to God. He alone can redeem even the worst of circumstances. After all, He alone is the God who raised the dead!

DISCUSSION STARTER:

Share about a time when you had to begin a new job or project.

GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. Look up Ex. 3:2, 3:21, and 19:18. Why do you suppose the Holy Spirit was portrayed as tongues of fire that came to rest on each believer at Pentecost and how does His relationship to believers change after this event?
2. According to Peter's Pentecost sermon (p. 391-392 or Acts 2:22-24, 36), who was responsible for Jesus death? As a group, discuss the tension we experience between God's sovereignty and man's free will.
3. What marked the community life of the believers (p. 392, 395)? Discuss ways your church and small group help foster a similar community. Share what is most meaningful to you personally.
4. The church grew rapidly from the beginning even in spite of growing opposition and persecution. What factors might account for such growth then?
5. God the Father was the most visible person of the Trinity in the Old Testament. Jesus, God the Son, was most visible in the gospels and now God the Holy Spirit becomes prominent in Acts. For most Christians, the Holy Spirit is the least understood person of the Trinity. List all you learned about the Holy Spirit from this chapter. What did you learn about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for your own life?
6. How did Stephen's martyrdom help fulfill God's mandate of Acts 1:8 (p. 389) beginning with Philip? If you are comfortable, share an example from your own life of God fulfilling an Upper Story work out of a Lower Story tragedy.
7. What accounts for the dramatic change in Saul of Tarsus from persecutor to preacher? Do you know anyone personally who has gone from being a Christ-hater to a Christ-follower? (Please be sensitive to privacy by refraining from mentioning names.)
8. God intended to teach Peter something even more profound than a lesson about foods through the vision of unclean animals (p. 402-403). What was it and why was Cornelius' conversion such a big turning point in the life of the early church? (See Acts 11:1-3, 15-18, Romans 10:12-13 and Ephesians 2:11-13 for further insight.)
9. What did you learn about suffering from Peter's flogging (p. 397) and imprisonment (p. 403-404), and Stephen's martyrdom (p. 397-399) that you could apply personally?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.