

## **The Story – Chapters 28: *New Beginnings***

### **Introduction**

This is our first chapter on the early church. We start with Pentecost and saw the bravery of the disciples who just 50 days earlier were pretty frightened. (Pretty amazing what the Holy Spirit can do!!!) We also looked at how the church started in Jerusalem, but in part because of persecution, ended up spreading throughout the Roman Empire.

If you want to read this material in the Bible, it's all found in the Book of Acts – Acts chapters 1-10 and 12.

### **Summary of Chapters 28 – New Beginnings**

What could turn a group of gutless deserters into courageous, outspoken evangelists willing to be imprisoned and even die for their cause? Along with hundreds of others, they had seen Jesus in various places and under a variety of circumstances.

Just before His ascension, Jesus told the disciples to wait for the promised power of the Holy Spirit so that they could be his witnesses 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, empowering the disciples to share the gospel. Peter spoke boldly, and on that day three thousand people were baptized. The apostles were even able to perform miracles similar to those Jesus had done! The new church continued to grow rapidly, as the new community of believers embraced teaching and fellowship.

As the apostles spread the word of Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem, they incited outrage and opposition from the Jewish rulers. Peter refused to be silenced and continued to speak despite orders to stop, and even a severe flogging. Stephen's 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 and he was stoned to death. (But before he died, he saw a vision of Jesus and prayed for forgiveness for his killers.)

Sparked by the martyring of Stephen, persecution drove Christians out of Jerusalem and throughout the Roman Empire. 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 as he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians there, he was confronted by Jesus and blinded. God was preparing Saul to be his messenger to the Gentiles (anyone who isn't Jewish), and a few days later, when Saul's sight was restored, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and he began to preach about Jesus. Needless to say, Saul's turnaround was met with suspicion, but Barnabas (another Christian leader) vouched for him to the apostles in Jerusalem. Saul soon found himself on the receiving end of death threats, so he was sent away from Jerusalem.

We had clues that God's good news was for everyone, but this was confirmed when Peter had visions in which he was instructed to eat meat that was unclean. When he protested, a heavenly voice told him that God had made it clean. As Peter was trying to interpret the meaning of this vision, the servants of a Roman centurion named Cornelius summoned him to their master's home. (Cornelius had earlier been told by God to send for Peter.) When Peter arrived and explained the gospel to a full house of Gentiles, the Holy Spirit was poured out on these Gentiles too!

Peter's continued preaching about Jesus resulted in his imprisonment. 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.

### **Discussion Questions**

As you read, remember there are discussion questions for Chapter 28 are on page 486 of the book and also questions that can be found on *The Story* bookmark (which is also on our website). Also, feel free to consider some of the questions below:

1. Just 50 days earlier, Peter denied Christ and cowered in fear and shame. Now, in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost, we find Peter preaching and facing down Jewish religious leaders and noticeably full of courage (p. 391-392). Describe the "new" Peter. How do you account for this change? When have you experienced this kind of power? Can you think of anything that may prevent you from experiencing this kind of power?
2. Read Acts 2:44-45 (p. 392). The Christians were giving to those who had any kind of need. Notice that the Christians weren't giving to each other because they felt the need to "give to the poor," but because all the believers now viewed each other as family, and what else do you do with family but take care of each other? How does being brothers and sisters in Christ transform how you view others in need?
3. Cornelius' conversion along with his household dramatically changed the direction of the church. What began as a Jewish messianic movement would now cross ethnic barriers. Consider the ethnic and racial barriers that exist in the Church today. What are some ways that our church can promote greater racial and ethnic integration and harmony in the church locally? Globally? Personally?
4. For most Christians, the Holy Spirit is the least understood person of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). What are some of the things you learned about the Holy Spirit from this chapter. What did you learn about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for your own life?
5. What do you think 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?