

---

**Day 325 - November 21**

---

## **Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)**

### ***Growth of the Early Church***

**Readings: Acts 3:10-6:7**

#### ***Reflections:***

- Growth of the early church: the first phase of growth happens in Jerusalem as Jesus had promised. The strategy Jesus gave the disciples was start in your city, expand throughout your country, and then launch into the known world. These first chapters of Acts focus on the early growth of the church in Jerusalem. This strategy remains to this day as often God prefers to mobilize Christians to impact their cities and then look to expanding their focus beyond.
- Peter heals crippled beggar: The promise of signs and wonders is immediately realized as Peter and John, the two most influential apostles, heal a crippled beggar. We see the disciples still participate in their religious tradition of going to the temple to pray but they bring a whole new spiritual reality into that pattern as God's presence works through them. Again, religious traditions are not in and of themselves evil. They can become bondage though if they are not ultimately strengthening a growing, intimate friendship with God. The man thinks his need is money and in fact Peter and John can't meet that perceived need. His real need is healing and through God's power that need is met. There are two lessons to be learned here. First, often what we think we need is not our true need. God is always looking to meet our real needs, not our perceived needs. Second, what we don't possess (like money) is not a true barrier to God working through us. God's power is what makes the difference in people's lives, not our education, wealth, status or personality.
- Miraculous power explained: There is nothing like a radically and miraculously changed life to set up sharing the message of Jesus. Peter doesn't pull any punches. He names what happened in no uncertain terms. He gives all the credit to Jesus and clearly labels the sin of the religious leaders (remember this is all happening at the temple) without hesitation or fear. Talk about a transformed Peter!
- Peter preaches repentance: We see in this message a great example of the early preaching to the Jews. The emphasis is on connecting the dots to the hope of a Messiah. The call is for repentance and to turn to God through faith (active trust) in Jesus.
- Peter and John arrested: No big surprise here. With everything Peter is proclaiming in the temple, we should expect they would be arrested and quickly!

- Defense before the Sanhedrin: A number of the key religious leaders are named. Within the Jewish context these would have been well known leaders. We will see now throughout the text that the Holy Spirit is given consistent credit for the transformation of the disciples into true apostles, “sent ones”. Peter responds with such boldness because he is full of the Holy Spirit. We see also that Jesus’ name is recognized as being the stamp of authority on their activity. Jesus’ name is not a new magical word that makes miracles happen. Through the Spirit, they are acting on Jesus’ behalf and carrying on his active work in the world. Like a body being directed by the head, so Peter and John are just acting under Jesus’ direction and in doing so, are doing it in his name. Peter also references in his response, Psalm 118:22, the verse about the stone the builders rejected becoming the capstone. This verse first used by Jesus will be used now throughout the early church (See Zechariah 4:7; Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; 1 Peter 2:7). Peter also makes it clear that salvation alone is found in Jesus. “For there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved.” The first followers of Christ understood that Jesus alone opened the way for a restored relationship with God. They had no sense that anyone could be fully reconciled through pagan religions. They also came to terms with the complete inadequacy of the temple and the torah to truly be the path of reconciliation with God. Only an inner transformation of the human heart can make us into friends of God. This transformation was only accomplished because of the blanket forgiveness of sins through Jesus’ death (similar to the Passover lamb) and then the coming of God’s presence into our hearts to change us from the inside out. Will there be surprises where people think they are reconciled when they are not and those that really know very little and yet God sees their hearts being right before him? Yes. We need to be careful not to judge others or embrace a false security in religious ritual. God is looking for those who truly want to be his friends and live in friendship with him. (See Matthew 7:15-23; 25:31-46).
- Apostles warned and freed: The religious leaders note three things now. Peter and John are courageous. They are unschooled ordinary men. They were with Jesus. Luke wants us to connect the dots. It isn’t how much education or social status you have. It is how close you are with Jesus that makes the difference. Can God use education and social status? Yes, clearly he does so with Paul who was trained in the best schools and was a Roman citizen. But God also delights to use very average people. We must remember the main point to the story of God is that he is not first and foremost a God of power, pride and prestige but rather a God of love, humility, grace and compassion for the weak and struggling. The religious leaders can say nothing because the healed man is standing right there. Miracles stand on their own as testimonies to the power of God. They don’t convert people but they can confirm the message. They try to tell Peter and John not to teach in Jesus’ name any longer but Peter makes it clear that they will obey God rather than care about what people think. The truth compels them.
- Prayer of church: When the church prays they do something significant. When the religious and governmental leaders killed Jesus, they were doing what God’s power and will had decided beforehand should happen. God is completely in control and will accomplish

everything he determines according to his will and power. Rather than being intimidated by the religious leaders' threats, the apostles pray for further boldness and an increased number of miracles. They are not backing down but ramping up. When forces come against the kingdom leaders, God's power wants them to become more resolved, cry out to him more, and become bolder and stronger. The power of God responds to their faith-filled prayers and the Spirit charges them up again for an even more intentional and aggressive outreach.

- **Sharing of possessions:** Interestingly right from being refilled with the Spirit's power, Luke immediately zeros in on their commitment to downsizing, demonstrating radical generosity and true unity within community. They didn't need only the power of the Spirit to proclaim the message. They needed the fruit of the Spirit working within their relationships so that they could demonstrate the message through loving community. Two great statements flow from this account. "Much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them." What a testimony to the power of such a grace-filled, generous community! Luke now gives an example of what this community practically looks like. People of wealth and means sell their assets (they didn't have the banks we have today and so people purchased properties as a way of gathering assets) and then invest it in the work of the kingdom. Notice that they lay the money at the apostles' feet. People don't give money to kingdom visions. They give money to leaders who are accomplishing kingdom visions. This is an important distinction. For people of wealth to invest significant funds you need: 1) a credible leader, 2) with a track record of getting the job done; 3) who is inviting people into a compelling vision. When you have all three of these elements, then people of wealth (in fact all people) will want to jump onboard. One of the key donors mentioned is Barnabas. Barnabas was his nickname (son of encouragement) because he obviously was an encouraging and affirming leader. He is the one who will advocate first for Paul and then later for John Mark. He is from the priestly line (Levi) and is contrasted to the couple Ananias and Sapphira.
- **Punishment of Ananias:** Ananias and his wife want to have the same recognition as Barnabas and the others but they also secretly want to keep some money for themselves. Similar to the story of Israel when in Number 16 some rebels are miraculously judged by God, here a couple wanting to mock God out of their pride is judged harshly. Peter declares that Satan has filled their hearts rather than the Holy Spirit and they have lied to the Holy Spirit. Rather than possessing a healthy faith in God (both trusting God that he will care for their needs if they give it all as well as respect for God and his righteousness) they demonstrate a self-centered arrogance. No doubt Ananias' heart attack-like instant death shocks everyone.
- **Punishment of Sapphira:** Peter's foreknowledge of her death is freaky. This entire section reminds us that we must not be too careful to characterize God as being somehow different in the Old Testament rather than what we see in Jesus and the early church. God as Creator and judge is the God of life and death. He alone knows the human heart and he alone is

judge of righteousness and sin. God does not move from being a God of wrath to a God of love in such a way that in the Old Testament he is the fearful, angry God who kills people and in the New Testament we find out he is the loving father who is sort of like a Santa Claus that winks at sin. God is both holy and merciful throughout the meta-narrative. The story of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us that the grace of Jesus does not mean we have a license to sin or arrogantly mock God. This dramatic example at the beginning of the church is a timeless reminder that God's grace does not compromise his holiness. Rather it works to fulfill true righteousness in the lives of those who humbly receive his grace and seek to walk in full obedience to what God reveals.

- Signs and wonders: We see here an interesting dynamic. The deadly judgment against Ananias and Sapphira causes people to hold back from trying to be groupies and yet more and more people align with the message that Jesus is the Messiah. They tried to bring the sick so that at least Peter's shadow might pass by and touch the people who are sick. We see here the belief that even the slightest connection to Peter and the apostles opened up the chance for God to work healing through them. We shouldn't take a superstitious approach to God and think that Peter is now the magical healer. We should see though that God desires to work through people rather than independently of people and as a result, sometimes we as humans get it confused and think that it is somehow the person that has something special to offer. Healing again includes deliverance from evil spirits.
- Apostles imprisoned: The religious leaders reaction is motivated by jealousy. When you are not secure in your relationship with Christ, when others gain influence, you are tempted to become jealous. Only when we are secure in Christ can we celebrate when others gain influence. The religious leaders attempt to stop the apostles is futile. An angel lets them out of prison and sends them with orders right back into the temple. You might think that they would be tempted to run and hide. Yet, God's confrontation of the religious establishment is far from over. God wants everyone trapped in religious bondage to hear the message of new life!
- Apostles' release discovered: The miracle of the apostles' escape is complete. The guards are oblivious. The jail doors are still locked. The religious leaders are more intimidated. They are afraid of the guards being stoned and so they back off from using force to re-arrest the apostles.
- Apostles reject warning: Peter's response again is as bold and courageous as someone can get. Credit is given again to the role of the Holy Spirit to transform their lives and make the truth of Jesus' message real for their lives. When we set our hearts to obey God, God gives us his Spirit so that we can in fact follow through with that desire to be obedient.
- Gamaliel's advice: Gamaliel is a famous teacher and scholar. He is mentioned here as well as in Acts 22:3. He is quoted a number of times in the mishnah and was given the highest possible title, Rabba (also see John 20:16). He was widely known and highly regarded, even in later Rabbinic tradition. Gamaliel's words are well worthy of reflection. He refers to a

couple of failed Messianic attempts and how these movements came and went once their leader was dead. He then says, "...if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." One of the greatest pieces of evidence in support of the truthfulness of the resurrection is the success of the early church. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, what explains the growth and expansion of the early church?

- Apostles released: The apostles are flogged and rejoice in their suffering for Jesus name. They don't back down. They continue to teach publically, in the temple courts and from house to house (also see Acts 20:20). This was the way the early church was structured: public preaching points supported by a network of house churches. "The Good News that Jesus is the Christ" is a now understood primarily as religious phraseology. In fact, most of the words used within the early church were political words. The "church" or ecclesia is the gathering of a town's citizens. The "good news" was a royal decree announcing a new king. It was like a presidential decree or announcement. "Lord" was a title used for Caesar. "Christ" meant anointed one or anointed king. So we should understand that this new kingdom had organized its citizens into a subversive house network that was making its own royal decree of a new monarch and ruler and all other rulers, both religious and governmental, were being put on notice. All people were being welcomed into this new trans-national, relationally inclusive kingdom.
- Seven chosen: The growth of the church community resulted in logistical challenges. The apostles needed to delegate their service to the widows and poor (notice how they are on the frontlines serving) and so they select leaders who are full of the Spirit (again see the importance of being filled with the Spirit to complete kingdom work) and wisdom (they need to manage logistics and people well). This delegation is critical so that they can spend time in prayer and in the ministry of the word. Spiritual leadership must serve on the front lines and yet they must also give clear attention to teaching and remaining fully connected to God through prayer. Most of the seven selected have Greek names and this suggests that they picked Hellenist leaders to help ensure those being overlooked were given the best possible care. Stephen is highlighted for his faith and being filled with the Spirit. Although he starts in a very humble service oriented position, God uses this as a launch pad into teaching and ultimately into martyrdom, the first of the early church. These men are commissioned through prayer and laying on of hands, a symbolic gesture of solidarity and transfer of responsibility, authority and empowerment. This simple reorganization allowed the church to continue to expand. Good reorganization facilitates further expansion. We see that even a large number of priests join the Jesus movement and so even those from within the religious establishment start to respond to the message. God is not opposed to religious leaders categorically. He opposes religion as the system of salvation. He wants to see people, even the religious leaders, set free from its imprisonment.