



Episode 9: God builds his Church

Acts 1–2

Key Verse:

“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.” (Acts 1:8)

Lisa Scheffler, author

We’ve traveled quite a distance, haven’t we? In our quest to discover the big story of the Bible, we’ve journeyed from creation, through the Fall, to the formation of Israel and its golden age, and on through its eventual exile. We stopped and stood awestruck at the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. Though we’ve traveled over some peaks and through some valleys, every vista has revealed the goodness and faithfulness of God.

So where are we now? The exciting thing about this week’s episode is that if we plotted our course on a line, we would almost be to the big, red “You are here!” dot. Although nearly two thousand years have passed since Christ’s resurrection, we’ve entered the part of our story that most resembles our current location. Though centuries separate us from the people of the early church, we share with them the same faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus, the same comfort and strength from the Holy Spirit, and the same bond with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This week’s episode has massive implications for how we live today.

As this is being written, our world is facing an unprecedented challenge from COVID-19, a novel coronavirus that is causing sickness and death, especially among vulnerable populations on earth. If there has ever been a time to understand what it means to be the body of Christ, it is now. So as we’re hunkering down and waiting to see what will happen, let’s think and pray about what it means to be the church. Because though the immediate future is hazy, the end of our timeline is clear, and we have an important role to play right now.

Day 1

Imagine the emotional roller-coaster the disciples had been on. Jesus enters Jerusalem to the cheers of the people, but then is arrested and crucified. Three days later he is raised from the dead and meets with his disciples, but they find out he's leaving them again. What a wild, mind-blowing, world-shattering ride!

This week we're settling in the book of Acts, Luke's account of the spread of the gospel and the formation of the church. In the first two chapters of Acts we move from the ascension of Jesus to the earliest days of the church. Today, we'll reflect on the mission Jesus gives his followers.

Read the Word

Acts 1:3–14 (NIV)

³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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."

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

¹² Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of

James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

- What expectations do the disciples have at first?
- How do you think they felt about Christ's plans for them?
- What was their mood after Christ ascended into heaven?

Reflect

During his life, Jesus had taught and demonstrated much about the kingdom of God. According to Acts 1:3, he continues these lessons during the 40-day period after his resurrection. The kingdom was God's reign on earth, marked by love, justice, and peace. Yet the disciples were still thinking in terms of the geo-political kingdom of Israel.

Jesus expands the scope of their thinking. It's like when a toddler arrives at the beach with shovel and pail in hand, and sits to play in the first pile of sand her feet touch. It's up to her parents to lift her head and direct her gaze to the seemingly endless wonder of the whole shore. God's plans were bigger than re-claiming the land under the disciples' feet. The wonder of Christ's death and resurrection is that it goes far beyond the descendants of Abraham, and blesses all the nations and tribes of the entire world. The disciples are invited to share that proclamation.

During this time, Jesus reminds his disciples of the gift of the Holy Spirit that he will be sending. He would be their comforter, advocate, and counselor. Without his power, they would be useless in their mission to bear witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Our key verse this week, Acts 1:8 previews the entire book of Acts. The disciples, acting as Christ's witnesses and full of the Spirit's power will take the gospel out from Jerusalem, into Samaria, the surrounding cities, and to parts of the Roman Empire that were far beyond. They would take Christ's message to everyone. To the Jews who had called for Christ's crucifixion and the hated Samaritan "half-breeds." To the Romans who scorned them and the pagan worshippers trapped in the worship of false gods. Their message wasn't just for their tribe, the people who were most like them, but for everyone.

God was doing something unbelievable. He was tearing down all the barriers that we hide behind — ethnicity, nation, class, gender, language, and way of life — to create something new. He would create communities that resembled his original vision for humanity. Communities of people who truly love God and one another. We carry that message to the world, even as we live it out.

After reminding the disciples of their mission, Jesus ascends to heaven. The New Testament authors tell us that he now sits at the Father's right hand (see Acts 7:55–56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1). During his earthly ministry, Jesus called himself the "Son of man." One of our key verses in this series, Daniel 7:13-14, explained the eternal significance of this title. His ascension "to the right hand of God" demonstrates his authority and reign.

The Lord Jesus Christ reigns and he will return. His kingdom has come and by the Spirit it will grow until it comes into its fullness. We have been given a mission from our King to spread his message to the earth until his return. Think about what it means to carry out that mission as we occupy our dot on the timeline. We will need the same comfort, guidance, and power from the Holy Spirit that the first disciples needed.

Who do you know who needs the message that Jesus reigns? Especially in a time when things seem so uncertain and chaotic? Stop and pray for them right now.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father God, I am in awe of what you have given me in Jesus Christ. Not only am I forgiven of all my sins and welcomed into your family, but you have given me your Holy Spirit. Help me help me better understand his presence in my life. Help me better understand how I can be your witness in the world. Give me a passion for reaching those who do not know you. I know that is your will, so I ask it Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 2

Before his arrest and trial, when he was with them in the upper room, Jesus spoke to the disciples about the *Paraclete*, or advocate who would come. He is the Holy Spirit, and Jesus also describes him as the Comforter and Helper. In this passage from Acts, we'll witness his arrival.

After Jesus' ascension, the disciples stayed together and prayed. You can imagine them anticipating the Spirit's coming by working out what they might expect. They'd recall Scriptures they had known since childhood and stories from the law and the prophets that spoke about God's Spirit. You can also imagine them thinking through Jesus' words about the Spirit. They must have had a million thoughts and opinions about who they were about to experience. Finally, the time arrived.

I have seen a couple of movie versions of the scene we are going to read about this week, but they never do justice to what I imagine. As you read the passage for this week, picture the scene as it unfolds. What do you see and hear? What reactions do you imagine the disciples having? What about the other witnesses? Imagine your own movie.

Read the Word

Acts 2:1–15 (NIV)

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”

- What happened when the Spirit filled the disciples?
- How did the crowd react?

The arrival of the Holy Spirit provides us with many touch points to other episodes of our story.

Recall the Old Testament story that we found in the book of Ezekiel that tells the story of dry, lifeless bones being brought back to life. “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live” (Ezekiel 37:9) After the prophet spoke the words of the Lord, an army stood before him — alive and full of the breath.

As with Adam when he was first formed, the breath of God gives life. As Jesus had explained during his earthly ministry, the Spirit of God gives new life. “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:7–8). In Greek and Hebrew, the words for “wind” and “breath” can also mean spirit. It shouldn’t surprise us that the Spirit came with the wind.

According to Acts 2, Christ’s followers are gathered together when suddenly a sound “like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven” and they saw “what seemed to be tongues of fire”

(Acts 2:2). Wind is often associated with the Spirit, and so is fire. Fire often signifies the powerful presence of God. God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. It was with a pillar of fire that God led the Israelites through the wilderness after rescuing them from captivity in Egypt.

This time the fire appears and then separates. It's significant that the tongues of fire "came to rest on each of them." The Spirit touches each of Christ's followers individually and gives them the power to carry out God's will.

The sound "like the blowing of a violent wind" drew a large crowd. Because of the harvest festival, Jews from all over the region were in Jerusalem and came to see what was happening. People were amazed to hear the disciples speaking their own languages. Luke lists all the cities represented at this miraculous event. They were located in a wide geographic area from Asia Minor to North Africa to Rome. These visitors differed in nationality, culture and language, yet each person was able to understand what Christ's followers, a ragtag group from rural Judea, were saying. "We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" They seemed surprised that people from Galilee of all places are speaking their language. Once again God has shown how he often uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

These pilgrims would take what they learned about the saving power of Jesus Christ back to their homelands. They would tell their friends and families, and the gospel would begin to spread. Instead of scattering to multiply and fill the earth with more people as God commanded Adam and Noah, these witnesses to the power of the Holy Spirit would disperse and help fill the earth with believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. God was uniting people from different nations and cultures who spoke different languages into one kingdom — with Christ as its head. The body of Christ would be multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual. People from every corner of the globe — united as the family of God and filled with his Spirit!

The Spirit is the Comforter who gives all of Christ's followers strength and encouragement to move forward in trust and obedience. He is the Helper who is a constant source of wisdom, power, and guidance as we follow Christ. He's the Advocate who represents the accused. The Spirit is the faithful, constant, reliable presence of Jesus who empowers his followers every step of the way. This gift from the Father is indispensable to all Christ's followers, then and now, as they seek to live as Christ lived and accept his call to take the gospel into the world. How will you rely on him today?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Lord Jesus, thank you for sending the Holy Spirit, my advocate, comforter, and helper. Show me how to rely more and more on him, especially in this season of heightened anxiety about the future.

Day 3

Near the beginning of the story, nestled in Genesis (right after the flood, but before we meet Abraham) we looked at the puzzling account of humanity's attempt to build a tower that reached into heaven. Earth's inhabitants fear being scattered and their desire to "make a name for ourselves" were the origins of this building project (Genesis 11:4). But God had re-issued the creation mandate to multiply and fill the earth, making their endeavor a sin in the same vein as Adam and Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit. Once again humanity chose defiance and pride over trust and obedience. In response, God confuses their language. They can't understand one another, so the people scatter to the ends of the earth.

Though he forces humanity to disperse, God had not given up his plan to have a people for himself. In the next chapters of Genesis, we saw God making promises to Abraham to make him a great nation, make his name great, and bless all the families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:2–3).

In Acts we see God ready to fulfill that promise by equipping the followers of Jesus to scatter the good news to the ends of the earth, starting with those who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost. In those moments, the Spirit ensures that language is not an obstacle to their understanding God's plan. Pentecost opens a new chapter in the story of the Tower of Babel — one gospel in many tongues for people of every tribe, culture, and nation. Babel is undone.

Yesterday we witnessed the Spirit's arrival. Today we'll focus on the message that Peter gives. Notice how we weaves Old Testament prophesy into his proclamation.

Read the Word

Acts 2:14–41 (NIV)

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ "In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.*

*¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.*

*¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,*

blood and fire and billows of smoke.
²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
²¹ And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

²² "Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵ David said about him:

"I saw the Lord always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.

²⁶ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest in hope,

²⁷ because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
you will not let your holy one see decay.

²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

²⁹ "Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰ But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. ³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. ³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

"The Lord said to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand
³⁵ until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."'

³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the

gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

- Why do you think Peter quotes from so many Old Testament texts?
- What other evidence does he give to show that Jesus is the Messiah.

Reflect

Throughout our story, we’ve found glimpses of Jesus in the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures. Today we’re seeing that Peter found him there too.

As we saw yesterday in Acts 2, the crowd surrounding the disciples at Pentecost experienced an amazing miracle, but they didn’t know what it meant. Guided by the Spirit, the disciples would have to explain what they’d learned from Jesus and the Old Testament about what God was doing in the world.

Peter begins by addressing the accusation that the disciples are drunk. It’s not drunkenness, Peter insists, it’s the Spirit. Then he reminds his Jewish listeners what God promised through the prophet Joel — that during the “last days” he would pour out his Spirit. He goes on to quote more from Joel who describes miraculous and bewildering signs and events before “the great and glorious day of the Lord” and asserts that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Peter then connects these prophecies with Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus performed miracles, wonders and signs, yet was put on trial and executed. Peter spares no feelings and implicates those gathered in Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. However, he assures them that Jesus’ arrest did not overturn God’s plan, but instead fulfilled it. He was raised from the dead, because just as David said in the Psalms, death could not hold him.

Several weeks ago, when we looked at the life of David, we saw Jesus in Psalm 110. This messianic Psalm was David’s song of anticipation for the coming Lord and Savior. Peter shows how Jesus is the Messiah that David sings about.

In addition to connecting the events they were experiencing with the Old Testament, Peter presents himself and the other disciples as eye witnesses to the resurrected Christ. These people had seen, heard, and even touched the living Christ. Their testimony carried weight.

Many receive Peter’s speech as true, are “cut to the heart,” and ask what they should do. “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the Holy Spirit,” Peter replies (v 38). According to Luke about 3000 people accepted Peter’s message and were baptized.

We share the same mission as the original disciples. We can bear witness to the love and goodness of God who has fulfilled all his promises in Jesus, and offers forgiveness, hope and renewal in his name. What can we learn from Peter as we take the message of Jesus to people in our communities? First of all, Peter begins by answering the question his audience is asking (“what does this mean?”) and responding to their immediate objection (“They have had too much wine”). Too often we tell people what we think they need to hear rather than discovering what their questions are.

Peter then connects his message to something that his listeners understand and believe, in this case the Hebrew Scriptures. He then shows them that Jesus is the one they’ve been waiting for. In our culture, we can help people connect the dots between what they hope is true, and what is true in Christ. Christ is the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to heal this broken world.

Of course, what we most want to share is Christ himself. Ultimately, we want to share the life of Christ, the reason for his death, and the significance of his resurrection and ascension. We can use our own testimony as evidence. You don’t have to be an expert to tell people what Jesus has done for you. Ultimately you and I believe in Jesus because we know him — and they can too.

The Spirit gives us the power to reach out to our friends and neighbors during this strange and difficult time. We can be a listening ear, and if they are receptive, we can tell them that Jesus is Savior and Lord. We can reassure them with the truths of the Bible, such as the ones that are here in this passage. People need to know that because God’s holy one did not see decay, we can have new life and because of the Spirit’s arrival, we can be filled with joy in the presence of God, even when a virus threatens our way of life. The Spirit can use us to offer hope and comfort no matter what the circumstances. Pray that he will use you today.

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Spirit, empower me to share your message of hope, peace, and restoration to a world that desperately needs to hear it. Open my eyes to those around me, and prompt me to meet their need. I want to be used by you to bless others.

Day 4

The Internet has made it easy to form a community that is unhindered by geography. Instead of gathering around a literal table, these people gather in chat rooms or in the comments section of their favorite site to exchange ideas and share their passion. The loyalty and dedication people have to these communities can be intense, and many feel a deeper connection to those who belong to their online community than to those in their real-life ones. Surely this phenomenon is born from the deep need we all have to belong, be accepted, and to believe that there is a group out there that “has our backs.”

Jesus gives us a richer and deeper connection to bond over. In Christ, we have spiritual brothers and sisters with whom we will spend eternity. These are people with whom we share a mission and a kingdom vision.

As we will see from the description of the early church in Acts, believers became a community in the best sense of the word. As we contemplate the verses below, let's re-examine our understanding of what it means to be the family of God and evaluate our commitment to our local church.

Read the Word

Acts 2:42–47

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

- What do you think it would be like to be a believer in the community Luke describes? What about it appeals to you?

Reflect

In Acts, Luke describes a community born in the aftermath of Pentecost. These believers “devoted themselves” to practices that solidify and grow their community

First of all, they sat under the Apostles' teaching. Although these new converts were likely Jewish believers who had a grounding in the Hebrew Scriptures, they needed the same education the Apostles had received from Jesus. They needed to know how Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures through his life, death and resurrection, and also how to live in his Kingdom.

Next comes the mention of fellowship. The Greek word *koinonia* (translated here as “fellowship”) means “sharing in common,” and as we'll see in the verses that follow, that's precisely what these people did. They were family. They learned and worshipped together, spent time together, and took care of one another.

Fellowship may not a word you hear used much outside of church circles, but it is something people long for. The way people live and work in the modern world can make it challenging for them to form the kind of deep kinship and community bonds Luke is describing here. So many are lonely, anxious, and trapped in addictions. We need to be known and loved. Being part of a

vibrant community of believers can point them to the comfort, peace, and freedom that the Spirit offers.

Last is the breaking of bread and prayer. As a family these believers took time to remember the Lord's sacrifice as a part of their gatherings in homes. A community at prayer seeks God's direction and is dependent upon him. We need to both remember and seek the Lord together.

A close-knit family of believers will help fill our need for love, acceptance, and support in good times and bad. And when Christ is at the center of a faith community, it will take on his personality. Power, love, and generosity characterized the life of the Jerusalem congregation.

Luke portrays this group as a community where people were happy to share what they had with each other. Obligation isn't implied here, just pure generosity. Imagine living in a community where, if a need arose, you could rely on other believers. As a member of such a group, you would feel a deep sense of security. You could rest easy that come what may, you wouldn't be left alone to weather life's storms, or as we are currently experiencing, it's diseases or financial hardships.

Love flowed in and through this community. Love from a heavenly Father who sacrificed his Son to save people who rebelled against him. Love from a Son who came to serve others and bring the lost home. Love from the Spirit who was sent to teach, guide and empower. As recipients of such abundant, overflowing love, we should be more than willing to pour out what we receive into the lives of others. Love, grace, and generosity can soften clenched fists until they become open hands. God will take care of us, so let's take care of each other, especially during times of uncertainty.

It's not surprising that "God added to their number daily those who were being saved" (verse 47). This group would have attracted people. They were joyful, sincere, and grateful to God for what they'd been given. Not that they would have been perfect, but I envision disputes being resolved with grace and forgiveness. Why? Because these people were filled with the Holy Spirit and willing to yield to his influence. They put Christ's agenda above their own, and were celebrating the love and forgiveness they had received from him by extending it to others.

If we are not experiencing genuine, loving relationships with other Christians, then we have to build them. We must pray and step out of our comfort zone. As many of our moms told us, "to make a friend you have to be a friend." We must open up, get real, and then encourage others to do the same. And as our bonds deepen, we should invite new people to join our community — Christians and non-Christians, alike. We must accept people wherever they are at and walk alongside them as we move toward Jesus.

The book of Acts goes on to record the spread of the Christian movement that started at Pentecost and moved outward, just as Jesus commanded. It began in Jerusalem, moved through Judea and into Samaria, and eventually to the outermost parts of the earth. The twelve disciples became the twelve apostles. Led by Peter, they boldly preached the gospel throughout Judea, even in the face of fierce opposition. As more and more people trusted in Jesus as the Messiah, the Jewish religious leaders increased their persecution, even to the point of putting some of Jesus' followers to death.

The apostles were joined by Paul, a Pharisee who had participated in the persecution of the early church before he had a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9). He was called by Jesus to be the apostle to the Gentiles — to go into Greece and Asia Minor and reach those who were enslaved to Pagan religions. On his missionary journeys, he founded new churches whose converts continued the spread of the gospel.

It wasn't always smooth sailing for the early church. Bringing together Jews and Gentiles who were so culturally different was a serious challenge. They had to be convinced that it was God's will for them to find unity in Christ. These first Christian communities were also threatened by Roman persecution who objected to their ways and false teachers who confused new believers with false gospels. Yet nothing could stop the church. Not conflict, opposition, or lies.

The same is true today.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father God, thank you for the body of Christ. Thank you that I can be a part of a spiritual family where there is love and support. Help me do my part to create the kind of community described in Acts 2. I want that for myself, and for the people you will add by the power of your Spirit.

Day 5

It's Friday! It's our day to reflect and worship. We're almost to the final episode. How well can you tell God's story? Could you list them in order and name the key figures? Today, review each episode and focus on each key verse. Challenge yourself to learn the story so you can share it with others.

The Story

Episode 1: God creates

- **Key Verse:** So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)
- **Key Passages:** Genesis 1–2
- **Key Figures:** Adam and Eve

Episode 2: God is rejected

- Key Verse: And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15)
- Key Passages: Genesis 3–11
- Key Figures: Adam, Eve, and Noah

Episode 3: God forms a family

- Key Verse: "He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" (Genesis 15:5)
- Key Passages: Genesis 12–21
- Key Figures: Abraham and Sarah

Episode 4: God rescues his people.

- The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them..." (Exodus 3:7–8)
- Key Book: Exodus
- Key Figure: Moses

Episode 5: God reigns

- Key Verse: "The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." 2 Samuel 7:11b–13
- Key Books: 1–2 Kings
- Key Figure: David

Episode 6: God judges rebellion.

- Key Verse: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13–14)
- Key Books: The Prophets
- Key Figures: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel

Episode 7: God comes to earth

- **Key Verse:** *"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah." (Luke 9:20)*
- **Key Books:** The Gospels
- **Key Figure:** Jesus

Episode 8: God dies for the world

- **Key Verse:** *"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16–17)*
- **Key Books:** The Gospels
- **Key Figure:** Jesus

Episode 9: God builds his Church

And just like that, he was gone. The disciples were left looking up at the sky, squinting their eyes to see if they could catch a final glimpse of Jesus in the spot where he had disappeared into the clouds.

Weeks earlier, they believed that the grave had claimed him. His crucifixion had sent them scurrying away to hide in fear. But three days after his brutal death, he'd appeared to them fully alive. And for forty days he taught with them, ate with them, and told them what they needed to do next. He was sending them out as his witnesses to spread the word. The whole world needed to know that Jesus was the Savior — that he had died for their sins and been raised from the dead. They needed to know that the ultimate King had come and defeated sin and death.

But now that he'd ascended into heaven and returned to the Father, they stood gazing at the sky. Suddenly two men dressed in white appear and reassure them. Jesus was gone, but he was coming back. So the disciples did what Jesus had told them to do. They went back to Jerusalem and prayed, and waited for the Holy Spirit to come. And wow. What an entrance he made.

On the day of Pentecost, as they were gathered together in Jerusalem, they heard the sound of a violent wind from heaven. Then what appeared to be tongues of fire appeared and came to rest on each one of them. Each person was filled with the Holy Spirit. He would comfort them, guide them and empower them to accomplish the mission Jesus had given them.

You see, God wasn't done with his plan. Our story has not yet come to an end. In fact, if there was a "you are here" dot on our story's timeline, we'd be standing on it. Because the same mission that Jesus gave his disciples on the day he ascended to heaven is also ours. And the same Spirit that rested on every believer at Pentecost dwells in us from the moment we trust in Jesus.

We get to spread the amazingly good news of what Jesus has done for us as our Savior, who died so our sins could be forgiven and we could be reconciled with the Father. We get to proclaim the reign of our King who offers peace, justice, love, and mercy.

And we get to share this message with everyone. Every nation, every tribe, every language, and every social class. They are all welcomed into this incredible thing we call the church. All the barriers that divide us from our ethnicity to our gender were shattered. Inside the church, they are rebuilt to form a beautifully diverse family of people who love God and one another. People united by the Spirit, committed to the ways of Jesus, and sharing the good news that our Savior and King has defeated sin and death. We are brothers and sisters in Christ inviting others into his church.

And one day, Jesus will come back in the same way the disciples saw him go into heaven and he will make everything right. That's how our story will end, with the biggest happy ever after you can imagine, and we get to talk about that in our final episode.

Key Verse

Meditate on our key verse for the week. Allow the Spirit to speak to you through God's Word.

“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.” (Acts 1:8)

Finding your place in God's story

Ask the Spirit to guide you, then consider these questions. Ponder the ones that speak to you:

- As you reflect on what you've read this week, what's your biggest takeaway? What did you learn about Christ's ascension? What was the mission he left his disciples with and who did he send to help? What were the first Christian communities like?
- How did you see yourself reflected in the stories we read this week? For example, how is the Holy Spirit your Comforter, Helper and Advocate? Are you excited to share the gospel with others and invite them into God's family? Why or why not? Who can you reach out and share the love of Jesus with? How can you demonstrate to them the peace and freedom of Christ?
- For what do you want to praise and thank Jesus?
- What requests do you want to bring to Jesus?

Tune in Next Week:

Next week is our final episode! It's the happy ending that we've been waiting for and you don't want to miss it!