

# THE GOSPEL TURNS THE WORLD

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## **A PEOPLE IN TRANSITION | Acts 1:12–26 | Paul Strychalski – Elder**

Jesus told the disciples to wait!

As they stood there, gazing with a mixture of wonder and anxiety, they recalled Christ's instructions: *"Go back to Jerusalem and wait for the Promise of the Father."*

Everything was changing and most of the disciples had no idea what was coming! They had just experienced several life changing events in a short amount of time: Peter's denial, Christ's death, earthquakes, darkness, Judas taking his own life, Christ's resurrection and now the living Christ ascending to heaven in full view!

Questions like, "What is happening?" and "What will happen to us?" were surely occupying their minds. But possibly the most intriguing question was "What do we do now?" Could Christ be getting them ready for a new way of living, a people in transition?

Then voices from two men in white snapped them back to reality. *"...why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into Heaven."*

So now the startled disciples returned to the upper room and Acts 1:14 says *"... continued with one accord in prayer and supplication..."* and waited.

During this time a discussion arose about the question of what had happened to Judas Iscariot.

Peter, in an effort to bring clarity to what had happened, recalled Scripture passages that were Divinely inspired, from David in the Psalms and encouraged the others with them. From Psalm 41:9 he described that it had to happen this way so that Scripture might be fulfilled. From Psalm 109:8, he cited that "we" must fill the office that Judas had vacated.

Knowing that Judas's replacement had to be someone who had followed Christ from the baptism of John until the ascension of Christ, they proposed a choice between two men, Joseph and Matthias. The final verse of the chapter tells us that by casting lots, they determined that Matthias was to replace Judas.

What we are going to do and where we are going to go are questions to which we can all relate. Everyone, at some point in their lives, comes to a crossroad, a change of life. We must take our transitional situations to the Lord in prayer, searching the scriptures and trust Him for direction, just like His followers in Jerusalem!

These disciples and followers were about to make a major transition in how they lived their lives but the One they had followed was gone! Someone was coming that would that would radically change their way of life! Would they be ready for this transition?

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## **A PEOPLE EMPOWERED | Acts 2:1–41 | Cody Podor – Pastor**

Picture the scene. 120 of God's people, witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, are gathered together in a small room in Jerusalem praying together and waiting.

What are they praying for? What are they waiting for? The fulfillment of Jesus' promise in 1:5 and 1:8, *"you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now... But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"*.

And then, it happens. Acts 2:1–4, *"When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance."*

For the first time in all of redemptive history, the Spirit of God takes up permanent residence in the people of God and everything changes. They burst out of the room and into the city streets proclaiming the mighty works of God and bearing witness to the good news of Jesus' triumph over sin and death.

The people are amazed and ask, *"What does this mean?"* And then, Peter, rises to address the crowd.

Remember, the last time we saw Peter was on the night of Jesus' betrayal where he denied knowing Jesus three times for fear of the consequences. This same Peter stands in the center of the very city where Jesus was crucified only 50 days earlier and boldly proclaims the life, death, and resurrection of his Lord and Savior from the Scriptures. What happened to Peter? Acts 2:4, he was filled with the Spirit and empowered for ministry.

The people hear the gospel and cry out, *"what must we do to be saved?"* Peter's reply is simple 2:38–39, *"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. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."*

Turn from your sin, trust in Jesus, and you too will be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a faithful and fruitful life.

God's people, equipped with God's Word, empowered by God's Spirit. The stage is set for the gospel to advance amongst the nations and the glory of God to be magnified amongst all peoples of the earth.

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## A PEOPLE TOGETHER | Acts 2:42–4:37 | Marland Villanueva – Elder

Is the early church perfect? Of course not. There's no such thing as the perfect church, not now and not in Acts 2. As we'll see in later chapters, the first-century church, like any church, is far from perfect.

Acts 2:41 tells us that after Peter's sermon, over 3,000 men—plus women and children—were added to God's church. Sharing this common bond of salvation, these new Christians are drawn to each other. Collectively and individually filled with God's Spirit, the first members meet together daily—studying doctrine, fellowshiping, worshiping and praying.

How tight were the early believers? Acts 2:44-45 says, *"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."* This notion of communal living was repeated in Acts 4:32, *"No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own."*

So was there really one big common pot of money that was being distributed evenly to all? Well, not exactly. The situation in Jerusalem is somewhat unique. Thousands of travelers that had been saved after Peter's message wish to stay longer to get grounded in their new faith. They need hospitality and financial assistance. Local church members open their homes and their pocketbooks to help the needy. Some even sell land and donate the proceeds. It is important to note that these actions are not done out of compulsion—everything was done willingly. In every way imaginable, the early Christians take part in voluntary acts of generosity. And this kind of selfless behavior seems to have been specific to the early church in Jerusalem.

Well, getting along is easy when life is good, but what happens when first signs of trouble appear? At this point in the history of the early church, nothing—not even persecution from outside the church—disrupts the unity among the early believers. In fact, God uses the first opposition to the church—the imprisonment of the apostles Peter and John for healing a crippled beggar *"in the name of Jesus Christ"* (Acts 3:6) and for proclaiming that *"there is salvation in no one else [than Jesus]"* (Acts 4:12)—to draw the persecuted believers even closer together and to further embolden them to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

The uncommon community and sense of togetherness among the members of the early church is characterized by an unspeakable joy that flows out of a right relationship with God. And it manifests itself in an abounding love for God and for his people. Consequently, God pours out his blessing on these early Christians and grants them favor in the eyes of the outside world. Acts 2:47, *"And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."* Acts 4:4, *"Many of those who had heard the word believed."*

God's people, filled with God's Spirit, fellowshiping and fulfilling God's mission together.

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## A PEOPLE PRESSED | Acts 5 | Rick Alexander – Pastor & Elder

But not everyone among the church was of one heart and one soul.

We see a couple that decides to try to serve both God and money. Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira take upon them a profession of faith and make a fair show of it, but then lie to God by pretending to give all of the proceeds from selling their land to the Lord, when in fact they kept hidden a portion of it. Their sin created a crack in the unity within the church, and now a people together faced an internal pressing.

How would this divisive spirit be addressed? Peter confronted them both, and God judged them instantly and severely. V. 11 *“And great fear came upon the church and upon all who heard of these things.”* A people pressed, faced the internal opposition by addressing the sin within and restoring the unity.

The continuing power of the Lord in the church was shown by signs and wonders done among the people. The miracles the apostles performed proved their divine mission and the church was of one accord.

But then the church faced an external pressing. Acts 5:17, for the high priest rose up with jealousy and arrested the apostles, placing them in jail. However, God was with them because during the night, an angel of the Lord came and released them to continue to proclaim the words of life.

Acts 5:21, instead of fleeing and hiding, the apostles went to the temple and preached the gospel. Their persistence in speaking the *“words of Life,”* brought them again in front of the authorities who charged them to no longer preach the gospel. They responded, *“We must obey God rather than men.”* This enraged the authorities who wanted to kill them, but after taking council, they beat them, threatened them and released them.

Amazingly, however, the apostles left the council v41 *“rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name.”* And every day, in the temple and in homes, the apostles continued to preach and teach the gospel. A people pressed, faced the external opposition with joy and boldly continued preaching the good news of Jesus.

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## A PEOPLE LED | Acts 6:1–7:60 | Larry Woods – Elder

At a time when the apostles were emboldened by the Holy Spirit to stand up to the same religious leaders who opposed Jesus and pressed for His crucifixion, more people than ever were putting their faith in Jesus. The church was growing!

It was in this context that a particular cultural segment of this new faith family was being left out. Just a few chapters back we learned that the new believers were mutually caring for one another. Some had needs; others had the ability to meet those needs. In this case, a group of widows who spoke Greek rather than the more common Aramaic was being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

As a solution to this situation, the apostles gave direction to the local church leaders to begin pushing ministry out to capable people who could lead in the caring for these widows so that the apostles could continue their daily bold proclamation of the good news of Jesus.

Seven men were chosen among whom was Stephen. Acts 6:5 calls him a *“man full of faith and of The Holy Spirit”*. As a result of multiplied ministry leaders, Acts 6 goes on to say that the word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and even a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. God was at work growing His church despite the vehement, physical opposition of the religious leaders who did not acknowledge Jesus as the true Messiah.

Stephen, this man chosen to lead his faith family by serving food to widows, was doing such great wonders among the people it got him noticed by those opposed to Jesus. They could not compete with his wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking so they had to instigate people to lie about him—just as they had done with Jesus.

The whole council of these spiritually blind religious leaders—including the high priest—could see the physical evidence that the influence of God was upon Stephen. The closing words of Acts 6 say, *“his face was like the face of an angel”*.

Empowered by God, Stephen gave his defense to the council starting with Abraham and recounting how God kept His covenant promises to the Jewish people. He used scripture to point out that God resides in the hearts of those who genuinely love and obey Him—not just in the temple. In one final, unvarnished indictment, Stephen calls out the council what they truly are—stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears and guilty of murdering the Messiah!

That was more than they could handle and they stoned Stephen to death. A man chosen to lead in the serving of food to widows but also led the church in the bold proclamation of truth.

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## A PEOPLE SCATTERED | Acts 8 | Robbie Carter – Pastor

This newly founded church grieves over the loss of Stephen (v2) who is the first of many martyrs to come. But persecution and death is not enough to stop the Holy Spirit from advancing the gospel of Jesus' witnesses through Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

In fact, we see the gospel going into Samaria and taking its first step towards the ends of the earth in Chapter 8.

Verse 1 says, because of the *"great persecution that arose against the church in Jerusalem"*, God's people scattered throughout Judea and into Samaria because of a man named Saul. Saul was, verse 3, *"ravaging the church"* and *"dragging off men and women and committing them to prison."* When Saul thought he was destroying the seed of Christians, God was purposefully scattering His seed throughout the nations. Neither persecution nor relocation can stop the Holy Spirit from spreading the good news of Jesus.

A man named Philip comes on the scene. Philip is not an Apostle, but just an ordinary Christian who knows the Gospel and is unashamed to teach the Word of God. He was among those who are scattered, and he finds himself taking refuge in Samaria. What was Philip's role in carrying out the great commission to Samaria? Verses 12–13 tells us that he simply *"preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ [and], they [believed and] were baptized, both men and women."*

And then Philip, this ordinary Christian, is commanded by an angel of the Lord to travel south. Upon his journey, a man from the African country of Ethiopia meets him along the way. The stage is set, God has providentially brought along Philip's path a man from a country that needs to hear the gospel. As Philip jogs alongside the Ethiopian's chariot, he notices the scroll of Isaiah sitting on the man's lap.

Verse 30–31, *"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip says over the loud trotting of the horses. "How can I unless someone guides me?" says the Ethiopian.*

So Philip hops into the chariot, sits down beside the man with the word of God open on their laps. Verse 35, *"Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with the Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus."*

This man believes, is baptized and is ready to take the gospel back to his country of Ethiopia, while Philip is once again led by the Spirit to another town. He preaches the gospel to all the towns along the way.

In the sovereignty of God, He uses suffering to scatter His people. Though God's people are scattered, this does not stop God's global movement of spreading the good news of Jesus to all nations through ordinary people in extraordinary ways.

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## A PEOPLE CHOSEN | Acts 9 | Chris Weisheim – Pastor

Praise the Lord! The gospel is expanding throughout the region. However, the first two words of 9:1, *“But Saul...”* force us to recall the ravaging persecution he inflicted on the church in Jerusalem back in 8:3, and awaken us to the sobering reality that Saul is still on the scene, still hating Jesus and still killing believers.

9:1 says, *“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”* Would Saul succeed in his mission? Would he snuff out the gospel? Would he destroy the church?

Well, the Lord Jesus answers these questions with a resounding NO! He appears to a now fully prostrate Saul on the road to Damascus and says v. 4, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* Saul responds, *“Who are you Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Rise and enter the city, and you will be told what to do.”* Saul radically comes face to face with Jesus, and Jesus has the last word. Jesus wins.

But the astonishing part of this story is that it was part of God’s redemptive plan all along. In fact, the Lord tells the disciple Ananias to go to Saul in v. 15, *“for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”* Saul’s evil plan is thwarted; God’s glorious plan continues; for Saul is chosen by God to carry the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles across the world.

So, what happens next? Well Saul, in v. 20, *“Immediately proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying ‘He is the son of God.’”* God chooses and transforms Saul from a great persecutor of the gospel to a great proclaimer of the gospel! An instrument belonging to the Lord Jesus.

A chosen people of God, who are instruments of God, proclaiming the glory of God. And the gospel advances.

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## **A PEOPLE CHANGED | Acts 9:32–10:48 | Hans Stonehouse – Elder**

A reoccurring theme we've heard so far is that Acts documents a dramatic change in people's faith. The persecution of the early church described in previous chapters led to the expansion of the church outside Jerusalem to encompass people from other regions.

Two such events that spread the gospel beyond its previous borders were opportunities involving Peter, who, at the end of chapter 9, healed a paralytic and miraculously resurrected a saintly woman named Tabitha. Both events were used by God to bring large numbers of people in the surrounding Samaritan region to faith in Jesus Christ.

Peter's ministry in the Samaritan town of Joppa brought him the realization that Jewish legalism, which prevented the inclusion of non-Jews, had to drop away. It marked the beginning of the biggest change the New Testament church would undergo—the admittance of Gentiles into the church.

The Apostles must have understood from Jesus' final commission that they were to preach the gospel to all nations. But it had not yet been accepted that Gentiles were to be included within the New Testament church. Would Gentiles need to convert to Judaism, or would their faith in Christ alone be enough?

Putting aside their centuries-old traditions and permitting non-Jews to join the church would be a difficult mind-set to overcome. It took a miraculous vision from God to change Peter and his way of thinking.

Acts 10 describes this vision in which Peter is taught to understand the underlying principle that Old Testament ceremonial laws were only temporary and not the divine will for all time. A foundation for unity of Jews and Gentiles within the body of Christ was to be laid.

Peter did not doubt the authenticity of the vision; his doubt was concerning the meaning of it.

Peter is then given the opportunity to provide a simple gospel presentation at the house of Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter was finally beginning to understand that the church needed to undergo a change to include people from every nation. Acts 10, verses 34 & 35 says:

*Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."*

Scripture tells us that as Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon those who believed.

Christ had given plain indication of it when He ordered them to teach all nations; and yet even Peter himself, who knew so much of his Master's mind, could not understand it until it was revealed here.

God himself was opening the door of His church to the entire Gentile world. This change was possible only through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross and then continued through the obedient response of Peter through the leading of the Spirit.

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## OUR GOD AT WORK | Acts 11:1–12:25 | Nick Tynan

So Peter returned to Jerusalem, where this whole movement started, to report back to the church leaders how God had been at work. More specifically, how God had been at work in the Gentiles, and the radical, confirming way God had moved through his Spirit. Peter tells the same story from Chapter 10, but this time to the Leaders in Jerusalem (look at chapter 11 v 15).

*'as he began to speak (the Gospel), the Holy Spirit fell on them (Gentiles) just as on us at the beginning.'*

No longer was this good news for mainly Jewish people; it was spreading to the Gentiles in the same, only-attributable-to-God kind of way, which they had seen at Pentecost.

v 18 *'When [the church leaders in Jerusalem] heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'*

This was a huge deal and a massive shift in the way Jewish believers had been thinking. It was an awesome story of God at Work in the world and in church leaders' hearts.

The leaders in Jerusalem are recognizing God at Work in the Gentiles. The gospel is spreading further and wider and the number of those being saved is growing. Churches are being planted and now we even see for the first time disciples of Christ being called Christians. Then we see these Christians caring for one another through hard times. There is a unity amongst Jewish and Gentile Christians on display that could only be attributed to a God at Work.

But this movement of God was not without opposition. Herod Agrippa, the king of the area including Jerusalem at the time, was persecuting and killing Christians and then captured Peter. Peter was even scheduled for execution *'but (ch 12 v 5) earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.'*

The church had already seen so many faithful God at work moments in their early days, that they immediately turned to the exact right place...humble prayer to the God who has it all in His control. Miraculously, God works again and sends an angel to guide Peter out of custody and leads him directly to the church that is right in the middle of their prayer meeting...a humanly impossible jailbreak continues to bolster the faith of the young church in Jerusalem and continues to display a mighty God at Work.

Chapter 12 ends with a clear demonstration that nothing will stand in the way of our God. Herod, who opposed God's work, is struck down because he did not give glory to God and he breathed his last. *V.24 but the Word of God increased and multiplied.* Emphasizing that Herod's work is put to an end. The work of God cannot be stopped.

These people, this beginning of God's church, a people in transition, a people empowered, a people together, a people pressed, led, scattered, chosen and changed all because of and for the glory of our Big God and the furthering of His Kingdom. This is our Awesome God at work.