

THE STORY

FINDING YOUR STORY IN GOD'S STORY.

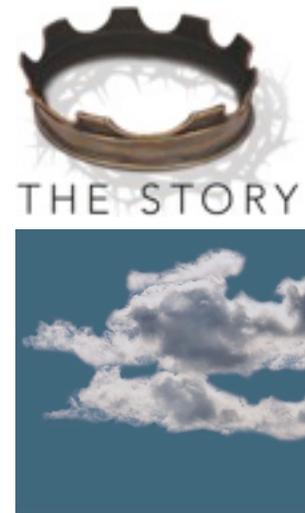
Synopsis & Context – Session #28: New Beginnings

What could turn the disciples of Jesus who, up to now seemed paralyzed in their fear and anxiety into courageous, outspoken evangelists willing to be imprisoned and even die for their cause? They had witnessed the Christ resurrected and Jesus had proven himself alive for forty days to various people in a variety of contexts. 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 addresses the crowd 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, but the Jewish authorities.

The new church continued to grow rapidly. The apostles were even able to perform miracles similar to those of Jesus! As the apostles spread the word of the resurrection in Jerusalem, they incited outrage and opposition from the Jewish authorities. 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 before he was killed.

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.



Chapter #28: *New Beginnings* is 'woven' from selections from *The Book of the Acts of the Apostles*

Acts 1—10, 12

Plot Points for Chapter #28: New Beginnings

Having given his disciples final instructions, Jesus ascends into heaven with a promise to return. At the Pentecost festival, the Holy Spirit falls on the disciples, unleashing powerful ministry of the gospel in words and in deeds of healing. The disciples are transformed from fearful cowards to fearless preachers in the face of the religious leaders' persecution. The death of Stephen, the first martyr, is a catalyst for the spread of the message and the growth of the church. The Gentiles are welcomed into the fellowship of the church and are no longer "unclean," excluded from membership in God's family.

Cf. Barr, Adam Exploring the Story: A Reference Companion (Story, The). Zondervan.

Acts

Ch. 1 – The Ascension of Jesus, Matthias chosen to replace Judas

Ch. 2 – The coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter addresses the crowd, the first converts

Ch. 3 – Peter heals a crippled beggar, Peter speaks in Solomon's Portico

Ch. 4 – Peter and John before the Council, the believers pray for boldness, the believers share their possessions

Ch. 5 – Ananias and Sapphira, the apostles heal many and are persecuted

Ch. 6 – Seven are chosen to serve, the arrest of Stephen

Ch. 7 – Stephen's speech to the Council and subsequent stoning

Ch. 8 – Saul persecutes the Church, Philip preaches in Samaria, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Ch. 9 – The conversion of Saul, Saul preaches in Damascus, Saul in Jerusalem, Peter in Lydda and Joppa

Ch. 10 – Peter and Cornelius, Gentiles to hear the Good News, Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit

**Ch. 11 – Peter's report to the Church at Jerusalem The Church in Antioch → NOT included in The Story.*

Ch. 12 – James killed and Peter imprisoned, Peter delivered from prison, the death of Herod

God's Story – YOUR story!

- **What in your estimation enabled the Church to grow so rapidly as we have read within Acts?**
- **How would you describe the empowerment by the Holy Spirit in your own life?**
- **What do you make of Saul's conversion experience? Has God ever spoken in various ways to you?**
- **What impresses you the most in reading Acts?**

The Bible as a Dramatic Story

i - Prologue – Creation (context)

ii – Prologue – The Fall (conflict)

Act I – Israel (First Covenant)

Act II – Jesus (Second Covenant)

Act III – New Life

Epilogue – TBD