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“You Will Be My Witnesses”

September, October, November 2005

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What's Ahead

Quarterly Preview

This study of Acts, entitled “You Will Be My Witnesses,” traces the early years of the Christian community. Its three units show how the early church developed in Jerusalem, grew out into Judea and Samaria, and went on to spread the Gospel “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The first unit deals with the birth of the church in Jerusalem at Pentecost and how the apostles preached, taught, and healed in spite of opposition. **The second unit** shows the Church expanding into Judea and Samaria and the initial outreach to the Gentiles. **The third unit** explores Paul’s conversion, the move into Europe at Philippi, the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila, and Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders as he prepared to go to Jerusalem.

In this quarter, you will see these biblical principles that can apply to your own life situations:

- The Spirit has the power to transform lives
- Community is essential to the Body of Christ
- Healing can be spiritual as well as physical
- The Gospel is the truth about Jesus
- Studying Scripture changes lives
- The Gospel breaks through all barriers
- With God we are never alone
- Your belief in God will impact your household
- Working for the Lord is a way of life
- Believers need to encourage one another

The Power to Change

A Present-Day Illustration

The blood curdling screams roused William and made his head flop down and his eyes flutter open. A man straddled a woman with his left hand clutched around her throat and his right hand raised, gripping a knife. William turned off the television as the blade descended.

The clock above the set said 2:13 a.m. Sometimes after getting off the night shift, he would sleep in the back room until his wife and children began to stir around 6:00 a.m. William flipped the side handle on the recliner, pushed himself up, and went into the kitchen in search of a snack.

He peered into the refrigerator and didn't see anything he wanted. Then he found himself easing down the hallway to the room of his 13-year-old daughter, Jalisa. She had been different lately. The teenager had gone to church about nine months ago and had come back "saved," whatever that meant. She talked about Jesus a lot. She had stopped hanging out with her old friends and had begun to make new ones. Her grades had even improved, mostly because she started doing her schoolwork.

William couldn't deny the change. He had been hesitant about making nightly visits to Jalisa's room for the last few months. Standing outside of her bedroom door now, he realized his wavering was close to fear. William made his way back to the recliner. He turned on the television just as the woman's killer was being handcuffed.

- 1.** *Where has Jalisa's power to change come from? List external changes in her life that indicate a change of heart.*
- 2.** *Why do we need the Holy Spirit to transform us? Why can't we just change on our own?*
- 3.** *Describe a life transformation you've observed recently as God's Spirit has been at work in a new (or recommitted) Christian.*

The Power of the Spirit at Pentecost

Acts 2:1-8, KJV

1 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.

2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

3 And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.

4 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

5 And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.

6 Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.

7 And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilæans?

8 And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?

Acts 2:1-8, NIV

¹When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?"

As was their custom, the Christians in Jerusalem had come together for fellowship. Perhaps they were staying in a house near the temple. But this gathering was a special occasion, for it was during the celebration of Pentecost.

The word "Pentecost" means "fiftieth." It was the Greek name for the Jewish Feast of Weeks, which occurred 50 days

(a week of weeks) after Passover. For Israel, Pentecost marked the end of the grain harvest.

This Pentecost festival, unlike all previous celebrations, was marked by three miraculous phenomena. The first phenomenon was “a sound like the blowing of a violent wind” (Acts 2:2, NIV). The wind-like sound filled the entire house in which the believers were gathered. The Greek word translated “wind” here is related to the word for “Spirit” and signifies the coming of the Holy Spirit’s power.

The second phenomenon was something that “seemed to be tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3). Apparently, the “fire” first materialized as a single mass of flame. But then, as these believers watched in amazement, individual flames broke away and stood over the head of everyone present.

In the Old Testament, the purifying presence of God is often represented by fire (see for example Gen. 15:17; Exod. 3:2-6; 13:21-22; 19:18; 40:38; Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16).

The third Pentecost phenomenon occurred when the Holy Spirit filled the assembled believers. According to the narrative, each of them began to speak in “other tongues” or languages (Acts 2:4). Throngs of people were in Jerusalem for Pentecost (vs. 5; 2:9-11). Perhaps most of these people understood Greek. At that time, it was the language of the marketplace. But there were probably many others who knew only the language of their own home district. Nevertheless, when the apostles proclaimed the Gospel in Jerusalem, everyone understood the message in his or her own language (2:6, 8, 11). No interpretation was necessary. According to Luke, this caused “bewilderment” and utter amazement among the multitude of witnesses because they supposed the speakers to be uneducated Galileans (vss. 6-7).

4. *Name the three miraculous phenomena which marked the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.*

5. *What was it about speaking in languages that caused utter amazement among the people?*

The Gift of the Spirit at Pentecost

Acts 2:38-42, KJV

38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

40 And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

41 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Acts 2:38-42, NIV

³⁸Peter 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. ³⁹The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

⁴⁰With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

⁴¹Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

In a powerful sermon (Acts 2:14-36), Peter connected the phenomenal miracles of Pentecost with Christ's death, resurrection, and ascent into heaven. These great events, according to Peter, were God's validation that "this Jesus, whom [Israel] crucified, [was] both Lord and Christ" (vs. 36). In other words, Jesus was the promised Messiah.

As Peter's words stunned his hearers, the Holy Spirit convicted their hearts. Their indictment for crucifying the Messiah prompted them to ask the apostles a desperate question: "Brothers, what shall we do?" (vs. 37). In order to "receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," said Peter, they must all "repent and be baptized" (vs. 38).

Repentance is defined as a voluntary change in a sinner's mind that results in a turning to God in faith with a corresponding turning away from sin. It includes a change of one's view, feeling, and direction in life. Baptism publicly symbolized the people's act of repentance and acceptance of Christ as their Messiah. This cleared the way for forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit. The practice of the early church was to baptize believers immediately following conversion. Thus baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit were closely connected. Peter told the people of Israel that the promise of the Holy Spirit was not only for them and their descendants, but for Gentiles as well.

Peter next exhorted the people to disassociate themselves from "this corrupt generation" (vs. 40), the Israelites as a nation who rejected and crucified their Messiah (see vs. 23, 36). "About three thousand" people repented, accepted Christ as "both Lord and Christ" (vs. 36), were baptized, and added to the rolls of the infant church that day.

These new believers eagerly gathered in fellowship for the purpose of prayer and "the breaking of bread" (vs. 42). "The breaking of bread" probably included both the Lord's Supper and a fellowship meal. These earliest believers also devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. This included doctrine related to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Since the church's formation at Pentecost, Christ's teaching as expounded by the apostles has been the touchstone by which the "Spirit of truth" could be distinguished from the "spirit of falsehood" (see 1 John 4:6b).

6. *What did Peter tell the crowd they must do to be forgiven of their sins?*

7. *What gift did Peter say was promised to those who received Christ and to whom was the promise made?*

8. *How many people were added to the church that day?*

Real-Life Turning Points

Turning Point Community Church puts out a monthly newsletter with a column inside called “My Personal Turning Point.” The column consists of the testimonies of people who have been transformed by the power of God’s Spirit. Here are some recent testimonies:

Ray had an alcoholic father, and as a teenager became addicted to alcohol as well. When he gave his life to Christ, God’s Spirit delivered him from alcoholism and changed his entire character. Today, Bill is a gentle, strong, faithful man, ministering to youth as a profession.

Naomi had been pretending to be a strong Christian, but she was shattered inside. After attempting to commit suicide, she felt even more shame. During a time of prayer and worship one morning at church, Naomi experienced spiritual warfare in her physical body. But once the battle was over, she was free. Now she has joy, peace, and purpose.

Arthur had a secret. It was a secret, that is, until police caught him . . . soliciting a prostitute. Once in jail, Arthur reflected on how he had become so spiritually handcuffed by sin. He was a Christian man who had a wife and children. As Arthur called on God to help him get victory, God’s Spirit led Arthur step by step to his freedom. Submitting to boundaries, accountability, godly counsel, and restorative discipline, God gave Arthur the courage and strength to be transformed on the inside, set free from his addiction.

9. *Can you relate to any of these stories? Explain.*

10. *As a group, identify three people in your congregation who have been powerfully changed by God’s Spirit in the past year (people whose testimonies are known). What changes have marked their lives?*

11. *How has God’s Spirit changed your life, or how is He changing your life right now?*

Testify to Transformation

God calls us today to testify concerning His great power and grace at work in our lives. Has God changed your life? Tell someone! It may be just what they need to hear

► *Think of someone you know who needs to know about the transforming power of God's Spirit. Write that person's name in the space below, asking God for an opportunity to share your personal testimony with them in the coming week. If you cannot think of a name, write the words "divine appointment," and ask God to arrange a conversation in which you could share your testimony. Then be watchful because God's Spirit is not only powerful but faithful, too.*

KEY VERSE

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. —Acts 2:38, KJV

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." —Acts 2:38, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

September 5 through 11

Mon. Deuteronomy 15:4-8—Share with Those in Need.

Tues. Isaiah 55:1-7—A Special Invitation.

Wed. Luke 12:13-21—Guard against Greed.

Thurs. Luke 12:22-34—Do Not Worry or Be Afraid.

Fri. Acts 2:43-47—The Believers Grow in Faith Together.

Sat. Acts 4:32-35—Be of One Heart and Mind.

Sun. Acts 5:12-16—Many People Are Healed.