

CHAPTER 32: The Gospels Part 10 & Acts 1 thru 4

People all around Jerusalem are talking about it. What happened to Jesus? Last week He was crucified by the Romans and now His body is missing! There are all these rumors floating around out there. Some claim they actually saw Jesus – alive! Others are saying that Jesus’s own disciples stole His body out of the tomb. There are even some who think Jesus didn’t really die but somehow, He revived in the grave and came out. That doesn’t very likely though. Then there’s the theory that they’ve misplaced His body somehow. That doesn’t seem likely either. So, what are we to believe? This whole thing is quite mysterious.

Two followers of Jesus are walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are discussing what happened. **While they were talking and debating these things, Jesus Himself approached and began to accompany them (but their eyes were kept from recognizing Him). And He said to them, “What are these matters you are discussing so intently as you walk along?” And they stood still looking sad.** (Luke 24:15-17) They recount all the events of the last few days – how Jesus had been condemned and crucified. They had hoped that Jesus would redeem Israel. There’s a report they’ve heard from a group of women about seeing angels and Jesus being alive. They don’t know what to think.

Jesus interrupts them: **“You foolish people – how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Wasn’t it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them the things written about Himself in all the scriptures.** (Luke 24:25-27) It isn’t until later, while they are eating dinner, that their eyes are opened and they recognize Jesus. At that point, Jesus disappears. **They said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us while He was speaking with us on the road, while He was explaining the scriptures to us?”** READ (Luke 24:32)

About the same time Jesus disappears from dinner with those two men in Emmaus, He suddenly appears to His disciples in Jerusalem – seven miles away! They are still in hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish leaders. Ten of the eleven disciples are there, but Thomas is not with them. Jesus greets them saying, “Peace be with you!” At first the disciples are terrified. They think they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus reassures them and convinces them that it is really Him. He talks with them briefly and then vanishes.

Later that same evening Thomas returns home. **The other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”** (John 20:25) But Thomas does NOT believe them. He thinks they are playing a practical joke on him. His unbelief is understandable and it’s really not any different from the unbelief expressed by the disciples earlier that day when the women had reported to them that they saw Jesus. Thomas is just a little more vocal about his unbelief: **“Unless I see the wounds from the nails in His hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will never believe it!”** (John 20:25)

Eight days later the disciples were again together in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and examine My hands. Extend your hand and put it into My side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe.” (John 20:26-27) But seeing Jesus is enough for him. **Thomas replied to Him, “My Lord and My God!”** (John 20:28)

Conventional wisdom says that “seeing is believing.” But Jesus tells Thomas... **“Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed.”** (John 20:29) Believing without seeing, now that is FAITH. Basically, Jesus is saying, “Thomas, those who believe that I am Lord without actually seeing Me with their own eyes, they will be blessed!”

The eleven disciples leave Jerusalem and return back home to Galilee. Jesus has given them the message to meet Him there. So, they meet up with many other followers of Jesus from that area. They all gather together on a certain mountain. We are not told what mountain it is. Perhaps it is Mount Arbel overlooking the Sea of Galilee. We don’t know, but it was a mountain that Jesus had designated. And just as He said He would, Jesus shows up!

When they saw Him [Jesus], they worshiped Him, but some doubted. (Matthew 28:17) The reaction from this large group is mixed. While many of them rejoice and worship Jesus, others remain skeptical about what they’re seeing.

Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given Me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20) This is often referred to as “The Great Commission.” Jesus gives His followers an assignment to carry out. It’s the task of continuing the work that He started. Those who follow Jesus are to preach and teach the kingdom of God. They are to spread the good news that salvation is in Jesus. He really IS the way, the truth and the life!

Jesus told His eleven disciples the last night He spent with them during the Passover that He must go away. **“There are many dwelling places in My Father’s house. Otherwise, I would have told you, because I am going away to make ready a place for you. And if I go and make ready a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with Me, so that where I am you me be too.”** (John 14:2-3) That same night Jesus also told them that when He goes away the Father will send the Holy Spirit. **“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you everything, and will cause you to remember everything I said to you.”** (John 14:26) The disciples remember these words but are still not quite sure what they mean. They will soon find out.

Before Jesus leaves, however, He has to some unfinished business He needs to take care of. One of His disciples, one of the sheep, has been deeply wounded. Jesus, the all-compassionate Shepherd must tend to him. Who are we talking about? Simon Peter. If you’ll recall, the night Jesus was arrested Peter denied Jesus three times. This was a low point in Peter’s life. He has been carrying the burden of guilt and shame around with him ever since.

Well, some of Jesus’ disciples decide to go fishing on the Sea of Galilee. It’s been a while since they have been able to do this. They fish all night long and catch nothing. Now it’s daybreak. Tired and frustrated, they row toward the shore. That’s when Jesus shows up standing on the beach. But they don’t recognize Him. **So, Jesus said to them, “Children, you don’t have any fish, do you?” They replied, “No.” He told them, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So, they threw the net, and were not able to pull it in because of the large number of fish.** (John 21:5-6).

This same thing happened to them several years before, back when Jesus first called Peter, James and John to be His disciples. John remembers it. He says to Peter, “It’s the Lord! It’s Jesus!” Peter realizes that John’s right. Without hesitation Peter dives into the water and swims to the shore to greet Jesus. The other disciples remain in the boat and arrive shortly thereafter.

When they got out on the beach, they saw a charcoal fire ready with a fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said, “Bring some of the fish you have just now caught. Come have breakfast...” (John 21:9-10, 12) And so, here on the bank of the Sea of Galilee in the early morning hours, Jesus serves His disciples breakfast. It’s a sweet and precious moment for all of them. When breakfast is over the disciples go back to work securing their catch and stowing their nets. But Peter remains behind. Jesus needs to talk with him alone.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these do?” (John 21:15) Jesus points to the other disciples. **Peter replied, “Yes, Lord, You know I love You.”** **Jesus told him, “Feed My lambs.”** (John 21:15)

This same exchange is repeated two more times – a total of three times, one for each time Peter had denied knowing Jesus. **Jesus said a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”** **He replied, “Yes, Lord, You know I love You.”** **Jesus told him, “Shepherd My sheep.”** **Jesus said a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”** **Peter was distressed that Jesus asked him a third time, “Do you love Me?”** and said, **“Lord, You know everything. You know that I love You.”** **Jesus replied, “Feed My sheep.”** (John 21:16-17)

But Jesus isn't finished. He has one more thing to tell Simon Peter. Jesus lets him know that his commitment to Jesus is going to cost him everything – his freedom and eventually his life. Nevertheless, Jesus tells Peter, **“Follow Me.”** (John 21:19)

Having completed His mission, Jesus, the Son, is ready to return to His Father. He leads the disciples back to Jerusalem. They walk together one final time up the Mount of Olives. Jesus gives His faithful eleven these parting words: **“Thus it stands written that the Christ would suffer and would rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And look, I am sending you what My Father promised. But stay in the city [Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high.”** (Luke 24:46-49)

Jesus blesses His disciples, lifts His nail-scarred hands and slowly ascends upward into the sky. Jesus then disappears into a cloud. And just like that, Jesus is gone. But not really! The disciples – they don't feel sad. They're no longer afraid. They stand on top of the Mount of Olives worshiping Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. They return to Jerusalem with great joy. There is much work to be done, but for now they will do as their Lord had instructed them. They will wait in Jerusalem to be, as Jesus put it, **“clothed with power from on high.”** (Luke 24:49)

And that is how the Gospels end.

The book of Acts picks up right where the Gospels left off. The eleven disciples are descending the Mount of Olives laughing and smiling. Their faces are beaming with joy. Why are these men so happy? One might think they would be downcast. After all, they just saw their best friend depart. But these men aren't sad, not at all. These men are glad! To fully understand their source of joy, we need to rewind. Let's go back in time about 30 minutes...

These same men stood on top of the Mount of Olives. They gazed up into the afternoon sky. They watched Jesus disappear into the clouds. They strained to catch one last glimpse of Jesus. **As they were still staring into the sky while [Jesus] was going, suddenly two men in white clothing stood near them and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come back in the same way you saw Him go into heaven.”** (Acts 1:10-11)

Whoever these men in white clothing are, their message to the disciples is clear – Jesus is coming back again! This jogs their memory. They remember Jesus saying to them the night of Passover: **“In a little while you will see Me no longer; again, after a little while, you will see Me.”** (John 16:16) Their hearts fill up with hope and joy at the very thought that Jesus is going to return. So now we see why the eleven disciples are so happy as they head back into Jerusalem.

There’s no question about it. Jesus’s disciples are changed men. Spending three and a half years with Jesus will do that to someone. No, Jesus did NOT establish a political kingdom like many of them had hoped. But Jesus did begin to build a living and breathing kingdom on earth, the kingdom of God. And He chose to do this through them and His many other followers. Early in His ministry Jesus referred to His small band of followers as **“My church.”** (Matthew 16:18) The book of Acts is their story.

The disciples return to Jerusalem. Together with about a hundred other followers of Jesus they sit and wait. This is what Jesus told them to do... **While [Jesus] was with them, He declared, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait there for what My Father promised, which you heard about from Me. For John [the Baptist] baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now... 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 farthest parts of the earth.”** (Acts 1:4-5, 8)

Note: From this point on in the story, the eleven disciples will be referred to as “the Apostles.” An apostle by definition is “one sent forth.”

The city of Jerusalem is celebrating the annual Feast of Pentecost. It is filled with Jewish pilgrims from all over the civilized world. However, Jesus’s followers aren’t mingling with the crowds. Instead, they are gathered together in the upper room of a house where they wait.

Suddenly a sound like a violent wind blowing came from heaven and filled the entire house where they were sitting. And tongues spreading out like fire appeared to them and came to rest on each one of them. All of them were filled

with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:2-4)

As soon as the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus' followers, they go out into the streets of Jerusalem and begin declaring all the mighty works of God. Foreigners who have traveled to Jerusalem for Pentecost hear the words being spoken in their own native languages! The crowds are astonished at what they're hearing. **Completely baffled, they said, "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that each one of us hears them in our own native languages? All were astounded and greatly confused, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others jeered at the speakers saying, "They are drunk on new wine!" (Acts 2:7-8, 12-13)** But these men are NOT drunk! They're filled alright, but not with wine. They are filled with the very presence of God, the Holy Spirit.

In times past God appeared in the form of fire – in a burning bush when He called Moses; in fire and smoke on top of Mount Sinai; in a pillar of fire by night in the wilderness; and in a consuming fire on top of Mount Carmel when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal. Once again God's holy presence appears in fiery form. But this time it's in small tongue-shaped flames of fire. These flaming "tongues" as they are described come to rest upon Jesus's followers. God has come once again, but this time He is not just WITH His people or ON His people. God is IN His people.

At the Feast of Pentecost tens of thousands of people are drawn to the strange phenomena of these Jesus followers speaking all of these different languages. They try to figure out what's going on. With a large crowd gathered, Peter stands up to preach. It is his first sermon. He declares to the Jewish people that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah. Jesus was the one spoken about by the prophets and by David. But what had they done with their Messiah? They had killed Him! But then God raised Jesus back to life and now He sits at the right hand of God. When the crowds hear Peter's message they're stunned. Their hearts are convicted of the evil they had wrought by crucifying their own Messiah. Many of the same people who had stood in the crowd yelling, "Crucify Him!" are now overcome with remorse and regret.

Now when they heard this, they were acutely distressed and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "What should we do, brothers?" (Acts 2:37) Like John the Baptist and Jesus before him, Peter offers an invitation, "Repent and be baptized." **Peter said to them, "Repent, and each one of you be baptized 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)** This is a repentance that leads to salvation!

Many take Peter's message to heart and repent. **So those who accepted [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were**

added. (Acts 2:41) This new family of Jesus followers, the newly formed church in Jerusalem, quickly grows from just over one hundred to several thousand people. But this church is much more than just a social club. It is a community, a coming together of like-minded believers.

They were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42) Whenever the church family gathers the eleven apostles tell their many stories about what Jesus said and what He did. They enjoy close-knit fellowship with each other. They worship, pray and eat meals together. They take care of each other's spiritual and material needs with loving, glad and generous hearts. They have servant spirits. United in a common purpose, they display the kind of love for each other that Jesus had taught them. This newly formed church family celebrates their new way of life together on a regular basis.

But not everyone in Jerusalem is celebrating. The church very early on encounters hostility from the Jewish religious leaders. This is no surprise to the apostles. In fact, it's what Jesus had told them would happen. On the evening of Passover Jesus stated, **"If the world hates you, be aware that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you."** (John 15:18-19)

Indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter and John begin to heal people just as Jesus had done. One afternoon they encounter a man at one of the temple gates who has been lame from birth. He sits and begs for money. **Peter looked directly at him (as did John) and said, "Look at us!" So, the lame man paid attention to them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, stand up and walk!"** (Acts 3:4-6)

At once the man jumps to his feet. He walks and leaps around the temple praising God. The people in the temple recognize him as that lame beggar. They're amazed to see him like this. The man is so happy. He clings to Peter and John and won't let go. This miracle grabs the crowds' attention. Word spreads rapidly about what happened to the lame beggar. People rush to the temple compound to see for themselves. Once again Peter takes advantage of the large gathering and starts preaching right there in the temple complex. He delivers the kingdom message that Jesus had given them and it includes repentance of sins.

Peter tells his Jewish audience: **"But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a man who was a murderer be released to you. You killed the Originator of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this fact we are witnesses!**

And on the basis of faith in Jesus' name, His very name has made this man – whom you see and know – strong. The faith that is through Jesus has given him this complete health in the presence of you all.

And now, brothers, I know you acted in ignorance, as your rulers did too. But the things God foretold long ago through all the prophets – that His Christ would suffer – He has fulfilled in this way.

Therefore, repent and turn back so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and so that He may send the Messiah appointed for you – that is, Jesus.” (Acts 3:14-20)

Peter's message is so powerful that thousands more people repent of their sins and believe in Jesus. Well, not surprisingly, the apostle's preaching about Jesus – like the one Peter just preached – doesn't sit well with the Jewish religious leaders. They arrest Peter and John.

On the next day, their rulers, elders, and experts in the law came together in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas... and others who were members of the high priest's family. After making Peter and John stand in their midst, they began to inquire, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (Acts 4:5-7)

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, replied, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today for a good deed done to a sick man – by what means this man was healed – let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, this man stands before you healthy. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, that has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among people by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:8-12)

With nothing to charge them for, the leaders warn Peter and John not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. **But Peter and John replied, “Whether it is right before God to obey you rather than God, you decide, for it is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19-20)**

The religious leaders threaten Peter and John some more and then release them. Now, do you think that the apostles are going to wilt under this pressure? Not a chance! Instead, they and their church family gather together and pray – not for deliverance or protection but for more boldness! Did God answer? Yes! **When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God courageously. (Acts 4:31)**