

the priests could have them executed for failing in a mission.

Some hours later, one of the women returned to the disciples' hideout claiming she had seen Jesus risen from the dead, and others said they had seen angels. The men ridiculed this nonsense, but then that evening two disciples ran in claiming to have met Jesus on the road northwest of town.

At that very moment Jesus actually walked into their locked apartment. He demonstrated that He was not a ghost by eating in front of them. He also showed them His nail wounds, the evidence He would carry into eternity that He had entered the depths of human pain and triumphed in it. Then He began to explain why He had to be killed and raised from the dead. Finally, He kept the first installment of His promise about the Spirit.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:21-23)

The Spirit had empowered Jesus to do amazing miracles; it was even by the Spirit's power that the Father had raised Jesus from death. But the first power these men needed as ambassadors of the true King was the ability to forgive.

## A Movement Explodes

Acts 1:1-8:40, 9:32-11:30

### Preparation

During the forty days after His return from death, Jesus appeared frequently to groups of His followers. He also appeared to His brother James; many of His friends and relatives found it difficult to believe He was the King during His former life, but seeing Him back from the dead sure convinced them. He would appear and disappear like a ghost, but He was too solidly physical to seem like anything other than a live person.

He did not do what one might have expected: materialize in the high priest's office or the temple courts and demonstrate His resurrection beyond any doubt. That would have been coercion. If He'd done that, the leaders and people would have been forced to bow to Him even though their inner commitments were unchanged. They still would not love Him. If blatant power displays had not won the generations who saw Moses on Sinai and Elijah on Carmel, they would not win this granite-hearted bunch.

So instead, Jesus trained His followers to present the evidence about Him in such a way that it would invite a change of heart. Like the prophets before them, these apostles would

be the King's friends sent to woo a maiden on His behalf. One day He would indeed come to claim His realm by force, but in the meantime His disciples would infiltrate enemy territory and seek recruits.

Then He vanished for the last time, warning His troops not to take action until the Spirit of God came on them to equip them for the job. They already had the Spirit's power to forgive; they still needed His power to testify.

For the next ten days, the 120 of Jesus' followers residing in Jerusalem spent their time almost constantly in prayer. The one thing we know they did was select a replacement for Judas in the Twelve. If there had been twelve tribes of Israel with twelve patriarchs, the group reasoned, there had to be twelve apostles to lead the new Israel.

The other way they probably passed that time was in dealing with unfinished business among them, and between them and God—putting that power of forgiveness into practice. Jesus had shown them how it was done. On the eve of His betrayal, three times Peter had denied he knew the rabbi. So during one of His post-Resurrection appearances, Jesus drew Peter aside and asked him three times, "Do you love Me?" Peter, no longer the macho freedom fighter who had sworn to stick by Jesus to the death, three times replied that, yes, he loved Jesus to the best of his human ability, but not perfectly. In no way perfectly. Yet each time Jesus reaffirmed His confidence in Peter by commissioning him, "Feed My lambs."

Peter certainly didn't deserve to be trusted as head of the team, but Jesus' forgiveness had the ability to transform anyone who let it touch him or her. Jesus' trust *made* Peter trustworthy.

Perhaps it was like that for the rest of the 120, as Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector let supernatural forgiveness weld together men who could not naturally love each other. Jesus' brothers were welcomed into the community they had ridiculed. Everyone forgot the old debates about which of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom. And at least one of the Sons of Thunder, John, became an impassioned proponent of brotherly love and unity.

### Pentecost

At any rate, ten days after Jesus' final disappearance came the Jewish Feast of Weeks. It had originally celebrated the beginning of the wheat harvest, but of late it had come to commemorate God's covenants. Greek-speaking Jews called the day Pentecost because it was fifty days after the Passover Sabbath (*pente koste* = fiftieth day). On this feast day, the biblical historian Luke tells us redundantly for emphasis that the 120 followers of Jesus "were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). They were together spiritually as well as physically, for the power of forgiveness had done its work.

Into that place of unity, the Spirit of God burst as wind and fire. The power of testimony came upon the believers, and they began to proclaim the news about Jesus in the dozens of languages of the known world. At Babel God had confused human languages so as to crush the threat of unified evil; now He gave a token that He was beginning to reverse that process. A true unity of those filled with His Spirit would reknit for good what God had unraveled to prevent evil.

A hundred and twenty people shouting in different languages at the top of their lungs attracted attention. Pentecost had brought to Jerusalem pilgrims from everywhere Babylon and Greece had scattered Jews, and these pilgrims were astonished to hear amid the gibberish that someone was declaring wonders about God in their own obscure local dialects.

A crowd gathered, some snickering that the babblers were drunk. Eventually Peter made himself heard in Greek over the tumult. Jesus had said that the Spirit's power to drive out demons was evidence that the Kingdom was in Israel's midst (Matthew 12:28). Now Peter announced that this display was nothing other than the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy of the Day of the Lord:

"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." (Acts 2:17)

Then Peter went on to explain how David had predicted that the Son of David would be recognized by His resurrection

from death. The supernatural languages were evidence that Israel should believe the apostles' testimony that Jesus had in fact risen and was the long-awaited King. Peter pleaded with his audience to be baptized as a public sign that they were turning their allegiance to Jesus the King. This, Peter told them, was their only hope of survival.

About three thousand people took up Peter's offer. Most of them were just visiting for the feast, and within days they carried their news and their revolutionized lives home to all parts of Europe and the Middle East.

### **The Assembly in Jerusalem**

Those who remained in Jerusalem carried on the apostles' custom of living as one big spiritual family. They ate, prayed, and learned together daily, and took responsibility to see that all of their group were adequately fed and housed. The richness of unity with God and each other was so satisfying that many thought nothing of selling their possessions to provide for the rest. All Jerusalem held them in awe because of the power and love in their midst.

First, Peter healed a cripple on the front steps of the temple and announced to the amazed onlookers that this was a sign that the man they had crucified as a criminal was in fact "the author of life," the rightful King, and the Prophet Moses had predicted. The Sadducees were irate. For one thing, they didn't believe resurrection was possible, and these apostles were claiming it had happened. Moreover, they were saying it had happened to a criminal the Sanhedrin had condemned just months before. Peter was accusing them of killing the Messiah; if the people believed that, how would they feel about their leaders?

Finally, it was ominously close to blasphemy for Peter to say of Jesus things like, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). To a Jew, the one name by which one might be saved from anything was the unpronounceable Name of God.

But the whole city had seen Peter heal the beggar, so the Sanhedrin could do no more than threaten him. This hostility

only roused the little community of believers to aggressive praying for God to enable them to proclaim Jesus with even more boldness.

### **Awe**

The next event that gave the citizens of Jerusalem pause was the sudden death of two members of the new sect. There was no hint of foul play; the couple dropped dead in public for lying to Peter (and God) about money they had promised to give for the community's poor. Members were free to keep their possessions if they chose to do so, but lying to the Holy Spirit brought instant death. With God so palpably in their midst, deceit was impossible.

That incident put an end to all but serious converts joining the community. People would carry their sick relatives into the streets when Peter passed, hoping his shadow would fall on them and heal them. But they wouldn't undergo baptism just for thrills and free food. It was too dangerous.

Some in the Sanhedrin wanted to stamp out the new sect by executing the apostles. Peter refused to yield to their threats, and he would certainly have gone the way of Jesus had not Gamaliel, the leading Pharisee on the council, intervened. Gamaliel reasoned that if the sect was merely of human origin it would be a flash in the pan like every other cultic movement in the past two hundred years. But if it was from God, then nothing could or should stop it. The rest of the Sanhedrin couldn't fight that logic, so the apostles went back to talking about Jesus both in the temple and in private homes.

### **The Hellenists**

The Twelve might have gone on indefinitely with their little Jewish community in Jerusalem. Except for their unconventional ideas about Jesus, they were scrupulously observant Jews. Nobody could find fault with them. They were content to pray and teach among their fellow Jews in Jerusalem, enjoying the goodwill of their neighbors.

But God had other plans. So He let this ground-laying party go on for a few years, then brought it crashing down.

His instrument was the Hellenists—Jewish followers of Jesus whose primary language was Greek rather than Aramaic/Hebrew (*Hellas* is the Greek name for Greece). The Hebraists and the Hellenists were two distinct Jewish groups in Jerusalem, and soon they became two factions in the community of Jesus. The apostles were all Hebraists, so to keep peace they urged their Hellenist brethren to choose leaders from among themselves. The apostles would still take responsibility for teaching, but the Hellenist leaders would see to it that their people's needs were not overlooked.

At least one of the Hellenist leaders soon began showing the same signs of divine power as the apostles. But this man, Stephen, was not one to sit quietly in the temple week after week. Many Jews believed that the age of the Messiah would displace the age of the Law of Moses. Moreover, God had said repeatedly through the prophets that He was not bound to a building. So Stephen reasoned that if Jesus had come, then the age of the Law was past and the whole temple system might as well be dispensed with. Stephen hadn't quite worked out how Jesus' death had fulfilled the sacrificial system, but he had a gut feeling that there was no point to the system anymore.

When he said this to the other Jews in his synagogue, however, he met with fury. Nobody but the Sanhedrin much minded these guys claiming Jesus had risen from the dead and was the Messiah. But when they started speaking against the temple and the Law, they were coming against sacred cows. Stephen was dragged before the Sanhedrin, and when he called them stiff-necked murderers, the mob stoned him to death.

### The Community's Walls Expand

This lynching triggered a general uprising of traditional Jews against the followers of Jesus. All of the Hellenist and most of the Hebraist believers had to flee Jerusalem; the apostles managed to stay because of their impeccable reputations. But this flight, which appeared to be the community's destruction, was actually a godsend. Jesus had told the apostles, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8, emphasis added). The community had been too

comfortable to venture out on the next stage of its assignment, but now it had no choice.

Once again the Hellenists led the mission. Philip, another Hellenist leader, had great success proclaiming Jesus in Samaria, especially since he backed up his claims with the apostolic signs of healing and casting out demons. Even so, Philip acknowledged the apostles' authority to approve his ministry. After all, these new believers were not Jews, the chosen people, but the traditionally hated cultic Samaritans. So Peter and John came and inspected the situation, decided it was in line with what Jesus had taught them, and gave the Samaritan believers their blessing. As public proof that the Samaritans were full members of the community, God gave them the Pentecost signs of the Holy Spirit's presence.

From Samaria, Philip went on to bring the news of Jesus to a black man sympathetic to Judaism—yet another radical move for a religious group that had come to define itself by its ethnic purity. Philip finally settled in Caesarea, the seat of Roman government in Judea and hence a largely Gentile city. Proclaiming the good news in that region kept him busy for the next twenty years.

### To the Gentiles

But God knew that if a Hellenist launched the mission to the Gentiles, the Hebraists would never accept it. So He gave Peter a vision and nearly drove him to Caesarea to tell a prominent Roman military man about Jesus. This man had long been praying to and serving the Jewish God, but to the Jews he was still a dirty pagan. Peter broke with deeply ingrained taboos by actually living and eating with this man's household, in addition to welcoming them into the community of Jesus.

The signs of Pentecost fell on them when they committed themselves to Jesus, so what could Peter do? This was his defense when the Hebraists back in Jerusalem demanded an explanation. And after hearing his story, they had to admit he was right. As incredible as it seemed, they had to admit that God wanted even the "inferior" races in His Kingdom.

It was a good thing they admitted this, for the Hellenists

were launching full steam ahead into Gentile territory. When the persecution drove them from Jerusalem, some of them had settled in Antioch, the third-largest city in the empire and the capital of Syria. Before long, crowds of Antiochene Gentiles were dedicating themselves to this Savior called Jesus Christos. With no Jewish background, *Christos* (Messiah) meant nothing to them as a title (the Oiled One?), so they treated it as a last name. Unbelievers in Antioch soon nicknamed them *Christianoi*, followers of this guy Christos.

If Philip's work in Samaria had been radical for the Hebraists, this new Gentile community in Antioch was off the page. The half million residents of Antioch were a cosmopolitan bunch, and people in such large trading centers tended to assemble their own approaches to spirituality from the smorgasbord of available religious options. A little Greek philosophy, a little Persian dualism, a little from the ancestral cult, a little Judaism, or maybe one of the other newer, fashionable cults. Antioch's priestesses of Daphne were famed ritual prostitutes. There was no telling what the pagans of Antioch might do with the teachings of Christ.

Accordingly, the apostles sent one of their trusted leaders, Barnabas, to inspect the Antiochene work. Barnabas was so impressed that he not only conveyed his approval to Jerusalem but decided to settle in Antioch. People were converting right and left; there wasn't enough leadership to keep up with them. Eventually, Barnabas thought of a fellow Hebraist believer who would be an ideal partner in slapping this Gentile community into shape. His name was Saul.

## The Adventures of Paul

Acts 9:1-31, 12:1-14:27

### Saul

When Stephen was raising the hair on the back of Jewish necks in Jerusalem, Saul was a student of Gamaliel, passionately attached to the Law, and already influential among the young rabbis. The Law asserted that anyone hanged on a tree (which included crucifixion) was under God's curse (Deuteronomy 21:23). According to this logic, it seemed that Jesus could not be the Messiah, and anyone who said He was, was blaspheming. This reasoning led to Stephen's stoning, a deed in which Saul played some leadership role. After that, he got himself appointed as a leader in stamping out the Jesus-blasphemy, arresting and executing dozens of believers.

Having all but exterminated the plague in Jerusalem, Saul took an official delegation to nip it in the bud in Damascus. (See map, page 345.) But somewhere along the 150-mile trip northward, a flash of light knocked him to the ground. He heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" The voice identified itself as Jesus.

Saul's clever reasoning was undone. Blinded and shattered, he let himself be taken to Damascus, where he fasted for three days. He groped to make sense of his world. If the voice was Jesus,