

“Introducing the Bible—The Fire Spreads”

Today we wrap up this message series we started three weeks ago called “Introducing the Bible”. We’ve looked at the Bible generally, we looked at the Old Testament in a more focused way. And last week we began a look at the New Testament; at how the events of the New Testament are connected to events and prophecies in the Old Testament. Last week we really focused on the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament and the events in the life of Jesus. Today, as we wrap up, I want us to see what happened next. Yes, Jesus was born; he grew up and began a ministry that spanned 3 short years. He called a group of men to be his disciples—they were a hodge-podge of very ordinary people. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. His disciples all abandoned him. He comes back from the grave and that band of twelve sets out to tell the world about Jesus, and in the process they change the world. How does that happen?!

Before we get into that, I want to remind you of my two goals in this series. First, to demystify the Bible. To dissect it, understand its contexts, its origins so that we can get a handle on it and begin to understand it. I want to demystify the Bible.

And at the same time I want to re-mystify it. I want us to have a supernatural encounter with God through this book. I want us to see it as holy, as a supernatural way that the God of the universe spoke and speaks to human beings. Let’s re-mystify it.

Today we look at what happens after Jesus’ death and resurrection starting in the book of Acts. You see, Jesus promised the disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit. And after his resurrection, he tells them to wait in Jerusalem for that to happen. There’s a prophecy about that in the Old Testament. In the prophet Joel, chapter 2 God tells of a time when the Holy Spirit will be given to all people. God says, **“I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days”** (Joel 2:28-29, NIV).

The disciples gather together and wait to see if Jesus will do what he said. Many didn’t know what to believe at that point. They’d heard reports about Jesus’ death and his resurrection, but they don’t know quite what to think about that. There’s about 120 people gathered in a room praying, waiting to see what God will do. Then all the sudden, all heaven breaks loose! In Acts chapter 2 the Holy Spirit shows up in a powerful way. There were flames like fire that appeared on them; there was the sound like the blowing of a violent wind. Those believers’ lives were set on fire, they were unstoppable! They poured out into the street, speaking new languages and from there they go out into the world.

What’s fascinating is that a few weeks prior to that, they were afraid of **everything**. They were afraid of the Romans, of the Jewish leaders, of their own shadows. Now they’re not afraid of **anything**! They go from being afraid to being unstoppable as they go out to proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah! On that day about 3,000 men, plus women and children, came to faith in Christ and were baptized. Acts is the story of that beginning.

Now, the first half of the book of Acts focuses on the thorny question of **“Is Jesus the Messiah for just the Jews, or is he the Messiah for everybody?”**

As non-Jews began to put their faith in Jesus and become followers of the Way the questions arose. The Jews who had become Christians believed that you still need to go to the synagogue, and you still needed to follow the law as the way to salvation. They also believed that Gentiles who became Christians had to do the same AND be circumcised. The question became, “Circumcision is the mark of being a man of God, so should these non-Jews first be circumcised and become Jews before becoming Christians?” You can imagine that that kind of put off a lot of men who wanted to become followers! They were like, “You want me to do what? To my what-what?” Some people don’t want to take The Saint Paul’s Experience to join the church?! What if we required circumcision?! There were a lot of folks leery about joining the church if it meant being circumcised.

Well, the disciples began to wrestle with this. They began to say, “You know, circumcision was the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham and Moses, but now isn’t the sign of the covenant baptism? Isn’t it that we’re

not saved by obeying the law, but instead Jesus saved us already and now we follow him?" They began to understand that the Gospel was for everyone, that the law doesn't save us, Jesus already did the work of saving us! Now we follow him. The law guides us, but it's not about the law anymore. Jesus told his followers to go into all the world, to all people. He was not just the messiah to the Jews, but to the whole world. The first part of Acts addresses that question and the main character is the apostle Peter. Peter is one of the original 12 disciples Jesus called. Jesus looked at Peter one day and said, "On you I will build my church". The first part of the books of Acts is about his ministry.

But about halfway through the book of Acts we encounter a man called Saul. Saul was on a mission of eliminating this movement called The Way. He was persecuting Christians because he was convinced that all the followers of Jesus were way off base and needed to be silenced. He saw them as tainting the true faith of Judaism. On the way to arresting a group of Christians Paul has an encounter. There is a blinding light, he's knocked off his horse, and he hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Through that experience Saul comes to faith in Jesus Christ and becomes Paul.

This man goes from persecuting Christians to becoming Christianity's greatest advocate! The second half of Acts is about Paul as the missionary to the non-Jews, the Gentiles. He begins to take the Gospel into all the world.

Let's take a look at a map of where all this takes places. **[Map- Holy Land in Jesus Day]** This is a map of the Holy Land in Jesus' Day. Down at the bottom of the map is the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found here. This is the Jordan River. Sea of Galilee--Jesus' spent most of his growing up years in this area. Most of Matthew, Mark and Luke take part in Galilee. John's Gospel focuses more on events around Jerusalem which is where Jesus is put to death.

Christianity begins in Jerusalem after Jesus death and resurrection and spreads to Galilee. So within the first few years, Christianity is going out to this land. Then the apostle Paul takes the Gospel from this little sliver of land, Israel, to a large part of the world. Paul's passion was to tell this good news and to start communities of believers who were living out The Way.

Paul takes three missionary journeys, probably in the mid 40's AD to start churches, train leaders and nurture churches. His last journey, a fourth trip, is as a prisoner to Rome. Paul is eventually executed there, probably by Nero.

Almost every Bible has maps like this in it. They're also available on line; the web site I use for awesome maps is in your study guide. Use the maps, they make it come alive.

Let's talk about **the Chronology of the New Testament**. Many people assume that the Gospels were written first, but it didn't work that way. By the way the oldest fragment of the New Testament is this right here **[PICTURE-Oldest fragment of the NT]**. It's a piece of papyrus that was found in Egypt. It has writing on both sides and it's an excerpt from John 18. This is dated 124AD. What made this such a miraculous find was that the Gospel of John was written in 90AD in Ephesus. That means that within 35 years of the writing of the Gospel of John we have a fragment from this book in a very distant place. That means that it had been copied and had spread all around.

Many people assume that the Gospels were written first because they're at the beginning of the New Testament, but they were written last. Because why would you need a Gospel when you had an apostle to tell you what happened. You see, it was an oral culture, people didn't read. So as long as there were apostles and those who studied under the apostles, you had a high chance of hearing it straight from their mouths. You could be sitting there in your church in Ephesus and John might show up and say, "Let me tell you about the time I saw Jesus do this...and here's what I believe it meant..." So for a couple of decades they didn't need Gospels, you had apostles. The Gospels are written down when the apostles start to die off, when they are killed for their faith.

Jesus didn't write the Gospels. He lived it out, and spoke, and taught. The disciples wrote down what Jesus said and did and that's what we have. The Gospels as we have them were written down between 60 and 90 AD.

So the Gospels were not the first documents in the New Testament. The first documents in the New Testament are the epistles by the apostles. The letters by the apostles. I touched on this last week. Paul would go into a city and preach and teach for a few days or weeks; people become followers of The Way; Paul chooses a leader of that new church and later Paul sends letters to them to answer questions, correct them, encourage them, etc. These letters make up a large part of the New Testament.

The oldest New Testament document is probably the book of Galatians written around 50AD, about 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. I've heard skeptics say, "There's nothing that attests to the fact that Jesus existed in the first century. There's no other literature about Jesus anywhere else." You say, "Wait a minute! There are 27 first century documents that testify about Jesus. Find that about any other ancient figure."

Jesus was an obscure figure at the time but we have 27 first century documents that testify about him. We have letters, Gospels, all kinds of writings. And then there are writings about him outside the Bible from non-Christians. The Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius both write about him. The Jewish historian Josephus, born in 37 A.D. also writes about Jesus.

So the letters, the epistles, were written first. And it's very important to know this when you're reading the letters: Each letter was written for a reason--usually a very specific reason. We don't really write many letters anymore, we email. And when we do we write about specific things. You write me an email about something going on in your life, or a question you have, or a concern you've got, then I respond. And I'll respond to you one way because of the circumstances you're in, and I might respond to someone else with the same issue a little bit differently because they're in a different situation.

As you read the New Testament letters, if you can understand what the issues is that being addressed (a need, or question, or problem) it unlocks a lot of the meaning. Knowing that background is important to fully understanding the letters in the New Testament.

Sometimes this is easy. Look at 1 Corinthians 7:1. Paul writes, "**Now for the matters you wrote me about...**" (1 Corinthians 7:1). That tells us that the Corinthians had sent Paul a letter with questions in it. We don't have the questions, just the answers. Look at 1 Corinthians 8:1. Paul writes, "Now about food sacrificed to idols..." Here is the answer, what is the question? (Is it OK to eat food sacrificed to idols?) Look at 1 Corinthians 12:1. "Now about spiritual gifts...I do not want you to be ignorant..." Yet another answer to a question. They must have written to Paul saying, "Some of us have these abilities, others have these, some of us feel like our abilities aren't as cool, as important. How does this work?" So Paul spends three chapters writing about spiritual gifts. If you understand that when you get to chapter 13 it makes more sense. It's about what love is and what love is not. That's meant to answer the ultimate question about spiritual gifts. "All the gifts are important, but if they're not used in the context of love, they're nothing."

If you look at 1 Corinthians chapter 1 you see that Paul is addressing a conflict among the people there. "**My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you**" (1 Corinthians 1:11, NIV). There was conflict there and knowing that helps to put the rest of the letter in context.

Understanding the context is important so that we don't misuse scripture by putting it into some other context to say what we want rather than what the original writer meant. Sometimes Paul must say, "That's not what I meant! That's out of context!" When you're reading to really understand what the New Testament is saying, especially the letters, know the context. Lots of Bibles will give you a small introduction that will shed some light on that.

Now I want us to shift gears for a minute and look at one of the more controversial issues in the New Testament. Every once in a while somebody will say, "I just don't get this in the New Testament. And that makes me angry and I just don't know if I can buy it." One of the big things that becomes a problem in our day and age is women's rights. When Paul writes that, "Women should keep silent in church" a lot of women, and some men, have an issues with that! We have women on staff here, women who have preached here, women who have been pastors here. Are we violating something?

When we read the New Testament it's important that we realize that it was written in a particular historical context. Some women call Paul a chauvinist pig. But when you understand the context you realize that Paul was a huge advocate of women's rights in that day and age relative to everyone else in his society.

He said radical things like, "In Christ there is neither male nor female." In Romans 16 he greets 11 women calling two of them his fellow apostles, one of them his fellow worker in Christ.

But in a few churches where women were exercising this newfound freedom, it was keeping some of the men from coming to Christ, so Paul tells those women, out of love for the mission, to keep silent. Today we see that and think, chauvinist! But in that context Paul was just the opposite! That women were even allowed in gatherings alongside men was radical and unheard of in Roman secular society and in Jewish religious society. Paul was more inclusive than anybody of his time. But relative to our day, he can sound chauvinistic. We have to do the work of understanding his context!

Now the challenge is to look at what is contextual and what is not. You could go through Paul's letter and eliminate all of his instruction of you wanted to by saying, "That was just for the 1st century, not for today." This is where we have to use our brains and good judgment and careful scholarship. This is why studying the Bible with other people is so important.

All of what we've done in this series is simply a way to get you to open the book. To not just know about it, but to know it personally so that you can listen for God's voice and hear God's voice. Use your study guides each week, or read on your own, study with others. As you read ask three questions. **1. What does this teach me about God? 2. What does this teach me about people? 3. What does this teach me about me?** Ask these of yourself as you read and the text will come alive and bring life.

In fact that's what the Bible is all about: bringing life. John wrote this near the end of his Gospel: **"These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).** These are words of life.

They certainly have been words of life for me. A few years back I was overwhelmed by a sense of insecurity wondering why God would use somebody like me to do what I do as a pastor. I didn't feel smart enough, or strong enough, or wise enough. I wondered if I should continue as a pastor if I felt so insecure. I felt so weak, so unfocused. I lay in bed with tears streaming down my cheeks one night. God's word spoke to me then in the midst of that weakness. God's word saying, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." Words of life knowing that God is my strength.

I've had to walk into very evil circumstances. Supernatural settings where I felt evil surrounding me. God's word came alive to me saying, "Do you not know that you are not your own. You have been bought with a price." I realized then that any evil that wants to get to me, has to go through the one who owns me. And he's not about to let that happen.

Another time I swear that God had just left me. I didn't know what I had done, or thought or said, but I had these feelings of abandonment by God. I felt so dead inside. I open up God's word and read along and this passage jumps out at me from Philippians, "He who began a good work in you will complete it" (Phil. 1:6). I felt God speaking to me from his word saying, "Trust me more than your feelings. I've not left you. You're my child. I will complete what I began in you."

What in your life is dead right now? Your faith? Your passion? Your love for others? Your love for your spouse? Your morals? These are words of life. God spoke and God continues to speak. Open it and listen.

I want to end this series with a song. The band did this earlier, I want us to do it together as we wrap up. It's called *Ancient Words*.

And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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