

Week Two: New Wineskins

Acts 4:8-12 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone." Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

8 years since the trial of Jesus, *the Jewish Council had had little rest.*

Stephen had to be silenced. He spoke of Jewish history – but he argued that men might worship God apart from the temple. He traced God from Abraham to Moses and showed that Moses prophesied the coming of Messiah saying, "God will send you a prophet like me from your own people" (*Acts 7:37, NIV*). Told how God gave Moses the pattern of the tabernacle and how Solomon built the temple, but he quoted prophet Isaiah *Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? 'Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things? (Isa. 66:1-2)*. Proving the Most High doesn't dwell in temples made with hands.

The council stirred and Stephen moved on boldly: "You stiff-necked people! You are just like your fathers; you always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you, who have received the law. . . but have not obeyed it" (*Acts 7:51-53*). The council was furious! They covered their ears as a mob rushed Stephen, dragged him out, through the streets, beyond the walls and stoned him—again and again, until all was silent.

CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

How did a Jewish Messiah, preaching a Jewish theme, the kingdom of God, to a Jewish following become the Savior of people everywhere (Gentile)? **It centered upon the interpretation of the Old Testament.**

It was not a question of what the Jewish Scriptures said, **but what they meant.** If Jesus was all he claimed to be, then the standard interpretation of the *Old Testament had to be revised, and in some cases scrapped entirely.*

The events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion give clear evidence of the hand of God.

PENTECOST

Seven weeks after Jesus' crucifixion (Jewish festival), excitement among them was running high. During the festival about 120 disciples were meeting in a home when an unusual thing happened. God's Spirit fell upon those gathered there.

They rushed into the streets and headed for the temple. *Visitors in the city saw them and followed because they heard their native tongue coming from the lips of the disciples.* At the temple, Peter stood before the huge crowd and told them that the miracle they were *witnessing was a fulfillment of the prophet Joel's promise about the outpouring of God's Spirit in the "last days."* He said, *lay in the recent crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. God had made him Lord and Messiah by raising him from the dead!* The resurrection was an astounding development. How could he ever substantiate such a claim? He appealed to the Jewish Scriptures, *which said that the Messiah would not be abandoned in death but would be enthroned at God's right hand until universal victory was his (Psalm 16:10 and 110:1).*

But what do such Scriptures have to do with Jesus of Nazareth? "He was the Messiah, We know it is so, because God raised him from the dead and we are all witnesses of the fact" (*see Acts 2:32*). From the beginning the apostles preached the resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's purpose announced in the Old Testament.. Apart from that miracle, said the apostles, there is no gospel, no salvation, and no church. That is how the Christian church started.

Christians ever since have insisted that the death of Jesus on the cross, his resurrection from the grave, and the empowering mission of the Holy Spirit are the foundational realities of Christianity.

The first forty years saw the infant church spread at a phenomenal rate. *It sprang up in most of the major cities in the Roman Empire and was transformed from a tiny Jewish sect into a fellowship of many different peoples.*

THE FIRST COMMUNITY

No one doubted that the first company of believers was Jewish. Since the whole company was devoutly Jewish, **they remained loyal, for a time, to their Jewish law and continued to worship in synagogues and at the temple.** The Jerusalem believers started to call itself by ekklesia (“church” in English-(OT term referring to the assembly of Israel) and meant a gathering of people, **God’s people.**

Had the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit made them a new wineskin?

The Sanhedrin chose to be tolerant, partly because the followers of Jesus attended temple services regularly and strictly observed Jewish laws and rituals. **They showed no signs of rejecting the law of Moses or the authority of the temple. Within two years their ranks had grown to several thousand.**

The movement maintained its unity by two special ceremonies that kept the reality of Jesus’ death and resurrection at the center of their fellowship.

- **Baptism** - baptism in the apostolic community was different. John’s baptism was a way of professing faith in a kingdom yet to come. Baptism in the infant church was what theologians now call “eschatological.” It marked entrance into a spiritual kingdom already proclaimed, though still to be revealed in its fullness. The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, followed by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, were divine events. They inaugurated a new age and people could enter life in that spiritual kingdom by faith in Jesus as Lord and witness to that faith by baptism.
- **The Lord’s Supper** looked back to Jesus’ betrayal and death and found in the events of Calvary and the empty tomb evidence of the “*new covenant*” promised by the prophet Jeremiah. Jesus’ death and the new life in the Spirit were symbolized and sealed to the congregation of disciples in their drinking from the cup and eating the consecrated bread. This simple meal renewed their covenant with God and with one another.

THE HELLENISTS

More and more of the converts were recruited from among Hellenist Jews. (Jews who had come to Jerusalem from all parts of the Roman Empire to settle. **Jews who embraced the Roman culture, language) They spoke Greek and used the Greek version of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint.**

They mixed more easily with Gentiles and were more responsive to new ideas than were their Palestinian cousins - the spirit of oneness was marred by a growing rivalry between Palestinian and Hellenist members. To remove these resentments, the apostles created a council of seven Hellenist disciples, among them Stephen and Philip, to oversee the distributions. **They called these men deacons (in Greek, diakonoi), meaning “servants” or “ministers.”**

Vigilantes began to seize and imprison suspected ‘Christians.’ One of the vigilante leaders was a zealous Pharisee named Saul of **Tarsus**. The Hebrew apostles were not bothered often – **But the Hellenist disciples were forced to flee Jerusalem.** They went to Samaria and Syria, Damascus, Antioch and Tarsus, the island of Cyprus, and Egypt.

News of the churches among the Hellenists filtered back to the Holy City, and the Christian elders in Jerusalem soon sent delegates to establish ties with the new Christian centers. Peter and John went to Samaria to confer with Philip. **Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus who was among the earliest Jerusalem converts, traveled to Antioch in Syria. There men had founded a successful Christian movement by taking the revolutionary step of evangelizing Gentiles.**

Antioch was the administrative capital of the Roman province of Syria. With a population of half a million, 3rd largest city in the empire, after Rome and Alexandria. At Antioch, for the first time, Jesus’ followers were called “Christians.” -

Soon, Antioch grew in Christian influence. In time it succeeded Jerusalem as the center of missionary outreach. This was due in large part to the work of Saul (Paul)

No man—other than Jesus—has shaped Christianity more than Paul

Saul was confronted by Jesus outside Damascus. *He dropped to the ground blinded by a light and he heard a voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* Suddenly Stephen's argument fell into place, and Saul became a believer.

Paul later explained: *The law pronounces a curse on everyone who fails to keep it in its entirety, so all who hope to gain God's favor by keeping the law are exposed to a curse. Fortunately, God provided a way of escape. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us," by hanging on a cross (Gal. 3:10—14).*

Strong medicine for Judaism – the authorities wanted no part of it. So the persecutor of Christians became the persecuted among Christians. *Paul was uniquely qualified to bridge the gap between Jewish and Gentile Christianity; He was a man of three worlds: Jewish, Greek, and Roman.*

Paul's converts were a mixed - few of them were from honorable backgrounds – *the majority were pagans with sordid pasts.* In one of his many letters Paul reminds his readers of their former life: *sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers. But, says Paul, "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).*

What was the best way to instill Christian principles of morality in these churches? That was the continuing tension between Jewish and Gentile believers in first century Christianity. *The Palestinian Christians said, "Tell them that unless they submit to the Jewish law, in addition to believing in Jesus, there is no hope for their faith."* Paul found this impossible. His own experience pointed another way. *If a person could gain the righteousness of God by obeying the law, said Paul, I would have been the greatest in the kingdom. But righteousness by personal effort can only lead to failure.* Man can be accepted as righteous only through God's undeserved mercy. That is grace.

Paul's itinerant ministry won more and more believers to his convictions.

---Paul traveled all over the known world planting churches among the Gentiles which infuriated the Jews...when he returned to Jerusalem at the end of one of his journeys , Jewish officials finally arrested and imprisoned him.

By that time the breach with traditional Judaism was almost complete. Gentile believers were not circumcised, they neither knew nor practiced Jewish dietary laws, and in most areas the Sabbath (seventh day) observance had given way to worship on the first day of the week,

THE DECLINE OF JERUSALEM

While Paul was gathering gentile followers throughout the pagan world, the church in Jerusalem continued its strict adherence to Jewish orthodoxy. About A.D. 41, *James, the son of Zebedee, long one of Jesus' closest followers, was murdered by the order of Herod Agrippa I, king of Palestine from 41 to 44.* James' brother John, "the beloved disciple," then fled Jerusalem. **Peter was arrested shortly after James' death, but he escaped and embarked on an extensive missionary journey.** Toward the end of his life he traveled to Rome where he, along with Paul, was caught up in Nero's persecution and martyred.

The leadership of the Jerusalem church rested first in the hands of James, "*the brother of the Lord.*" A devout, law-abiding Jew, he was revered by his followers, **but in A.D. 62 he was murdered by command of the Jewish high priest.** His death left the Jerusalem church leaderless and demoralized. Meanwhile the completion of the Jewish temple in **A.D. 64** put thousands of laborers out of work, adding to the general discontent. **Finally in A.D. 66 the Jews revolted, signaling their intent by refusing to perform the daily sacrifice for the emperor.**

Frederick Bruce describes it "The tragic, bloody war that followed cost more lives than any previous conflict. The Jews held out against over-whelming odds for four years, but they could not withstand the power of Rome. In A.D. 70 the Emperor Vespasian's forces, led by Titus, broke through the walls of Jerusalem, looted and burned the temple, and carried off the spoils to Rome. The Holy City was totally destroyed. In the reprisals that followed, every synagogue in Palestine was burned to the ground. At the start of the revolt, the leaders of the Jerusalem [Christian] church were advised in a vision to flee the city"

Pious Jews considered the Christian flight an act of treason, and it sealed the fate of the church in the Jewish world. **They decided to bar Christian Jews from synagogue services some years later, the break was complete.** Any Jew who wished to remain faithful to his religion could not also be a Christian. The new faith had become and would remain a gentile movement. The old wineskin was irreparably torn.

For practical purposes A.D. 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem mark the end of the apostolic age.

We too are called to live a faith that lasts into our culture though we may not see it