

Lesson 35 – What Next?

The ascension of Christ, the descending of the Holy Spirit, miraculous healings, martyrdom, imprisonment, courtroom scenes, dangerous journeys, and shipwreck. After finishing the exciting Book of Acts, we naturally find ourselves asking, “What happens next?” [TM note: There are sources outside the Bible that tell us about what happened after the events recorded in the Book of Acts. Through these writings, we can trace the enduring message of salvation through the centuries. There have been many threats to the Christian faith: persecution, false teachings, and corruption. But God used dynamic leaders, brilliant teachers, and ordinary people to help preserve His Word and its eternal message of justification by faith alone.]

Jesus had given His followers a clear picture of what to expect from the world around them. What did He promise them in John 15:18-21? *Jesus promises His followers that the world would hate them, because it hated Him. Christians should not be surprised when persecution comes to them, because it came to Jesus and His disciples too.*

Of the twelve apostles, only John died of natural causes as an old man. All the others were martyred for their faith. Some were crucified, some stoned, and some killed with swords or spears. James, the brother of John, was the first martyr among the apostles and was killed during events recorded in the Book of Acts. Peter reportedly asked that he be crucified upside down at his execution since he didn't feel worthy to die in the same way Jesus did.

Other believers were also martyred for their faith. Jesus' brother James, a leader in the church at Jerusalem, was thrown from the top of the temple and then beaten to death. [Note the list of the apostles' lives and deaths in the answer to Discussion question #3.]

After two years in Rome, Paul finally received a trial and was released. It is believed he took another missionary journey and traveled as far as Spain before he was arrested again and finally executed by sword.

Nevertheless, the message of salvation could not be extinguished. The Gospel spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

Early Church Fathers

- **Polycarp of Smyrna** (69-156 A.D.) was a pupil of the Apostle John. He was burned at the stake as an elderly man because he refused to deny His Savior. He told the crowds in Rome, “Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who saved me? Bring forth what you will.”
- **Ignatius of Antioch** *ihg-nai-shihuhs* (35-108 A.D.) was a disciple of the Apostle John. His letters to Christian groups emphasized the deity and humanity of Christ because this belief was being questioned by false teachers.
- **Irenaeus of Lyons** *ai-rehn-EE-uhs* (130-202 A.D.) was raised in a Christian family and was a student of Polycarp. He wrote many books based on Scripture. The most well-known is *Against Heresies*, which specifically disproved the false doctrine of Gnosticism.
- **Tertullian of Carthage** *ter-tool-lee-ann* (160-220 A.D.) was a brilliant and prolific writer. His work covered a broad range of spiritual topics. He was the first to use the terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” He wrote against the heresies of his day, especially strengthening the doctrine of the Trinity.
- **Augustine of Hippo** (354-430 A.D.) was a bishop in North Africa who greatly influenced the Christian church. His writings were closely based on the writings of Paul, and he strengthened the church's beliefs about sin and salvation. He wrote several books that are still widely read today, including *The City of God*.

The Middle Ages

Eventually, the widespread persecution of believers stopped, and Christianity was accepted and even protected by leaders of the Roman Empire under the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. This freedom continued broadly throughout the Middle Ages—the time period from the fall of Rome in 476 A.D. to the fifteenth century.

Over time, the structure of the church shifted from small groups of believers with little formal leadership to a much more organized structure with bishops and cardinals. The Bishop of Rome (also called Pope, meaning “father”) came to be viewed as the leader of Christianity.

As church leaders gained more power, they often became corrupt. Over the centuries, the Catholic Church reached a place where the Bible was almost forgotten and only tradition and the decrees of the Pope carried any weight. The message of Jesus dying to save us from our sins was almost forgotten.

During this time, Christian monasteries helped preserve God’s Word by meticulously copying it, illustrating it, and even translating it. Many evangelists were sent from the monasteries to bring the message of salvation to the people of Northern Europe and the British Isles, who worshiped pagan gods. The Scandinavian lands were generally Christianized by 1100 A.D.

The Reformation

In some places where the Bible seemed to have been forgotten, there were people who called for a return to biblical teaching. John Hus (1369-1415) and others spoke out against some of the abuses of the Catholic Church, but they were frequently called heretics and were even killed for taking a stand against the power of the Pope.

In the early 1500s, a monk and college professor named Martin Luther was troubled by his sin. As he studied Scripture, he began to recognize that the message of grace and forgiveness taught in the Bible was not being taught in the church.

Luther raised concerns about some of the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church, which brought him into direct conflict with the Pope. Luther believed it was not right to go against what the Bible taught and boldly took a stand against the Pope, the Emperor, and the entire Catholic Church. Through his work as well as the efforts of many other reformers, there was a rediscovery of the teachings of the Bible. These core Bible teachings together are often referred to as the Five *Solae*. The Latin word *sola* means “alone.” [The plural of *sola* is *solae*.] Look up the following verses and complete the Five *Solae* below:

- II Timothy 3:16-17 *Scripture alone*
- Romans 1:17 *faith alone*
- Romans 3:24 *grace alone*
- Acts 4:12 *Christ alone*
- Matthew 5:16 *glory to God alone*

These ideas were life changing for Luther and his followers. This great awakening was known as the Protestant Reformation.

New Ideas: Creeds and Confessions

One of the themes from the Apostle Paul’s epistles is the call to defend the truth against false teachings (e.g. Romans 16:17, I Timothy 1:3-11). Paul wanted Timothy, Titus, and countless others to cling to the truth of the Gospel and to pass it on to generations to come.

Throughout history the Christian church has adopted creeds and confessions to summarize and communicate the truths of Scripture. For example, early church creeds stressed the importance of sound teaching concerning the person of Christ. [TM note: the 2nd Article of the Creed and Luther’s Small Catechism teaching of the Second Article] This was important as the heretical, false teaching of Arius (who denied Jesus was God), were causing dissension in the church. As time went on, false teachings about justification became common, so a document like the Augsburg Confession (1530) declared what the Bible teaches concerning this great truth. [TM note: Augsburg Confession Article IV.]

Pastor John Strand said, “Convictions, unless discussed and taught, die.” [TM note: Pastor John Strand, 1st AFLC President: Front of “Free and Living Congregations: The Dream That Would Not Die” Volume 2 of AFLC Heritage Series.] The convictions of the church in the early centuries were stated in creeds such as the Apostles’ (c.120-250), Nicene (325), and Athanasian Creeds (c.500). These doctrinal statements give a “pattern” or “standard” of sound words (II Timothy 1:13) from the Scriptures that help Christians rest in the truth and identify error. [TM note: With this in mind we can see how Luther’s Small Catechism is so helpful as a teaching tool and a confession] Many of the errors that we believe to be new are simply old false teachings repackaged. In looking at the creeds and confessions of the past, we can see how our fathers in the faith dealt with these false teachings and what the Scriptures declare to be the truth

Memory Verse

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,
to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
Romans 1:16

Extra Memory Challenge

Romans 1:17

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”

Discussion Questions

Each teacher should encourage, as much as time permits, discussion and inquiry on the part of students. Not every aspect of the following questions is addressed here, and students may have thoughts related to but not mentioned in this guide. The obligation of the teacher, then, is to understand as deeply as possible the Scriptures that are being discussed, in order to answer as well as possible any questions a student might have.

1. When Martin Luther rediscovered the Gospel in Romans 1:16-17, it shook the world. The biblical truth that one is justified by faith alone in Christ alone replaced the hopeless, grueling, tormenting efforts of self-righteousness being taught in the church. Discuss how this was life-changing to people who had been solely focused on trying to please God. How have you seen people try to merit their own righteousness? Consider Ephesians 2:8-9 and I John 5:12-13.

This life changing truth freed each person from the fear of not being “righteous enough” —not having done enough good works to outweigh one’s sins. The work of our salvation is in Christ alone, His death on the cross was payment once for all for our sin. This would restore joy in the Lord, peace in their hearts and give them assurance of life eternal in heaven

Answers will vary about how people try to merit or earn righteousness, financial giving and volunteering in charities and/or a church, strict attendance to church, rigid rules for living, memorizing Scripture, reading the whole Bible to name a few.

2. Why is it important to know about church history? Note Hebrews 11 and 12:1 and read Hebrews 13:7-8. What can we learn from the Christian leaders who lived so long ago?

Hebrews 11 repeatedly uses the phrase “by faith” (v.39), their faith gave them the hope of heaven, eternal life, believing the promise of the coming Messiah, the once and for all sacrifice for sin. Because of their example we can run our race of faith keeping our eyes on Jesus the Messiah who has come. The Old Testament believers give us an example to follow. Some people refer to Hebrews 11 as the “Hall of Faith” chapter. If you have students with little scriptural knowledge, as time allows, discuss what one or two of these examples did; why they are noted here; take them back to the Old Testament record of them. Hebrews 13:7 says “imitate their faith,” learn from their example so we live our lives to bring glory to God and to lead others to Christ

3. What challenges did the early Christians have that we don’t have today? What challenges faced by the early church do Christians still encounter today?

Early Christians did not have modern communication methods or modern transportation methods. They did not have the freedoms that we enjoy today.

Some similar challenges we share with them would be battling false teachings, battling sin and temptation, and hindrances in reaching non-Christians with the Gospel message.

Globally, many Christians are still violently persecuted and martyred. Teachers may want to point out the organizations that help support persecuted Christians, such as *The Voice of the Martyrs*. Consider leading the students in prayer for the Christians who face persecution today (Hebrews 13:3).

TM Note on the apostles: Acts 1:8-11 records the last words Jesus spoke to His disciples. This Great Commission, or command to be witnesses around the world, was carried out by His disciples. The Bible records only the death of James (Acts 12:2) and of course Judas who betrayed Jesus. They all suffered for their faith and most met violent deaths because of their bold witness. Widely accepted historical reports of the remaining ten apostles' lives and deaths include:

Peter – ministered in Rome; crucified upside down

Andrew – worked in area now known as the Soviet Union, Turkey, and Greece; crucified

Thomas – proclaimed the message as far east as India; speared to death

Philip – brought Gospel to North Africa; died a cruel death

Matthew – preached in Persia and Ethiopia; stabbed to death

Bartholomew – witnessed in India, Armenia, and Ethiopia; various accounts of how he was martyred

James son of Alphaeus – testified of Christ in Syria; stoned to death

Simon the Zealot – declared the risen Christ in Persia; various accounts of how he was killed

Matthias – one chosen to replace Judas, evangelized with Andrew; burned to death

John – led the congregation in Ephesus and cared for Mary, Jesus' mother; exiled to the Island of Patmos where he wrote Revelation and later died a natural death of old age

Daily Devotions

Sunday: Exodus 13:1-10

Monday: Deuteronomy 4:9-20

Tuesday: Deuteronomy 5:4-21

Wednesday: Deuteronomy 7:17-26

Thursday: Deuteronomy 8:1-10

Friday: Deuteronomy 8:11-20

Saturday: Deuteronomy 32:7-14

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH AND ITS CHURCH YEAR

* What is the Trinity season?

The Sunday after Pentecost (often called Trinity Sunday) focuses on the biblical teaching that God is Three Persons in One Being, that is, the Holy Trinity. For several months, Christians continue to learn more about Bible truths that help us grow in faith. In some churches, the Sundays are numbered after Pentecost to accent the Spirit's work of sanctification in us.

1. How did Jesus express the Trinity in Matthew 28:19? How about Paul in II Corinthians 13:14?

Jesus commanded baptism in the name (singular) of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (three persons).

Paul blessed Christians with three mentions of God's love and grace in Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

2. What is God's desire for our lives each day throughout the year? (see II Peter 3:18)

That we continue growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.