

Experience Church

Lesson 1: Experience the First Church

Vocabulary:

to record (n. record)	radical (adj.) (adv. radically)	bold (adv. boldly)	shriek (n.)
to ascend	to devote	to shake (past. shook)	to betray
to witness	fellowship	despite	to rebel
festival	to be filled with (awe)	one in heart	earnestly
to gather	wonder (n.)	possession	to turn away from
to declare	in common	from time to time	worldly
to praise (n. praise)	favor (n.)	to distribute	lifestyle
native language	to bless (n. blessing)	energy	constantly
to plead	genuine (adv. genuinely)	to take care of	soul
grain	persecution	to drag	to torture
wheat	beggar	to break out	to imitate
harvest	to cry out	to mourn	to reveal

Discussion

Our earliest **records** of the church can be found in the second chapter of the book of Acts in the Bible. We see that after Jesus dies, he begins appearing to people just three days after his death. Over a period of forty days, he appears to over five hundred people.¹ After this time, Jesus **ascends** to heaven, something **witnessed** and **recorded** by his followers.

During the first Pentecost² **festival**, over forty days after Jesus is raised from the dead, Jews from every nation travel to Jerusalem for a festival to worship God. At the same time, one hundred and twenty of Christ's Jewish followers **gather** in a house in Jerusalem, probably near the Jewish temple. Suddenly, the Holy Spirit comes and begins speaking through everyone in the house, giving each follower the ability to speak in other languages **to declare** the **praises** of God (Acts 2:1-11).

What religious experiences have you had in your life? Have you ever experienced Jesus in a miraculous or meaningful way?

When the Holy Spirit causes all the believers in the house to declare the praises of God in other languages, the sound is so loud that thousands of Jews nearby hear the believers praising God, but each in his **native language**. As the people gather around the believers, Peter, a leader among the Christians, stands up and speaks to the crowd. He tells them the good news about Jesus the Messiah who was crucified and raised from the dead, and he **pleads** with them to turn away from the world and from sin. Three thousand Jews hear the message that day, turn away from sin, get baptized, and begin a new life in Christ.

¹ See 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

² *Pentecost* (also called *Shavuot* in Hebrew) is a Jewish celebration found in the Old Testament and is also called the Festival of Weeks. Jewish people from every nation came together at the temple in Jerusalem to worship. As part of the worship, God commanded the Jews, their families, and their servants to bring their first **grain** from the **wheat harvest** and other sacrifices to the Lord seven weeks after the beginning of harvest time (Exodus 34:22-23, Deuteronomy 16:9-12, II Chronicles 8:12-15).

Describe how you first learned about Jesus.

How has the message of Jesus changed your life, your sin, and your relationship to the world?

Have you ever been baptized? If yes, describe your experience. If no, do you want to be baptized? Explain.

After their baptism, the lives of the new believers are radically transformed as they begin following Jesus. Instead of spending their time the way the world does, their desire is to be with the other believers to worship the Lord together. This is the beginning of the first church that we see in Acts 2.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (NIV)

Go through each verse and describe the life of the first church and their activities.

Why do you think the new believers choose to live this way?

In what ways does God bless the first church?

In these verses, we see how much Jesus's love for them, his sacrifice, and their salvation means to them. The followers no longer want to be a part of the world, but they want to be with each other and share this new life together. Out of this genuine heart, God blesses the church with more people coming to faith in Christ.

Yet, as the church grows, so does the persecution. In Acts 4, we see the Jewish leaders putting Peter and John into prison for healing a beggar and for teaching about Jesus. When Peter and John are released, where do you think they go? Home to their families? Actually, no! The first thing that they do is find the other believers. All together, the believers cry out to God about what has happened and beg God to help them share their faith boldly and fearlessly.

²⁴ When the believers heard this, they all prayed to God with one purpose. They said, "Master, you are the one who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and everything in the world..." ²⁷ Herod, Pontius Pilate, the other nations, and the people of Israel all came together against Jesus here in Jerusalem. He is your holy Servant, the one you made to be the Messiah. ²⁸ These people who came together against Jesus made your plan happen. It was done because of your power and your will. ²⁹ And now, Lord, listen to what they are saying. They are trying to make us afraid. We are your servants. Help us to say what you want us to say without fear. ³⁰ Help us to be brave by showing us your power. Make sick people well. Cause miraculous signs and wonders to happen by the authority of Jesus, your holy servant." ³¹ After the believers prayed, the place where they

were meeting **shook**. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they continued to speak God's message without fear. (ERV)

When the believers face challenges, how do they pray? What do they pray for?

What is the result of their prayers?

Have you been facing persecution or rejection for your faith? Are you afraid to share your faith with others? Explain.

Are you praying about sharing your faith with others? In what ways do you want to grow in prayer and in telling others about the Lord?

From these followers' prayers, we see them praising God and telling him what is happening to them. They trust God with their lives and understand that persecution is part of God's plan to strengthen their faith. For this reason, they ask the Lord for boldness and great faith so they can continue sharing the message! With this faith, the Lord fills them with the Holy Spirit and says, "Yes!" to their prayers.

As the believers continue to share the message and power of Jesus, the church grows quickly. Yet, as the number of believers increases, so do the needs of the people. This, however, does not stop the church. **Despite** the persecution, the church is strong in love for one another.

³² All the believers were **one in heart** and mind. No one claimed that any of his **possessions** was his own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ [so] that there were no needy persons among them. For **from time to time**, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was **distributed** to anyone who had need. (Acts 4)

⁷ On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. (Acts 20)

Go through each verse and describe the relationships within the church and the hearts of the believers for one another.

Why did the followers of Jesus meet together? Consider both passages.

Where do you see you need to grow in your relationship with the church and other believers?

We see in the book of Acts that the first followers are completely devoted to one another. They love each other deeply and from the heart. When they come to the gathering, they come to give to others, not just take for themselves. They are not selfish but share their possessions and are concerned for one another. They are committed to sharing the message of Christ with the world and meet together to tell the stories of how God is working powerfully in their lives and in the lives of the people who are hearing

the message of Jesus. They sacrifice their time, **energy**, and even money to spread the message of Jesus and **take care of** one other based on the needs.

These early followers do have phones or email, so according to Acts 2:46, they meet daily at the temple to share miracles, stories, pray for each other, and take care of each other's needs. In Acts 20:7, we see that they also meet once a week to break bread, or take the Lord's Supper, now called communion.³ They are willing to stay up all night to be with Paul, their leader, and listen to his teachings before he has to leave them the next day. And why do they do this? They genuinely love Jesus and each other. There is no place they would rather be than with the church.

In the book of Acts, we also see that persecution is a normal part of a growing church spreading the good news about Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. In Acts 7, we see Stephen, a leader in the church, boldly preaching to the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, and challenging its religious leaders. In anger, the leaders **drag** Stephen through the streets of Jerusalem and stone him to death for his message. The persecution against the Christians in Jerusalem becomes severe, but we see in Acts 8 that the believers act wisely and do not give into fear:

¹ On that day a great persecution **broke out** against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and **mourned** deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. ⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with **shrieks**, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

What do the Christians in Jerusalem do first when they are persecuted? (v. 1) Why do you think they do this?

When Christians get to a safe place, what do they do? How do they react to persecution? (v. 4-6)

We read earlier in Acts 4:29-31 how the believers prayed. In this passage, how is God saying "Yes!" to their prayers?

While he was still living, Jesus gave this advice about persecution to his followers: ²¹ "Brother will **betray** brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²² You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³ When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another" (Matthew 10). In the book of Acts, we see the followers obeying Jesus's advice. They leave a city or place where they are being heavily persecuted and find other people who have not yet heard the message of Christ so that all nations can be saved.

³ The *Lord's Supper* or *communion* is a time when Christians gather regularly to remember Jesus's sacrifice of his own body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. During this time, Christians drink a small amount of red wine or juice representing Christ's blood, as well as a small amount of bread that represents his body that died on a cross. During this time, the Christians examine their hearts by honoring Jesus's sacrifice, as well as remembering, confessing, and turning away from any sins that they have in their lives to renew their walk with Jesus.

In this way, throughout the book of Acts, we see more and more people outside Jerusalem hearing the message of Jesus, being baptized, and receiving the special gifts given by the Holy Spirit (8:12, 14-17). We see the churches forming in other regions and cities in ancient Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus, Turkey, Macedonia, Greece, Crete, Malta, and Italy. The message of Jesus spreads among Jews and people who are not Jewish, also called Gentiles (Acts 10). Yet not all persecution can be avoided. During this time, King Herod Agrippa⁴ is still arresting people and putting them in prison. He even puts to death James, the brother of John (Acts 12:1-5). In Acts 12, Herod imprisons Peter, and again we see the church gathering to pray continually and **earnestly** as early as dawn, and possibly all through the night. While they are praying, an angel appears to Peter and frees him from prison (Acts 12).

What do you notice about the prayers of the first church?

Describe your personal prayer life. How can you grow in prayer for yourself and for others?

We see in the first century how miracles began happening because the church was praying together. Have you experienced this with your church? If yes, how have you seen Jesus moving among you? If not, how could you help to change that?

From the book of Acts, we see God's plan for his church. They meet regularly to hear the teachings of the leaders, pray for miracles, worship, and take the Lord's Supper. They have close relationships where they eat together and pray **earnestly** for the needs around them. They perform miracles over the sick and help people **to turn away from** sin and **worldly lifestyles**. They are together **constantly** and are one in heart and mind for Christ's purpose for their lives. For this reason, God blesses them with many people who also follow Jesus. They spend their lives changing the world one **soul** at a time.

Even by 112 C.E., Roman governor Pliny the Younger was still killing and even **torturing** Christians. From a letter he wrote, we learn that the Christians of the second century C.E. were so severely persecuted that they attended secret, hidden meetings for worship and the Lord's Supper. They sang songs to Christ, vowed not to sin, steal, commit adultery, or deny their faith. They then promised to attend the next meeting. From this letter, we learn that even during severe persecution, the Christians found ways to meet, and committed themselves to attend these meetings, even if it meant risking their lives. According to the Romans, these people were the true Christians (*Pliny's Letter to Trajan*).

The heart for the church in the Bible and throughout the first few centuries of the Christian faith is the same heart that Jesus wants us to have for his church today. Devotion to the church and other believers is simply part of following Jesus. We cannot follow him and separate ourselves from his church because in many ways, it is *through* the church that we follow Christ: worshipping, praying, showing love to other followers, and sharing Christ with those who do not yet know him.

Describe your experiences with church. Have you ever been a part of a church like this?

Based on this study, how could you grow in your walk with the church, as well your own walk with Jesus and other believers?

⁴ Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great who was king at the time of Jesus's birth.

This Week:

Write in your journal:

1. Read the book of Acts. After each chapter, write in a notebook what you learn from the first church and the early believers.
2. Think about ways in your life that you can **imitate** the believers of the first church. Pray to the Lord **to reveal** the areas where you can grow.
3. Find a church or a group in your church where you can have these kinds of relationships with other believers.
4. Make a plan to share your faith with your family, your friends, your neighbors, and your city. Consider going online to share your faith with others in your city or around the world, especially if you live in an area where there is persecution.
5. Do you know someone who needs this study? Share it with them!