

In The Beginning

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Good morning

Our lesson today is called, "In The Beginning."

I can imagine that you may be thinking that this lesson has to do with the Creation. In a way, yes it does. But probably not in the way you expect.

Reading from the first chapter of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and it was void, and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. Then God said 'Let there be light' and there was light" (Gen 1:1-3).

Let there be light and there was light. The very first thing God created on day one was light. Even before He created any sources of light.

An extremely high form of energy. It moves so fast, for all practical purposes it's just about everywhere at once. Without it we're almost helpless to function. We can't move about. We can't absorb and understand. We can't formulate plans.

Now, let's shift our focus to another beginning -- the one I want to talk with you about this morning. The beginning of salvation in Christ. This is the beginning we're reading about in our Sunday morning Bible study in the book of "The Acts of the Apostles."

When God said "Let there be light" in the very beginning, His plan to save the world in Jesus Christ was set in motion -- from even before that actually -- from "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 1:20).

And now, in our Bible study, we're seeing the fruit of that plan as it unfolded.

God, again, causes light to appear. This time, the absolute highest form of energy ever. Truly everywhere at once. Light. Not physical light, but spiritual light in the person of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ

Reading now from the first Chapter of the Gospel according to John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1:1-3, referring to the Creation).

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

"And the light shines in the darkness" (John 1:5).

"There was the true light, which, coming into the world, enlightens every man" (John 1:9).

"John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to him and said, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29).

"As many as received Him and believed in His name, to them He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).

Without the Gospel Light we're helpless to function before God. The entire world is helpless without it. We can't walk with God without it. We can't comprehend His Majesty without it. We can't enjoy fellowship with Him in His beloved Son without it. We can't receive forgiveness of sins without it. We can't make solid plans to live in Heaven forever without it.

One of our members, a number of years ago, told of His journey in becoming a disciple of Christ (a Christian). He had read the four Gospel accounts concerning the Light that came into the world -- Jesus Christ (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).

He called these Gospel accounts, "page turners." A person brought up in a "Christian family" may never think about the Gospels this way.

Then he asked, "Now what?" And the answer came from Christians helping him with his Bible studies, "READ ACTS." Read the "Acts of the Apostles."

Study it. See what was done with this magnificent story of Jesus Christ, the sinless crucified and risen Savior. It is the record of the Apostles carrying out their marching orders from Jesus Christ to go into the entire known world and preach His Gospel -- His Light -- and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and then to teach them all things He has commanded.

Oh yes!!! Read Acts. Study it. Drain every drop of truth from it.

Yet, let's not fail to see the forest for the trees. Let the power of the unfolding story wash over us -- the story that connects all the spiritual dots and is able to humble the proudest human spirit.

This will be but a piece of the story.

The picture I see in my own mind goes like this. God drew a target on the city of Jerusalem. And He aimed a multitude of events -- happenings, promises, prophecies -- at this target. Further, He chose a particular time in the unfolding history of mankind when all these incoming "missiles" would strike this target.

All at the exact same time. That's no mean feat, setting all these event missiles in motion and causing them all to hit at once

Perhaps this is one way to appreciate the planning and power and providence of God that brought the Light onto the scene, at just the right time, with the just the right preparations, and ignited the largest fire storm ever unveiled.

The Promises of God. The prophecies. The rising and falling of nations. The struggles of God's people. God's preservation of His remnant. The Divine birth of God in the flesh. The preparations of John's and then Jesus' ministries. The selection and training of Jesus' Apostles -- His witnesses. Jesus' promise of the Comforter.

All these incoming's hit.

SUDDENLY

The Apostles were immersed in the Holy Spirit. They had the authority to say what goes -- to speak for God and Christ.

And – BANG!

The Gospel of Jesus Christ -- the Light of Christ --exploded in the center of a dark and sinful world. Right there. Right then. On Mt. Zion. In Jerusalem.

Nothing has been the same since.

Josephus, a Jewish historian born in Jerusalem a few years after Christ was crucified, records that about two-million Jews made their way to Jerusalem, to the Temple, to keep the Passover.

Twenty-thousand lambs were slaughtered in a single day at that last Passover – Two-hundred fifty-thousand all together. Herod had a tower built so he could see forty lambs per minute prepared. The blood ran, and the flames soared high.

Surely the Jews understood John’s reference when they heard him proclaim Jesus as “the Lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world.”

And just as surely they understood the significance of John preaching baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Immersion. Gentile converts to Judaism – proselytes -- in addition to submitting to circumcision, submitted to water immersion. This immersion -- this washing of water -- signified the cleaning of the Gentile, making him fit to be a Jew under the Law of Moses.

Is it any wonder that the Pharisees and Sadducees hated Jesus from the start? “The lamb of God?” No way! “Take away sin?” Hardly! “Cleansing with water” -- repentance and faith in the coming Kingdom as the only prerequisite? Can’t be!

After thirty-six months of preaching, and teaching and preparing His Apostles, Jesus -- after some personal time with those he dearly loved and from whom he drew human strength – entered Jerusalem -- the innocent Lamb of God -- about to take away the sin of the world on Calvary.

A few days later, He virtually surrendered Himself to the Temple police in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In one of the most rushed, absurd kangaroo court scenes ever, Jesus was brushed off by the Jewish High Counsel, ignored by the Jewish puppet monarchs, and tossed to the Romans for execution.

“There, at long last we’re rid of Him!” -- the Jewish leaders sighed in relief. “Now we can get on with life as we know it.”

However, as we all know, and for which we are eternally grateful, God raised Jesus in the early waking twilight hours, on the third day, on the first day of the week.

For forty days Jesus showed Himself alive to hundreds of eye-witnesses. He gave His Apostles final instructions. He told them to stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them in power – as He had promised the same night He was arrested, 43 days earlier.

Then, He was taken up into the clouds. To God the Father.

For ten days ... nothing!

With the help and direction of God, Matthewhias was chosen to replace Judas.

The Twelve – the Apostles -- continued to wait. Were they anxious? Nervous?

Then suddenly, the Holy Spirit fell on the Twelve, and they were immersed in Him.

The Apostles began speaking in multiple foreign languages such that any one of the roughly two-million people still in the city at that time could understand what was being taught. (The population of Jerusalem was about 600,000 in those times.)

It was the Feast Day of Pentecost. In the year that Christ was crucified, Pentecost occurred on the first day of the week, our Sunday. It had been fifty days since Jesus had risen from the dead.

A huge crowd gathered – amazed -- as the people began hearing the Apostles speak to them in their own native tongues. A crowd made up of many devout, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

Don't know how large the crowd was. Probably pretty big. Most of the people that journeyed to Jerusalem for the Passover stayed over until Pentecost.

God's workings are simply amazing, aren't they? Just about every God-fearing Jew in the in the known world at that time was in Jerusalem (or represented in Jerusalem) to hear the Word of the Lord proclaimed for the very first time.

About three-thousand responded to Peter's sermon, repenting and being baptized. Three-thousand souls were washed of their sins. Three-thousand were added to the Lord's church that very day.

Jesus had indeed built His Church. The gates of Hades had not contained His soul. The grave had not held him. And Peter was sending out the Gospel Light.

Jesus had told His Apostles that they would be acting on His behalf, with full authority, backed up in Heaven. As promised, the Holy Spirit sharpened their memory concerning what Jesus had already taught them, and completed their knowledge by guiding them into all Truth

On that Sunday morning – in that beginning – Peter, standing up with the Eleven, preached the very first Gospel sermon. He unleashed the Power of the Gospel upon the world. One Gospel preacher, heard in 15 languages.

Peter had a job to do, and he did it. He had the keys -- the authority and means -- to open the door to the Church, giving anyone who would hear and believe and repent and be baptized, permission to enter.

But only the Jews had been invited to enter thus far. Peter needed to unlock one more door. And this is exactly what he did when God sent him to Caesarea to the household of Cornelius to unlock the door to the church for the Gentiles.

Peter preached the same message there -- Jesus the Christ, not only crucified and risen, but coronated as well. Just as he had proclaimed on Pentecost a few years earlier.

But this is getting a bit ahead of today's story

As the Apostles taught and shepherded the new Church, it began to grow by leaps and bounds. Soon it swelled in size to probably more than eight to ten-thousand souls.

Peter and John were working miracles, proving what they were teaching was from God and by the Authority of Christ.

More were believing. More were calling on the name of the Lord. More were being saved. More were being added to the Church by the Lord. More and more attention was being drawn to Christ's resurrection and power and Divinity.

But not all of the attention comes with good-will, however.

The Jewish Leaders were not happy. They thought the crucifixion had ended their troubles with Jesus. The sight of Him agonizing in His death throws should have discouraged His followers.

But ... no.

For example, over a period of days, Peter and John were dragged before the High Council after healing a lame man in the name of Christ. They were warned against teaching any more of this "Jesus nonsense heresy."

They would have loved to have had them flogged within an inch of their lives and fed to the jackals. But too many -- way too many -- common everyday Jewish people, who did not necessarily hold to the extreme teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees, held the Apostles and the Gospel in favor.

Later, after being sternly warned, the Apostles were back teaching Jesus. Not in a corner, but still near the Temple.

Arrested again

Thrown in prison this time. Sprung by God. Back teaching again. Before the High Council again. As Peter phrased it, "If I've got to please you or God, I choose God."

The church grew. Even among the members of the High council, there were a few secret believers in Jesus.

Christians were truly enjoying their fellowship with Christ and with one another. They were learning from the Apostles. They were growing. They were worshiping. They were benefitting from the Spiritual Gifts many had received by the laying on of the Apostles hands.

They were sacrificing and caring for one another's needs. And they were attracting others to Christ. People saw what they had, and desired to become Christians too. Even some of the Jewish priests believed and obeyed the Gospel.

But there were growing pains.

A husband and wife -- Ananias and Sapphira -- wanted to help others ... "probably." But they wanted to help themselves even more. They tried to look good to God and look good to men, all at the same time.

They sold some property, giving part of the proceeds to the church treasury, to help those in need. And, they kept a portion back for themselves. They lied to the Holy Spirit in front of the Apostles, saying they gave it all into the treasury.

Both were struck dead, one by one. A few moments apart. Liar by liar.

God let it be known that He expects the truth and holiness at all times, and that the joys and freedoms that are available in Christ come with rules and responsibilities. Rewards as well as consequences.

God was raising a new family in Christ. Not unlike He did over a many years before when seventy of Jacob's family went down into Egypt, and came out about two-million strong.

This new family – the household of God – the Church – was close to the next level.

More growing pains

It was felt that Grecian Jewish widows were getting preferential treatment over the Hebrew Jewish widows, in the allotment of needed relief.

The Apostles oversaw the selection and appointment of seven men (deacons) to deal with these day to day affairs, so they could focus in spiritual instruction.

The seven men are named, yet we know only of the lives of two.

Philip and Stephen.

Philip was the evangelist who preached Jesus to the Ethiopian Eunuch and to those in Samaria

And Stephen. Well He has quite a story as well.

Because Jews living in various regions of the world traveled to Jerusalem for the keeping of feast days, many groups built and maintained their own synagogues as places of meeting and worship when in the city.

A group called the Freedmen -- Jews from various regions who likely had been taken captive in Roman conquests and then eventually set free -- got into it with Stephen. Really got into it.

Stephen's preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the miracles he performed caused a lot of hostility between him and the Freedmen. But the Freedmen, the scripture says, "couldn't stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave Stephen as he spoke."

Since they couldn't answer Stephen's arguments or discount his miracles, they resorted to lies in order to silence him. Just like the Jews did with Jesus years earlier. They lied -- telling everyone who would listen -- saying that Stephen blasphemed the Law of Moses.

He was dragged before the Elders and the High Counsel. This time, unlike the instances with Peter and John, the crowd was on the High Counsel's side.

Stephen preached an eloquent and detailed sermon, carefully showing how the Law had prepared the world for Christ and the Gospel. And having completely fulfilled its purpose, was no longer needed nor in effect.

He wasn't speaking out against Moses and the Law. He was explaining how it all fit into God's grand plan of eternal salvation in Christ.

In my analogy, this event was one of God's missiles aimed at Jerusalem.

But no one cared.

They resisted the Holy Spirit.

If you thought the Jews were mad before, you've seen nothing yet. They were angry. Very angry.

Stephen pointed out that they had resisted and killed the prophets, and now had killed the Son of God, calling them stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart and mind.

They gnashed at him with their teeth

He looked up and told them that he saw "the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"

They stopped up their ears. They ran at him. They seized him. And they stoned him to death.

As he died, Stephen prayed, "Lord receive my spirit," and "do not charge them with this sin."

Doesn't all this bring to mind the death of the Lord? How wonderful it is, to see Stephen waLukeing in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus!

Notice something.

Stephen referred to Christ as the "Son of Man." He could just as easily have said "Son of God." This brought home to the rebellious Jews, that Stephen was seeing the very one who had been "God in the flesh" and had waLukeed among them, resurrected, back in His heavenly home from whence He had come, with God the Father.

One of the men watching Stephen being killed, and was smiling on the inside, was Saul. Saul, soon to be summoned by Christ to become the Apostle to the Gentiles (just as Peter was an Apostle to the Jews).

At this time, however, Saul wanted nothing more than to round up every Christian he could find and have them put to death.

“Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time, a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the Apostles” (Acts 8:1).

God focused all His plans and preparation on Jerusalem, and they all hit at once in what God calls “the fullness of time.”

God raised His Son from the dead and crowned Him King of Kings, Lord of Lords.

Jesus built His Church.

Now ... it was time for the church to explode out into all the world.

A forest fire repopulates the forest by causing pine cones to explode, spreading their seeds. The persecution in Jerusalem accomplished like results, scattering the Christians and the Word of God out into the world.

What appears to be trauma to us, is often God at work causing increase. Glory to God in the highest

As Daniel prophesied, “In the days of the Roman Emperors shall the God of Heaven set up a Kingdom that shall never be destroyed ... and it shall stand forever” (Dan 2:44).

The Invitation Of Christ

If you have not called upon the name of the Lord in baptism, won't you repent and be baptized, and rise up to waLuke in newness of life, your sins forgiven? Just as Peter preached from Pentecost (Acts 2:38) forward?

If you are a Christian, and have stopped calling upon the name of the Lord, falling back into the world, won't you repent and pray to God for forgiveness? Just as Peter preached in Samaria (Acts 8:22).

The hope of eternal life is *incredible* beyond measure!

John Dicus (Feb 13, 2022)