



Acts
&
The Epistles

Opening Prayer

Mighty God, you breathe life into our bones,
and your Spirit brings truth to the world.
Send us this Spirit, transform us by your truth,
and give us language to proclaim your
gospel, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and
Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the
Holy Spirit, on God, now and forever.
Amen.

The Day of Pentecost

- Watch this video:

<https://youtu.be/J5tr4pqWlo4>

The Gathering Community of Believers

- The Holy Spirit unites the disciples and empowers them to head out into the world to share the story of Jesus.
- The disciples are given the ability to speak in other languages because the message about Jesus is intended for the whole world.
- The sound of the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples gets the attention of people all over Jerusalem and very quickly people from all over the world begin to gather.
- They are amazed to discover that the disciples are speaking in their native languages.
- Peter takes this opportunity to share the story about Jesus who was living in Jerusalem.
- The people were so impressed by the story that about 3000 people were baptized and began to follow Jesus that day.

The Gathering Community of Believers

- The story of Pentecost doesn't end with the baptism of these 3000 people.
- Following their baptism, these new believers joined the early Christian community.
- They joined with the other believers and began to worship, to pray, to study and to share their gifts.
- You can read about this early version of the church at the end of the book of Acts.

What does this mean?

- The Holy Spirit comes and is with us still to help us discover the next best, most faithful step in our journey through life.
- The Holy Spirit has come and is with us still to equip us with the gifts we need to meet people where they are, to speak to people in their own languages, to help others to discover what a gift it is to have the wisdom and love of God in your life.
- The Holy Spirit is with us still to nudge us to reach out in love and compassion when our instinct is the opposite.
- For just as the Holy Spirit helps, strengthens and inspires Peter and the other disciples on that first Day of Pentecost, so too can the Holy Spirit help, strengthen and inspire each of us to use our gifts to be God's heart and hands and voices share the story and the love of Jesus with the world.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think you would have done if you had been with the disciples when the Holy Spirit came rushing in?
- Why do you think the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak other languages?
- What cultural languages (sports, band, theater, gamer, etc.) do you speak that could allow you to share the story of Jesus with a segment of the world?

Peter

- Simon Peter, the brother of Andrew, was a fisherman and a disciple of Jesus.
- Peter often asks questions and speaks for the disciples.
- He is present when Jesus heals his mother-in-law, at the Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- Although he denies Jesus during his trial, he is among the first to learn of the Resurrection.
- On the Day of Pentecost, he speaks to the entire crowd and becomes a key leader in the early church.

Peter

- The video below provides a full discussion of Peter's life and ministry.
- The entire video is worth watching if you are really interested in learning about Peter, but if you jump ahead to 20:35 and watch until 23:51, you will learn a little more about Peter's role in the early church and the interaction between Peter and Paul as the church developed.
- <https://vimeo.com/54527674>

Paul

- Saul was a faithful Jew who persecuted the followers of Jesus.
- Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus as a bright light from heaven.
- He became a follower of Jesus and changed his name to Paul.
- Paul traveled around the region proclaiming the story of Jesus to Jews and non-Jews.
- He wrote many letters to the churches teaching about a life of faith.
- He was arrested and sent to Rome where he died in jail.
- <https://youtu.be/bN4tqrCgWwc>

Recap

- In the early church, Peter and Paul were two of the most powerful voices sharing the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.
- Peter, as a leader among the original 12 disciples, was a natural choice to be a leader in the early church.
- He was with Jesus at critical points in Jesus' journey like the Transfiguration, the Feeding of the 5000 and in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- He raced to the tomb when word came of Jesus' resurrection and inspired by the Holy Spirit, he addressed the crowds on the Day of Pentecost.
- In the days and months following Pentecost, Peter became a fixture in Jerusalem and a key leader in the growth and development of the church.

Recap

- Paul, on the other hand, was the last person you would expect be a witness to Jesus.
- As a devote Jew who viewed the early Christian movement as a heresy, Paul persecuted Christians until his experience on the road to Damascus completely changed his understanding of who Jesus was and what he meant to the world.
- Once Paul embraced Jesus as the Messiah, his gift for writing, his passion for missionary work and his openness to including Jews and non-Jews made him the perfect person to take the story of Jesus to the whole world.
- As you can see from [this map](#), Paul traveled around the whole region.

Discussion Questions

- If you could pick one of the two men to spend time with, would you rather talk with Peter or Paul and why?
- Paul wrote letters and sent them to young churches around the Roman Empire to answer questions about who Jesus was and what the church should be like. Since most people don't write letters today, compose a message in 140 characters or less telling the world about Jesus and share it below.

The Epistles

- Epistle is not a word you hear pretty much anywhere but church.
- At its most basic, it means “Letter.”
- In the days of the early church, sending a letter was not easy.
- So when we have a letter in the New Testament, it is important.
- They were written to share the faith, to encourage people in times of persecution, to explain the faith in the face of false teachings, and to ask for help for Christians in need.
- Most letters in the New Testament were written by Paul.
- Other letters, sometimes called the “Catholic” or “General” epistles (catholic means ‘universal’), were written by different authors.

The Epistles

- The General Epistles get that name because they were not written to a specific audience.
- This would be like the difference between a note your teacher sends home to your parents specifically (which in my experience is either a really good thing or a really bad thing), or a letter that is sent home to everyone's parents.
- The second is more of a general information nature. And so it is with the general epistles.
- Where Paul was writing to specific people about specific things, the other writings do not get as specific.

Hebrews

- We don't have any idea really who wrote this, and it doesn't tell us.
- Some Bible's say "The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews" but that was only a guess.
- The letter is written to Jewish Christians who seem to have begun to question if Jesus is the Messiah, because they were expecting a military king.
- Despite the resurrection, the people's faith was shaken because the followers of the Messiah were being persecuted.
- The letter goes into detail to explain that the Messiah was more of a priest than a king, and that his role was as a sacrificial offering to God.
- The role of Jesus as King was yet to come according to this letter.

James

- This letter is often attributed to one of the disciples named James, either James the son of Zebedee or James the son of Alphaeus.
- But James son of Zebedee was killed before this letter would have been written and James son of Alphaeus never has a prominent role in the scriptures and little is known of him.
- The letter simply says James.
- Instead of the two apostles, evidence points to James the brother of Jesus. He claims to be the brother of Jude, who was known as the brother of Jesus, so it seems he was family.
- The letter itself is about how we are justified (made right) before God.

James

- One of the most well known passages (and most argued about) is:
- ¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

James

- This passage is somewhat controversial through the history of the church.
- It led Martin Luther to discount the entire book because he saw it as disagreeing with a reliance on God's grace and instead pushing the idea that we somehow work to earn our salvation.
- Luther stood behind Paul who insisted that we do not need to do good works to earn God's love.
- But the reality is that Paul and James were dealing with different problems.

James

- Paul was dealing with people who claimed that we had to do good works, that the things we did were to earn salvation.
- So Paul points out that God loves us not because of what we do, but despite them.
- James on the other hand, was dealing with people who said they could live any way that they wanted because God's grace was free and we got it no matter what.
- Luther was dealing with people who were much like the ones Paul dealt with; the church in his day was selling forgiveness for money, and so naturally Paul's writings were more helpful.
- James, who was saying that if we live our faith we will by necessity do good works, was not being as contrary to the faith as Luther seemed to see him being.
- He was simply reminding us that if we are forgiven, we ought to live new and changed lives, not to earn grace, but to honor it.
- James also writes about worship, particularly about praying for and anointing those who are sick.

Three Johns

- These three letters all seem to be written by the same person.
- The traditional view says it was written by the same John who wrote the Gospel, but there are significant differences in language that make some question whether that is true.
- These three are mostly concerned with divisions in the community of believers, particularly caused by false teachers.
- The first letter is a sermon on God's love; the other two are more specific about false teachers.

Jude

- This letter is attributed to Jude the brother of Jesus.
- We do not know much about the author.
- It is one of the shortest books of the Bible: 25 verses.
- It is concerned with false teachers who lead the people astray, and warns people to remember the teachings of the apostles who shared the truth of Jesus.

The Two Letters of Peter

- Like the letter of James, we are fairly certain that the author claimed in the writing (Peter) is not the Apostle Peter.
- The events that the First Letter of Peter seems to be dealing with, the official persecution of Christians by the government, happened long after Saint Peter the Apostle was dead.
- The second letter also has signs that Peter the Apostle couldn't have written it, and most scholars doubt that it was written by the same person as the first.
- But confusion of authorship was not uncommon... writing in someone else's name was normal if you saw yourself as a follower of the more known person.
- First Peter deals with how to keep faith in times of persecution.
- Christians were being killed for their faith, and it was causing many to lose faith. So this letter was sent to help us keep strong.
- Second Peter is more of a general encouragement in the faith, and warns to beware of false teachers who lead astray.

Closing

- There you have it... a brief synopsis of the General Epistles.
- These letters were instrumental in keeping the faith for early Christians.
- These letters still have deep meaning for us today as we seek to keep the faith, even if our life circumstances are much different than the early Christian community.

REMINDER

- Send an email to Marie (mariemartinez@livingwordkaty.org) and name 3 things you learned and 1 question you still have.