

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH.

(1) Heralding a New Dawn.

All 4 of the gospels in the New Testament climax their story with the most significant event in the history of the world - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. A magnificent climax, but not the end of the story; rather, the beginning of a great new epoch with its own tremendous story. It fell to Luke, one of the gospels, to tell that story - one in which the resurrection of our Lord Jesus was the springboard from which all the events of his book of Acts took off. In the very first verse he referred to the gospel story as "All that Jesus *began* to do and to teach," and proceeded to deal with the vast, unpredictable, exciting explosion that began at Pentecost. For 6 weeks the risen Lord had appeared to His disciples, sometimes in ones or twos, and once at least to over 500 of His followers together. And always He had urged them to wait – wait until He sent the gift He had promised them – the gift of the Holy Spirit. Little did they dream what was in store for them!

In **Acts 1:1-11** Luke tells of the triumphant culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry – His ascension into Heaven to take His place at the right hand of His Father. From then on, Heaven would be different: Jesus was taking with Him His earthly body, scars and all, humanity glorified in the person of the Son. Yet it seems from **verse 6** that those disciples still did not get the import of what Jesus had done: they asked "Lord, are you at this time going to *restore the kingdom to Israel?*" Indoctrinated for centuries with the notion that Israel should take pride of place in the world, and unmindful perhaps of such prophecies as **Isaiah 27:6** that "In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and *fill all the world with fruit*", their world view did not extend beyond the bounds of their own nation.

Yet the patient Jesus, after a gentle reminder that it was not their business to enquire into God's agenda, gave them a wonderful promise in **verse 8**, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Little did they glimpse the unimaginable scope of the ministry that lay ahead for them to fulfil! And with those parting words, Jesus was taken from them and caught up into Heaven, leaving 2 angels to reassure the mystified disciples that He would come back to them one day, in the same manner as He had gone away.

As Gentiles we have the worldwide view of the Gospel. Yet are we grateful to Israel, and prayerful for them, for the heritage they have given us?

In spite of their puzzlement the disciples obeyed their Lord's command and returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives to await further instructions. **Acts 1:12-15** tells of the upper room which could quite probably have been the same room in which Jesus shared that last supper with His disciples. Full of memories, it would have sparked that little band to mutual support and prayer to God their Father. We have here the list of the apostles, all 11 of them, while other disciples brought the number up to about 120. Among these were women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, who is mentioned almost as an afterthought. It was right that she should be among the believers, yet she was given no special recognition. Like the rest of them, she had needed the saving grace available to her through the death and resurrection of her Son. Yet what a delight it must have been to her, to see her other sons among the believers at last!

Alas, one disciple found it impossible to wait as Jesus had asked them to do. **Acts 1:15-26** tells how Peter, his Jewish mind fixed on the number 12, found it necessary to appoint someone to take the place of Judas Iscariot, and to do this he used the Old Testament method of casting lots. It had not yet dawned on Peter that now was the age of the Holy Spirit, and the casting of lots was redundant. It would not be long before the Holy Spirit Himself would add the 12th man – the apostle Paul. In **Acts 9:15** God says of Paul, "*This man is My chosen instrument.*" We hear no more of Matthias.

How hard is it to await God's timing? Our own timetable seems much more workable! How effective was Peter's effort to "make up the number?" How effective is any work without the Holy Spirit?

Acts chapter 2 starts with a significant phrase – “When the day of Pentecost came ...” **Leviticus chapter 23** records the calendar of events of Israel’s ecclesiastical year. First up was the Passover which we know to be a symbol of the death of Jesus, our Passover Lamb (**1 Corinthians 5:7**). Immediately following that is the Festival of Firstfruits, when Israel brought as an offering to the Lord a sheaf of wheat, the firstfruits of their harvest – and it had to be brought on the day after the Sabbath, i.e. the first day of the week. **1 Cor. 15:20** says “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, *the firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep” – and He rose on the first day of the week! From that day they had to count off 50 days (hence the name “Pentecost”) and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord along with drink offerings and lambs, a bull, rams and a goat. This Feast of Weeks was to signify the beginning of a new dispensation, when a new meal-offering would be offered to the Lord – just as in the wake of Christ’s resurrection, all who believe would rise from the death of sin to eternal life through Him. As Israel gave back to God what He had first given them, in the form of fruits, grains and meats, so in Pentecost we are to see the beginning of the thousands who gave themselves back to God Who had first given them life through Jesus Christ.

When does eternal life begin for the believer? Can anyone take it away from us? What exactly does “eternal” signify as used in the New Testament?

Chapter 2 goes on to tell us “they were all together in one place” – possibly all 120 of them, and maybe in one of the Temple courts where different groups had the freedom to meet and converse, and where the disciples spent most of their days in praise and prayer to God. **Acts 2:2-4** is full of wonderful drama – the explosion, the bursting forth, the magnificent introduction of a new era, a new covenant, a new life in Christ. For now came the gift Jesus had promised to send from the Father – and that gift was the Holy Spirit!

A sound like a violent wind – the Greek word “pneuma” means breath, or spirit – tongues of fire that graced each disciple, and an infilling of the Holy Spirit that opened their minds and their mouths to proclaim this new era of eternal life through faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

Verses 5-11 list the more than a dozen nationalities that were in Jerusalem at the time. Passover and Pentecost were 2 of the festivals which all males were obliged to attend if at all possible, hence this unique opportunity for the message to spill out instantaneously to thousands of bewildered listeners. And everyone heard the message in his own language through the divinely-appointed miracle of communication!

Of course there were some who scoffed, and that was the cue for some explanation to be offered. And so we come, in **verses 14-36**, to a sort of “first fruits” in Peter’s life: through the Holy Spirit infilling him, he was freed from his brashness, his cowardice, his “foot-in-mouth” weakness. Now he was enabled to deliver one of the greatest sermons of all time, a sermon that laid the foundation for the church that was about to be built, a sermon concluding with the challenge in **verse 36**, “Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” The situation was unique, and the sermon was unique: never again would such an opportunity arise. The sermon was simple – any Jewish child could understand it – and it was Christ-centred. And it was delivered to Jerusalem, the city which had had the greatest privilege of a visitation from Christ, yet had the greatest guilt, that of crucifying the Son of God.

Imagine you were among the crowd that day. What would your feelings have been at this radical, dynamic preaching? Would you be scandalized, frightened, sceptical? Would you be able to cope with such a dramatic departure from the norms of your religion?

Verse 37 gives us the reaction of the crowd – they were “cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” It is important to realise that among these people were visitors come to Jerusalem from other countries to worship at the Temple, which means they would have been devout Jews, awaiting the Messiah, and not necessarily the crazed rabble that yelled for Jesus’ crucifixion a few weeks before. The very fact that they addressed the apostles as “brothers” shows their open-mindedness. The Holy Spirit had convicted them and they were willing to accept Peter’s message – the message that the Messiah had come but had been rejected by His chosen nation. Israel had suffered much in the past through her

Infidelity to God; now that this greatest of crimes had been committed, what would be her punishment? She had crucified her King and now that King had gone. Was there any way the crime could be undone, any way that Israel could be given a second chance? In other words, their remorse for the nation of Israel and their own involvement, would have struck them with fear.

In response Peter sought to change their focus from the nation to the individual, from the Old Covenant to the New. “Repent and be baptized, *every one* of you,” he urged in **verse 38**. It was to be a personal change, a change of heart rather than one just of ritual. To be baptized would be the outward witness of the inward change, a breaking with the worn-out traditions of corrupted Judaism, a declaration to all of personal repentance and a renewed devotion to God and acceptance of His Son Jesus Christ.

And this brought a promise, as Peter went on to say – forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and ongoing blessing to succeeding generations. He did not openly refer to Christ’s oft-repeated prophecy of judgement on the nation – a judgement that fell in 70 A.D. – but he did urge them to avoid such judgement in **verse 40** - “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” The nation could not avoid judgement, but the individual through faith could be spared eternal death and received instead eternal life.

Through faith today we can be spared God’s judgement too. How much do we care that our friends and relatives are in danger of such judgement? What is our responsibility towards them?

Verses 41-47 show us that the harvest was ripe. Peter applied the sickle and reaped an abundance! Three thousand of his listeners were not only moved and convicted: they were galvanised into action – burning the bridges, hoisting the flag, and in being baptized, demonstrating their unconditional surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord. Without any New Testament to guide them, it was natural that they should eagerly listen to whatever the apostles - those who had been closest to Jesus - could tell them. No-one had to make rules: the fellowship sprang up naturally with their oneness of heart. It was an awesome time, a time to delight in this great new relationship of love, to pray together, to eat together, to learn together and then, to care together as goods and riches were gladly pooled to provide for anyone in need.

The ecstasy comes bubbling over in the closing verses of **chapter 2**. They met in the Temple courts, they met in each other’s homes with glad and sincere hearts, they praised God and enjoyed the favour of all the people. After the initial “explosion”, the harvest of that day of Pentecost was repeated in God’s good grace. What Jesus had declared would happen, had wonderfully come true. The Church had been born.