



## THE ANCIENT CHURCH

At no point were the hopes of the Christian faith more frayed than when Jesus ascended into heaven in Acts 1. After three years of ministry with twelve disciples by His side, Jesus had left them to continue His work. While Jesus was on earth, His disciples struggled to understand His teaching, assumed His kingship meant something totally different than what Jesus intended, and ran away from Him when He was captured and led to death. And Jesus was putting the responsibility for guiding the Church into their hands? Surely a disaster in the waiting?

Yet that was hardly what happened. The Holy Spirit's influence upon the disciples made them bold ambassadors for the good news of Jesus' saving death and resurrection. Against much resistance, the Gospel (the term Christians have given to this "good news") spread throughout the Roman Empire. The disciples—who became known as apostles—were sent out, along with a new ally named Paul, to start new churches in cities within and beyond Israel. The message of Christ swept through Caesarea, Antioch, northwest into Asia Minor, and across into Greece and onward to Rome and beyond.

All this took place despite much persecution against Christians. Some Roman emperors were more direct in their policies of resistance, some preferred to let local leaders manage a response to the growing Church. Yet, Christians had to be watchful. They knew of the promise of Jesus, that as the world had hated Him, the world would hate them, as well. In some cases, the persecution was so intense that a number of Christians were martyred—

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killed because of their unwavering faith. Bishops such as Ignatius, Polycarp, and Cyprian were among them, and the list of other Christ-followers who lost their lives could fill many books.

Despite persecution, the Church throughout the world continued to grow, attracting new followers with its message of the grace of God through Jesus Christ. The Christian faith was shown in a lifestyle that honored the human family, dignified women, sought out abandoned babies and children to give them loving homes, and recognized the inherent worth of people in the lowest parts of society. All this happened even though the Church was looked down upon by the ruling class, and the Christian faith was increasingly marginalized.

All this changed with the ascension of Constantine as undisputed emperor. Due to a visionary experience before a key battle, Constantine believed the God of the Christians had given him the victory that sealed his kingly power. In response, Constantine authorized full freedom of worship for the Church and gave high honor to Christians. Overnight, followers of Jesus went from being hunted targets to esteemed citizens. The liberty they now enjoyed could set them more at ease. It could also create some tensions that had not been there before.

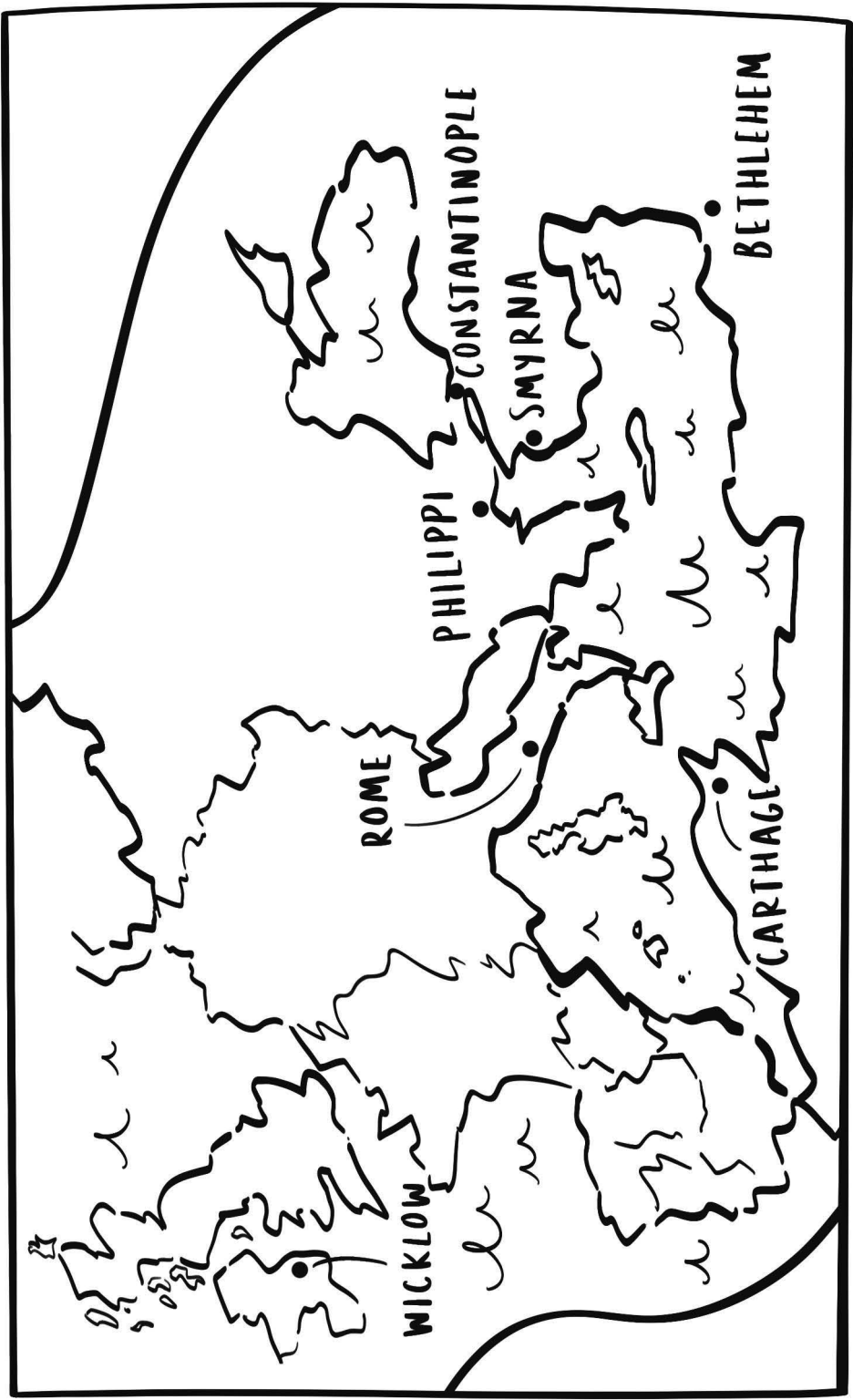
In time, various teachings about Jesus caused confusion and competition within the larger Church. Arius and Athanasius would engage in a verbal battle over the nature of Jesus. Was He the eternal Son of God, or was He the first and most worthy created being? Constantine—not wanting his newly-won empire to fall into disorder—commanded that these tensions be settled in a council of bishops at Nicea. There, the Nicene Creed demonstrated the biblical truth that Jesus was the eternal Son of God, but for years afterward, arguments continued to rage. Many other councils followed to deal with other questions. “How

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is Jesus both God and human?” “How are we saved from sin?” It seemed the more freedom the Church enjoyed; the more questions rose from within demanding answers.

This is not to say that Christians were left ignorant in their search for truth. The Church produced many great writers, thinkers, bishops, and pastors to offer deep and practical guidance. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine explained and clarified Scriptural teaching. Gregory the Illuminator boldly returned to his homeland of Armenia determined to preach Christ to his people, and the former slave Patrick courageously took the Christian faith that had settled in Britain and went to Ireland to convert a pagan land.

The story of the ancient Church is one of a people who were finding their way over many years by God’s light. We must recognize that the beginnings of this movement were difficult, and these followers of Jesus struggled at times to speak to the world around them. Today, we are looking back over the centuries with many more years of understanding. If anything, we should be able to empathize with our fellow believers in ages past, for we stand on the shoulders of those who braved persecution, death, debate, and mystery on behalf of generations to come.



ROME

PHILIPPI

SMYRNA

CONSTANTINOPE

BETHLEHEM

CARTHAGE

WICKLOW







## Pentecost in Jerusalem, A.D. 28 or 29

Peter took the leftover bread from the low table, tearing it in half and wincing as he did so. *I wouldn't think that remaining inside rather than fishing on the sea would exhaust me so much*, he thought. Although he had a similar pallet bed at home in Galilee, sleeping in a different location meant fitful nights and less rest. Being away from the sea also affected his joints and muscles. His fingers ached; his back cried out for relief, and every time he ascended and descended the steps in this house, his ankles crackled like a Roman chariot over loose stones. He chewed the bread and looked up as Matthias entered the upper room.

"A blessed morning, Peter," Matthias spoke cheerily, his voice fully confident yet without a trace of bombast. The apostles had just selected Matthias to join their company the day before, but rather than being puffed up with pride, the newly minted apostle seemed eager to learn and follow.

"Good morning, Matthias," Peter replied, pressing his left palm down to the floor and pushing himself gingerly into a standing position. "I assume all are gathered downstairs?"

"They are," Matthias responded, "and several of the women just got here. Salome and Joanna had taken bread to the Temple so they would be among the early crowd. But all the brothers are downstairs, with Mary and Mary Magdalene."

All in perfect harmony?" Peter chuckled, knowing Matthias would understand his gentle sarcasm.

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“We might be by the end of the day, Peter,” he said, “but if anyone can quell their disagreements, you can.”

Peter shook his head as he moved toward the door. “Matthias, if you knew me over the last three years, you’d know what a dangerous idea that is.”

“I don’t know Him!”

“I’ve never met the man!”

“Curse you, I don’t even know this Jesus you’re talking about!”

The words remained imprinted in his soul. No amount of pain in his weary body could compare with the anguish of knowing that he had denied Jesus on the eve of the Master’s death! He remembered the crowing of the rooster; he recalled the pained look in Jesus’ eyes.

And yet the day came, after Jesus had miraculously risen from death, that they met by the Sea of Galilee. While the others cooked a morning breakfast of fresh fish, Jesus had pulled Peter aside.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” the Lord asked him.

“Yes, Lord,” Peter said, remembering how Jesus would call him by his original name. “You know that I love you.”

“Then I ask you to feed my lambs.” “I will, Jesus.”

A painful pause, then Jesus said, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Jesus, you know I do. Of course, the answer is yes!”

“Then, tend my sheep.”

The pause. How painful. But Peter knew what was coming.

“Peter, do you love me?”

Jesus had asked again. Three times Peter had denied Him. Three times his Master pursued him. And that’s when Peter understood. *This is grace. This is grace.*



## Peter

“You know everything, Lord. I love you, always and forever.”

“Then feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”

*Why do you continue to pursue me, Lord?* Peter wondered. But he felt his Master’s hand on his shoulder.

“I cannot imagine why you have called me, Jesus,” Peter whispered, barely able to fathom the words of his Lord, “but you have said it will be so, and so I accept.”

“Peter! Peter!”

Matthias’ words pierced his trance. Looking around the room, he saw them all. Men who had been with him over the last three years, through hope and anguish. The women who had assisted and encouraged them. Jesus’ mother, Mary, with the other ladies. Other men who simply desired to come and pray, for they had no other place to go.

“We are all here?” he asked.

His brother Andrew nodded. “We are waiting for you to speak, Peter. We have selected Matthias to join us. We have prayed for several days. What is the next step?”

“To do what we have been doing,” Peter said firmly. “We must pray.”

“Pray?” The question, posed sharply, came from Bartholomew. “I appreciate your desire to seek guidance from God, Peter, but how long will this go on? Do you not remember what Jesus told us before he was lifted into heaven? ‘Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations’! How are we to make more disciples if we as disciples remain here? How are we to baptize others if we never leave this house?”

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“Agreed!” called out Simon.

John rolled his eyes. “Oh, not you! Spoken like a true Zealot! Unless we’re on the move uprooting everything, we’re not making progress!”

“Have a care, John,” Peter whispered, gesturing him to be quiet. “He’s just expressing his opinion.”

“We’ve had our time for prayer,” Simon continued, “and now it’s time for action!”

“It is time to listen, Simon,” Matthew spoke up, “and if we would stop making our own plans, maybe we will discover God’s!”

“All right,” Peter raised his voice a touch above the others, “let’s just consider this. We are putting out a lot of our own words. Maybe we should remember Jesus’ words? Yes, Bartholomew, he said to go, to make disciples, and to baptize. But he didn’t say when! The pace at which we travel must join with Jesus’ pace, not the other way around. But he definitely said to wait here in Jerusalem for what the Father has promised, to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If we wish to receive that promise, we should wish to obey our Lord. Jesus never told us how long to wait; he only told us what to do. Obedience and prayer is the order of the day.”

James shifted in the corner of the room. “I am in full agreement with you, Peter, no matter what danger might come our way. Because I realize if I proclaim Jesus, that is a costly enterprise that could cost me my life. But you do also understand, Peter, that this task seems very overwhelming.”

“What do you mean?” asked Andrew.

“What James is saying,” said Thaddeus, “is to think about our time with Jesus, all of us. Think about all he said and did that we didn’t understand at the time, how clouded in mind and heart we could be. We weren’t exactly shining examples of spiritual hope when Jesus was still

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here. And now he's gone, and he wants us to carry on His work! We were bumblerers when Jesus lived among us. What about now?"

Peter put his hands up for quiet. "I can appreciate all of this, Thaddeus. I really can. There are over ten dozen of us crowded in this house today. I know you all, and you know me. You all know that I denied Jesus the night before His death. James and John can tell stories about their pride. Judas betrayed our Lord, which is why we've had Matthias join us. And even when Jesus gathered us all together on that day he departed into heaven, some of you expressed your doubts that he had really risen from the dead. I agree it seems pretty poor strategy to entrust Jesus' plan with us, except for one thing." He paused before going on. "Jesus said to us, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.'" I do not know how that will happen, brothers and sisters, but I know Jesus has promised to make it happen. And if he says we should keep praying until we receive that, so be it."

A murmur went through the group. Even Simon, the political firebrand, softened his eyes and nodded his head. One by one, they closed their eyes and bowed their heads. And prayed.

Peter did not know how long they had been praying. It was an unusually cool and somewhat overcast day, but from the position of the sun, it could not have been past the third hour. He thought little of the sound of the wind, and joining hands with Mary and Philip, he went back to praying when he opened one eye and looked out the window.

Strange, he thought, I hear the sound of a stiff gale from the sea, and yet no trees outside are moving.

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And then, it happened! A furious blast shot through the whole of the room, lifting Thomas out of his kneeling position and knocking Peter over! The women clutched each other.

“Brother, what’s going on?” Andrew pleaded.

Peter’s body aches surged into abject pain. “I don’t know, Andrew. This is worse than any storm we had when fishing, but...”

Amongst the cries and calls of the throng, Peter never got to complete his sentence. The wind howled once more, cascading in form into rippling, concentric circles above their heads!

“Peter!” cried John. “What is this?”

“Maybe,” Peter croaked, “this is the end of our waiting.”

And with that, the ripples of the gale collapsed with a loud crack, and the room was filled with a blinding light. Peter shielded his eyes as he scrambled to his feet, reaching down to steady himself on one of the other disciples. It happened to be his brother, Andrew, who looked up at him.

“Brother,” Andrew panted, “what is that on your head?”

“I was about to ask you the same question about yourself,” Peter coughed.

When the wind had ceased Peter saw the others within the room scrambling to their feet. His brother: James. John. Philip. Thomas. All the disciples, including Matthias. And there it was, hovering over each of their heads.

Fire.

And there it was, burning within his heart.

The promise! He thought. We’ve received the promised Spirit!

And then he recalled Jesus’ words...You shall be my witnesses.

It didn’t surprise Peter that they all moved toward the door at once, and moments later they were spilling into the streets of Jerusalem.

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The response was overwhelming, and Peter could not have scripted the story any better. Andrew was preaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus, with a throng of devout Jews from Carthage and Cyrene, and from the looks on their faces they understood every word! A crowd of Jews from Antioch latched on to Bartholomew. At the same time Philip was speaking to several families from Iconium in Asia. Even Simon was happily telling of Jesus to a cluster of Parthians obviously far from home. All over the streets a wild conversation had sprung up, and Peter and the others found all enthralled by what they had to say. And all around them they heard the questions spring up.

“What is going on?”

“I know of these folks. Aren’t they from Galilee in the north?”

“If that’s so, how are they speaking our language?”

“This is outrageous!”

“This is amazing!”

“What does it mean?”

Finally, Peter saw one of them striding toward him as he spoke of Jesus rising from the dead to a group of children from Caesarea. “Oh, God be with me now. It’s the son of the high priest.”

“You there!” The accuser spat. “What do you mean by disturbing a peaceful Shavuot morning? Are you drunk? That’s what this is!” He spread his arms wide, gesturing to the crowd, others calling out agreement. “They’re filled with too much new wine, the drunkards!”

Peter, excusing himself from the children, rushed into the crowd’s midst.

“Men of Judea,” he called out, “and all who dwell this day in Jerusalem, listen to what I have to say. Use reason! How could we be drunk? It’s only nine o’clock in the morning! Rather than assuming the worst, perhaps it is wise to believe this is a fulfillment of a promise long ago!”

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“A promise?” shouted a farmer from Derbe.

“From the prophet Joel, where he said of old, ‘And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

The assembly had hushed. Peter looked over at Andrew, James, and John. Their eyes widened, they nodded to him to proceed.

“Men of Israel,” he continued, “hear what I say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man proven by God to you through public wonders and miracles—this Jesus, the one given over by God in His sovereign plan, the one whom you crucified, our God raised Him up, shattering death which was powerless to hold our Lord Jesus Christ!”

The crowd gasped, overwhelmed by the news. Peter went on for several minutes as they began to tremble and weep at the words of Jesus’ death and resurrection!

“We are all witnesses of these things, you see,” he continued, “that Jesus is raised and exalted at God’s right hand, and now in this day our Jesus has richly poured out the Holy Spirit upon us, as you can clearly see! So, know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you put to death, both Lord and God!”

Whatever the people had seen and heard that day, nothing compared to the power they felt from Peter’s words. A woman clutched at the feet of John and wept. Several rushed to the place where Peter stood, asking, “Brothers, what should we do?”

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Peter raised his hands for quiet, then spoke firmly yet with deep passion: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit! For this is a promise, a promise for you and for your children and for those in the most distant coastlands: everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself! Come and be saved!”

A multitude of people swarmed forward, tears coursing down their cheeks and prayers of repentance spilling from their lips. Calls for water for baptism went up, and in the swarm, Peter and the apostles led them toward a nearby pool. He felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Matthias.

“Did you see, Peter?”

“See what?”

Matthias pointed to the sky. “You speak of Jesus, and the sun breaks out overhead! I don’t think that was a coincidence.”

Peter smiled, keeping pace with the crowd moving briskly toward the pool. He couldn’t believe it. There must be about three thousand people here!

Yes, the promise of the Lord was sure.

“Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep.”

The story of **PETER** is one of dramatic grace. During Jesus’ ministry, Peter was known for speaking truth boldly but also for being too rash and overconfident. Yet, Jesus was determined to take who Peter was and work within him for moments such as this. The Pentecost sermon was an event instrumental in bringing many into the church at Jerusalem. For many years, Peter would serve as an apostle, sent to proclaim salvation found in Jesus Christ, and he had a special heart for Jewish believers who became Christians. His travels ranged from Judea all the way to Rome, where it is likely he met his death as a martyr.

