



A CHURCH FORMED: GOD'S PLAN FOR HIS PEOPLE

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It was quiet ... real quiet ... probably more quiet than any room with eleven guys has ever been. Something so astounding ... something so unexpected ... something so epic had just happened, that these eleven guys who had followed Jesus just sat in a room and they didn't know what to do ... so they started to pray.

In order to get a context as to why these guys were sitting there, why these guys were so astonished, why these guys were so quiet, why they didn't know what to do except to pray ... we need to go back a little bit and do a brief recap.

We need to go all the way back, back to the beginning. Right in the very beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He put animals on the earth, plants on the earth, the sun and stars and the moon in the sky, and he looked down at what he had created and he said, "Ahhh, this is good, this is so good." He said, "I know the icing on the cake. I know what I need to do." He formed this man, he breathed breath into it, and this man he named Adam, and God said, "Ahhh, so good."

God said to Adam, "It is not good for you to be alone. Why don't you go around and check out all the different animals that I have made and see if you can find yourself a suitable partner." So Adam roamed around the earth finding animals and naming them, saying, "You are a bat. You are not a very good partner for me." I like to think that his last animal was an orangutan (it's my favorite animal). So, he named the orangutan, saying, "You're close, but a little too hairy." He stepped back and said, "There is no one suitable for me." God, recognizing this, put him to sleep and out of his body formed woman. After God looked at Adam and this woman, he named her Eve and said, "You are very good. You guys go together. I like this." In fact, he liked it so much that God himself strolled around with this couple. They took walks together, they talked together, and they hung out. God said, "This is so good. This is exactly what I wanted to make. This is exactly what it needed to be."

You know the story. Things didn't stay that way. The one thing that God said they couldn't do, they did. They did the same thing that I would have done, they did it. They ate of the fruit that they were not supposed to eat.

That created this rift between them and God. But not only was their relationship with God in peril, but all of creation was affected. Things spiraled down, really quickly actually. Things got so bad that within six chapters of the first book of the Bible God regretted that he even made people. The thing that he said was very good, the thing that he loved walking around with, humanity, he regretted having made.

So God took Noah, and Noah's family, and set them on a boat with all these animals, and he wiped out everyone on the earth. And he said, "I need to start from scratch. Maybe then things can go back to the way they are supposed to be." Of course it didn't, things spiraled down really quickly, once again.

In fact, things got so bad that God said, "Here is what I am going to do." God grabbed this guy named Abram, you might know him as Abraham, and he made this covenant with him. In Genesis chapter 12 he said, "I am going to make you into a great nation. I know you are old and your wife is wrinkly, but you are going to have a kid." God didn't say it that way, but he did say, "I am going to make you into a great nation even though you are old." Abram's kid had kids, and those kids had kids, and they grew into the nation of Israel. And God said, "You are going to be my people, and in fact, as my people, you are going to bless the rest of the world. I am going to bless the world through you."

So, God had these people, and basically the rest of the Old Testament is the story of God's people oscillating back and forth, back and forth. Following after God, doing what God wanted, obeying God's law given to them through Moses, and then swinging to the other side where they were following after idols, mistreating others, doing their own thing, the things that were right in their own eyes. As time went on the oscillations started to get heavier and would last longer on the side away from God.

Things got so bad, actually, that in the book of Jeremiah we come to a low point in Israel's history. God was so grieved about his people who kept following after idols, that he sent prophets saying, "Come back to me. Come back to me. Come back to me. I still want you." But they didn't. God got so fed up with them going off, doing their

own thing, fed up with them mistreating each other, that he sent Jeremiah to tell his people, "Not only are you going to be oppressed and enslaved, not only am I going to allow that, not only are a lot of you going to die and I am going to allow that, but I am actually going to be on the other team. I am going to be fighting against you because the things you are doing are not blessing the people of this world the way they are supposed to." Things got dark, things got dirty, and things got heavy. The outside observer was starting to say, "You know what, God's plan is failing."

Ever since Adam and Eve ate of that fruit, were kicked out of the garden, and their relationship was severed, ever since then, God has been on this mission of restoring humanity and restoring all of creation. He has had a plan. It was with Abram that he said, "My plan is going to come out through you." In the book of Jeremiah, when God was fed up with man, he cleansed his people so that he could restore them.

After Jeremiah there was a little bit more oscillation ... back and forth, back and forth, and then BAM, silence. Israel didn't hear anything from God for 400 years, nothing.

I don't know if you have been there, at a time in your life when you felt like you needed God and it seemed like God wasn't saying anything, it seemed like God wasn't there. Israel was experiencing that. It seemed like maybe God had just abandoned his people. Maybe God had drawn up a new plan.

Then one day a star appeared in the sky. Some wise men from far off saw it, and they came to check it out. One night some angels appeared in the sky over a field, and they started singing glory to God. There were shepherds there with some sheep, and they saw and were taken aback. They didn't know what was going on. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. Something great is coming, has come. You guys need to go check it out. It's in town, this thing everybody has been waiting for."

For thousands of years of Israel's history God had sent prophets to say, "Someone is coming. Someone is coming. Someone is coming." The angel said to these shepherds that that someone was here, to go see him. So they marched into town smelling like shepherds, and they found a baby in a barn lying in a feeding trough. There was no royalty there, no parade going on, nobody playing any instruments (except for maybe the little drumming boy, forgot about him). The religious leaders were not there. It was just a mom, a dad, a baby, a donkey, some sheep, and some shepherds.

See, God had this huge plan, and it seemed like it was failing, and yet he said, "I am sending someone. I am sending someone. I am sending someone." The angels appeared and they said, "He is here!" Yet, it was kind of a letdown. It was not exactly how they wanted their king to come into the world. It was not exactly how anyone would want their Savior to come into this world. It was not what they were expecting.

You have to be asking yourself the question, what was God doing here? If God was really showing up here, why was it so anti-climactic? A few weeks ago we talked about the little baby who grew up into the man named Jesus. We talked about the miracles he did: healing of the blind man, the lame man, the woman who bled, and raising people from the dead, like Lazareth. We talked about some of the teachings that he gave. He even made some of the hard laws of the Jews, even harder. He said, "You have heard it said 'don't murder', but if you really want to get to heaven, if you really want to be with God, I tell you not only can you not murder, but if you hate somebody, hate your brother, you might as well have committed murder." "Don't commit adultery, well that is good, but I am saying that even if you have lusted after someone, you have committed adultery." He expanded on God's laws and made it harder and harder and harder to get to God.

Jesus made the religious teachers mad, but he gained popularity with the people. In fact, in the pinnacle of his life, he was finally coming into Jerusalem and people were so excited because he was supposed to be their Savior. He was supposed to be the one who would restore the people of God, Israel. As he was coming into town riding a donkey they were all waving palm branches. He was coming in, and they were all saying "Hosanna" as they were waving palms and putting them down, welcoming in their king.

Just a week later he was arrested and brought to trial. He was executed on a cross. The one whom God sent to save the world, to save his people, was now dead. What was God doing?

I realize that there is not a lot of suspense for you, because you know the next part of the story. He doesn't stay dead. He rises from the dead. When he rises from the dead, he blows everybody away. He comes back and talks to his apostles, he sees other people, and he eats with people. The most epic and astonishing experience that anyone could ever imagine. God sent his Savior, then he died, then he rose from the grave. It changed everything!

Just as he was about to leave, he looked at his now eleven disciples and said, "Stay here, stay in Jerusalem. Don't go anywhere. I am sending a gift. I am sending a gift for you.

Wait for that gift.”

So we find ourselves in a room with these eleven disciples, not knowing what to expect, but just waiting and praying.

They didn't wait too long, because pretty quickly after that we jump into the book of Acts. It started off with a bunch of people getting together for Pentecost. They were in Jerusalem, yet had come from all over the place, thus they were all speaking many different languages. All of a sudden, as they were all gathered together, a violent wind whipped through and chaos ensued. Little flames that looked like tongues came down and landed on people, and when they did the people started speaking a language they had never been able to speak before. There were people wondering how others knew their language. They didn't know how, but they were speaking their language and preaching about Jesus, about who Jesus was and what he came and did. Pandemonium was ensuing because nobody really knew what was going on. Everyone was preaching in a whole bunch of different languages. In fact, it even says in Acts that some people thought that they were drunk.

Peter stood up in front of everybody. (I like to imagine that through all the mumblings of everyone talking, when he stood up it got quiet.) He started to preach.

Acts 2:22-24:

²²“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”

Peter stood up to give the very first sermon after Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, and in that sermon he started to point fingers. He said, “God sent Jesus and you killed him. You nailed him on a cross. You put him to death even though he didn't deserve it. But God raised him from the dead; freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”

Peter gave a couple different sermons recorded in Acts, and in all of them he pointed a finger and said to everyone,

“You killed him. You killed him. He didn't deserve it, but you killed him.” I started to wonder why Peter was doing that. Why was he making all of those accusations? It doesn't seem like a very good way to make a sermon. But then I started to think about Peter and who he was.

The night before everything went down, Jesus was sitting at dinner with all the disciples and he said, “You know what? You guys are all going to betray me.” Peter spoke up and said, “Not me! I am not going to. I will even go to death with you. I am not going to betray you.” And Jesus said, “Not only are you going to betray me, Peter, but you are going to do it three times. And when you hear the rooster crow, I want you to remember this conversation.”

Obviously that happened. Because Jesus said it would happen, it happened. Peter was distraught. What I love about it is that after Jesus came back, after Jesus was resurrected, on the very same page in my Bible, at the very end of the book of John, Jesus came to Peter and said, “Do you love me?” And Peter said, “You know I love you.” And Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” Then Jesus said to Peter, “Do you love me?” And Peter said, “Lord, you know I love you.” And Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Jesus said a third time, “Peter, do you love me?” And Peter said, “You know all things. You know I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

What Peter had gone through caused him to feel the weight of the responsibility of abandoning Jesus in his most crucial moment. Yet, Jesus came back and restored him. That was the good news of the gospel for Peter. I think that it was also the reason why he was preaching so passionately, straight from his heart. It was something that he himself had experienced. He was pointing his finger at himself.

Here is how he ends the sermon and the reaction it brought.

Acts 2:36-39:

³⁶“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

Here's how they responded:

³⁷When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

³⁸Peter replied, “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. ³⁹The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

They felt the weight of that accusation from Peter. And yet, the good news of the gospel message was that even though Peter was guilty, even though these people were guilty, God was in the midst of trying to remedy what happened way back in the beginning when Adam and Eve ate that fruit. Because, since that time, God had been trying to restore his creation, trying to restore humanity and this was God’s plan for how to do it. It was something that was so unexpected that it just blew everybody’s minds.

Pretty quickly after that, Peter and John were walking around and there was a guy who was a beggar. He asked them for money and Peter stopped and looked him in the eye and said, “I do not have any money, but what I have I am going to give to you, get up and walk.” This guy got up and for the first time in years he was walking around, he was jumping, he was so excited, he was making a big racket, people were starting to come check things out. “What’s going on over here? Isn’t he that lame guy?” Rumors started to spread. “Peter just healed him! He can walk! Now look at him, he is jumping.”

Peter started to see this crowd gathering together, and what does Peter do when there is a crowd? He stands up and starts preaching! He started preaching and again he pointed the finger, “You guys killed Jesus. But God raised him from the dead and he is able to redeem.” And the people started to get intrigued and more people started coming. Religious leaders started coming and they were bothered by what they heard. They took John and Peter and threw them in jail. The next morning they came out and put them before everybody. Let me read what happened:

Acts 4:8-12:

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹Jesus is

“ ‘the stone you builders rejected,

which has become the cornerstone.’

¹²“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

This is Peter we are talking about; the same Peter who abandoned Jesus when the rulers came to arrest him. He was now standing before those same rulers and saying stuff like, “Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved other than that of Jesus.”

That is the gospel message!

Five thousand people were saved. The church was starting to grow. They were starting to get a glimpse of what God was doing. I like to think of it like an ultrasound. We have this early-term ultrasound, an amorphous blob; the only distinguishing feature was the heartbeat. There was this little beat going in Jerusalem. God was starting to develop something. All the people were starting to follow this new gospel message, starting to share their possessions and sacrifice for one another as they lived with one another in community. God was doing something amazing in trying to restore his people, and yet he had something bigger in mind.

It came about in this really funny way, actually. In Jerusalem there were some Jews who spoke Hebrew and there were Jews who spoke Greek (Hellenistic Jews). When Hebrew men died, they would leave behind their wives; their widows, who would be taken care of. But when the Hellenistic Jewish men died, their widows were not being taken care of as well. People started complaining to the apostles. The apostles realized that this was a pretty big problem, but had a lot of other things to do. They couldn’t do everything. So they took seven faithful guys and put them in charge of taking care of the widows (and any other business that came up). These seven guys also preached the gospel.

One guy in particular, his name was Stephen, went out and started to preach the gospel. Just like Peter, he got into an argument with the religious leaders who didn’t like what he had to say. They named Stephen a heretic, hired some guys to get him, and brought him before the religious officials. Stephen gave a super long sermon, basically the entire history of Israel. He ended the sermon with this:

Acts 7:51-53:

⁵¹“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and

ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵²**Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—**⁵³**you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”**

The religious leaders got so upset by this that they started acting like little kids. They put their fingers in their ears and started yelling, “Lalalala, I can’t hear you.” They were so outraged and began running around in an uproar. They started to drag Stephen out of the city. They picked up rocks and started to stone him. As they were stoning him, Stephen stood there and looked up to heaven and saw Jesus sitting next to the right hand of God.

Acts 7:57-60:

⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Now check out what happened. On that day, great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem. All, except the apostles, were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Through this funny little incident where the widows weren’t being taken care of and the apostles appointed seven guys to look after them, one of them started to preach. He was martyred because of what he was preaching. Now all of the Hellenistic Jews were scattered all over Judea and Samaria.

Acts 8:4:

⁴Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

No longer was it this little fetus with just a little heartbeat in Jerusalem that God was developing. It was starting to get bigger, and it was spreading out to the half-Jews in Judea and Samaria. God was saying, “You know what, include them, they are part of my people.” This fetus was starting to develop some recognizable features. It was starting to

look just a little bit like a person.

But God was not done yet. A couple of other incidents really blew this thing wide open. It was really almost as astonishing as Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. You see, one day this guy named Saul, the one who was there giving approval for Stephen’s stoning, was heading out to persecute some Christians. On the way, Jesus showed himself to him and told him what to do through a man named Ananias, who followed Jesus. Jesus said to Ananias:

Acts 9:15-16:

¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Jesus said, “I am choosing you, Saul, to take my message to the Gentiles.” This was something that was unheard of because everyone knew that Israel was God’s people, not the Gentiles. Everybody knew that God favored the Jews. Yet God was saying, “My people are more than just the Jews.” So Jesus appointed this guy name Saul, also named Paul, who wrote many of the books that we will be studying from here on out in this EPIC series.

The other incident that happened was this: Peter, who has been preaching to the Jews, had a vision. In the vision a sheet came down from heaven and on the sheet were all kinds of different animals, including animals that he was not supposed to eat according to Jewish law. In the vision God said to Peter, “Peter, take and eat these animals.” Peter said, “I know your tricks. I know I am not supposed to eat that. I have never eaten that and I am not going to. I am following your law.” God said, “How dare you. Don’t make unclean what I have made clean. Take and eat.”

The wheels started turning in Peter’s head. “What is going on here? What is God doing?” Just shortly after that, a couple of guys came to get Peter. They said to come, that a man named Cornelius had had a vision from God and Peter needed to come talk to him. So Peter went with these people to Cornelius’s house. Cornelius was a Gentile! This was a big no-no. This was something that was not supposed to be done. Peter showed up at Cornelius’s house and asked what he needed. Cornelius said, “I am not sure. God just told me to tell you to come here.” So Peter started to preach to these Gentiles. He shared with them the message of Jesus, of who Jesus was. They were doing this over a meal, which was another really big no-no, and the craziest thing happened.

Acts 10:44-48:

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷“Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” ⁴⁸So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

This is craziness! God had taken this little fetus that was unidentifiable, with a little heart beat in Jerusalem of his people, and he had grown it to a larger fetus with some identifiable features by bringing his gospel out to Judea and Samaria. Now he was birthing out a body; a body that included Jews and Gentiles. A body that he was going to say was his own body.

This was something that nobody saw coming. There was supposed to be a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Yet, God was saying the thing that identified people as his people was not what ethnicity they were, it was if they followed Jesus.

As I was reading through this book of Acts, I was thinking about what it means for us; for you and for me. Aside from the fact that this is probably the greatest thing that has ever happened to us; that God has decided and declared that we get to be a part of the people of God. How do we live here differently?

I think for one thing, we must recognize that God has a plan that is bigger than us. God has a plan that is bigger than something that we might be going through today. If you look at the overview of Israel's history, there were times when they thought that God wasn't there. There were times when they thought that God had abandoned them. Maybe you have felt like that, or feel like that. But guess what? You are a part of this plan that God has. As our part, we have this mission; this mission to declare the words that Peter declared. I am going to read them:

Acts 3:19-20:

¹⁹“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.”

See, our mission, as part of this body that God birthed, is to join with the apostles and with our missionaries who are overseas or here, to let people know that there is good news. The good news is that even though you may have gone against God, God has provided a way to come back to him. God is making a way to restore relationships that he originally created with Adam and Eve. That way is through Jesus.

So for us, for you, and for me, our mission going forward is to share that good news with other people, whether by talking with the people in our neighborhoods, in our families, in our work places, in our schools, or joining with some missionaries in supporting them as they spread that gospel message. We get to be a part of what God is doing. We get to be a part of this big story.

Let me pray.

God, I want to thank you for this morning. Thanks for a chance to come and worship you. God, I thank you that through your Son, through this astonishing epic act of death and resurrection, you have allowed us to become part of your people. God, may we recognize that for what it is and may we be inspired to share the mission of spreading that good news both here in our hometowns, where we work, in our homes and neighborhoods, and also by supporting those who are doing that overseas. We thank you God in Jesus' name, amen.