



GOOD NEWS ON FIRE!

ACTS 1-2

Have you ever seen fiery tongues fall from the sky?

You haven't? Never?

Believe it or not, it's happened. People saw it, and they lived to tell the tale.

But let's back up for just a minute. You see, before the fiery tongues showed up, God's people had been through a lot! For thousands of years, they waited for Jesus to come. But when he arrived, he was nothing like what they had pictured.

They wanted Jesus to take away the sadness and evil around them all at once. But Jesus wasn't like that. His kingdom was, and still is, one of compassion and kindness. Jesus said his kingdom is like a seed. A mighty oak tree will eventually grow from a tiny seed, but it takes a while. It doesn't happen all at once.

And now, at the young age of 33, Jesus had died. What!?! The hero of the story, God's own son, dead?

You got it.

Jesus came and lived the life God says we should: perfect and blameless. He died the death we deserve for our sin (the selfish things we do that break God's heart). He gave his life so we could have life. What a beautiful gift!

Three days after Jesus died, he rose from the grave. Jesus had defeated death! Now he wanted to spend time with his disciples before he went to be with his Father in heaven.

"When will the world be our perfect home again?" the disciples questioned Jesus.

"Now is not the time, and I can't tell you when it will be," Jesus answered. "Only my Father knows."

Their faces fell, worried, wondering what life would be like now that Jesus was leaving.

"Now your job is to tell the world my story, the good news." He spoke in a voice so warm they couldn't help but listen. "Go to Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth."



But the disciples questioned Jesus, “The world is such a big, big place and there are not many of us. How are we supposed to do that?”

“The Holy Spirit will come. He will give you all the power you'll need.”

But the disciples wanted instructions. They wanted a step-by-step plan for how to carry out God’s plan to rescue the world.

But a plan would never help them with what they needed most...to learn to trust that the very same God who made the oceans and trees, the God who led Joshua, and who defeated huge armies with tiny ragtag militias was the God who was still with them now.

Just then, a cloud came and lifted Jesus into heaven. Two men in white robes appeared to reassure the disciples, "Jesus will come again; only next time he will bring heaven back with him."

Until then, the disciples had a job to do. Jesus promised them a helper and it wouldn't take him long to arrive.

Only a few days later, wild wind unlike anything the disciples had ever seen swirled down from the sky like a tornado. Tongues of fire filled a room full of people. But this was an unusual fire. No one was hurt. In a bizarre twist, it seemed to give life to God's people...like that burning bush and Moses (remember that?).

As if this was not strange enough, people began to speak different languages and yet everyone could still understand one another. God was making the good news for every language! All of this reminded them of a story their grandparents used to tell them.



In the story, which dates back many, many years, God's people tried to build a tower to get to heaven. When God saw his people trying to make their own way to him, he destroyed it and confused them with all new languages so they couldn't understand one another.

But now, God was making their hearts come alive. Instead of them building their own way to God, he was coming down to them. In place of confusion, he was bringing people together so they could tell the world about him.

In the midst of the fire and commotion, Peter spoke to the crowd, "This is what God promised. What David longed to see is now happening! Repent of your sins and be baptized. This is what you were made for!"

That day in Jerusalem, the crowd of 120 swelled to over 3,000 believers. But this was only the beginning! God was just getting started with his great rescue plan.

A PORCH AND A PRISON (PART 1)

ACTS 3-4

If you want to see a crowd go wild, you should heal someone. Do a miracle. That's what the disciples did.

One day Peter and John were going to the temple to pray. On their way, they stopped at a place called Solomon's Porch. Sitting right outside was a man who'd never walked even one step in his entire life.

All Peter had to say was, "In the name of Jesus, get up and walk!" In the snap of a finger, the man jumped to his feet!

Not only did he walk, but he leapt up and ran around like he was 8 years old again!

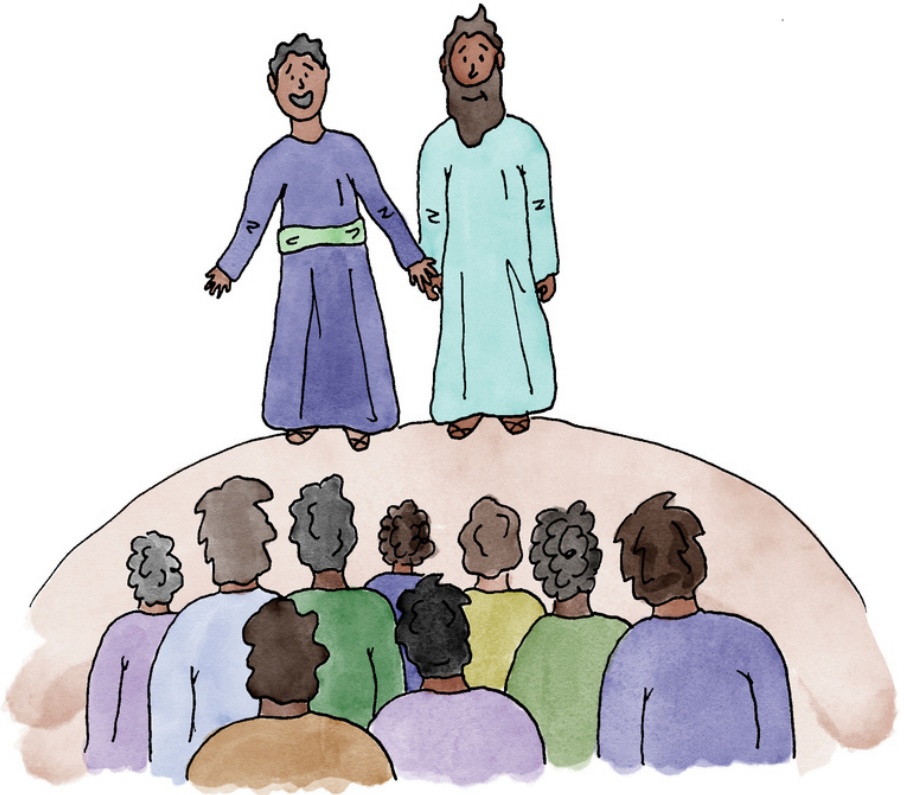
Now, the place where this man was healed was not a big town. Everyone for miles around knew him. News spread, and people flocked from all over to hear Peter speak about the miracle. If the good news could heal this man, they wanted to hear more!



"I did not heal this man," Peter began, "It was Jesus. The scriptures you teach in the synagogue told us Jesus would come to bring life to the world. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses all announced his coming, but when you met Jesus you hated him and killed him. You deserve nothing but death."

The crowd looked around, knowing they were guilty. A still, eerie hush fell over Solomon's Porch.

"But I tell you, God's good news is much better than you can imagine! Repent, confess your sin, and God will forgive you. God wants to show you kindness and refresh you like a cool, gentle stream in a desert. He wants to bring life to your heart just like he did for this man's legs."



The book of Acts is full of stories of people from all walks of life. Some loved the good news, while others hated it.

Peter was still speaking when some men from the "hated it" group came. They arrested Peter and John and threw them in prison.



What was happening? Was the greatest healing this town had ever seen ending with our friends going to jail? Was the good news actually bad news?

The following day, Peter spoke to the men at the jail. "The same God who raised Jesus from the dead also raised this man to his feet. This is the same Jesus you rejected. But by pushing him away, you ran from what your heart needed most. Only Jesus can save you and rescue you from your sin."

Peter spoke like one who really had been with Jesus. Something special radiated off him. The whole town picked up on the excitement. Quickly, the captors realized that punishment was not an option because Peter and John had become the most famous people in town.

After removing their chains, the captors ordered Peter and John to never speak of Jesus again.

This would not be the last time the disciples met people who did not like what they were doing. But the Holy Spirit gave God's people strength and courage to handle each challenge he sent their way.

The "hated it" group would often think they were punishing the disciples. But their plans usually backfired. More times than not, they were only helping the gospel spread!

One man was healed, two disciples went to jail, but over 5,000 people believed in Jesus and were saved that day. The good news could not be stopped.

Or could it?

ANANIAS & SAPPHIRA

ACTS 5

One way the good news changed people is that they stopped hogging all of their belongings. When believers saw someone in need, they were more than willing to give away what they had to help. People were changed forever when they saw how generous God was to them. After all, he had given them his one and only son!

Even so, sin and evil were alive and well. Some people still behaved in the most selfish ways.

A husband and wife, Ananias and Sapphira, had more than they needed. They owned some land and decided to sell it. All of the money, they said, would go to their church for those who needed it. But they lied and kept some of the money for themselves. Ananias and Sapphira tried to hide their dishonesty from their friends, but they couldn't hide it from God.

When Peter discovered this, he grew furious. He called to Ananias, "Why have you lied like this? This is an evil deed Satan put in your heart!"

Before Ananias could even respond, he collapsed to the ground and died right at that very moment!

Three hours later, Peter saw Sapphira and asked her the same question, "What happened to the money? You have lied to God as well!"

Just like her husband, she dropped dead right in front of Peter.

Their friends were shocked. What was God doing? Were the good times coming to an end?



Let's pause for a moment.

You see, some stories in the Bible are easy to understand, while others might leave you confused and maybe even a bit sad. This is one of the most difficult stories in all the Bible. It's heartbreaking and could make you wonder how God could do such a thing. These are good thoughts! You are not wrong for having them.

One thing we must know is that God's wisdom is far greater than ours. He is worthy of our trust, even when things don't seem to make sense. One day we will meet God and get to ask him all our questions. Until then, we can trust him, even when we don't have all the answers.

While not everything about this story is clear, one thing makes sense...

How could the church grow in health with believers who love their money more than God?

Jesus told his disciples, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. Things on earth get destroyed and stolen. Instead, store up treasures in heaven because your treasure has control over your heart."

Greediness shows us what has real power over our hearts. It has no place next to the generosity of the good news.

A PORCH AND A PRISON (PART 2)

ACTS 5:12-42

God's people were still in shock over the loss of their two friends. The truth of God's good news is wonderful for those who trust and obey Jesus. But the gospel is dangerous for those who don't.

Peter knew more than ever how much people needed to hear and see God's rescue plan.

The disciples went back to Solomon's Porch every day. The sick were healed if Peter's shadow barely touched them. God healed people's bodies of all sorts of ailments. Very often their hearts were healed too as they sensed the kindness of God. People needed this time of refreshment after the tragedy of Ananias and Sapphira!

But things would not stay this delightful for long.

Can you guess what happened next?

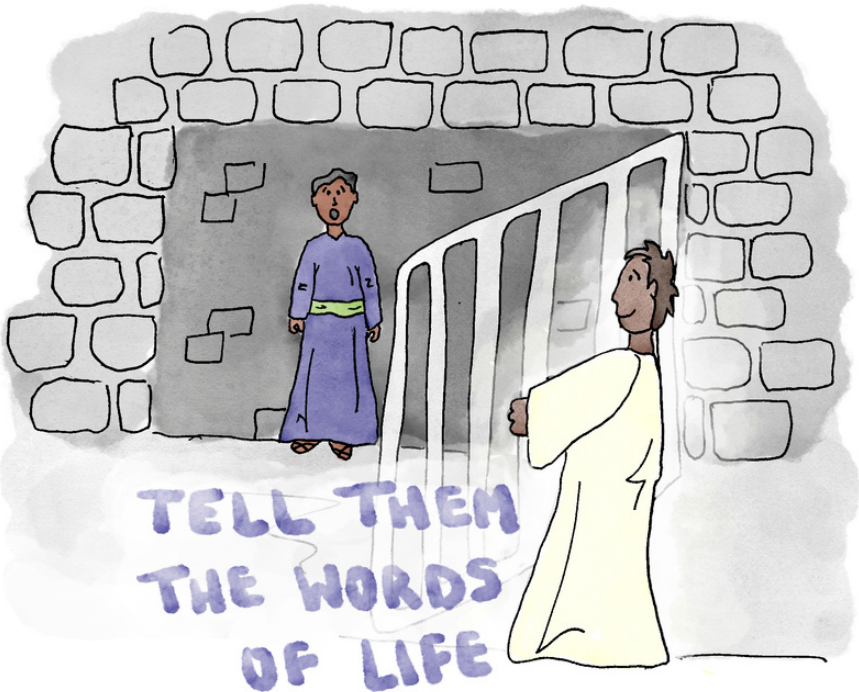
If you thought that Peter would be carted off to prison again, you are 100% correct!

But you don't think some measly little prison bars could stop the good news now, do you? Not a chance!

As Peter sat in his prison cell, an angel appeared. Before he could blink, the prison gates were opened. Peter walked right out!

The angel left him with these words: "Go back to the temple and tell the people the words of life!"

The next morning, the high priest and all his big, important men, who hated the good news, came looking for Peter. The gates were shut, the locks were firmly in place, but Peter was nowhere to be found! Their hearts pounded and their bodies filled with fear. Where was Peter?



They searched high and low and around every corner. Eventually, the big, important men found Peter, and he was doing the very thing they told him to never do again.



"We told you to stop all this talk about Jesus!" they shouted.

"We must obey God, not man," Peter replied. "The Jesus you killed wants to save us from death. We must tell people about him."

The big, important men did not like what they heard. These same men nailed Jesus to a cross. Now, they were ready to take Peter's life as well.

But before they could make their first move, one of the leaders, named Gamaliel, stood up and hollered, "STOP! Let's not act without thinking."

Was God working through Gamaliel?

Gamaliel continued, "We have seen things like this before. People come with a new message about God, but they end up destroying themselves, and we don't even have to lift a finger. Let's leave Peter alone. We won't be able to stop him if God really sent him. If his message is made up, like the others, he will fade away. Besides, I don't want to be found guilty of killing God's messenger. Do you?"

Low and behold, the men listened and set Peter and his friends free with *just* a scolding and beating.

God has spoken through all sorts of people and things throughout history: donkeys, prophets, bushes, water, and even fire. In the synagogue that day, he spoke through a man who didn't even believe in Jesus! God will use any means necessary to save the world.