

Three decades that changed the world

The first thirty years of the Christian Church would help to define the story for all times. It was a period of great growth, which was matched by an unflinching integrity among those who followed. Before the Christian message spread across the whole earth, this church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, faced huge challenges. First century Christianity was far from perfect, but it has an enormous amount to teach us today. As we reflect upon these days, we catch a glimpse of what a Spirit-transformed community of Jesus Christ is like.

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**BIBLE
SOCIETY**
Live light

Scripture taken from The Holy Bible: NIV

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
1	He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But 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."	Acts 1:7-8	<p>In Acts, Luke presents the Ascension of Jesus as a pivotal moment. It is the hinge between the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The promise of the gift of the Spirit requires a willingness to wait in the city and then to go to the ends of the world as witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ. The promise of the Holy Spirit sets the scene as the major theme of Acts. The closing words of Jesus recorded by the pen of Luke increases the scope of God's saving work.</p> <p>How does God's vision spoken in Jesus Christ broaden our own perception of his calling in our lives?</p>	<p>Holy Spirit of God, as you have called us in Jesus Christ to a life of discipleship, send us as your empowered people in service to the ends of the earth. Help us to be raised above our concerns about 'times and seasons' to a larger vision of Jesus Christ. Amen</p>
2	They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."	Acts 1:10-11	<p>The description of two characters in white robes is evocative of the two men at the tomb of Jesus and even earlier at the transfiguration. The words spoken to the followers of Jesus who witnessed the Ascension stress that his ultimate return will be in a similar manner but we are not given specific details. The words call us to anticipate the conclusion of all the work of Jesus Christ.</p> <p>If the ascension of Jesus points to Jesus' ultimate return, what does this mean for our understanding of our place Jesus' ministry?</p>	<p>Lord, help us to fully grasp the power of you leaving this world and then granting your continual presence in the Holy Spirit. Call us from any futility of gazing into the sky to a renewed sense of anticipating your final coming. Amen</p>

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3	When the day of Pentecost came, they were altogether in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.	Acts 2:1-2	<p>At Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit was released and the church was born. The wind of God's Holy Spirit brings to a conclusion a period of waiting and ushers in the era of power. The energy of the Spirit was felt like wind by all who gathered on that momentous day. The Holy Spirit is no mere expression of God, but God himself. He was at work long before Pentecost, but now it is this power that will carry forth the message of God's love to the whole world.</p> <p>How important is it that we are "together"? The spirit of unity has always been considered a key factor in the experience of the church. Are we ready for a fresh anointing?</p>	Gracious God, come afresh upon us and make us alert and alive to your marvellous new life. As you fell upon the first disciples transforming them, come upon us that we may reach those of our own day with the wonderful news of Jesus Christ. Equip us and send us out to serve you today. Amen
4	Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."	Acts 2:12-13	<p>Peter and the disciples were accused of being drunk after they received the Holy Spirit. However, alcohol was not the reason for their early morning demeanour—they had experienced a deep sense of joy. Onlookers were "amazed and perplexed". These ordinary men and women received a message to be shared with the whole world. The promise of the Spirit was now manifest in their lives. Their excitement and joy was a great witness, which stirred others. Pentecost was a unique event and, as a result, Christians no longer have to wait, for we too can be filled with the Spirit.</p> <p>Could the recovery of joy be one of the most important features of the renewal of the church in Australia?</p>	Holy Spirit of God, fill us with your power, so that we can be reshaped by your grace at work within us. Revive your people to new life and purpose. Call us as a united people to declare the works of Jesus Christ. Amen

Three decades that changed the world (continued)

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5	Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, 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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”	Acts 2:38-39	<p>Peter’s great Pentecost sermon is unquestionably one of the most significant sermons of all time; only the Sermon on the Mount tops it! At dawn there were 120 disciples, but by the close of the day the number of followers was over 3,000, drawn from many nations. Peter’s sermon had a deep impact upon all who heard it. They began asking what they should do. Peter called them to repentance and drew a direct relationship between forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit, which is intrinsic to the saving offer of the good news of Jesus Christ.</p> <p>The original word “repent” means “change your mind”, that is, change your attitude toward God, sin and yourself. Have you understood the positive gift of repentance?</p>	Lord, give us a vision of your church so that we, set among many who do not know Jesus Christ, may be given the grace to make a meaningful witness in our day. May we learn what it means to turn away from all that would hold us back and grasp your larger picture through the work of your Spirit. Amen
6	All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.	Acts 4:32-34a	<p>These verses stress two main emphases: the “fellowship of worship” and “a shared sense of ownership”. This unity gave the early church spiritual power, which was much stronger than a mere “agreement of views”. The practical love that united these early disciples of Jesus Christ was on an unprecedented scale and was a major factor in the rapid growth of the Christian community. Such spiritual growth did not happen because of a carefully crafted plan of evangelism, or any particular style of worship; it came as an overflow of the Spirit’s work amongst them.</p> <p>It was God’s love that inspired these people to love one another, to open their homes and to share their goods. How does this love inspire us today? Are we too self-centred?</p>	Lord, bless us that we might be as one and grant that our life together might speak of the wonder of Jesus Christ. Clothe your people with a fire that cannot be extinguished and reaches every part of life. Amen

Three decades that changed the world (continued)

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7	Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.	Acts 5:25-26	<p>Acts 5 gives us a window into the tensions of the early church and also an awareness of what God was doing through them. A large proportion of the chapter reveals how fresh persecution was spreading across the church. The Sanhedrin (Jewish Council) was called and they sent for the apostles who had been imprisoned. They could not find them, for they were preaching in the temple courts. The chapter closes with the wonderful words, "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." Before church buildings existed, the gospel was growing exponentially in the open air and from house to house.</p> <p>What do you learn from this vivid picture of life in the early church?</p>	Lord, thank you for granting us the enormous privilege of spreading your good news in our day. Give us strength when we face the torrents of opposition or even persecution, to make an effective witness for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen
8	<p>While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.</p> <p>And Saul approved of their killing him</p>	Acts 7:59-8:1a	<p>In the previous chapter, Stephen is described as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit". Chapter 7 is an account of Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin, after he had been seized under the accusations of false witnesses. Stephen's defence is a positive offering of Christian teaching. The leaders were furious and they stoned him. Stephen exhibited the Christlike quality of forgiveness. Luke reminds us Saul was among the crowd, consenting to this awful act; however, it surely played a part in Saul's journey of faith. The manner of Stephen's death was remarkable in that it was his greatest witness. It would light the fuse of mission and further advance the work of the gospel.</p> <p>How can Stephen's patent holiness cause such a negative reaction? Can the spirit of forgiveness in Stephen inspire us today?</p>	Lord, we thank you for those who, like Stephen, have answered your call of faithfulness at such great cost. May the Spirit of God move us to follow Jesus Christ, take up the cross and be willing to lose our lives in the cause of the gospel. Amen

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9	Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.	Acts 9:18-19	<p>The wonderful ninth chapter of Acts describes how Saul became Paul. Saul had both a physical and a deeper spiritual need. Each is met as he receives sight and strength. The word "immediately" gives a real sense of the work of the Spirit, as something akin to "scales fell from Saul's eyes". He is now fully a member of the church, which is confirmed by baptism. We do well to remind ourselves that the opponents of Christ from the earliest days were merely men and women like ourselves. Let us not be swift to separate the experience of Paul from our own. We, like him, need the touch of God's Spirit, not merely to bring our faith to life, but also to maintain it day by day.</p> <p>God never gives up on anyone and even those who are prone to oppose him can find themselves caught in the brilliant light of God's presence. What can we learn from Saul's amazing conversion?</p>	<p>God our Father, we have seen you in the evidence of changed lives and in the growth of the church from small beginnings to a worldwide fellowship. We thank you that one who breathed out murderous threats against Christians was so changed to become a great evangelist. May we follow the best examples of those who have gone before and be open to the influence of your Holy Spirit. Amen</p>
10	Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.	Acts 11:25-26	<p>The fact that the people of Antioch found it necessary to give a name to the new movement is an indication of just how large it had become. Here we have one of the best examples of nurturing and mentoring that you will ever find. Barnabas, the encourager, and Saul, the great teacher, gathered disciples around them for a whole year. It was a time of rich, fruitful ministry and the two of them were moulded into a great partnership. Their complementary ministry was greatly used by God. The twin aspects of encouragement and expounding are part of authentic mission.</p> <p>The title "Christian" was not a self-chosen designation, yet it speaks powerfully of their witness as a people. Are you ready to bear the name of Christ in your daily life?</p>	<p>Lord, we rejoice because you gave the Holy Spirit to the first Christians. You made Jesus real to them; you taught them the truth and enabled them through your power to witness boldly, often at great cost. Fill us today with the same Spirit that we may know something of this experience in our own lives. Amen</p>

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11	The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.”	Acts 15:12-14	<p>A crucial turning point in Acts is the Council of Jerusalem. There was much debate about the relationship between Gentile Christianity and the Jewish law. Paul and Barnabas knew the importance of what was at stake and in these verses we see how everyone became silent as they listened to the testimony of these two leaders. You will notice that Barnabas is mentioned first and was held in high esteem by the church. The church had earlier prayed for exactly what was happening now. God answered their prayers in abundant measure. From this turning point, we observe a church whose greatest strength will lie among the Gentiles.</p> <p>What are the obstacles that we must address in our mission to the world today?</p>	Lord, we thank you that you did not restrict the message of the gospel to one people. We thank you that you called all the world to hear your word. Grant us the spirit of wisdom and light to make us quick in understanding and bold in our declaration of what we know is right, through Jesus Christ. Amen
12	He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.	Acts 16:30-32	<p>This chapter tells how the church at Philippi began. Paul and Silas are in prison and the miraculous earthquake releases them from their chains and cell. Not surprisingly, the jailer is terrified, as he contemplates having to announce that his prisoners have escaped. The jailer asks what he must do to gain salvation and the answer he received from the two missionaries becomes an early Christian declaration. It is interesting that the whole household is touched and the implication is that they are taught the faith together.</p> <p>These early missionaries taught the jailer and his family what they needed. How significant is it that the whole family were touched? What might that say to us today?</p>	Lord, we bless you that the most unlikely of people have responded to the call of Christ in the most challenging of circumstances. May the release of our lives from the prisons that enslave us lead us to make a clear witness to your love and grace for all people. Amen

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13	Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.	Acts 27:40-41	<p>The last two chapters of Acts are dominated by a nautical theme. This last journey is to be Paul's journey to Rome. The chapter tells of a fierce storm where they lose control of the ship. Paul was a practical man, as well as an evangelist and missionary. He offered strong advice that the people stay with the ship and that they eat food. The decision to cast off the anchors was an important one and in the end provided a much more positive outcome, for though the ship broke up, the passengers took hold of pieces of wood and we are told everyone reached land safely.</p> <p>It was only because of Paul's bold leadership that the voyage ended without loss of life. What does this account of the shipwreck tell us about our Christian purpose in the midst of a challenging world?</p>	Lord, we thank you that there is no storm of life that can ultimately defeat us. Draw us ever closer to understand that your saving work can be seen in the most difficult of circumstances. Strengthen our sense of confidence in you when we see the storm clouds gathering. Amen
14	For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!	Acts 28:30-31	<p>People often assume that when Paul reached Rome that he was in prison. It is quite clear from these verses that Paul was under a kind of house arrest and many Christians came to see him during this time. There was opportunity for him to teach, and openness for people to hear the gospel from him. Just as Paul began his ministry by tent-making at his own expense, he would live in a hired house at the close of his ministry. We can only imagine how many people came to hear the good news through Paul during this period of two years.</p> <p>We began Acts with a real sense of a mission to all the world. Who could have predicted it would end like this? Do you want to be part of the continuing story?</p>	Lord, we thank you for the wonderful way in which your Spirit anointed the Apostle Paul and led him through the most difficult of times. Help us to discover what it is you want to do through us, to complete the work to which you call us. Amen