

Epic: Church Age

Acts 8:1-3; We're nearing the *end* of our Epic series, where we've been discovering God's work of redemption from creation to eternity
Intended to not only inform you and refresh your *memory*, but also your heart, and passion, and love
And thus far we've covered 14 of the 17 **time periods**; From . . .
Creation and the Fall, to the Life of Christ – the keystone of it all; The time period to which everything points, and from which everything flows; Which brings us to the . .

Church Age

That's the next time period; Stretching from 30AD to the present – the time we're in now
(**Time Period – 30AD-Present**)

Key People – Peter, Paul, James, John

Key Places – Jerusalem, Damascus, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Rome

Main Events – Pentecost, Paul's conversion, Jerusalem Council, Paul's Journey's, Temple Destruction, Great Tribulation)

And it started on the day of *Pentecost*, 50 days after Christ's resurrection (Acts 2)
Which is appropriate, b/c Pentecost was a *celebration* under the Old Covenant, when Jewish males went to Jerusalem to thank the Lord . . .
And mark the beginning of the wheat harvest
But on that particular occasion, it was the day that God sent his Spirit to mark the beginning of the *soul* harvest, the church
And what a harvest it was; People came to Christ by the thousands (Acts 2:41)

But the more they came, and the more they preached, the more *persecution* increased;
Eventually causing the church to scatter; Acts 8:1b-3
[1b] *And there arose on that day [the day of Stephen's execution, which Saul approved] a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. [2] Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. [3] But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*

It was difficult; And they scattered
And much of the persecution was led by a devout Jew named *Saul*; Until he was brought to his knees and confessed Christ as Lord on the road to Damascus
And so *dramatic* was his conversion, that he changed his name to Paul, and went on to become the greatest missionary the world has ever seen
Preaching the Word to the Gentiles, and writing about half of the NT; So that *the word of God increased and multiplied* (Acts 12:24); It was quite a harvest

➤ But it also led to quite a stir; Not only among the Gentiles, whose *worldview* was challenged, but among the *Jews*; B/c some of them flat-out didn't believe
And others, who *did* believe, clung to the Law; Feeling like they needed to keep the *Old Covenant* in *addition* to their allegiance to Jesus, in order to be accepted by God
They even advocated that the *Gentiles* keep the Law; The pot was stirred; Big time

➤ And it came to a head (**Timeline**) in AD50 at the **Jerusalem Council**, found in Acts 15
That was the point at which the apostles and elders decided that Gentiles need not keep

the Law in order to be saved and reconciled with God
And neither did the Jews for that matter
Confirming that we're saved by *grace*, through faith; Not works
But that didn't matter much to the *unbelieving* Gentiles; B/c a decade later Paul was thrown in prison *anyway*, and spent his final days in Rome

➤ Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, and unrelated to Paul, the Jews once again *revolted* against the Romans, and tried to re-take control of their city
That was 66AD; And a big deal, b/c it led to *another* dispersion of the Christians, to avoid the inevitable repercussions by the Romans
And sure enough, they rolled in with their armies 4 years later – to crush the rebellion, *level* the **temple**, and destroy the city; It was devastating

But the church continued to spread; Confirming that the temple was no longer *needed* for God to do his work; It was a fading shadow of realities already present
Realities of which Jesus and the apostles had already spoken
That's the Church Age up to that point

➤ But that's not where it ends; And that's not the end of pivotal *events* over the centuries
Some of which God *circumvented* to further his work, and some of which he *used*
Like the Roman Emperor **Constantine**, who legalized Christianity in 313; It was a pivotal event, and God used it
As well as the **Council of Nicaea** in 325, that gave us the Nicene Creed and confirmed the biblical teaching on the Trinity
And the **Fall of the Roman Empire** in 476; Which was both good *and* bad for the church; Good, b/c it diminished persecution, but bad b/c it reduced order and safety
As did the **Rise of Islam** in 610; In fact, it almost *eradicated* Christianity in some areas
➤ Then came some *black* marks on the church's ledger; Like the **Great Schism** in 1054
Where the church in the West, based in Rome, parted ways with the church in the East, based in Constantinople; Hence, the Eastern Orthodox church . . .
And the Roman Catholic church; It was a black mark
As were the **Crusades**; Starting in 1097, and lasting over a hundred years

But the **John Wycliffe Bible** in 1382 was definitely a *positive* – the first translation into English; And the **Gutenberg Bible** in 1456 was the first from a printing press
Enabling *mass* distribution

But the **Spanish Inquisition** in 1479, was another black mark and obstacle
Lasting almost 350 years, it saw thousands of Jews and Protestants tortured and killed by a corrupt government and church
Fortunately, in other parts of Europe, the **Reformation** was percolating; With Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses on the door of All Saints Church in 1517
Starting a time when he and others broke from the teachings and traditions of the *Catholic* Church, and emphasized a return to *Scripture* as our sole rule for faith/life

All of which led to a massive *surge* in the church, all over the world
Like the **Modern Missionary Movement** in 1793, led by William Carey
And the evangelistic ministry of **Billy Graham** in 1949; And countless *other* events and movements that God has used to accomplish his work of redemption more recently

That's the Church Age; And it won't end until the *Great Tribulation* runs its course, and Christ *returns*; What an amazing time in which to live (**Summary**)

- And if you've committed your life to Christ, you're a part of it; Not as a bystander, but a *participant*
Meaning that you bear the responsibility to carry the torch, and fly the flag, and fulfill God's purposes – just like those who've gone before
You don't have to be a *pillar* of the faith, you just have to be faith-*full*; Faithful to fulfill God's purposes; The first of which, is . . .

God's Purpose: To spread the word (Lk 9:57-62)

The *word* being the gospel; The Good News of Jesus Christ; The arrival of God's kingdom; Like we saw last week, when Jesus said that *the kingdom of God is at hand*
The point being – we weren't saved to sit; And we were weren't saved for *silence*
We were saved to spread the word; Just like the *first* disciples; Lk 9:57-62

- [57] *As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."* [58] *And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* [Do you realize the difficulty?]
[59] *To another he said, "Follow me." But he [the disciple] said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."* [60] *And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."* [Do you realize the sacrifice of spreading the word?]
[61] *Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."* [62] *Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* [Do you realize the cost?]

We weren't saved to sit, and we weren't saved for silence; *Go and proclaim the kingdom of God* Jesus said (60b); As in, spread the word
And not *half-heartedly*; Or only when it's convenient
But even when it's hard – like not having a place to lay your head
Even when there are sacrifices – like not being able to say appropriate good-bye's
Even when there are significant costs – like not being able to bury your loved ones
Whatever the situation or obstacles in our lives – our job is to spread the word

Just like the church in Jerusalem, in Paul's day; Acts 8:4 says – *Those who were scattered went about preaching the word*. They spread the word; And so should we
B/c how can people call on the one of whom it's about, if they never hear? *And how are they to hear without someone preaching?* (Rom 10:14)
They can't; It takes an ambassador; Which is exactly what we are
2 Cor 5:20 says – *We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us*.
God's purpose in this Church Age is to spread the word, and he wants *us* to do it

And one of the best ways to live it out, is invite somebody to church
It doesn't matter *which* Sunday, or what *event*, or what's being preached; Just bring them; If their hearts are soft, God will get through
And if they're not, a seed will be planted

We weren't saved to sit, and we weren't saved for silence
We were saved to spread the word; That's the *first* of God's purposes in this age

Second, is . . .

God's Purpose: To make disciples (Mt 28:16-20)

Spreading the word is only the first step; The *goal*, is to make disciples; Mt 28:16-20
[16] *Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.* [17] *And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.* [18] *And [undeterred] Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."* [19] *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

God's purpose in this age is not just to spread the word, but make *disciples* – as in followers, and learners, and doers, and workers, and reproducers
That's the idea of a disciple

1. They're **followers** of Jesus, in that they publicly identify with him in baptism
2. They're **learners**, in that they study all that he commands
3. They're **doers**, in that they apply what they know
4. They're **workers**, in that they serve him with their gifts
5. They're **reproducers**, in that they make *other* disciples

God didn't save you to sit, he saved you to work; And follow; And learn; And do; And go
He saved you to *go*; Whether it's across the street, over the river, around the world, or all the above; Go; Go (**Summary**)
And when you do, fulfill God's purposes; Don't just have coffee, spread the word;
Don't just move, make disciples; Don't just *be* one, make others
That's *God's* purpose; Why not make it yours?

And 3rd, is . . .

God's Purpose: To build his church (Mt 16:18)

Jesus said so himself; *I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* (Mt 16:18); IOW the powers of darkness will not prevent it, or overcome it
Referring to Christ's work of saving and sanctifying a people *for his own possession*
A people set apart for his plan and his purposes
A people called out of the darkness, and into the light; Out of the world, and into his presence; Out of wrath, and into grace; There's no stopping it; None
I will build my church Jesus said

And it's happening; Just like it says in **Eph 2:19-22**; Speaking to believers, Paul says . . .
[19] *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God [the church], [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord [no longer physical, but spiritual]. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

That's the church; A dwelling place for God; And it's happening; Right now; And right here; Not to mention all the other places in the world*****

And our response, should be a sense of . . .

Our Response: Urgency

That's how we should live *our* lives in this church age

B/c the fields are *ripe*; And the laborers *few*; And the time *short*

Ripe, b/c people are hurting and hungry – hurting for community, and hungry for *truth*

And the laborers few, b/c the world is big and the sacrifice great

And the time is short – b/c people are dying, and Satan is active, and Christ is coming

All of which *begs* for a sense of urgency; Like Jesus had

Mt 9:36-37 says – [36] *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless [hurting and hungry], like sheep without a shepherd. [37] Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; [38] therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*

Pray *earnestly* – b/c there's a need; That's the first part of living with a sense of urgency

➤ The 2nd, is *pressing* toward the goal; Pray earnestly, and press toward the goal – the goal of fulfilling God's purposes and bringing this age to a close
Like Paul says in **Philippians 3:13-14** – *Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*. The prize of rising again, and being in his presence 1 day
Which happens when? When Christ returns, and brings this age to a close
Ushering *all* those who know him as Lord, into his presence; That's the *goal*

And Paul had a sense of urgency about it; So much so, that he strained and pressed to bring it about; Not just b/c there's a need, but b/c there's a **prize (Summary)**
We ought to live with a sense of *urgency* in this age, b/c people are dying, and life awaits; That's our response

➤ So as we share in communion, remembering the death of Christ as payment for our sins, and rejoicing in the new covenant he secured for our salvation – keep that in mind
And let God stir your heart with a sense of urgency (**Communion**)
A sense of urgency to spread the word, make disciples, and build his church
A sense of urgency b/c the need is great and life awaits

And don't forget to examine your heart

B/c the Bible says that anyone who eats and drinks without considering their worthiness to participate, will be guilty of showing disrespect and irreverence toward God
And risk bringing judgment on themselves; Better to confess and come clean
Even if it's for the very first time; You can do that; Right now

And when we distribute the elements, take the bread on your own this time
As a testimony of your personal faith and trust in Jesus to save you and keep you, and an expression of your personal commitment to be his disciple
Do that on your own, but hang on to your cup and we'll drink that together

➤ On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took the cup and said – *This cup is the new covenant in my blood*

This cup and what it contains is symbolic of the promise of salvation that Christ's blood bought and guaranteed

And symbolic of his guarantee to build his church, fulfill his purposes, and bring this age to a close; Jesus didn't hang in there to leave us hanging

He'll do it; Just like he's been doing it; Remember that; And remember him

Pray – Lord, stir our hearts with a sense of urgency, and don't stop; Increase our compassion for the need, and our anticipation of the prize
And use us more and more to accomplish your purposes, including our tithes and offerings that we give now

Close – Visitor Bags; Christmas invitations

Be sure to introduce yourself to **Nate and Marie Newell** if you have the chance
Nate is the SP of HBC-KL, and is with us for a few weeks in preparation for their departure

And next weekend, we'll commission them and have a reception to send them off in a manner worthy of their call, and show them our love