

Why Are We Here?

Lesson 4

To Help All People Experience a New Life in Jesus Christ

Biblical Community in the Early Church

Acts 2:44-47

During the LORD's three-and-a-half-year ministry, Jesus gathered thousands of people who heard Him pray and teach. On one occasion, the LORD fed four thousand men and their wives and children. On another occasion, the LORD fed five thousand men and their wives and children. These two records show how many men and their families followed the LORD everywhere He went during His ministry time. The crowds were enormous. Why were the crowds so large? Everyone knew something was different about Jesus. What was different? He was a true miracle worker. His miracles were not tricks, deceptions, or misdirection as magicians had used for millennia; His miracles were real. Here are some examples.

- He turned water into wine in John 2:1-11.
- He healed the official's son in John 4:43-54.
- He drove out the evil spirit in Mark 1:21-27 and Luke 4:31-36.
- He healed Peter's mother-in-law in Matthew 8:14-15, Mark 1:29-31, and Luke 4:38-39.
- He healed many that were sick in the evening in Matthew 8:16-17, Mark 1:32-34, and Luke 4:40-41.
- He caused the first miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5:1-11.
- He cleansed the leper in Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45, and Luke 5:12-14.
- He healed the centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10.
- He healed the paralytic in Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12, and Luke 5:17-26.
- He healed the man's withered hand in Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6, and Luke 6:6-11.
- He raised the widow's son from the dead in Luke 7:11-17.
- He calmed the storm winds in Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 3:35-41, and Luke 8:22-25.
- He cast the demons into the herd of pigs in Matthew 8:28-33, Mark 5:1-20, and Luke 8:26-39.
- He healed the woman in the crowd in Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34, and Luke 8:42-48.
- He raised Jarius' daughter from the dead in Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43, and Luke 8:40-56.
- He healed two blind men in Matthew 9:27-31.
- He healed the mute man and gave him a voice in Matthew 9:32-34.
- He healed the invalid at Bethesda in John 5:1-15.
- He fed the five thousand in Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-15.
- He walked on water in Matthew 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-52, and John 6:16-21.
- He healed many who were sick in Gennesaret in Matthew 14:34-36 and Mark 6:53-56.
- He healed the Gentile woman's demoniac daughter in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30.
- He healed a deaf and dumb man in Mark 7:31-37.
- He fed four thousand people in Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark 8:1-13.
- He healed the blind man in Bethsaida in Mark 8:22-26.
- He healed the man born blind in John 9:1-12.
- He healed a boy with a demon in Matthew 17:14-20, Mark 9:14-29, and Luke 9:37-43.
- He pulled the Temple tax from a fish's mouth in Matthew 17:24-27.
- He healed the blind and mute demoniac in Matthew 12:22-23 and Luke 11:14-23.
- He healed the cripple woman in Luke 13:10-17.
- He healed the man with dropsy on the Sabbath Luke 14:1-6.
- He cleansed the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19.
- He raised Lazarus from the dead in John 11:1-45.
- He restored the sight of Bartimaeus in Matthew 20:29-34, Mark 10:46-52, and Luke 18:35-43.
- He withered the fig tree in Matthew 21:18-22 and Mark 11:12-14.
- He healed the ear of the servant in the garden in Luke 22:50-51.
- He caused the second miraculous catch of fish in Matthew 21:4-11.

But as Jesus progressed into His last days, before His crucifixion, many followers fell away by the thousands. All the miracles listed above were magnificent and drew people in; however, His greatest miracle was His resurrection from the grave, which caused them to return. When He rose from the grave, everyone knew about it, and no one could deny it.

The People Had Seen the Miracles of the Lord's Ministry (Acts 2:22-24)

Peter said the following to the crowd in his message on the Day of Pentecost. *"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—²³ this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.²⁴ But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power."* (Acts 2:22-24) Here Peter quickly concludes Jesus' Lordship. The people in the crowd knew Jesus was the Lord, and they had participated in His death with encouragement to crucify Him. That is the reason Peter said, *"you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death."*

The Events of the Time of Jesus' Death Was Predestined

Everything that happened to Jesus was planned from the beginning of time. Peter said, *"this Man [Jesus] delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God..."* Luke gives two of the favorite words of the Calvinists – predetermined and foreknowledge. Who was turned over by the predetermined plan? Jesus. According to His foreknowledge, who turned Jesus over to be nailed to the cross? God. First, Acts 2:23 is the only place the word "predetermined" is used. Let us look at its counterpart, "predestined." In Acts 4, the Jewish Sanhedrin and priests demanded that Peter and John stop preaching about Jesus; they did not stop. They were arrested, threatened, and then released. Peter and John use of the word "predestined" to the LORD when they prayed, *"For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."* (Acts 4:27-28)

Peter and John do not tell us that Herod, Pilate, the Gentile [soldiers], and the people of Israel were predestined; they are telling us who were gathered at the events of the ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus that were predestined as witnesses and participants. But focus on the words, *"to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."* Which was it? Were those people predestined, or were the events of Jesus' ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and accession predestined? It was the events that were predestined, and the people happened to be living during the predestined time of Jesus' arrival to pay the price for Salvation. Paul confirmed this when he said, *"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."* (Romans 5:6)

Jesus Was Predestined

In Roman's 8:29-30, speaking to the Jews, Paul said, *"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified."* (Romans 8:29-30) Whom did God foreknow? Jesus. Who was predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son? Jesus. Again, Who was predestined? Jesus. What does it mean when Paul says Jesus was the firstborn? In all Jewish heritage, the firstborn, human and animal, was considered the *"most excellent."* The firstborn son had all the rights and would inherit everything when the father died. The offerings in worship were always to be the unblemished firstborn of the mother. According to the writer of the book of Hebrews, Jesus was the head of the assembly of the *"Church of the firstborn."* As the head, He was the *"Most Excellent"* of the Church, which is what the word *"firstborn"* means.

What did Jesus, as the foreknown, firstborn, and predestined, do for the people of the world who believed in Him as Savior? He called, justified, and glorified the believers – the three essential elements of salvation. How do we know God is speaking of Jesus in this passage? We must look at the context. Look back at the beginning of the chapter. It says, *"Therefore there is now no condemnation*

for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:1-4) Combining this with Paul's words, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly," (Romans 5:6), we learn that Jesus was predestined to come in the flesh as Jesus. Individual believers were not predestined.

The Wisdom of God Was Predestined

Paul also tells us of the predestined wisdom of God. "Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; ⁷ but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; ⁸ the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory;" (1 Corinthians 2:6-8) God's wisdom was predestined. Wisdom is not a person.

The Process of Adoption Was Predestined

Finally, we come to the first chapter of Ephesians. Paul says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace ⁸ which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight ⁹ He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him ¹⁰ with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him ¹¹ also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, ¹² to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. ¹³ In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory." (Ephesians 1:3-14). In love, what did God set in place for those who believed in the LORD Jesus? Adoption by the kind intention of His will. What does that mean? Paul was not writing to Jews. In Ephesians, Paul was writing to Gentiles. The LORD did not come to the Gentiles first. Paul explained this in his opening in Romans when he said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16) He said the same in Romans 2:9-10. In Romans, he addresses what Jesus did for the salvation of the Jews through chapter 10. Then Paul will begin telling the Gentiles what Jesus did for their salvation. The Jews were the natural branches of the vine that were broken off because of their unfaithfulness and unbelief to the LORD. Therefore, the Gospel message would be taken to the Gentiles, who would have the ability to be grafted into the vine by the mystery process of adoption. But in Ephesians, Paul states that the adoption process was predestined for Gentiles to enter into salvation. It was all part of God's plan for the ages, and salvation could still be theirs by calling upon His name. The adoption process was predestined for whosoever believed in the LORD Jesus and saved. Verse 13 = listen, believe, sealed.

The Activities of the New Church (Acts 2:43-47)

With the birth of the Church on the Day of Pentecost, everything in the Jewish religious community changed. Everything Jewish had always been restricted from all people considered unclean, but now the Jewish support system would begin to be restricted from all who followed Jesus. To the dismay of the Jewish authorities, Jesus had given the Apostles the same abilities to continue the signs, wonders, and miracles. After the resurrection and Day of Pentecost, the same thrill that had caused the multitudes to follow Jesus continued as multitudes gathered to follow the Apostles.

Before they killed Jesus, Caiaphas, the high priest, *“had advised the Jews that it was expedient for one man [Jesus] to die on behalf of the people.”* (John 18:14). In other words, if the Jewish authorities could kill Jesus, it would end this rebellion and all the people would fall back into the Jewish way of life. Jesus, being all-knowing, thwarted the Jewish plan. Neither the Jewish authorities nor Caiaphas, ever thought Jesus’ Apostles would have the ability to continue the miraculous work Jesus started. But when the Apostles had the same miracle-working powers, the rejection by the Jewish authorities caused the Church to bind together even stronger to meet the needs of each individual. The result was Church growth. Luke reported the following. *“Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles”*⁴⁴ *And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;*⁴⁵ *and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.*⁴⁶ *Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,*⁴⁷ *praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”* (Acts 2:43-47)

Signs and Wonders Through the Apostles Continued

When the LORD selected the twelve Apostles, He endowed them with the power to perform all the same miracles He performed. Matthew tells us that *“Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.”* (Matthew 10:1). These were the powers Jesus used in every miracle we listed above. These powers were vital in continuing the growth of the Church with the Apostles whom He put in place and trained. It was a continual sign that the Church was not a fluke in time designed by some strange but interesting Man. But, only the Apostles had these powers.

Support of the Believers Continued

Believers in the Church were helping each other, but the reason was not given clearly in Luke’s passage. What was happening in the Jewish world that caused the Church to have to meet the needs of the members? In the Jewish system, set up by the LORD, the Jewish community gave offerings to the LORD. With those offerings, the priests supplied anyone with the basic daily need of food. One day, when Jesus was in the Temple, He pointed out a widow who placed all her money in the treasury. It may have been all her money, but the Temple met her daily food needs. She did not have to worry because she could eat at the Temple. After the Church was born, the Jewish authority cut off this privilege from those who were Gentile converts to Judaism who also became believers in Jesus. The Temple authorities could not cut off widows of Jewish blood because of their heritage to Jacob, but they cut off Gentile converts because they did not have the same heritage. The problem caused the Apostles to select deacons to maintain feeding stations for the Gentile widows and children. The generosity of the Church members became necessary, and members sold their extra properties to meet these food needs. It was a crisis that needed immediate attention.

Worship in the Temple Continued

Luke also reported that the Jewish believers continued to worship in the Temple. Many have asked, “Why?” But if you step back and think about the times, “Why would these Jews not continue to visit the Temple?” They loved the same LORD, Who was Jewish, spent time in the Temple daily, and came to offer salvation to all Jews, including the Jewish authorities. His last words were, *“and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). This command included the Jewish authorities and visitors to the Temple in Jerusalem. What better place to share the Gospel? When Paul became a believer, he went to the synagogues daily to share about Jesus with the Jews. In those first years, believing Jews wanted all their relatives to know Jesus and become part of the Church. According to Luke, their evangelism efforts worked, and *“the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”*