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Interpreting The Acts of the Apostles

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Lesson 1: Acts 1:1-11 The Commission of Jesus Christ

Introduction

Welcome to lesson 1 of, *Interpreting the Book of Acts*. If you enjoy history, I imagine you already enjoy the book of Acts, the inspired biblical account of the early spread of Christianity. If you do not typically enjoy history, Acts has a lot for you to consider. I am not even sure if it is correct to call Acts a history, certainly not the kind of typical history we are used to with lots of names and dates and battles and political parties. Acts is not that. Acts is historical. And Acts is written as a narrative. But as with all biblical narrative, the goal of the author goes well-beyond a record of events. The book of Acts is theological history.

Acts gives us an authoritative, inspired interpretation of a critical moment in human history. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ divides human existence into two major eras. There is the before Christ era and the after Christ era. Together with the Gospels, the book of Acts serves as a bridge from before Christ era to after Christ era.

Acts is a book of transitions. We are transitioning from the leadership of Jesus to the leadership of the Apostles, from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from a primarily Jewish people of God to a multi-ethnic people of God. This historical context of transition provides a backdrop for Luke to help believers define the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we see that Gospel worked out through transition.

In the fifth chapter of his Gospel, Luke describes a confrontation between Jesus and a group of Pharisees. Put off by Jesus' reception of tax collectors and other sinful people, the Pharisees question the behavior of Jesus' disciples. Jesus responds,

³⁷ No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. ³⁸ But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. ³⁹ And no one, after drinking old *wine* wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'

The Pharisees were committed to the Old Covenant and to their own understanding of Old Covenant institutions and rituals. They had a structure, a skin, a container in which the wine of relationship with God, the wine of their spirituality could go. The old wine is good. They have no desire for new wine or a new wineskin. They are open to the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah as long as it looks, and it tastes, and it feels just like what they already have.

Jesus says, "That's not going to work." The New Covenant is something new. It is not going to taste and smell the same as the Old. And if you try to shove it into the same form, it is going to burst that form. This is not simply an upgrade of all the same rituals and institutions you are used to. Now, we know that Jesus also affirms and values the Old Covenant. He came to fulfill all of the Law, not a bit of the Law is being rejected. But the Old Covenant Law has fulfilled its purpose and now we're moving into something new. And there is going to be both continuity and discontinuity in that move. Now, I reject replacement theology. The New Covenant is not simply a replacement of Old Covenant, where we don't need it anymore and it has no value to Christians, where we doubt that it was a good thing. Christians do not, or at least ought not, dismiss the Old Covenant simply because the New has come. The New flows from and fulfills the Old. We need to resist a rejection or any kind of devaluation of the Old while also embracing the radical change of the New. But we do not want change just for change's sake. We want the new wineskin that Jesus' offers.

And this new wineskin is not going to be intuitive to those who grew up under the old. Jewish believers are going to face significant challenges letting go of what they ought to let go of. And new Gentile believers are going to face another significant challenge of being tempted to bring pagan

values with them into the New Covenant. So, the book of Acts helps us understand and embrace the new wineskin that is the New Covenant, what really is the Gospel.

Right away, the first eleven verses of Acts emphasize for us the transitory nature of this period. Jesus has risen from the dead, but he has not yet returned to Heaven. Jesus has given leadership to a small movement of Jewish believers dedicated to proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Now he commissions his apostles to take over leadership and he ascends into Heaven. The transition has begun. What now?

That's the big question hanging over the first chapters of Acts. Jesus began something. He has left. What happens now to this little group of mainly Galilean followers?

Background of the Book of Acts

Let's start with just the first verse of Acts and address some background information about the book.

Acts 1:1 begins with these words, "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach..." Consistent with other ancient writings, the author does not identify himself. He's not going to identify himself anywhere else in the book. Ancient Greek letters, epistles, like those of Paul and Peter were an exception, being written with a "to" and a "from" in the greeting. We tend to know who wrote those. Acts is not a letter, so no author is specified.

Early Christian tradition attributes Acts to Luke, the traveling companion of Paul who, also according to tradition, wrote the Gospel of Luke. We do find a couple of clues in Acts. The narration is mostly in third person, telling us that Peter did this, or Paul did that. But then in chapter 16 verse 10 the narration changes to first person, "And when [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia." Did you hear the "we"? "We sought to go into Macedonia." The author is not just telling us about the travels of Paul from a third person point of view. The author is with Paul. "We went into Macedonia." And that "we" shows up again in chapters 20, and 21, 27 and 28. So the author is there.

In his own letters, Paul mentions Luke three times, once each in Colossians, 2 Timothy and Philemon. In Colossians 4:14 Paul calls Luke "the beloved physician." To the best of our knowledge, Luke was a Gentile traveling companion of Paul trained as a physician.

In this series, I am going to trust the accuracy of Church tradition that this Luke, this traveling companion of Paul, wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Here is our first verse again, "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach..." This is not Luke's first work. He references another work calling it "the first account." And it was about "all that Jesus began to do and teach," which sounds an awful lot like a Gospel.

Acts 1:1 references a person named Theophilus. The only other reference to the name Theophilus in the Bible appears at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. Taking the two references of Theophilus together, we have what appears to be a two-book series, covering the life of Jesus and the spread of the early church.

The first verses of Luke's Gospel tell us a little more about Theophilus and a little more about Luke. This is Luke 1:1-4,

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; ⁴ so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

The name “Theophilus” combines the two words “theos” and “phileo”, meaning “loved by God” or “lover of God.” It’s a great name for a Christian. It reminds me of John’s term for himself in his Gospel, “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

And because the name has such a great meaning for a Christian, it has been suggested that Theophilus is a literary character made up by the author. We are all to be Theophilus, loved by God and loving God, earnestly seeking to know the truth about Jesus Christ, which is here recorded in Luke and in the book of Acts. And by all means, be a Theophilus. Be a lover of God. Seek to know the exact truth of what you have been taught. But just because the name works so well as an exhortation to readers of Luke and Acts, that is no reason to think Theophilus is not also a historical figure. The name was a common one. And Luke’s address treats him as a real person.

Luke says he is writing, so that Theophilus might “know the exact truth about the things [he had] been taught.” So, possibly Theophilus is already a believer. He is at least an interested person who has already been taught about Jesus. Luke honors him with the words, “most excellent Theophilus,” making us wonder whether Theophilus was Luke’s patron. Could he have been a wealthy Christian who supported Luke in his ministry of the Word? We don’t know. That’s certainly a possibility. Could he have been an influential Roman who could urge for Paul’s release? That’s where Paul is. He is under house arrest at the end of book of Acts. Could Luke be writing to this Roman who cares about Christ, who cares about Paul, giving him all this information so that he could argue for the release of Paul? It is a possibility. We really do not know that much about Theophilus at all. So in a sense, we’re just guessing.

Even without knowing much about Theophilus, Luke’s reference to him helps contextualize his writings. It gives us a sense of the real. Luke and Acts were written in such a way that a real person, somebody like Theophilus, living in the first century, a real Gentile, a non-Jew, might understand accurately the events and teaching of Jesus Christ and the spread of the early Christian movement. And you can imagine him, you can imagine this man wanting to know more. You can even put yourself in his place, “I want to know more about the life of Christ. I want to know more about the spread of Gospel, and what is the Gospel and how it went out from Israel into different nations.”

Luke’s introduction to his Gospel also gives us a little insight into his process. You know, what does Luke believe he was doing. He acknowledges that others had recorded events and teaching of Jesus, and things received from eyewitnesses. Luke is not himself an eyewitness. He is not even Jewish.

But Luke believed that he has something to contribute to the record. In writing his Gospel he may have been motivated to provide a version of the life of Christ more accessible to a Gentiles, like himself. He certainly seems to have been motivated to write about the birth of Christ. If we don’t get the Gospel of Luke, we don’t have most of what we know about the birth story. Luke also seems motivated as a travel companion of Paul to give us Paul’s story, covered in the second half of the book of Acts, leading some to suggest that Acts is primarily intended as a defense of Paul. And I think there is something to that, though I think it more accurate to say that Luke was motivated by a defense of the Gospel of which Paul was an apostle, and in defending Paul he is really defending the Gospel preached by Paul. So Acts is about the Gospel. What is this Gospel? Let’s define it. Let’s defend it.

Luke indicates that he has consulted eyewitnesses. He has investigated. He has written things down in a consecutive order. And that’s his language. These are the values of a historian who desires to communicate events truthfully. You know, he was a physician, he was a man of science who understood order, who understood the importance of being exact and getting facts right. We might wonder when did Luke do this, when did he carry out his investigation into the life of Christ. Since he indicates in the book of Acts that he was present in Israel at the end of the book, it is plausible to

think Luke took time during Paul's two-year imprisonment in Caesarea to do on-location research, and perhaps he visited Nazareth, and the Sea of Galilee, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem, and he met with people, and he gathered information.

Luke may have conducted research during Paul's imprisonment. But when did he actually produce the finished manuscripts of Luke and Acts? When were they available? Well, the book of Acts takes us up to Paul's house arrest in Rome. Tradition suggests that Paul was released and able to continue his ministry but was imprisoned a second time and executed during the persecution of Rome. An early dating of Acts assumes that Luke has ended his story when he has brought events up to his present time; that he actually is ending his story while Paul is under his first imprisonment in Rome. If that is the case, Acts may have been written just after 60 AD. Certainly before the mid-sixties, when Paul was executed.

Proponents for a later dating of Acts point out that Luke's Gospel emphasizes prophecies about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. And it is inferred from that that Luke did this after the temple's destruction in 70 AD to remind readers that Jesus had made these prophecies, so when the temple falls people need to remember that Jesus knew this was going to happen and he prophesied it. And so, Luke gives that emphasis in his Gospel. And since Acts was written after Luke, this view argues that the date of both books comes in the early 70s, after the destruction of the temple. It seems unlikely that Acts would have been written much later, since Luke makes no reference to Paul's letters, suggesting that those letters were being collected and circulated more after the writing of Acts, though not much later, since 2 Peter already refers to Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:16). Taking either point of view, whether we're looking at the early 60's or early 70's, the book of Acts was written very close to the events recorded by a person - Luke - who was actually an eyewitness to some of those events. He was traveling with Paul.

So, to sum up, the book of Acts serves along with the Gospel of Luke as a two-part work that bridges us from the era before Jesus to the era after Jesus. Acts is written very close to the time of the events by a traveling companion of Paul who wants us to understand the truth about the early spread of Christianity and uses the true story of those events to define and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so that we might rightly understand the new wineskin of the New Covenant and not try to understand our walk with Jesus according to the old wineskin of the Old Covenant or the old wineskin of pagan belief. We are asking with the apostles, "What now? What does life with God look like now that Jesus has ascended into Heaven?"

Witness and the Spirit (Acts 1:1-11)

Let's continue on in this lesson with our first passage, the introduction to the book found in Acts 1:1-11.

¹ The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when He was taken up *to heaven*, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. ³ To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over *a period of* forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. ⁴ Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," *He said*, "you heard of from Me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." ⁹ And

after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. ¹¹ They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”

Transition from Gospel to Acts (1:1-5)

Luke begins Acts with an overlap to the end of Luke. The Gospel ends with Jesus appearing to the disciples, commissioning them as his witnesses, affirming the promise of the Holy Spirit, and ascending into Heaven. Acts begins with Jesus appearing to his disciples, commissioning them as witnesses, affirming the promise of the Holy Spirit, and ascending into Heaven. As the Gospel ends, so Acts begins. This overlapping is a feature of the Luke’s literary style that we’re going to see at every major section of Acts. In this case, the overlapping is between two books, and it’s creating a connection between Luke and Acts. So rather than two blocks placed side by side where one clearly ends and the other one clearly begins, Luke and Acts are like two puzzle pieces that click into place. They’re linked together.

Verses 1:1-5 of Acts point us back to Luke. We can read here that Jesus, “presented himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of things concerning the kingdom of God,” and then if we want to know more about that, we go back to the last chapter of Luke and what we find is Jesus appearing to the disciples and teaching them about himself.

Luke 24 records Jesus walking with them, and talking with them, and eating with them. Jesus also says to them,

“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have (Luke 24:38-39).”

That’s what Luke is saying here next. Jesus gave the disciples proof of his bodily resurrection. This is the Christian hope. Jesus truly did rise from the dead, and he did so with a physical body. His resurrection is not an idea, it is not a metaphor, it is not a vision, it is not a dream. Jesus rose from the dead as a human being in the flesh and he gave proofs of his resurrection to his disciples. And just as Jesus has risen from the dead, this is our hope also, that we will rise from the dead with new bodies. And the disciples are an eyewitness to this truth. The historical resurrection of Jesus is critical to the witness.

We also get in the Gospel an idea of what Jesus talked about with his disciples during these appearances. Luke 24:27, “Beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, [Jesus] explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.” And again in 24:44, “All things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” The apostolic message about Jesus is grounded both in the teaching that Jesus gave the apostles directly about himself but also in the understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus communicated to them.

It’s on the day of Pentecost, that is coming very shortly, when Peter preaches about Jesus with reference to the prophet Joel and to the Psalms of David, how do we think Peter developed his understanding of these passages? Well, he could have put two and two together himself, but we read here that he got it from Jesus. Jesus was his Old Testament professor. Jesus taught the disciples how the Old Testament scriptures point to him; how Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. Peter learned these things from Jesus.

Jesus prepared his disciples to be his witnesses by helping them understand who he is according to Scripture. That's a necessary requirement for witness, that the witness understands and communicates not his own truth, but the truth of Scripture. In the New Covenant, Word and Spirit act hand in hand. So, it's not going to be enough to witness simply by the Word, but the expectation is by the Word and Spirit. Disciples are going to perform a ministry of the Word, they are also going to baptize in the Holy Spirit. They're going to witness to the Word. They must witness in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And for this reason, Jesus is not ready for the witness to begin. Even though we see it at the end of the Gospel of Luke that he taught them all these things, and we know that they had been there - they're eyewitnesses - so they have a lot they can say. Nevertheless, they must wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon them. And the Holy Spirit will not be sent until Jesus first returns to the Father.

The Commission of Jesus Christ (1:6-8)

Let's move on and look at the commissioning. This is in Acts 1:6-8. And Jesus makes very clear here, just as he did at the end of the Gospel of Luke, he's making clear here this connection between the Spirit and the witness. 6-8 again,

⁶ So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

First, here we have the disciples asking a question. And we might wonder why they are still going on about Jesus reigning as king over Israel. The word is, "Is it at this time that you are restoring the kingdom of Israel?" Wasn't that one of the main misconceptions Jews had about Jesus during his whole ministry?

Yes, it was a major misconception. People believed that Jesus came to make Israel great again and to re-establishing the throne of David and to throw off Roman rule. That's what they wanted from Jesus. But we do not have to assume that the disciples are so dull or disconnected from the plan of Jesus that they're thinking that, that they're thinking that was the whole reason that Jesus came. The early misconception also denied the validity of a crucified Messiah. But these disciples, they've accepted and believed that Jesus had to first come to die to provide forgiveness of all humankind. And they had believed that Jesus is more than a man. He is more than a son of David. He is also God. So, some of their misunderstandings have been rectified.

With that accomplished, now that they've believed that Jesus is God, they believe that he had to die and they believe he is risen again, so with all that accomplished, what happens next? The disciples are processing all that Jesus is saying and they're trying to understand the plan from the cross and from the empty tomb onwards. Jesus never denied that he would set up an eternal earthly kingdom promised to the son of David. He simply argued that there was more. Not only is he the son of David. He is also the son of God. And not only will he reign. He must also die.

The disciples accept Jesus as God and king. They accept him as lion and lamb. They saw the lamb slain, now they are wondering when will the lion reign. And they are hoping the answer is "Now."

Jesus, however, in a way that must seem very familiar to the disciples from what we've seen in all the Gospels, their time with him, Jesus declines to give them an answer to their question. He tells them it is not for them to know times or epochs fixed by God. And the use of the "epoch" there might be a

hint to them how long this might be before the earthly throne of David is established. They're not to know about the epochs of God.

Also, in a way familiar to the disciples, Jesus takes their question, and he may not answer it, but he communicates to them something that they really need to know. It gets more to the heart of the matter. They don't need to know the plan for the second coming of Jesus. They do need to know the answer to the question, "What's next?"

Jesus has already told them, more than once, that their job now is to serve as witnesses to him in the world. The most famous wording of the Great Commission is from Matthew 28:18-20, which begins, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..." That Commission Jesus gave on a mountain in Galilee.

Luke records for us here the last version of the Commission spoken by Jesus just outside of Jerusalem, right before he ascended into Heaven, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses." This is what is next. You will wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit has come on you and then you witness. The restoration of Israel is a hope for the future. Do not worry about that. It will come when it comes. For now, do this. Be my witnesses in the power of the Holy Spirit.

If you have your Bible out with you, you really should highlight or circle or underline Acts 1:8. This is as close as we come to a purpose statement for the book of Acts. You should memorize it. The power of the Holy Spirit and witness to Jesus Christ. Both of those themes are going to run through the book. And both themes take on a unique aspect in the New Covenant.

Though the Holy Spirit does empower certain Old Covenant believers for special acts of service, the work of the Holy Spirit indwelling New Covenant believers enables a new kind of spiritual experience that was not available until after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. You know, Moses prophesied about this in Deuteronomy 30:6, that after exile God would do a new work in the hearts of believers to enable them to love God. They are missing something under Old Covenant, something they need and Moses, looking ahead, promised, "You're going to get it but it's going to come after the exile." In Jeremiah 31:33, Jeremiah connects that something new with the New Covenant. There's a new work that's going to be done. He calls it, putting the Law of God into the hearts of believers.

Jesus connects this new work in his own teaching with the promised helper of John 14-16. And there, Jesus gives us the metaphor of the true vine in chapter 15, "I am the true vine...abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in me." Jesus is the branch. Spiritual vitality flows through him. We cannot bring about the spiritual fruit of the New Covenant unless we abide in Christ through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit. We know that Jesus intends for us to understand the metaphor of the vine, the spiritual relationship with the Holy Spirit, because both chapters that flank John 15 include a promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "After I go, I'm sending him to you." And in John 14 the emphasis is on the Holy Spirit empowering the believer to live a life of loving obedience to the Father. It's very Deuteronomy language. And in John 16 the emphasis is on the Holy Spirit empowering the believer as a witness in the world. In both chapters, the disciples are taught that the Holy Spirit is not coming until after Jesus ascends. This is a new reality that's made available in the New Covenant.

And so here, the apostles are supposed to wait for it. They are to sit. They're not waiting for the second coming of Jesus, which we don't know how long that's going to take. They are waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, which is very imminent. It's coming. And then they are to be witnesses.

The act of witnessing is also not completely new to the New Covenant. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests. That means that they were to witness to the nations of God. Priests mediate relationship with God. They are supposed to try to help bring other people into relationship with Yahweh. There is, however, a new content to New Covenant witnessing. And identifying that new content of the New Covenant is going to be one of our tasks as we go through the book of Acts, so we do not want to assume too much about that message, the witness from the start. We want to pay close attention and see how did these early believers witness, what is the content, what were they driven to tell people. But it is safe to say that the witness is going to be about Jesus Christ. And this knowledge of Jesus Christ is something that the prophets of the Old Covenant long to know about - more specifically, to understand, but they never saw how exactly this was going to work out. It has now worked out. And that gives content to New Covenant witness. Eternal life now comes through faith in the name of Jesus. So, the witness is going to be connected to Jesus. The witness is not about the Holy Spirit. We don't want to confuse that. Holy Spirit and witness go together. But they go together because the Holy Spirit empowers witness about Jesus Christ just as Jesus taught in John 16:14, "He shall glorify me; for he shall take of mine and disclose it to you."

We are going to follow these two themes closely as we observe Acts, the empowering of the Holy Spirit, you know, what really is that? And the Gospel witness to Jesus Christ. So, what is the message they were sharing? And when I use that word "Gospel" through our series, I'm not going to be referring to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I'm going to be referring to the basic Christian message that is being proclaimed by the witnesses recorded in Acts. We will be paying attention to the definition of the Gospel provided by Luke as he records this movement from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and towards the remotest parts of the earth.

That expansion out is the second half of our key verse Acts 1:8. So we get these two themes of Spirit and witness but we're getting more than that, "You will be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." The progression of the Gospel is going to be described as a geographic expansion from the city they are in at this moment, they're in Jerusalem, and it's going to go into the surrounding countryside, the nearby area of Judea and Samaria, and then it's going to go out to remote parts of the earth. Some versions say, "to the ends of the earth." The disciples are being commissioned to witness to the Gospel everywhere.

At the same time, this geographic expansion is also an ethnic expansion, moving from Jews in Jerusalem and Judea out to Samaria. The Samaritans are a cultural mix between Jew and Gentile, and then out to all the peoples of the earth. And we're going to follow both the geographic and ethnic expansion of the Gospel through the book.

The Ascension of Jesus Christ (1:9-11)

Jesus has commissioned his disciples. Now it is time for Jesus to go. Acts 1:9-11,

⁹ And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. ¹¹ They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."

The angels answer the question of timing for the disciples. When will the kingdom of Israel be restored? When Jesus comes back on the clouds of heaven just as he has gone up. Do not stand around waiting for Jesus to come back. You will know when it is time for him to come back when you actually see him coming.

Believers of every generation talk about the second coming of Jesus. We know there are going to be wars and there are going to be plagues. These are some of the signs. The Covid-19 pandemic seems to be strengthening the conviction of many that the end is near. And the end could be near. I don't know. I am reminded of Jesus' teaching to the disciples that the signs of the end will be like a woman in labor. Tribulations are going to occur in successive waves. And if it is like labor, the present pain, whatever pain you're in right now, whatever tribulations are going on, it's always going to seem like it must be the. Can it get worse? Until the next pain comes. And then you know it can get worse. It's not over.

So, when I hear people talking about unrest in the Middle East, I think to myself, when has there not been unrest in the Middle East? And why would we think it's not going to keep happening? And when people talk about this leader or that coalition of governments setting up a new order, I think, didn't every generation have their possible explanations of the anti-Christ? And when someone refers to Covid-19, I think wasn't there a Spanish flu before that, and people thought it was the end? And the black plague before that? People certainly thought it was the end. I mean, could Jesus come back during this generation? Certainly! Could his coming still be hundreds of years away? I do not know why not. I am sure that the crusaders who captured Jerusalem in the 11th century would have scoffed at the idea that Christ's return was still at least 1000 years in the future. But that's the metaphor of the woman in labor, that the pains are going to keep coming and you don't know is the baby coming right now, or do we still have hours to wait.

So, we are to eagerly look forward to the return of Christ. But we're not supposed to just stand around, looking into the sky. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?" Do you want to know when Jesus is coming back? You'll see it, I promise you won't miss it. He is coming and everybody is going to know it's him. Right now, the Holy Spirit is coming to empower you. Ready yourself for that, so that when the Spirit comes you might engage in the work of the Gospel to be my witnesses. This is your mission, Church. In the power of the Holy Spirit witness to me in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the remotest parts of the earth, so that people of all nations and every might hear the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Life Change Through Bible Study

With this lesson, we begin the new observetheword.com series *Interpreting the Acts of the Apostles*.

These lessons are intended to supplement your own study of the text as you seek to interpret the meaning of God's word and apply his truth to your life.

Good Bible interpretation comes first and foremost from good observation. This is the lost art of Bible study. It is quite natural to come to a Bible text full of assumptions about things you have heard or to seek to give the text some special, spiritual or religious meaning or to latch on to points of comparison to your own life. When you do this, you are bringing meaning with you and placing it on top of the text, rather than letting the text speak for itself, which, in the end, is a simpler process.

The drive to come up with spiritual meanings and applications of the text skips over the most important task of basic reading. Simply put, observation asks, "What does the text say?" Forget that you have read it before. And read it again, slowly, thoughtfully, just taking note of what you see.

Interpretation comes next and goes a step further asking, "What does the text mean?" Having paid close attention to what the text says, some of the interpretation has already become clear. But questions are also raised. You will not be able to answer all the questions. After observe, observe, observe, the second key to good interpretation is context. As my Bible Study Methods teacher used to drill into us, "Context is king!" A biblical phrase means what it means in its literary context of sentence, paragraph, section, and book. Pay close attention to the immediate paragraphs and also to the author's flow of thought through the whole work. Context also applies to the historical situation. A biblical phrase means what it means in the historical context of the original author and original audience. What was Luke communicating to his first readers?

Application follows observation and interpretation, asking, "What does this mean for me?" That is the individual way to phrase application. You could also ask in the corporate sense of your family or your church, "What does it mean for us?"

Starting with observation of the biblical text, we are not looking for great spiritual insights in religious language. We are simply reading. We are assuming that the author has something to communicate, and we are paying close attention to what the author says and the way he says what he says.

To observe well, we need to slow our brains down with some method for observation. One way to do that is to write the text out in a notebook. Writing the text forces you to slow down and pay attention to the words. Or we can ask the journalist questions of who, what, when, why, where, how. Who is mentioned in the text? What are they doing? Why are they doing that? Or why does God do that? Or why did the author include this? (You can ask endless why questions.) Where is this taking place? How is the text telling me to act? If the answer to the question is apparent, right it down. Questions also make great observations to pursue for interpretation. Write down your questions.

Good observation really does require pen and paper (or computer and keyboard). Get a journal. Grab some colored pens if you like. Set aside some time in a quiet place. Start with prayer. Then just read God's word and take note of what you see.

At the end of each lesson, I have included some questions that might be helpful. The first question is always the same. It is the most important question and should take most time. If you discuss these questions in a group, begin with 15 minutes of silence in which everyone reads the text on their own and writes down at least three observations of simple things they notice in the text. Start your discussion by going around and having everyone share a short observation (not an interpretation) of something they noticed.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 1:1-11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Read the beginning of the Gospel of Luke 1:1-4. What stands out to you in this passage? What is similar to the beginning of Acts? What information is included that is not repeated in Acts?
3. Read the end of the Gospel of Luke 24:36-53. How much of this is repeated in the beginning of Acts? Do these events provide a good ending to the book of Luke? Why? Do these events provide a good beginning to the book of Acts? Why?
4. What question might the disciples be asking in Acts 1:5? Consider the context set up by the end of Luke and beginning of Acts? What is going on at this moment when they ask? What do they want to know?
5. Observe Acts 1:8 again closely. What stands out to you in this one verse? Write down at least two more observations.
6. From what you already know about the book of Acts, how does Acts 1:8 relate to the message and structure of the book?
7. What stands out to you in Acts 1:9-11?
8. From these initial words in the book of Acts, what do you understand about the purpose of Acts? What is Luke intending to communicate through Acts and how is this different from his Gospel?

Lesson 2: Acts 1:12-26 Replacement of the Twelfth Apostle

Introduction

Our second scene in the book of Acts picks up right where the first scene left off with the disciples returning to Jerusalem after having received the final commission of Jesus and having watched him ascend into heaven. Angels appeared to tell them not to just stand around looking up into the sky. That is not the posture of the Christian. Jesus will come back when he comes back. As for you, you obey the will of the Lord in the here and now.

The will of the Lord for the disciples right now is to wait, wait for the Holy Spirit. Christians are not supposed to stand around wistfully looking up into heaven. Christians are also not to just be busy for the sake of being busy. While still being action-oriented in obedience, dependance on God requires periods of waiting. Timing matters. God's lead matters.

In this lesson, we will consider what the disciples did while waiting for God's timing. And since one of the main things the disciples did was to replace the twelfth Apostle, we will also take some time to consider how that sets up this book traditionally called the Acts of the Apostles.

Preparation for the Coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:12-26)

They were devoted to prayer. (1:12-14)

We start with our consideration of how the disciples prepared for the coming of the Holy Spirit. We are going to see them doing two things. The first is in Acts 1:12-14. Let's start with just those 3 verses.

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ When they had entered *the city*, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James *the son* of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas *the son* of James. ¹⁴ These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with *the women*, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

Jesus ascended into heaven just outside of Jerusalem at Mount Olivet. A Sabbath day's journey is the distance that Jewish tradition allowed people to travel on a Sabbath without breaking the command to not work. You can just go this far. It was about three-fourths of a mile or just over a kilometer. In this context, Luke seems to be emphasizing that the place of ascension was very close to Jerusalem. You know, they are where they're supposed to be. It also gives us an interestingly Jewish feel to a book written by a Gentile, that he would measure the distance the way they would, calling it a Sabbath's day journey away.

Luke then lists for us the disciples who Jesus had just charged to be his witnesses. This list of the Apostles is the same as the lists in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke except that Matthew and Mark refer to Judas the son of James by his other name, Thaddaeus, which Judas probably appreciated. He was grateful that he had another name besides Judas, that people could call him Thaddeus. John does not give us a list. He mentions several disciples at the beginning and end of his Gospel. Nathanael, mentioned in John 1:45, as the friend Philip found and brought to Jesus, stands out by not being included in these lists from Matthew, Mark and Luke. Some have suggested that Nathanael is another name for Bartholomew, but we cannot be sure about that. He could have been an early disciple of Jesus who was not chosen as one of the Twelve.

So, with names we have to be careful about two things. We have to be careful to recognize that the same person might have two different names. We also have to be careful that the same name is used for more than one person. There are two Jameses in this list. The more famous is James is the brother of John, one of the three disciples closest to Jesus. The other James, the son of Alphaeus, does not show up in the Gospels in with any significant mention. He's really just one of the Twelve. In the book of Acts, we are going to encounter yet another James, the third James, the brother of Jesus, who becomes a leading elder of the church in Jerusalem.

Philip is another name to watch. Philip is from the same hometown as Peter and Peter's brother Andrew. We see him making comments here and there in the Gospel of John. But he is not the same Phillip that is prominent in Acts chapter 8, who takes the Gospel to Samaria and witnesses to the Ethiopian eunuch. That Philip was one of the deacons chosen in Acts 6 to help make sure funds were administered fairly to believers in need. So be careful with the names as you go through, making sure you attach them to the right person.

This list here affirms for us that these men, chosen by Jesus at the beginning of his earthly ministry, are the same who have just received the commission to be witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria and to the remotest parts of the earth."

They are not alone here. They are gathered together with a number of female followers of Jesus. Luke had mentioned women in context with the disciples in his Gospel, women who had been ministered to by Jesus and women who ministered to Jesus. This is an example from Luke 8:1-3:

¹ Soon afterwards, He *began* going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, ² and *also* some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.

Along with the eleven disciples and these faithful women, Mary is also present in the upper room with the brothers of Jesus. And to get an idea of who the brothers were, we get a list from Mark 6:3.

³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?

This James in this list, as a brother of Jesus, is the one I just mentioned who will become a prominent elder in the church in Jerusalem and will write the biblical letter of James. He was also there, gathered with them.

So, what were these men and women doing in preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit? Luke writes, "These with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer." That's how they were preparing. And that's not doing nothing. That's not standing with your eyes gazing up in the sky wistfully, desiring for Jesus to come back and be in charge. Prayer is hard, especially continual devotion to prayer.

It's a challenge to me. I struggle to be devoted in prayer. Over time I have become better at praying through the day, keeping up a conversation with God. But even then, I do not really enjoy silence. I would rather have my mind focused on some kind of an activity, or on studying Scripture, or preparing something. To sit and pray for long periods of time is not something I do well. And I believe they were praying here for long periods of time. They were gathered together, devoted to prayer continually.

They did have the benefit of a direct command from Jesus not to move into action until the Holy Spirit came. They didn't have to choose to put off action in order to pray. They were told to wait. Still, that does not mean that they would automatically choose to prepare by praying. We can come up of with a long list of things to do in preparation for a momentous event apart from prayer.

I assume this is a special season of prayer for a very special time in life. Two historic moments, the ascending of Jesus and the descending of the Holy Spirit, create a boundary that defines this short period of waiting in which this small community of believers has entirely devoted themselves to prayer. According to church tradition, all the Apostles will eventually go out as evangelists, bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They will all take off into action. Right now, they are waiting at the line for the starting flag to drop. They're just waiting. And as they wait, they pray.

They are not going to stop praying as they move out into action. We will see them praying in homes, and they will pray at the temple, and they will pray in prison, and they will pray on ships. The

Apostles will describe their ministry in chapter 6 as one of prayer and the Word. Still, this is a special season, and they're devoting most of their time right now to prayer. And that makes me wonder what special seasons of life create boundaries, waiting moments, preparation time for us that we should fill with prayer. Usually big events call for so much preparation that prayer gets minimized. Can you imagine just before a wedding taking a day just to go and pray? You know, there's so much to do. And if prayer gets minimized during the preparation of a big event, it is certainly likely to stay on the side once the busyness of the events have begun.

I do not want to give you a list of examples of when I think we ought to stop and pray, when we should give extra time as we prepare for a new season of life. And I do not want to give examples, one: because I haven't been that great at this, and two: because my goal is not to convict you or make you feel bad for all the big moments that have passed by without prayer. I am suggesting this to you just as much to me, that we should think about the question. What major events are coming up in my personal life, or family life, or work life, or ministry life? How am I preparing for those events? And is God leading me to devote considerable time to prayer in my preparation? You know, what do I think about taking a day, a whole Sunday or a half day to be with the Lord in prayer to prepare for what he is bringing into my life? And could this be a group or community prayers, that's something that's happening with other people? Who else is involved that might share a desire to pray in preparation? I'll leave that for you to think about and reflect in your own life. What's coming up?

This question, "Who should I pray with?", you know, who should be invited together in prayer, comes out in this text. This wasn't one or two people praying. It wasn't just the Apostles praying. The Apostles and the women and family of Jesus are together, and they are continually devoting themselves to pray. The text says they are together with one mind. It is a picture of the prayer Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17 that they would be one, he prays, perfected in unity. It is a picture that is going to be sorely tested and fractured and often lost through Christian history. But here at the beginning, we have a group of men and women connected through the shared experience of having walked with Jesus. They knew Jesus. They spend time with Jesus. They shared that experience. They are also connected through a shared sense of purpose to be witnesses for Jesus. They've been commissioned - and even more, they are connected through a shared love for Jesus. Their shared heart, their shared purpose, their shared experience results in a unity of mind that is really desirable. That's the kind of Christian community that if you've tasted, if you've been a part of that even for a short season of life, or a small group or a community that has really come together with one mind. And they express it in prayer and then action. It's a wonderful model, ideal, goal to strive towards in Christian community.

They replaced the twelfth disciple. (1:15-26)

Now, as they are all together of one mind, devoted to prayer, Peter stands up and speaks. There is something else they need to do before the coming of the Holy Spirit. This is the second thing to prepare themselves. Let's read the rest of the text, Acts 1:15-26.

¹⁵ At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, ¹⁶ "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. ¹⁹ And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'LET HIS HOMESTEAD BE MADE DESOLATE, AND LET NO ONE DWELL IN IT'; and, 'LET ANOTHER MAN TAKE HIS OFFICE.'" ²¹ Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— ²² beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these *must* become a witness with us of His resurrection."

²³ So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen ²⁵ to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶ And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Peter, led by the Holy Spirit from the Words of Scripture, is convinced that the number of Apostles should be restored to twelve before the coming of the Holy Spirit. I have heard it suggested that Peter made a mistake here, that the Apostle Paul was God's chosen replacement to fill the twelfth spot. Peter acted presumptuously, kind of like Abraham did. He is going to help God out by sleeping with Hagar to get a child instead of waiting for Sarah to become pregnant with Isaac. Acting too quickly rather than waiting for God's plan is a common failure among God's people.

But I think it is a poor interpretation in this instance. Here we see God's people doing what is so often missed in those stories. You know, we don't read that Abraham stopped and devoted themselves to prayer and then agreed with Sarah to sleep with Hagar. That's a clear omission in that text. But these have their minds and hearts turned to God in prayer. And not is Peter acting out of a sense of God's leading from his prayer, but he's also acting out of an understanding of the Word of God. He quotes the Psalms. Prayer and the Word led Peter to speak. It is better to understand Paul as he describes himself, one untimely born. God is famous for not sticking to what people expect. You know, he is not that neat and tidy. God delights in surprising us. Paul will be a surprise addition later.

The indication from the context here, we see from the reference to 120, that even more are gathered than the disciples, the faithful women, and Jesus' family. There is a gathered community of Jesus' followers. Compared to the scope of taking the Gospel to the whole world, to billions, 120 is a completely insignificant number. It's nothing compared to the whole of humanity. And yet, these 120 are going to change the world. I said God is not always neat and tidy when we think about Paul being added to the Twelve. But sometimes God is neat and tidy. You see that here with this number of 120 followers. They are restoring the number of Apostles to 12 and their own number equals 12 times 10. Sometimes history lends itself quite nicely to symbolism. So this is a representative community. These are God's people. And there's something that is whole and complete about them as 120, even if they're small. This is just how many God wants. Makes me think of Gideon. This is the number God is going to use to turn the world upside down.

In speaking about the problem of Judas, Peter does not try to rewrite the story. He does not say, "We were never really sure about him. He did not play a significant role. Anyway, he was just kind of always on the side. He was always coming and going, not really one of us." It is tempting to whitewash the history of a movement's beginning. "Never really one of us." But that is just not how it happened. When Jesus said that one of you will betray me, nobody responded, "Yeah, and I bet I know who," all pointing to Judas. No. They didn't know. They were all equally confused because, on the outside, Judas was just as much one of them as anyone else. As Peter says, "he was counted among us and he received his share of the ministry." Now, how could Jesus not know that one he had chosen would betray him? Well, in fact, Jesus did know. Yes, he was a friend and confidant of Jesus. HE was a known and respected disciple by the others. Jesus trusted him with the money box. He was the face of the movement to everyone who's going to needed payment. And Jesus allowed him to be. Jesus allowed this to happen. And Judas turns on Jesus.

This story of betrayal has become common knowledge in Jerusalem, maybe spurred on by the manner of his death. The side note in verses 18-19 tells us of the report going about concerning Judas. He bought a field out of grain from his betrayal and his body burst open when he fell in death in that field. And that field became known as "the field of blood." People know about this in Jerusalem.

At first glance, this account seems to contradict the Gospel version. Didn't Judas throw the 30 pieces of silver back on the steps of the temple? Then how can he use it to buy a field? And, to add to that, didn't Judas hang himself? What is this falling down in a field and dying?

Before jumping to the conclusion that this is contradictory, we need to recognize that this is exactly how historical research works. You get pieces of stories from different sources that leave out significant amounts of information. And sometimes the pieces might seem not to go together, and then we need to do the work of a detective to consider possible scenarios of how the stories might fit together. But unless we are given more information from some other source, we might be left just guessing, we might never really know. But it's worth thinking through scenarios just to remind ourselves that it is not necessarily contradictory; there's a way this could have worked out. And this is not only true to history. It is simply true to life. When you've got two kids in trouble, you are likely to get very different versions of events when you speak to them separately. And you, as the parent, are going to have to piece together what actually happened. Even if both versions they give you are basically true, they are going to frame the story the way they want to frame the story. So, this account in Acts is different from the account in Matthew, not because we have two competing versions, but we have limited detail, we have two different purposes in the communicating of the information. Matthew communicates what he needs to communicate, Luke communicates what he needs to communicate. Unfortunately, we don't get the whole story. So, we have to take the two pieces.

But with a little thought, it is not very difficult to suggest ways to reconcile the two. The comment here that Judas bought the land with the price of his wickedness could indicate that Judas went back and gathered up the silver he had thrown on the steps. You know, he rethought it, he went and got it. On the other hand, John 12:6 tells us that Judas used to help himself to the money box. He was a thief. Could that be the price of his wickedness referred to here? Is that where he got the money to buy the field? We're not sure, but those are both possible. Concerning the fall, one way to explain Judas bursting open on his fall is to imagine that he did hang himself. In fact, it's quite strange to think of Judas just falling and tripping in the field and his guts gush out. But if he was hung and his body became blotted and even began to decompose, and if nobody cut him down but the rope just gave way and broke, and then Judas fell, or his body fell and burst open, spilling out his intestines. He both hung himself and, after the hanging, his body fell and burst open. That's completely rational.

These are guesses at how to reconcile the details. I am not saying I know this is how things worked out. I am saying that we do not have to assume there is a contradiction. We have pieces of the whole story. We do get here a clear representation of the consequences of his wickedness. Judas turned away from the role given him. He rejected Jesus. And in the end, his body becomes bloated and rots away in death. He leaves a very poor legacy.

So, after the side note, Peter then quotes two Psalms of David. The original occasion for both Psalms doesn't have to do with Jesus. It has to do with betrayal against David. David is speaking about personal betrayal he's experienced. Peter sees a prophetic meaning which also points to David's greater son, Jesus. And that's one of the ways prophecy works that you get an occasion, a psalm or a vision and you can see that there is an immediate application but there are also little details there that seem to be speaking to something else. Psalm 109 is more difficult to see as Messianic. The connection there is just between David and his later descendant, Jesus. Psalm 69, however, includes other references to the Messiah. We especially see the messianic context in verse 9, "zeal for your house has consumed me", in referring to Jesus clearing the temple and quoted in John 2:17, and then in verse 21 of Psalm 69, "For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink," which refers to the sour wine given to Jesus on the cross, that's in Matthew 27:34. Peter then takes Psalm 69:25 and he understands that "Let their camp be made desolate and no one dwell in their tents", he then applies

that to Judas. And then the Psalm 109 sounds even stronger, “Let another man take his office.” So, the place of Judas is desolate. He has given up everything. But another man is to take his place.

The qualifications stated by Peter for a replacement of Judas give us a sense of how these men understood their role as Apostles. I’ll comment first a little on the word itself. The word, “apostle”, that is used to describe these men in chapter 1 verse 2 and used then again here in 26. The word appears through Acts, 28 times. It keeps coming up. The Jewish use of an apostle retains an older meaning of the Greek word. It wasn’t used so much this way in the 1st century Greek times but it was used this way for Jews when they were translating into Greek, and they used it to mean, “one sent for a purpose.” It could be translated as a “delegate” or an “envoy.” The idea of “sent one” is prominent in the Gospel of John. Jesus is the ultimate Sent One having been sent from Heaven by the Father. After his resurrection, John records Jesus saying to the disciples in 20:21, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”

With all the biblical terms used for leadership in the early church, we have to ask, “How technical had the meaning become?” For example, with the word “deacon,” you may have a very specific idea of what a deacon in your church or denomination does, what their role is. There may be a set process by which a person becomes a deacon. But the word had a simple, common meaning in Greek at the time of the New Testament. It simply meant “slave” or “servant”. It wasn’t a specific role in the Christian community. And so, it could be “a slave to Jesus” or a “servant of the church in Corinth.” So now, when we read that word in the New Testament, we have to determine by context whether “deacon” is being used in a general sense, just as a servant of Jesus, or as a specifically defined role.

The same is true of the word, “apostle,” which can simply mean, “one who is sent as a witness.” And the word is not confined to the Twelve in the New Testament. James, the brother of Jesus seems included as an apostle by Paul in Galatians 1:19. Barnabas seems included in Acts 14:4. And Andronicus and Junia are referred to as apostles in Romans 16:7. A helpful way to distinguish between the two uses of the word, “apostle”, between a more general use and a more technical use is to think of capital “A” Apostle as the specially defined role described here by Peter, and lower case “a” apostle, simply referring to any Christian sent out in evangelistic ministry or as a representative of the church. So, capital “A” is the more technical sense with a more specific role in mind, and lowercase “a” is the more general sense of the word with a broader application.

The special, technical role of Apostle has qualifications provided here by Peter in verses 21-22.

²¹ Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— ²² beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these *must* become a witness with us of His resurrection.”

There are three qualifications here. The first qualification was that the new Apostle be a man, “Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us....” And there were certainly women qualified to serve as a witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus chose Mary Magdalene as his first witness on the morning of his resurrection. He first appeared to her and sent her to the Apostles. However, in the case of the Apostles, Jesus himself specifically chose twelve men to be his disciples. There were women available. Jesus chose men. And God has directed Peter to fill that role with a man. So that’s the first qualification.

The second qualification is that the new Apostle must “have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us – beginning with the baptism of John until the day He was taken up from us....” That qualification eliminates many of those present, since there only would have been a select number of disciples who were present at the very beginning, at the baptism of John, all the way through to the ascension. This man must be one who has personally seen the

actions of Jesus and who has heard Jesus' teaching over this considerable span of time. That implies that they've had this full experience of Jesus and that they also have a persevering character, they stuck with Jesus.

The third qualification is understood by the primary responsibility of the role, "one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." It has already been stated that the man must have been with Jesus up to the ascension. He will have seen and heard from Jesus after the resurrection. He is more than a witness to the truth that Jesus was raised from the dead. We can serve as that kind of witness. You can witness to the truth of the resurrection. You can tell people about that. This man must have seen Jesus with his own eyes as having been raised from the dead. He was an "eyewitness" witness.

The qualifications for this role support the responsibility of the role. The Apostles are witnesses to Jesus as the Messiah sent from God who died and rose again. The Apostles are also guardians of New Covenant teaching. Luke will say that believers devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching. The New Testament will be composed either by Apostles or by servants of Jesus who have a special relationship with an Apostle. Think of Mark's connection to Peter or Luke's connection to Paul. The Apostles are the source that God uses to guard and produce New Testament teaching.

Considering other potential Apostles such as Andronicus and Junia mentioned in Romans 16:7, with their Latin names they were certainly not among Jesus' disciples from his baptism to ascension, they did not see Jesus on earth after he rose from the dead, and Junia is a woman's name. She performed the role of lowercase "a" apostle. She was a sent one, likely doing the work of an evangelist or of a missionary. But neither Junia nor Andronicus qualified for the role of capital "A" Apostle, the technical sense of Apostle mentioned here. And that is also true of anyone who claims that title in our day. If anyone is getting the sense that they have the same authority and role as one of the original Apostles, that's a very strong claim and it goes against the qualifications that Peter set out here. They may be an apostle in some more general sense, as one sent into ministry. Many Christian workers are "sent ones," lowercase apostle. But they are certainly not Apostle in the sense that is being used right here.

Someone might look to Paul as an exception, since he was not with Jesus from baptism through ascension. So, what do we think about that? And we would have to admit that that's exactly what we think about that. He is an exception. He is a special exception to the rule. And in fact, he proves the rule in that he was one untimely born, he was added in later. I would argue that he did meet the third requirement, seeing Jesus as one raised from the dead, even though he wasn't there at the appearances of Jesus that occurred from the resurrection to the ascension. He had a very special experience with Jesus on the road to Damascus, where Jesus chose to reveal himself to Paul and give him this special call. Jesus made him an exception. And so along with the other Twelve he becomes a witness to the resurrection of Jesus, and also a guardian and communicator of New Covenant teaching.

In selecting a replacement of Judas, the community lands on two men, "Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias." And we don't know anything about them from the Gospels. And they may have been the only two qualified here. Or the disciples may have considered other qualities. Maybe there were other potential choices and the disciples thought about, well do they have an ability to teach? What's the consistency of their character? Do they show a genuine concern for others? We don't know what additional factors may have led to the naming of just these two. But however it happened, they came down to two.

And the Apostles don't want to declare the successor of Judas as though it were their decision. They did not want to vote. Just as Jesus chose them, they want God to choose the replacement. In fact, they believed that God had already chosen a successor, so they asked that God reveal him. "And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles."

We do not know much about this, either: the drawing of lots. It was a practice reported in a rare number of occasions in the Old Testament. We can imagine there being two colored stones in a jar and one gets poured out, and that indicates this guy versus that guy. Who knows how it was done exactly. The intention was that it be an act of faith by which those gathered trusted God to make the final decision between two very good options.

A significant question for us to ask is whether we ought to do this. Is the report of the drawing of lots is provided here in a descriptive capacity or a prescriptive capacity? That is going to become an important distinction for us in interpreting different things we read in Acts. Luke is describing actual events so that we might be aware of what happened. But he is also providing for us exhortation through the narrative on how to live the Christian life. The challenge for us is understanding when the narrative is only descriptive and when it is also prescriptive.

If the drawing of lots is only descriptive, then it is an example of how the Apostles expressed faith in a particular situation. You know, it's just describing for us what happened and how they did it. It's not telling us to do it. If the drawing of lots is prescriptive, then we are not only to take it as a description of how things really happened, we ought to also apply it to our own decision-making process in our Christian communities.

This particular example of drawing lots has not been picked up by many Christian movements or churches, though I do know one example. The early Moravian missions movement used lots to affirm the selection of missionaries. A piece of paper drawn at random would read "yes", "no", or "maybe." Though they took it as prescriptive, or at least as a potential way to do things. But most simply take it as descriptive, it's just deciding how they did it. And the issue of whether or not to cast lots is probably not a burning issue for you, it's not something you are struggling with. It is, however, a good example of a challenge inherent to the interpretation of biblical narrative. And it's good to think about it now, before we get to some of those burning issues. "This is what they did. Is it also what we are to do?" The challenge is perhaps more real to us in Acts than in the Old Testament narrative, since Acts is closer to us. It is narrative about churches. This is New Covenant stuff. Are we supposed to do things the way they did things? And we're going to have to develop some sound principles as we go to help us interpret and apply the narrative sections of the book of Acts to our lives and to our Christian communities.

To summarize what we have here, Luke has reported for us two ways the small Christian community prepared for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They devoted themselves to prayer, and they replaced the missing Apostle.

But why did God lead Peter to replace Judas and why did Luke report on it? I believe the replacement of the twelfth disciple was required by the prophecy quoted by Peter that another would take his place. I also believe that God intends for us to understand this special responsibility of the Apostles to communicate and guard the teaching of the New Covenant established by Jesus. They would both give witness to what they saw and heard in Jesus, and God would use them to further develop New Covenant teaching as prophets in their own right. Eventually, from them and their close associates through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the books of the New Testament would be produced. The story that follows will be one grounded in Apostolic teaching. Though interestingly, it will not be a story about the Acts of the Apostles, the traditional title notwithstanding.

We need to, in conclusion, turn to that question. This naming of the eleven Apostles in a list and telling of the replacement of the twelfth would be really a decent way to start a book about the Acts of the Apostles. But is that what this book is about?

Is Acts Really a Book about the Apostles?

I want to speak briefly on this question to introduce the structure of Acts that is going to guide our study. When we read through Acts, we really only see the acts of the one of these Apostles, and that is Peter. Even then, the book will be more about Paul than about Peter. But the Acts of the Apostles is not a book about the Apostles. This is not because the Apostles did not do anything.

James, the brother of John, was a leader of standing in the church of Jerusalem. And for this, Acts 12:2 reports that Herod had him put to death by the sword. His death is the only one recorded in the New Testament. We depend on church tradition to tell us about the rest of the Apostles. Thomas is said to have become a missionary to Persia and Germania. He was killed in Judea with a spear. Simon was said to have taken the Gospel to North Africa and Britannia. He was crucified. Judas, also called Thaddeus, took the Gospel to Mesopotamia. He was crucified at Edessa. Bartholomew witnessed in India and Armenia, was crucified, and beheaded. Andrew witnessed to Scythians and Saxons. He was also crucified in Edessa. Matthew served as a missionary to Parthia and Ethiopia where he was killed with a spear. Matthias, who we met in this chapter, was stoned in Jerusalem and then beheaded. Peter witnessed in Asia Minor and was crucified in Rome. Philip served in Phrygia was crucified and stoned. And the other James, of whom we hear very little, was said to have served in Egypt where he too was crucified. Very dangerous calling, this being an Apostle.

I imagine there is some embellishment in this record by people very much wanting to claim that the Gospel came to them through a specific Apostle. But there also tends to be a lot of truth involved in the early records of church history. I do know that this is a story I would love to hear. How awesome would it be to have a record of the ministries of the Twelve as they were sent out by God to take the Gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the world! Don't you hope we get to hear that story in Heaven? It would be awesome!

Observing closely the text of Acts we find that the title, "Acts of the Apostles," only stands if we mean Acts of the two Apostles, Peter the Apostle to the Jews and Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. As we begin to consider the makeup of the book, three factors provide for us a structure of Acts.

The first comes from the key verse Acts 1:8 with the assertion that the Apostles will be witnesses to Jesus "in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the remotest part of the earth." The geographic and ethnic spread from Jerusalem provides a guide through the book. The story is going to move from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and then out to the Gentiles.

The second structural factor is that the book divides into two halves. The first half is 1:1-12:24 and the second half is 12:25-28:31. Peter's witness to Jesus dominates the first half whereas Paul's witness to Jesus dominates the second half.

The third structural factor is Luke's use of summary statements. There are five summaries creating six sections. To give you an example, the first summary in 6:7 is this:

The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

If you'd like to mark these in your Bible, the summaries occur in 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5 and 19:20. The five summary statements give us six separate sections. Luke has grouped the events in each section both artistically and theologically. And we are going to consider the arrangement of each section as we go.

Getting into this series, my primary source for what I'm teaching comes from my own observation of the book of Acts. But of course, I've been influenced along the way and I do have places I go for help.

I am reading David Gooding's study, *True to the Faith: The Acts of the Apostles: Defining and Defending the Gospel*. And he is my primary source, challenging me to think about what Luke is communicating through his arrangement of the material. So, you'll get some of David Gooding.

I am also using F. F. Bruce's *New International Commentary* on Acts and John Pohill's *New American Commentary* on Acts to check my observations and to gain some technical insights. I had no idea how long a Sabbath's day was so I checked the commentary. That's just to be transparent so you know some of the sources I'm using.

Though we have to recognize that Acts is not the story we might think it is based on the title, we do not want to diminish the story that could be written about the many acts of each Apostle. Acts 2:43 says, "Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles." I am sure the report of the miracles, and teaching, and trials, and successes, and adventures of the Apostles is a fascinating story. It is just not this story. This is another story. And understanding that story is our goal as we go through this present series, *Interpreting the Acts of the Apostles*.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 1:12-26. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?

2. What do you know about this gathered community of 120? What is their recent history? How would you describe them, both based on what you see here in the text and from what you know about the ministry of Jesus? What might they be thinking and feeling?

(Feel free to use your imagination, within reasonable limits, to think about this early community. Just keep in mind a distinction between what is clear in the text and what might be true.)

3. When have you devoted yourself to pray in advance of a momentous event in your life or the life of your church? What is something coming up in your life that you would consider devoting yourself to prayer in preparation?

4. What qualifications were required by Peter for potential replacements of Judas? What is the significance of each qualification?

5. Is the title *Acts of the Apostles* an appropriate title for this book? Why or why not?

6. Considering again the last question of the last lesson, if this book is not a detailed record of the Acts of the Apostles, then what is the purpose of this book? And why did Luke choose to communicate acts done primarily by Peter and Paul? And why did Luke choose these specific acts done by Peter and Paul and not other acts?

(You may not be able to give decisive answers to these questions now at the beginning of your study of Acts, but it is good to think about the intention of the author as you study, so try to come up with some possible answers to these questions which you can refine later.)

Lesson 3: Acts 2.1-21 Pentecost and the Holy Spirit

Introduction

The birth of the Church? The cross or Pentecost? Pentecost is not the moment that divides the ages. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, those three days are the critical moment that distinguish the Old Covenant from the New Covenant. More than that, the cross stands as a towering banner, dividing all of human history between the period before God died for us and the period after God had died for us.

We cannot elevate Pentecost above or even to the same level as the cross. Pentecost could not happen without the cross. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ answers the most critical of Old Testament questions, “How does God overcome the curse of death justice demands for the rebellion of Adam and Eve?” Or in other words, “How does holy fire burn on a dry bush without consuming it? How does a holy God enable the possibility of relationship with sinful people?”

This is the first question of Covenant. How can I be seen as acceptable or righteous in the sight of God? I have addressed the two questions of Covenant extensively in earlier podcasts, especially in the Romans and Pentateuch series.

The first question asks, “How are we deemed acceptable before a holy and just God?” The biblical answer is consistent throughout. We are made acceptable 100% through his grace. Old Testament believers looked ahead to the event that would secure salvation. We look back. The cross is that event. Jesus died in our place. When we place our faith in him as Lord and Savior, his death pays the wages for our sin. We are declared just: justified by a gift of grace which we receive through faith.

A second question follows that first question. “Now that I am in relationship with God based 100% on grace received through faith, how then shall I live?” This question does not remain the same throughout the Bible. God’s moral nature does not change. So, there is a consistent moral vision through the Bible. That does not change. But other facets of covenant are different. Abraham lived according to the Covenant of promise he received. Israelites lived according to the covenant of Law communicated through Moses. Now, after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has instituted a New Covenant. We live according to the New Covenant, with a different set of expectations that govern the second question, “How then shall we live?” We not only ask, “How then shall we live now that we are in relationship with God by grace through faith?” But we ask, “How then shall we live now that we are in a relationship with God by grace through faith under the New Covenant?”

How do the people of God live differently after the cross than the people of God who lived before the cross?

Considering this second question, I am now ready to make a strong claim about Pentecost. While not the central, critical moment of salvation history, the coming of the Holy Spirit is a necessary moment in salvation history to enable the new wines skin we call, the New Covenant. The New Covenant of grace as a guide for how we ought to live out our relationship with God would not be possible apart from this new reality of the Holy Spirit indwelling believers. Something incredibly new takes place at Pentecost that gives birth to a new kind of community.

We do not want to diminish the importance of Pentecost for the New Covenant people of God nor do we want Pentecost to overshadow the central importance of the cross.

Is Pentecost the birth of the Church? While we should probably consider the whole fifty-day period from the crucifixion to Pentecost as our watershed moment, I think we can say, “Yes, what we are witnessing at Pentecost really is the birth of the New Covenant community that we call, the Church.”

We have a community of Jesus' followers already formed and waiting. They are waiting because Jesus told them to wait. An essential piece is not yet in place. They are not to begin their mission of witness until the Spirit comes. At Pentecost they will be empowered with a new experience distinctive to this New Covenant. Something new is truly coming into being.

Acts chapter 2 can be divided up into three parts. In verses 1-13 we have the miraculous wonder of the Holy Spirit filling this community of believers. Then in the middle section, 14-41 we have teaching from Peter explaining what is going on. And in 42-47 the chapter ends with a summary description of this New Covenant community.

In this lesson, we will address the miraculous event, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the first part of Peter's speech. In our next lesson we will address the rest of Peter's teaching and the summary description of the new community at the end of the chapter.

The Miracle of Pentecost

So we start with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-13.

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. ⁵ Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ "And how is it that we each hear *them* in our own language to which we were born?" ⁹ "Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our *own* tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." ¹² And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others were mocking and saying, "They are full of sweet wine."

When the Holy Spirit came, the Holy Spirit came! There is sound like a mighty, rushing wind. In Zagreb we live on a hill. And when the wind blows down at night down that hill, the building shakes and the roof rattles and there's a whistling noise. And you can't sleep all night, it gets so bad. These men were familiar with that kind of powerful winds swooshing down the mountainside across the Sea of Galilee. It is a mighty sound, like a hurricane. The Spirit comes with sound and with sight. Tongues of fire fan out and rest on each person. The word, "tongue", is a play on words. It doesn't look like the tongue in your mouth. The tongue of fire is a flame. But it connects with tongues of speech that come. So, a tongue of fire, tongue of speech, it's a play on words. And so, this means that there is a flame resting on each person. So, the Spirit comes with sound and sight and speech. This is a personal manifestation of the Spirit moving each individual member of the community to say something, to speak out in a way that cannot be explained apart from the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit. They don't just speak. They speak in languages that they can't know.

And this miraculous wonder is full of symbolism, just starting with the fact that this is the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Pentecost is not a Christian word. Pentecost was a word for the Feast of Weeks.

The Feast of Pentecost

In the Old Testament festival calendar, three feasts invited all Jews to travel to Jerusalem. The presence of Jewish men was required at these three feasts. The feast of Unleavened Bread came in

the first month of the year. This holy week began with the Passover meal though, by the first century, the whole week could be referred to as Passover. So, either Unleavened Bread or Passover. The Feast of Weeks occurred seven sabbaths and a day after the end of Passover week. Seven weeks, that's seven times seven plus one is fifty, so the Feast of Weeks also began to be called in Greek, "Pentecost," which literally means "fiftieth". The third feast, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, took place half-way through the year in the seventh month.

The Biblical directions for all three feasts indicated that they were celebrations of God's provision. Passover celebrated the barley harvest. Pentecost celebrated the wheat harvest. The Feast of Booths celebrated the grape harvest and later grains. And then, in addition to giving thanks for the harvest, both Passover and Booths, the first and the last, provided an opportunity to remember some aspects of God's historic deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The Feast of Unleavened Bread begun with the Passover meal, reminded the Jews how the initial escape from Egypt occurred after the tenth plague, when the angel of death passed over. At the Feast of Booths, families built booths and spent the night in them to remember God watching over Israel as they wandering forty years in the wilderness, before finally entering the Promised Land.

Unlike Passover and Booths, the Feast of Pentecost was not originally designed to remember some Old Testament event. Originally, it was purely just a harvest celebration, a thanks to God for his provision. But well before the time of Christ, the Jewish festival calendar had begun to use Pentecost to remember, to celebrate the birth of the nation when God gave the law of Moses at Mount Sinai. And this development of the cycle makes a lot of sense. So, you start your year in the first month, with the Passover and celebrating the great deliverance from Egypt. Then, fifty days later, at Pentecost you celebrate the cutting of covenant at Mount Sinai, the actual getting of the Law. And then in the seventh month, with Booths celebrates God's provision through the years of wandering. So, each year you remember these events chronologically, beginning with Passover, and leaving Egypt, and getting to Sinai, and receiving the Law, and then God's provision through the forty years of wandering.

In this period from Passover to Pentecost, that was historically a shorter period of traveling from Egypt to Mount Sinai - the long forty years comes later - so there's this sense of historic expectation that people came out of Israel, and they're waiting for God to communicate to them his expectations, while the Jewish cycle encourages that same sense of anticipation, you have Passover and then the Week of Unleavened Bread, so that's a major festival, and then you're counting off seven weeks and a day to celebrate Pentecost. So, there's this repeated sense of anticipation towards that moment of celebration when Israel truly became a nation. At Sinai, with receiving the Covenant, they become a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." They have a covenant. They have a Law. And they heard the fearful sound of God's voice. And they saw his holy presence as fire and smoke on the mountain.

And so now we look at the time of Christ and we see, what a great sense of timing God has in using these symbolic feast days of the Old Covenant to establish the New Covenant. At that remembrance of Passover, the delivery from Egypt, now we are remembering even a greater deliverance, with the death of Christ freeing us not from oppression of some nation but freeing us from the oppression of slavery to our own sin. They had symbolically put blood on the doorposts of their homes so that the angel of wrath would pass over. And now we see that Jesus Christ, he's not a symbol: he is the Lamb of God; he is the sacrifice, the god-man dying in our place so that his blood would cover us, would protect us from the wrath of God, because God looks at us and he sees the penalty has been paid. Justice is satisfied. So, we had a great deliverance at Passover, and then we have this period of anticipation, this waiting for fifty days. And at Pentecost, again, with a sound, the mighty sound that

was at Sinai, and with fire and smoke, just as it was on the mountain, God gives birth to the New Covenant people. He speaks his word not just through the one man, Moses, but he speaks his word through all the individual members of the community gathered together, and the result is not going to be one geopolitical nation, but it's going to be first fruits from all the nations.

The Nature and Effect of the Miracle

Now, focus is going to turn toward the Twelve in verse 14, when Peter takes his stand with them. But we have good reason to believe that the miraculous speaking in tongues came forth from all the members of the community. Not just the Twelve disciples. The chapter began by telling us they were all together in one place. This likely includes the women followers mentioned in chapter 1, and the family of Jesus mentioned, and quite probably most of the 120 that were most recently mentioned. So, after saying they were all in one place, the text goes on to tell us that the tongues of flame rested on "each one of them" and that they were "all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues." So, we catch this emphasis is on "all together", "each one", "all filled." That emphasis is going to be confirmed by Peter's quote of the prophet Joel, that the Spirit of God is promised for all members of the community, male and female, everybody, not for some elite class in the community.

The Holy Spirit is manifested by wind, that mighty sound, and by fire, but most importantly, by speech. A consistent theme found in the Old Testament is that our God is the God who speaks. While the idols are dumb, our God speaks. You remember the prophets of Baal called out in a great frenzy, but they could not get one word out of Baal. God took Elijah to Mount Sinai. A great wind roared by, but God was not in the wind. Fire came, but God was not in the fire. Then God spoke. Unlike the pagan gods, God is not the phenomenon. He is not fire. He is not storm. Those things might represent his presence, but our God is the God who speaks, and the world falls silent.

The Holy Spirit is not an energy source. The Spirit is not a phenomenon. He is not fire or wind. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. He manifests himself most importantly through the inspired speech that's coming forth from the gathered believers.

The Holy Spirit gives them prophetic words. And in this case, the Spirit miraculously communicates those words in the dialects represented in that multicultural crowd. This is why they ask, "Aren't these all Galileans?" They expect to hear Aramaic with a country Galilean drawl. How can Galileans speak with clear accent, each person's mother tongue? I'm hearing the language that speaks directly to my heart. And this is a powerful moment at the beginning of the birth of the Church. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for every nation. There's going to be something about the Gospel that frees it from one culture. You don't have to become Jewish to accept the Gospel. The Gospel is going to come to you in your own heart language. It is for you, and you, and you, and you: for every culture.

The people gathered are both Jews and proselytes. Jews lived spread out to the West all over the Roman Empire and to the East all over the Persian Empire. They are the diaspora, the Greek word for "dispersed" or "scattered all over." Proselytes are non-Jews who have begun the process to be become as though they are Jewish. They are more serious than God-fearers. We'll hear that term, "God-fearers." The God-fearers want to worship Yahweh. The proselytes are even more involved in the process of being initiated into Judaism so that they might keep the Law of Moses in full. Pentecost, as one of the three main feasts of presence, causing the swelling of Jerusalem with visitors from across the empire, both Jews and proselytes. And we also have to recognize that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, so we don't know how many of these people actually live in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is, in that sense, multicultural. I mean, it's primarily Jewish, but Jews from all over, so a lot of these could be residents of Jerusalem, but then also, we assume, a lot of them came for the Feast. And we don't really know how many are visitors and how many live here.

What we do know is that we have a microcosm of the surrounding world. You know, if Jerusalem is the center, these people are on the map all around Israel. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia. That's pointing up to the Persian Gulf and then up the two rivers, Tigris and Euphrates. And then we have mentioned Judea. That's kind of our central and that's kind of circling to the West. And then we move on to Asia Minor with Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia. These are all Roman provinces of modern-day Turkey. Then we jump the Mediterranean and we come down to North Africa and we're continuing West from Egypt and over to Libya and the surroundings of Cyrene. And then we jump the sea again and we go up to Rome before coming back to Crete, just to the West of Israel, and Arabia just to the East.

All of these Jews and proselytes had come with anticipation to Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost. These are holy days. They've come to worship. They've come to hear about God, to praise God, to come to see things. The city is swelled, it's packed with visitors. It is no surprise that the sound and light and speech fallen on this community spills into the streets quickly and gathering this crowd. And it's the third hour in the morning is around 9 am. It's not that early. And so, the people are ready to gather and they're asking, "What's going on at the Feast?"

So, what do these gathered Jews and proselytes from all over find when they hear the noise and they start joining the crowd? They are astonished. They become perplexed. "What's going on. We hear all these different people speaking in our own tongues! And they're speaking about the mighty deeds of God."

This gathering creates two biblical images in my mind. First, I can't help but think of Isaiah 2:2.

² Now it will come about that in the last days
The mountain of the house of the LORD
Will be established as the chief of the mountains,

That's talking about Zion, the mountain in Jerusalem.

And will be raised above the hills;
And all the nations will stream to it.

The second image I have as I think of our key verse Acts 1:8 that when the power of the Holy Spirit comes on the apostles they will be witnesses - they will speak of the mighty deed of God concerning Jesus, "in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the remotest part of the earth."

God's commitment to all the peoples of the earth begins immediately, right here, with the birth of the Church. The proclamation of the mighty deeds of God could have happened in Aramaic and practically everybody would have understood. Add in a little Greek and you've got everyone. God began much more inclusively than that. He spoke to the heart, to the culture of each person gathered. The first message inspired by the Holy Spirit on this Pentecost morning is a message for the nations.

Now this is not the streaming into Zion that Isaiah foresaw. And it is not the going to the remotest part of the earth that Jesus proclaimed. This is not the fulfillment yet of either vision. This is a first fruits right at the beginning, signaling that one of the new realities of the New Covenant people of God is a multicultural inclusion of disciples from all nations. This is where we are headed. That is integral to the commission of Jesus Christ. All nations. This is not the old wineskin, where one nation is central and dominates. This is all nations. That's the scope. Not black separated from white separated from Latino separated from Asian. One Gospel for all peoples. That's the plan. It's not going to come naturally to the disciples. They are going to struggle with the plan. Just like it is still not natural to the majority of Christians in our day. It is much more natural to reach people like us in our place than it is to reach people different than us or to value the spread of the Gospel in different

places. And yet, this is the Good News. This is the Great Commission. This is the plan. “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Acts 1:8 does not say that when the Holy Spirit comes, you may gather in committee and, you know, decide whether you want to be witnesses or not to the barbarians. What do you want to do? That’s not what it says. It says, “When the Holy Spirit comes you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and in the remotest parts of the earth.” It is not “you may.” It’s not “if you want to.” It is “you will.” There is a sovereign hand of God that is going to be resisted by the will of his people, but the spread of the Gospel is going to happen. The Spirit will ensure that the Gospel goes forth to the nations.

Peter’s Speech at Pentecost, part 1

Whenever something miraculous or supernatural happens, there are always going to be those who see and wonder, “What does that mean?” They are going to be asking, “How should we interpret these things?” There are also going to be those who mock and quickly discount, like the ones in this crowd who jeer. You know, “They are just full of sweet wine and they’re all drunk.”

Peter engages the mockers. The text says that he takes his stand with the Eleven. And he raises his voice to be heard by the crowd and he speaks. The first part of his speech has to do with the miraculous sign now taking place. Peter is going to explain what is going on. That’s the part of Peter’s speech I am going to address in our second half of this lesson. We’ll look at the rest of the speech in our next lesson. So right now we’re going to look at Acts 2:14-21.

¹⁴ But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: “Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. ¹⁵ “For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is *only* the third hour of the day; ¹⁶ but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ ‘AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,’ God says, ‘THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; ¹⁸ EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT And they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ ‘AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. ²⁰ ‘THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. ²¹ ‘AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.’

Now, Peter knows how to preach. I really don’t know if Peter meant his audience to smile when he began. “Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is *only* the third hour of the day...” That’s 9 am. The implication is that if it were 9 pm then maybe, you know, this big crowd at Pentecost here for the feast. Then you might expect we’ve got a rowdy group of drunken men.

Whether Peter said that with a smile or whether he was just straight serious, I don’t know, but he sets up the speech by countering the misconception of some of the members in the crowd. And that’s going to be a form of address throughout the book of Acts. You know, there’s going to be people misunderstanding Christianity, and then someone, an Apostle, usually Peter, Paul, or maybe another believer, stands up to give a little speech to provide a correct perspective.

It is a good way to draw in the crowd. “I hear what you guys are saying. You’re saying they are drunk. Well, they are not drunk. That makes no sense at this time of day. Let me tell you what is going on.” You can imagine the crowd kind of focusing in on Peter. “Yeah, tell us, this is - we’re perplexed. We have no idea what is happening here. Tell us what’s going on.”

And then, having grabbed their attention Peter seamlessly begins his quote of Joel. “And it shall be in the last days, God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.’”

This full quote is from Joel 2:28-32a. The translation included here by Luke is from the Septuagint, the standard Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

There are two things to always check when a New Testament author quotes the Old Testament. First, what is the context of the quote? And second, what did the New Testament author add or change?

Peter's Use of Joel – the Context

You check the context because New Testament authors can expect listeners to recognize the wider story that surrounds the quote. For example, what if I were just to say to you, “My precious. My precious.” And that’s the only quote I give you. What do you think of? Half of you just thought of a consumed little soul who’s obsessed with possessing a golden ring that, in fact, possesses him. The quote brings in this whole story. Or if I say, “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.” What do you see? It brings in the whole story of the crucifixion. Just getting that little quote, and then you’re quite likely thinking of Jesus hanging on the cross, and maybe you’re thinking of the soldiers casting lots below him. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” It’s a quote that brings in context. And we should check for that whenever a New Testament author quotes, that they could assume that these Jews and these proselytes, that they recognize quotes from the Old Testament, and they start thinking about the surrounding context.

In Peter’s quote of Joel, this short prophecy describes the devastation of the land of Israel by a locust plague. And the locusts become a metaphor for an invading army from the North that will devastate Israel in the day of the Lord. And it will be a just punishment on Israel for turning away from God. The main idea of Joel is a call to repentance. “‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘Return to me with all your heart...(Joel 2:12).’” The context fits exactly where Peter is going to go with his speech. The crowd of men and women of this generation of Jews, right here, right now in Jerusalem, rejected and crucified the Messiah. They have turned from God and deserve his wrath. Peter is going to call. He is going to say, “It’s not too late. Yet even now repent of your sin and turn back to God.” He is going to tell them the same thing that Joel told the people in his day.

That’s really going to get to the second half of Peter’s talk. Even more importantly for this first part, Joel is pointing ahead, past the day of God’s judgment to the day of God’s restoration. He is saying there will be this judgement of an invading army, but there will be time of refreshment after that. And Joel is looking ahead towards the New Covenant and the outpouring out of the Holy Spirit that was foreseen by Moses and Jeremiah before him, that God is going to do something new. The context of Joel is both a call to repentance and also this vision of a new age that is going to come after.

Peter's Use of Joel – the Changes

So, we first pay attention to the Old Testament context. When we get an Old Testament quote like Joel, we go in and we read around it to see what’s the context, because the author is importing more than just the quoted words. We then pay attention to how the author changes the quote, because this so often happens. Again, New Testament preachers, and you have to think of them more as preachers maybe than writers, can expect their audience to know Scripture. And since their audience knows the text, additions or changes to the texts - they’re not trying to trick people by giving them the wrong quote; they assume you know the right quote and they add things to embellish the quote, and it causes the listeners to perk up. The intent is not to change the meaning of the text, but to clarify, to develop it, or to apply it to the contemporary context.

And there are three changes here. The first two are primarily stylistic, and the third is a development. Peter switches the order of young men and old men. That seems to just be a style choice that allows “sons and daughters” to flow right into “young men,” and then we move to “old men.” He also adds, at the end of verse 18, a repetition of the phrase, “they shall prophesy.” This is also a style choice drawing attention to the idea of prophesy by everyone. We’ll talk about that when we get there. The most significant change is at the beginning of the quote. This is where Peter adds something that is not there. In his prophecy, Joel does not start with the phrase, “In the last days...” Joel simply says, “And it will come about...” Peter adds “In the last days...” It’s in accordance with Joel’s vision, it’s just not the words Joel uses but it adds clarity to what is happening right now in Jerusalem. We are in the

middle of a transition from one era to the other. What you are witnessing, men and women of Israel, is the beginning of the “last days.” We have crossed the bridge from the Old to something New. These are the last days.

Peter’s Use of Joel – The Pouring out of the Holy Spirit

Now, looking at the text itself, two features stand out in Joel’s prophecy concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is poured out on all the people of God. “I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND.” The word is not literally “mankind.” The Greek word is literally “flesh.” It creates a contrast with Spirit. The Spirit is poured out on all flesh. The translation is good, “mankind”, better to say “humankind” or, “all people” because that is where Joel is going to go with it. This is not just for men. This is men and women. The Spirit is poured out on all people. Look how he develops that.

AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY,
AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS;
EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN,

“Sons and daughters,” that is men and women. “Young men and old men,” that is regardless of age, young and old. “Even on my bondslaves”, which referred probably just to Israel. They considered themselves as God’s slaves or servants as a whole nation. But in this New Covenant context it probably also is intended to cause to think about slave versus free. So, we have sons and daughters, they’re the “free”, and we have slaves, the bond servants. And then we get the reassertion of male and female, bond slaves but men and women.

These verses in Joel end with the repetition, “I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT,” and then Peter adds, “And they shall prophesy,” which creates a nice balance to the way this text begins and this text ends.

And this is the second feature that stands out. The first was that the Spirit is poured out on male, female, young, old, slave and free. The second is the emphasis on prophesy. The pouring out of the Spirit leads to a recognition of and communication of truth from God. The Spirit speaks through the community of believers. That is what has just happened as God poured out the Holy Spirit on the gathered community of 120. They are filled with the Spirit in order to speak truth about the mighty deeds of God. And that is emphasized with the repetition of the idea that they shall prophesy.

Peter’s Use of Joel – The Sign of Messiah

Now, Peter could have just ended there to explain what was going on, but he keeps going with a few more verses from Joel.

¹⁹ ‘AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE
AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW,
BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE.
²⁰ ‘THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS
AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD,
BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME.
²¹ ‘AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.’

I think Peter kept going because he wanted really to get to the end, “‘AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED’”, because that is going to transition him into what he really wants to talk about, which is Jesus. That’s going to be the rest of his talk. But to get there, he has got to refer to the wonders above and the signs below. We could understand this prophesy of wonders above and signs below as having happened between the time of the crucifixion and this day of Pentecost. The signs below of blood and fire and smoke could refer to the blood of Christ and the fire and smoke of the Spirit. You know, as the tongues of fire rest on each one of them, like at Mount Sinai. And the wonders in the sky above could refer to the Sun going dark at the crucifixion. The Sun went dark. And maybe to a blood-red harvest Moon during this period of harvest.

But we don't have to read the prophecy of Joel as all happening at the same time. We don't have to understand these wonders and signs as coming true right now. It is all part of the same age, but the pouring out of the Spirit could occur at the beginning of the age and the Sun going dark and Moon appearing as blood could happen at the end of the age. And this is just one of the challenges of Biblical prophecies. For the prophets, looking into the far future is very much like looking at a mountain from a great distance. And you see what looks like one peak, but the closer you get, the more details stand out and you start to see that what looked like one large peak is really many peaks with valleys between.

And the prophets are often given the visions that bring everything together. But now that we have the perspective of time coming very close to these events, we see that, okay, Israel returned from exile, but then there was some time before the rebuilding of the Temple, and then there was quite a bit of time before the coming of the Messiah, and then there's a lot more time for the establishment of a New Heaven and New Earth. And so, what might come together in one prophetic vision, from our perspective of events we now see great valleys in-between the peaks. We see a first and second coming of the Messiah. That was not so clear to them. The Kingdom of the Christ has been inaugurated but the New Heaven and New Earth are not going to come until the end of the age. And personally, that's how I understand Joel's prophecy, that it's a conflation of this great age, and the pouring out of the Spirit initiates the age but the darkening of the Sun and the Moon to blood, those are going to happen at the second coming of Christ, and so it's separated by a valley of thousands of years.

And either way you look at it, the quote definitely fits Peter's aim. The fire and smoke at Pentecost and the darkened Sun at crucifixion, you know, that easily comes to mind with what he's quoting right here, whether that's the fulfillment, whether that's just suggestive of a future fulfillment, it does not really matter.

The story Luke is telling begins a new age. From this point on, the Holy Spirit will play a prominent and active role in the spread of the Church.

As Paul put it in Romans 7:6,

We have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

So, it's something new. As Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses..." The mission depends on the Holy Spirit.

While it is very tempting to take time now and discuss the things of the Spirit, the role of tongues, what does it mean to be filled with the Spirit; how about the baptism of the Spirit that was mentioned earlier in chapter 1; how does the Holy Spirit work in the lives of believers to give us this power that's promised? But this is all part of Luke's story that is just being introduced. So, we're not going to take time to address those questions now, but we are going to address them. We are just going to wait and see how Luke develops these things for us.

What is clear from Luke's report here is, that through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the Church is born in fire and Spirit. This is no longer the wineskin of the Old Covenant established at Mount Sinai. This is the wineskin of a New Covenant made possible by the cross of Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, and by the filling of the Holy Spirit. We cannot answer the second question of Covenant - how then shall we live? - we can't understand how to live for the Father in the grace of Jesus Christ without understanding the New Covenant work of the Holy Spirit. So, I'm really looking forward to what Luke has to show us about the Holy Spirit as the Book of Acts unfolds.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 2:1-13. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. According to the text, what was the nature of the miracle that happened at Pentecost? Who performed the miracle? What did they do? Who did they affect?
3. What significance comes from the fact that God chose to pour out the Spirit at this particular feast?
4. What significance and effect comes from the fact that the crowd represents Jews from all over the Roman and Persian lands?
5. Read the beginning of Peter's speech in Acts 2:14-21. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. What is Peter's objective with this part of his speech? How does the first part of the quote from Joel (Acts 2:17-18) accomplish this objective?
7. How does the second part of the quote from Joel (Acts 2:19-21) work to transition Peter into what he wants to talk about in the rest of his speech?
8. How do you explain the importance of Pentecost as a moment in salvation history? What promises are fulfilled? What reality is change? What is the relationship to the cross?

Lesson 4: Acts 2:22-47 Pentecost and Witness to Jesus

Introduction

Some crazy stuff is going on. Fire is resting on people without burning them up. The roaring sound of heavy wind blows through the building. Everyone talking at once in unharmonized cacophony. Men and women spilling out into the streets like an ecstatic drunken mob.

Except, not at all like an ecstatic drunken mob. There is no violence. There is no staggering around. What is going on? And as a crowd begins to gather at the scene, each individual begins to make sense of the noise. The speech is not unintelligible as it might have appeared at first. Each one hears a particular voice speaking directly to his heart or her heart in their own dialect, their mother tongue.

And they begin asking, what is this? What are they saying? They are speaking about the mighty works of God, and they're doing it in Greek, in Aramaic, in Persian, in Latin, in Egyptian which is weird, because they're all from Galilee. What does this mean? And then one voice rises above the crowd.

"Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is *only* the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel...(Acts 2:14b-16)"

Peter quotes from Joel to declare a new era. We have crossed from the Old to the New. These are the last days. What you are seeing is both a sign of the last days and an essential aspect of the New Covenant. This is the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the people of God to give us new hearts that we might live for God. Moses spoke of this new heart of New Covenant that the people of God might love the Lord with all their heart and soul (Deuteronomy 30:6). Jeremiah spoke of God putting his law in our hearts that the people of God might live for him (Jeremiah 31:33). And in John 14:16-31 Jesus connected the coming of the Holy Spirit with loving obedience of God.

All three prophecies promise that the Holy Spirit will have a powerful impact on the behavior of God's people. The Spirit motivates the heart out of love, enables a recognition of God's truth, and empowers the people of God to put that truth into practice.

That internal work of individual transformation comes into focus as we consider the new community that comes into being. There is another work of the Holy Spirit initially in focus at Pentecost. According to Joel, the Spirit will empower the members of the new community to prophesy. And according to Jesus the Spirit will empower them to prophesy about him. They will become his witnesses.

In the middle of the miraculous, the flames, the many languages, the people of God are proclaiming the mighty deeds of God. What mighty deeds are they talking about? If Peter's speech is an example, they are speaking of God's mighty deeds of salvation through the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. They are speaking of Old Testament promises being fulfilled in Jesus. Those are the mighty deeds Peter proclaims.

Jesus, in his teaching that night before his crucifixion, did not limit the work of the Spirit to the internal transformation of believers. That was the emphasis in John 14. But in John 16 the emphasis was on the Spirit's work in witness to the world. I am going to read a little longer section from that chapter in John because I believe Pentecost is an initial fulfillment of that promise. Listen to this. This is John 16:7-15.

⁷ "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. [That right there is amazing, isn't it? It is better for us that Jesus leaves earth, so that the Spirit might come work inside of us and empower witness to the world. It is better that he goes, so that the Spirit can come.] ⁸ And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; ¹¹ and concerning

judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. [The Spirit convicts the world, not us. We witness. The Spirit convicts.] ¹² I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. ¹³ But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. ¹⁵ All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose *it* to you.

In the mystery of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit willingly submits to the Son, just as the Son willingly submits to the Father. The Spirit does not come to bring focus onto himself but onto Jesus. While on earth, the miracles of Jesus led many to a false belief. They saw Jesus simply as a means to meet their needs. Jesus healed. Jesus fed. Jesus entertained. Jesus amazed. Sometimes the signs lead to a deeper knowledge of Jesus, to true faith. Sometimes not.

It is the same with the miraculous manifestation of the Spirit. The obvious problem is with the skeptics who scoff that these people are all drunk. That is clear unbelief. The more subtle problem comes with those who believe in the miraculous but are not led to faith in Jesus. If faith is all about what the Spirit can do for me or how the Spirit can make me feel, without challenging my moral behavior and pointing me to Jesus as my Savior, then my belief is not saving belief. Jesus said, “the Spirit will glorify me.” The Spirit points us to Jesus. That is the first test whether manifestations are from the Spirit. Do the miraculous signs serve to glorify Jesus, to quickly point us to the truth of who Jesus is?

That happened to this multitude gathered at Pentecost. They were initially attracted by wonders. As they crowded in, their ears began to hear a witness to the mighty deeds of God in their own language. Then Peter took his stand. He started by explaining the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit and immediately, with the prophecy of Joel, he turns attention from the Holy Spirit to Jesus.

In fact, Joel makes the transition for Peter. Here is the last verse from Joel in Acts 2:21, after speaking of the outpouring out of the Holy Spirit, “AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.” The Spirit of God is poured out and the people of God prophesy, so that people will see Jesus, turn to him in faith, and be saved.

Let’s look at how Peter develops this message in the rest of his speech and then we’ll consider the kind of community that begins to form in Jerusalem. The rest of the speech is in Acts 2:22-40.

Witness to Jesus

²² “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. ²⁵ “For David says of Him, ‘I SAW THE LORD ALWAYS IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, SO THAT I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN. ²⁶ ‘THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE; ²⁷ BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY. ²⁸ ‘YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.’ ²⁹ “Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ “And so, because he was a prophet and knew that GOD HAD SWORN TO HIM WITH AN OATH TO SEAT *one* OF HIS DESCENDANTS ON HIS THRONE, ³¹ he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID His flesh SUFFER DECAY. ³² “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. ³³ “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. ³⁴ “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, ³⁵

UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET.”³⁶ “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”³⁷ Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?”³⁸ Peter *said* to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.”⁴⁰ And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!”

Peter begins his witness with a set of claims. He then supports those claims with two Old Testament quotations, and he concludes by addressing the response of the crowd. Let’s break down the initial claims in verses 22-24.

Initial Claims (2:22-24)

First Peter identifies Jesus as a real man who is known by this generation of Jews and who was affirmed by God through miracles.

²² “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—

They had seen what Jesus had done. Peter is probably implying that God attested Jesus as Messiah, but he does not say that directly but that’s probably what he has meant, that God attested him. Peter then accuses this generation of crucifying Jesus, even though he had been affirmed by God. Peter brings together three players in the crucifixion in a very succinct sentence. God was involved, bringing good out of evil. You Jews present here right now were responsible. And you pressured the godless Romans, who became complicit by carrying out the crucifixion.

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.

That’s not the end, though.

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.

So, we have these claims. Jesus, the man, was put to death by you, the current generation of Jews in Jerusalem. And God raised Jesus from the dead. Those are the facts. Peter then quotes Psalm 16:8-11a to provide a biblical interpretation of the facts.

Supporting text #1 (2:25-33)

Luke uses the standard Greek translation for the quote, so it does not appear that Peter added or changed any of the phrasing. The context of this Psalm is a choice for life. That choice is set up as a choice between the God of Israel and the gods of the nations. That context fits great with this present moment as the Gospel of Peter will require the Jews present to choose between the God of Jesus Christ and a false Jewish god that would reject Jesus Christ. They are going to have to make a choice who is really God. In the Psalm, David chooses God, declaring, “Yahweh is the portion of my inheritance...I have set Yahweh before me continually.” Peter’s quote picks up with this desire to always be with God.

²⁵ For David says of Him, “I SAW THE LORD ALWAYS IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, SO THAT I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN.”²⁶ THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE;²⁷ BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.”²⁸ YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.”

The Psalm is spoken from the voice of David, but there is an indication that this Psalm is about someone other than David. Jewish interpretation recognized this as a Messianic Psalm looking ahead to the promised descendant of David. Peter agrees. In his speech, Peter explains the problem with seeing this Psalm as only about David. Verses 29-31,

²⁹ Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ And so, because he was a prophet and knew that GOD HAD SWORN TO HIM WITH AN OATH TO SEAT *one* OF HIS DESCENDANTS ON HIS THRONE, ³¹ he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID HIS FLESH SUFFER DECAY.

David does not fulfill the promise of the Psalm. We all know it because we know he is buried. His tomb is here. David is dead. Who is the Holy One that overcomes death? In verse 30 Peter quoted 2 Samuel 7:12 that God would “seat one of [David’s] descendants on his throne.” That’s a prophecy about the Messiah, the Son of David. The Holy One of Psalm 16 is that greater Son of David. And Peter identifies him as Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one whom death could not hold. Verses 32 and 33,

³² This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. ³³ Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.

Peter says very directly what he is a witness to. He is a witness to the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Peter has supported his initial claim that Jesus, the man, crucified by you, the people of this generation, was raised from the dead by God. Psalm 16 helps us understand those claims. Peter has also added three more claims. He has directly declared Jesus to be the Christ, which is the Greek word for, “Messiah.” He has declared that Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God. So not only raised but exalted. And he has declared that Jesus is the one who poured forth the Holy Spirit who is the source of these signs the crowd is now witnessing.

Peter then quotes a second supporting text. It’s the 1st verse of Psalm 110.

Supporting text #2 (2:34-36)

This is the most quoted Psalm in the New Testament. Peter simply follows Jesus’ own application of the text to himself. Here is how Jesus quoted the Psalm in Matthew 22:41-46.

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: ⁴² “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” They said to Him, “*The son of David.*” ⁴³ He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying, ⁴⁴ ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I PUT YOUR ENEMIES BENEATH YOUR FEET”’? ⁴⁵ “If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” ⁴⁶ No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.

Peter quotes the same text - Psalm 110:1 - that Jesus used to affirm that Jesus is Lord over David. This is how Peter said it. Verses 34-36,

³⁴ “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, ³⁵ UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET.”’” ³⁶ “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

This passage supports claim already made that Jesus is the Messiah and adds that he is more than Messiah. He is Lord, sitting in Heaven at the right hand of God.

Peter follows up these claims by coming back to the accusation he made in his opening statement. “This Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now if that is not bold, I don’t know what is. Just think about whom Peter is talking to. When Jesus told a crowd gathered in Jerusalem that they were slaves to sin, they picked up stones to kill him.

Eventually, they crucified him. I mean, just fifty days ago at the last feast in Jerusalem, a crowd just like the one Peter is talking to was crying out, “Crucify him. Crucify him.” And Peter stands up and tells them, “The one you crucified is the Messiah.” How is that going to end for Peter?

I will tell you what I think Peter is doing here with this accusation, “You crucified him,” why Peter doesn’t hold back. Peter is not inserting this accusation into his speech because he is getting back at the people for killing his Lord and friend Jesus. This is not stored-up hatred for these Jews in Jerusalem. He ended the Joel quote, “All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

They need to be saved. Saved from what? From the wrath of God. The penalty of sin is death. God is just. We are under a penalty of death because of sin. How can they be saved? By calling on the name of the Lord. But for this specific group of people, they have a very specific sin that prevents them from calling on the name of the Lord. We do not just go around telling every that they have crucified Jesus. And if we do, we don’t mean it literally. That is not one of the main points of our Gospel message. We tell them that they have sinned. And because of that sin they need a Savior. But this group of people is actually responsible for the crucifying Jesus. They crucified the Savior. They cannot be saved without repenting of that particular sin. Because if they don’t repent of that particular sin, they will not call on Jesus as Savior.

Peter is pointing to the heart of the matter for this particular generation of Jews in Jerusalem. You have got to change your mind about Jesus whom you crucified.

He is not shying away from their sin. You crucified the Messiah. Now, how are they going to respond? Are they going to pick up stones? Are they going to angrily reject Peter for shining light onto their sin? Are they going to reject him like they rejected Jesus? Are they going to crucify him? What is going to be the response of this crowd on this particular day in this particular place? Acts 2:37-41,

Response of the Crowd

³⁷ Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?”

Pierced to the heart? Calling the Apostles, brethren? But why are they pierced to the heart? It makes no sense. They heard Jesus teach time and time again. They saw Jesus do miracles - miracles that the Messiah was supposed to do. And they nailed him to a cross. They did not feel remorse then. They mocked him. They congratulated themselves.

But here, in this moment, they are the ones who are pierced. How? Is Peter a greater evangelist than Jesus?

Jesus said, “It’s going to be better for you if I go away because then I can send the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment.” The Spirit will convict the world of sin: the sin of not believing in Jesus. He will convict the world of righteousness: the righteousness of Jesus affirmed by God through the resurrection. And he will convict the world of judgement because the physical and spiritual rulers of the world are under judgment of falsely condemning Jesus.

The Spirit’s work of conviction in the world does not pierce every heart. But on this day the Spirit pierced thousands of hearts. And they cried out, “What shall we do?”

³⁸ Peter *said* to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.”

Repent and be baptized. Is that what we are to tell all people to do? This is our first Gospel sermon in Acts. We are going to look at several others. Peter’s words bring up the interpretation challenge I mentioned in an earlier lesson. Is this story merely descriptive, telling us what has happened? You know, this is just the way Peter shared the Gospel to these people? Or is it also prescriptive, telling us what we should do? Often the reality is a mix between the two. When we’re reading a narrative,

there are principles in Peter's speech that we should follow. But does that mean we should always do exactly as he did, using the same words? Should we be telling everybody, "You crucified Jesus?" It can't mean the same thing it meant for Peter because they literally crucified Jesus. Even if we mean it spiritually, we are changing what Peter was doing. You know that accusation was specific to his generation. So, do we call everyone to repent and be baptized or does that specific invitation apply only in this specific case?

As we look at more examples in Acts, we will be able to recognize patterns in the Apostle's witness that will help us recognize sound principles to follow in our own witness. I am going to consider here why Peter's words are appropriate for this situation. I'm going to leave the question of what we should do open for the moment until we have moved further through Acts and we get more examples to consider together. Right now, we're just going to consider Peter's call.

Let's consider the two calls to action separately, first repent and then be baptized.

The call to repent is literally a call to "change your mind." That is what the Greek word used here means, "change your mind." In the prophecy of Joel quoted earlier by Peter, the call to change one's mind was a call to change their mind about turning away from God and turning back to God. Change your mind about where you find life. Joel wrote, "Rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil." So, for Joel that change of mind was also expressed in the sense of turning back, turn away from that, change your mind about that, and turn to this.

In terms of the Gospel, faith in Jesus and repentance from sin can really be seen as two sides to the same coin. They are not the exact same thing, but they go together. All people have turned astray and go their own way. All people. We universally turn away from God in our heart and will, and we turn to other things to find life. To repent is to reject our false idols of worship and salvation and control - the things we've turned to - and to turn back, in our minds, to God. To turn back in our hearts to him as the one who truly deserves our worship and is able to give us life. We have to change our mind about our sin. But then we also need to believe in Jesus as the solution. You see, those are two slightly different things. Judas seems to have repented. He seems to have changed his mind about sin. He repented of his wicked act of betrayal. He went and threw the money back at the steps of the Temple. He turned from that sin. But he did not turn to Jesus in faith. His repentance led him to despair. Peter, on the other hand, turned from his denial and reaffirmed his faith in Jesus.

We can use either term alone, we can just say, "repent," or we can just say "believe," with the understanding that that single term implies both a change of mind about sin and trusting in Jesus. So, technically, we don't call people simply to repent. We call them to repent and believe. And we do not just call people to believe without having repented. But when we use just one of the words - "repent" or "believe" - the implication is both concepts together, two sides of the same coin in salvation. And we will look at how this works later in examples of Acts. You know, do they always use the word, "repent?" Do they always use the word, "believe?" Or do they sometimes use one word and sometimes the other word, or sometimes both words?

Peter does not use the word, "believe", here but that does not mean the concept is absent. Peter inserts a call to baptism instead. He gives his listeners an act by which to express their belief in Jesus. Whether baptism is necessary for salvation and whether the call to baptism is a necessary aspect of our Gospel is an idea for us to consider as we go through the book of Acts and see more examples of the Gospel being shared.

In this context, a call to be baptized would not have been the part that challenged these Jews. Baptism was a recognized concept among this generation, and it wasn't solely a Christian idea. The word, "baptism," hasn't yet taken on a particularly Christian meaning. The audience would have heard the word in their own context. They may have thought of the ministry of John the Baptist who employed baptism as a commitment to righteousness. The word literally means, "to be immersed."

That is what they would have heard. They would have heard Peter calling them to be immersed as an act of religious commitment.

And all Jews, for some time, were familiar with the concept of ritual cleansing in pools of water. The idea is not literally taught in the Old Covenant, but it came to be part of Jewish practice. Ritual pools called, “mikveh,” had been used for at least 200 years before Christ and were placed throughout Israel, throughout Jerusalem, especially outside the Temple complex. Mikveh were pools with steps leading down into them. A small one was large enough for an adult to be immersed. They go down the steps and they can go down underwater, and often there is another set of steps to exit. Large public mikveh, such as the pool of Siloam mentioned in John, were also accessible to the people of Jerusalem. Anybody could go there, and enter in and be immersed, and come back out.

When the people ask, “What must we do?” If Peter says only, “Repent and be baptized.” That is not necessarily a significant barrier to these people. The “repent” part is because they have to repent of crucifying Jesus. Being baptized is not that hard. It sounds very similar to what John the Baptist called for. They need to repent, that is, change their mind about their sin, and they need to be ritually immersed. Not too hard.

The greater faith challenge for this audience comes with the words that clarify the call to be baptized. It’s not just, “Be baptized.” “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” If you want to be forgiven, you must be ritually immersed in the name of Jesus the Messiah. Now, a name is a person’s true character. So, when Peter says, “in the name of Jesus,” he means according to who Jesus really is. According to the witness and teaching we are giving to you, as Peter has already explained briefly: according to Jesus as the Messiah, the Lord, the Holy One, raised from the dead, exalted, seated by the right hand of God. That Jesus. The Jesus David called, “Lord”. That Jesus. Savior. That Jesus. You have to change your mind about Jesus and be immersed in his name. That is, that you accept these truths. You believe who he is so much that you are willing to publicly, ritually enter the water for the forgiveness of your sins. And then you will be forgiven. Not because of the ritual but because of the act of faith. Because you have truly changed your mind about sin - the sin of crucifying Jesus - and have trusted that Jesus is who we are proclaiming him to be, and that he is your only hope.

Of course, there is the possibility that a call to baptism is going to be misunderstood. That someone might be tempted to believe that the ritual of baptism is a work that removes sin. But that potential for misunderstanding does not prevent Peter from using the challenge to be baptized as a powerful call to faith for this particular people who have the potential for understanding baptism as a statement of faith. It fits their cultural context.

Peter adds one more thing. The Gospel is not just about avoiding bad news. There is also good news. Peter goes on to announce, along with forgiveness, that the promise of the Holy Spirit will apply to all who do believe. He does not explain what he means by that, not exactly. Is he saying that they, too, will all speak in foreign tongues prophesying about the mighty deeds of God? Will it look just like for them how it looked for this group at Pentecost? Tongues is going to come up several more times in Acts, so once again I’m going to have to say we are going to pay attention to that as we go. I would say that the main idea behind Peter’s declaration is the internal transformation foreseen by Moses, Jeremiah, and Jesus. That’s what Peter has in mind. When you change your mind about sin and place your faith in Jesus, you will be indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus who will begin a work in you, so that something we didn’t have in the Old Covenant, but he’s going to begin a work in you so that you might love God with your mind and soul, and you will obey him out of gratitude, and you will be transformed. Peter is not promising tongues. He is promising new life. And we will see that in the description of the new community that follows. There is going to be transformation.

Peter says more than what Luke records for us here. According to verse 40, he kept on going, “And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation!’” Luke has given us the essence of Peter’s witness; his claims about Jesus, his

accusation against this generation, and his call for a response. Peter apparently went on and kept clarifying and kept preaching to the crowd with other words, but we have the essence of it and we have his call for a response.

And respond they did. Jesus prophesied the night before he died that his disciples would do greater works than he did. You know, he connects it to the coming of the Holy Spirit. I believe Jesus was speaking of the new life that would follow as people of every nation came to know Jesus: in number of people saved and in geographical distance, how the scope of the work; what the disciples do is going to go far beyond the ministry of Jesus, that is, in bringing people to saving faith. That's the greater work. Of course, when we think about it, it still is the work of Jesus, because it's Jesus active in these disciples through the Holy Spirit. They can't bring people to the point of conviction. They can't pierce hearts. Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus is doing that. So even these greater works are still the work of Jesus, but not the work of Jesus physically here on earth, but Jesus had to go and send the Holy Spirit so that this work can begin. So, these were the greater works. Jews and proselytes from all over Rome and all over Persia have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Right here we have the first fruits of the greater work. Verse 41 even gives us the stats, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls!"

These souls immediately began to form a new community. Remember, the true work of the Spirit quickly focuses on witness to the truth of who Jesus is and then results in life transformation. The Spirit is going to bring us to see Jesus, and in relationship with Jesus, change us. We see that in Luke's summary of what this newly born Church began to look like. This is Acts 2:42-47. We're going to get a brief look at this passage. This is going to be the conclusion of this lesson.

The Newly Formed Community

⁴² They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ 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.

Okay, so the thing that stands out most to me is sharing everything. That's a big idea to introduce at the end of a long lesson. How are we going to unpack that? What is going on? Fortunately, Luke is going to mention again this selling of possessions and this communal sharing, so we're going to wait until we get there at the end of chapter 4 to talk about what this means for us. So, I'm going to leave that part of interpretation for later. I will just point out here, at the beginning of the new community, the spiritual transformation of individuals brings out a change in the way they view material goods and in their concern for one another. Spiritual transformation has material effect. True faith in Jesus hits us where we live.

For now, since we're at the end of this lesson, let's break down this wonderful summary of the Church Luke gives us in verse 42. He recognizes four markers of this new community, and the heart attitude of devotion applies to all four. These early believers were devoted to the Apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. There is energy and commitment in the word, "devotion". They're not just doing these things. They're devoted to these things. Devotion implies an investment of time, a prioritizing. It involves the heart.

The first mark of this new community is a devotion, a prioritizing, a commitment to the Apostles' teaching. They want to learn the truth about Jesus and about the New Covenant. They need to know. How now do we live? What has changed? They don't have a New Testament, yet. So, what standard are they going to use for the theology of the New Covenant? They depended on the teaching

ministry of the Apostles. Jesus' promise in John 16:13, that the Spirit of truth would guide you into all truth, had a very specific application for this inner circle of disciples. Jesus gave the Apostles the responsibility of communicating, developing and recording New Covenant truth.

And how do the Apostles know these things? How does Peter know what he has just communicated to this crowd? Well, a big part of that answer is the Holy Spirit. Peter was led by the Holy Spirit in a very special, authoritative way just as Jesus had promised. But the Holy Spirit is not the only source for Peter's understanding. Remember, Peter spent three years sitting under the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ as he proclaimed truth about the Kingdom of God that had come. And remember what Luke said about one of the post-resurrection meetings Jesus had with the Apostles. Luke 24:44-46,

⁴⁴ Now [Jesus] said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day...

Jesus was Peter's Old Testament seminary professor. Now, Peter was inspired by the Spirit in his references to quote Joel and to quote the Psalms. But he also sat under Jesus as Jesus explained Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. How does Peter know about this quote from Joel? How does he understand it? Well, Jesus taught it to him. Peter learned about the Old Testament's witness of Jesus from Jesus.

And we're going to see in Acts 6 the Apostles, when there's all this more work to do, they're going to stay committed to their unique ministry of the Word. They have learned from Jesus to be faithful to the Old Testament word and they have received from Jesus this responsibility to pass on the theology of the New. Their Apostolic teaching has been authoritatively preserved for us in the New Testament. Just like this early church, we are to continue to express devotion to Apostolic teaching. What that looks like for us is not listening to Peter and James and John preach. Our devotion is devotion to the teaching of the Bible.

The next mark of the new community, fellowship, seems best interpreted by the other three elements in the list. The Apostles' teaching is the ground of fellowship. So, fellowship is connected to the teaching. Jesus prayed in John 17 for a oneness among his followers. What kind of oneness? It's a oneness that would come as they are sanctified in the truth of his name. The unity of Christian fellowship depends on a shared devotion to Biblical truth.

We also connect fellowship to breaking of bread and to prayer. Breaking of bread here refers to more than enjoying dinner together. They enjoyed dinner together, we get that in the full quote, day by day they were breaking bread house to house, they are taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart. So that fellowship is enjoyed by eating meals together but that phrase, "breaking of bread," here includes something else also. As with the Passover, the symbolism of the Lord's supper takes place in a home around a meal. And as the believers are enjoying the meal, they break the bread and pass it around, and remember that they are unified through their faith in Jesus who was broken for them. And they also take a cup of wine and they pass that around, and they remember his blood poured out for the forgiveness of sin. So, the Lord's Supper, this remembrance, took place in the context of the fellowship of the meal. And which also included hangout time in one another's homes.

So, they experienced fellowship through the breaking of bread, and also through prayer. In Acts 3:1 we are going to encounter Peter and John going into the temple at the designated time for evening prayer. These new believers are going to pray together with other Jews at the culturally accepted time and place for prayer. They'll keep that up. The connection here in this list with the breaking of bread and fellowship suggest that we are talking about prayer beyond the normal Jewish custom times for prayer. So, this would be for us beyond Sunday morning. But they are praying together in their homes. And in fact, we have already seen this in Acts. In chapter 1 when Luke described the

Apostles, and the women disciples, and the family of Jesus all gathered together, what were they doing? They were gathered together devoted to prayer.

This is the story of Pentecost. On the day the people of God celebrated the birth of the nation Israel, God gave birth to a new people that we call, the Church. The Church was born through the witness of Jesus Christ empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit worked to pierce hearts and change lives. The resulting community began to form in devotion to Apostolic teaching, fellowship, sharing the Lord's supper, and prayer. These are essential markers of a New Covenant community.

The enthusiasm and commitment of this new community will be sorely tested in the days ahead. Persecution is going to come. It's not that far off. And false teachers are going to follow. We see that through the letters. Division is going to happen. Christian communities have struggled with all this through history. Our Christian communities in our towns, in our cities, they are struggling. So, we ask, what should our commitment be to the pattern described here by Luke? Is this devotion and this commitment to teaching, and fellowship, and prayer, and breaking of bread, is this just an unachievable ideal? Or is this a vision toward which we ought to give our devotion?

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 2:22-47. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What claims does Peter make about Jesus?
 - a. List the initial claims in 2:22-24.
 - b. List additional claims in 2:25-33.
 - c. List additional claims in 2:34-36.
3. How does Peter use Psalm 16:8-11 to support his additional claims?
4. How does Peter use Psalm 110:1 to support his claims?
5. Pierced to the heart, members of the crowd asked, "What must we do?" How do you understand Peter's requirement for forgiveness of "repent and be baptized"? Is faith not enough? (Consider Jesus' response to "What must we do?" in John 6:28-40.)
6. How have you personally experienced the attributes of Christian community described in Acts 2:43-47?

Lesson 5: Acts 3 A Sign of Healing and Witness to Jesus Christ

Introduction

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem.” Acts begins with the Jerusalem Awakening, the amazingly, fruitful witness of the Apostles at the heart of Israel. This first section of Acts contains eight reports divided into two halves. The first half, the first four reports, are all positive.

The first two of those four were preparatory. We started with the commissioning of the disciples as witnesses and the ascension of Jesus into Heaven. We then read about the choice of a new apostle to replace Peter. With all the Apostles in place, Luke gives us two more reports about the successful witness of the Apostles that results in the birth and the growth of a new community. First, we have Pentecost, the miracle of tongues and a sermon by Peter. Then, we have a miracle of healing and another sermon by Peter.

This is what Jesus said must happen first. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem.”

Peter is here again standing forward as our spokesman in this lesson. We will address the miracle first and then consider the sermon. The healing occurs in Acts 3:1-11.

Sign of Healing (3:1-11)

¹ Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth *hour*, the hour of prayer. ² And a man who had been lame from his mother’s womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he *began* asking to receive alms. ⁴ But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, “Look at us!” ⁵ And he *began* to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, “I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!” ⁷ And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. ⁸ With a leap he stood upright and *began* to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹ And all the people saw him walking and praising God; ¹⁰ and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to *beg* alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. ¹¹ While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.

The Miracle

In the summary of chapter 2, Luke told us, “Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.” Many wonders through all the Apostles. This is just one example of the wonders occurring in Jerusalem. After reading this account of a formerly lame man leaping in the Temple - and remember, this is just one wonder - many wonders were going on through all the Apostles and thousands are committing their lives to Jesus the Messiah and there is a change in the people, a seriousness about the Word and prayer, a joy in fellowship, a willingness to give up possessions to help those in need, a remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus through regularly celebrating the Lord’s supper in one of their homes. Remembering that that’s what’s going on, you can easily imagine the energy and awe affecting the people of Jerusalem at this time.

Similar to Jesus healing the blind man recorded in John 9, this lame man was so from birth. That magnifies the power of this miracle and ensures that this man would be recognizable by people in Jerusalem. He had been coming every day to the gate of the Temple for years. And he is there at prayer time, when people would be going in. The text says that it’s the ninth hour, the hour of prayer. That would be 3 in the afternoon, it’s the evening hour of prayer, and he’s stationed himself there as people are going in. If you live in a city with beggars and regularly pass by the places in your

city where beggars ask for money, you know what this is like. There is a man there with one leg always talking to himself, or a lady with a child rocking back and forth, and the guy with no legs sitting on a piece of cardboard. Some come and go, and you do not recognize those beggars. But there are always some in the same place, and they are fixtures in the city. They are as permanent as the fountains and the statue of the man on horseback. They're always there. The people of Jerusalem knew this man by sight. So, when the miracle happens, they know it's a miracle.

The miracle is a bold one. Peter does not quietly pray for the man as he walks by. He says, "Look at us! I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" Then, not even giving the man a chance to respond, Peter grabs his hand and pulls him up. And that's bold! You know, what if he is not healed? You pull him up, he falls back down. And everybody is looking because as you were going by the man, you spoke. You said, "Look at us!" Other people are looking, too. But the man doesn't fall back down. The man's ankles instantly become strong. And he immediately enters the Temple with Peter and John at this time of prayer, with all the people about. And he is praising, and he is jumping around. The miracle by Peter was public and bold. The affect on the man is public and jubilant. Can you imagine a man leaping in the Temple of the Jews and joyfully praising God at the solemn hour of prayer? I am not sure they had seen anything like this since David brought the Ark back to Jerusalem, dancing and singing. And if you remember what happened then, you can imagine that most eyes in the Temple gave the man this judgmental, kind of scathing look, like David's wife did in his day. "Quiet down. You are being shameful. Show some respect. Recognize who you are. Recognize where you are." As their eyes drilled into this man, willing him to be silent, though; that moment of realization must have happened, when their eyes are judging him and, all of a sudden, their eyes grow big. "Isn't that? No, it can't be? That's the guy? How is he walking? How is he jumping?" And as they realize this great miracle because they recognize the guy, the crowd begins to gather and the enthusiasm spreads.

Later in Acts, pagans will attribute miraculous works directly to Paul or Barnabas. This Jewish man was better prepared by his world view to understand the source of power that healed him. He does not bow before Peter and John. He immediately begins leaping about the Temple giving praise to God. The healing immediately, even through the one healed, points us to the Healer.

The Miracle as a Sign

Now, this story of healing brings up our persistent Acts question. It's the challenge of Biblical narrative. Is this healing simply descriptive or is it prescriptive? Is Luke reporting on this wonder to indicate that something exceptional and special is going on in Jerusalem, he's just describing it, or is he suggesting that such healing should be the model for how we do evangelism? Is he simply describing the events around the birth of the Church or prescribing the norm for all Christian communities? Do we need to be doing what Peter and John were doing?

Rather than waiting for more of the miracles of Acts, I will go ahead and address the issue of healing now, whether it's prescriptive or descriptive. We will continue to see miracles of healing through Acts. The miracles are not going to be recorded in connection with every church planted. Not all evangelism is going to include the miraculous. But just because Luke does not mention healing that does not necessarily mean healing is not happening. So that's not necessarily conclusive.

I am not going to take the time now for a systematic view of Scripture on the subject of healing. So, I know when I'm done, there are going to be questions left. But since we do encounter a lot of miracles in Acts, even if I'm not going to give you a whole systematic run through the Scripture, I'm going to go ahead and explain my position, so that you know where I am coming from. I do believe that God heals today. I also believe that the gift of healing of the kind possessed by the Apostles is not the norm for Christian community and is not a necessary component of evangelism. I believe Luke is describing something exceptional, not prescribing the norm for our communities. Though, as I said, I do believe God heals today.

I will start my explanation with the emphasis I believe Luke recognizes with this particular healing of the lame man. So, how does this healing fit what Peter is getting ready to say? Peter is going to mention in the following speech the second coming of Jesus Christ. And he is going to use a particular word to do that. He is going to say that Jesus Christ will return when it is time for the restoration of all things. That phrase, “restoration of all things,” connects us back to the first verses of Acts in 1:6 when the disciples asked, “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” The reference to restoration here and the restoration in chapter 1, it creates kind of bookends on this initial section of Acts, the first four reports.

Jesus responded to the disciples in chapter 1 that it was not for them to know the time of restoration. Their role was to wait in faith for the coming of the Holy Spirit and then to be his witnesses. With the sermon we are getting ready to hear, Peter seems to have matured in his understanding since that original question in two ways. One, he now understands the restoration as something that happens when Jesus comes back. It is not happening now. And two, he frames the restoration, not in the limited terms of restoration of kingdom to Israel - that was the original question - but now Peter calls it, the restoration of all things. Jesus is much bigger than Israel. He is going to put everything to right, everywhere. The restoration of all things is a reference to the new Heaven and new Earth, to universal restoration.

Peter understands that the current awakening in Jerusalem, though wonderful and exciting and important and valuable, is not the end goal. We look ahead to the coming of Jesus, the second coming, for restoration. The healing of the lame man is not proof of a current restoration, it is a sign of a future restoration. That’s what I believe Luke is doing here. He is giving us this healing miracle as a sign of future restoration.

Luke likes the phrase, “signs and wonders.” He uses the word, “sign,” ten times through Acts in connection with miracles. He is using it in the same way as John did in his Gospel. The miracles of the Apostles, just like the miracles of Jesus, point us to spiritual truth about Jesus and about his Kingdom. That is what a sign does. It provides information. So, the miracles aren’t just acts of power. They are acts of power with information pointing us to something.

The healing of the lame man is a sign of the restoration to come. It is not the restoration. It is a limited physical restoration of the man’s leg muscles. That’s true. But this man will still die. He is healed in this body, but he is not made new. He can experience a spiritual rebirth now through faith in Jesus. That kind of restoration is available now. But He must wait for the restoration of a glorified body. He must wait for his sin to be completely removed. He must wait to be made truly whole. And we all must wait.

Should Miracles of Healing be the Norm?

Now, this does not answer the question about whether these kinds of miracles are normative for all Christian communities. But it does help us frame the question. It helps us to understand something that Luke is doing here in Acts. The miracles performed by the Apostles are signs pointing us to Jesus and to the restoration Jesus will bring. So now, we come back to the question, “Are these signs something that happens under special circumstances or should we expect these signs to be happening among all Christian communities that are functioning as God intends?” You know, if you are doing things right, you are going to have people doing these kinds of miracles among you.

First, let me say, “I do not believe that God desires physical healing for all Christians. I hear that sometimes, and I must say I strongly, strongly disagree with that idea. That idea is a misunderstanding of a few passages like Isaiah 53:5, “by his scourging we are healed.” Everybody becomes sick and dies. If you avoid a fatal accident, murder, or capital punishment and if you don’t die in that way, you are going to become sick and die. Every apostle, every evangelist, every teacher, every faith healer that does not die in one of those ways, accident or murder, becomes sick and dies. Lazarus became sick and died, again. God does not always desire the healing of our mortal bodies. You know, ultimately, he is going to let all of our mortal bodies die, go unhealed. God desires to give

us new bodies that we will not grow sick or die, ever. That is part of the next age, the restoration. Faith in God does not always end in healing. It does always end in eternal life. Sometimes the glory of God is displayed as a witness through healing. Sometimes the glory of God is displayed as a witness through the character of the believer as they enter into death.

God is the one who chooses whether to heal our current bodies. When he does, he does so for a reason. Those reasons are God's reasons, and they are not always discernible.

So, we should not expect miraculous healing as a normative part of Christian community for this reason that God desires to heal all believers. But should we expect healing as a normative part of Christian community as a sign, a sign of awe to believers and a sign of evangelism to non-believers?

It is still a tricky question. In the Gospel of John, one of John's themes is the ineffectiveness of miraculous signs to bring about saving faith. Sometimes a miracle leads a person to eventual faith. But just as often in the Gospel of John, miracles lead people to false belief about Jesus. Miracles are not the key to evangelism. Still, should we see miracles as normative in faithful, Christian communities?

A big picture view of the Bible helps me come to my belief, to how I answer this question. To get some perspective, list the times in the Bible when the vast majority of miracles happened. Miracles are not recorded through the Biblical narrative. That is something people don't always consider. There are gaps of hundreds and thousands of years without the report of miracles among the people of God. So, when does the Bible record most of the miracles? And who does the miracles? You might want to pause this lesson right now and answer that question for yourself. There are three clusters when the vast majority of recorded miracles in the Bible are happening. Through whom do they happen?

The first cluster is with Moses and his disciple, Joshua. The second cluster is through Elijah and his disciple, Elisha. The third cluster is through Jesus and his disciples, mostly the Apostles, but also others like Stephen. Interestingly, Moses and Elijah are the two men who appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. We have Moses, who represents the Law, Elijah who represents the prophets, and Jesus who represents the New Covenant. I believe the clusters of miracles in the Bible match significant periods of salvation history when the Word of God was being written down for us, the Law through Moses and Joshua, the Prophets represented at their beginning by Elijah and Elisha, and the New Testament through Jesus and his disciples. The signs affirm the revelation.

We see a gap or lack of miracles from the beginning of the Bible to Moses, then from Moses to Elijah there's not a lot of miracles recorded, then from Elijah to Jesus not a lot of miracles recorded. That does not mean there are no miracles at all. But the clusters of miracles attached to those men accounts for the majority of recorded miracles, especially the miracles that come through a gift given to human beings. Each of these was gifted to do miracles in a way that is not the same as the community of faithful praying and trusting God for the miraculous. There is something else going on. When Moses rose his staff, the sea parted. When Elijah lay down on the boy, that boy rose from the dead. When Peter grabbed the lame man, he leaped up. So, there was a boldness that was part of their giftedness.

Should we expect these kinds of miracles to end after the Apostles as these kinds of miracles ended after Moses and after Elijah? I believe so. It is hard to prove since the Bible ends with this first generation of Christians. If we had more Bible for several generations after Jesus, then we would have an authoritative answer to the question. We would see if there is a lesson of the miraculous giftedness. But we do not have that. The Bible ends with the generation that followed Jesus. So that makes it harder to answer this question.

I think there is indication that this kind of miraculous gifting was part of the first generation and not succeeding generations. For example, in Paul's early letter to the Corinthians, he includes in his list of gifts both miracles and healing. But then in his later letters to the Ephesians and Romans, he does

not mention miracles or healing in the gift lists. Why does he leave them out in those letters? I believe the gift of miracles faded after attesting to the Apostles' authoritative teaching, as recorded now in our New Testament.

This is one of those questions I have a firm belief on, yet I recognize it is a debatable question among Christians, so I'll leave it open for you to think about. I do want to make one last clarification. I said I believe in healing today, so I don't want to be misunderstood. Definitely, God heals! I am questioning the gift of healing of the type that Peter displays here. This healing does not follow a prayer session. It does not follow the whole community getting together and we hope that he is going to be healed, but he might not be healed, and if he does, we'll be excited, but if he doesn't, we'll trust God because it doesn't always happen. This healing doesn't even follow a statement of faith by the lame man. Peter grabs him and yanks him up, and he is healed. This is a miracle on demand of the kind we see with Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. It is a special kind of healing gift. That is what I do not believe is normative today. I believe it is possible for God to gift someone in this way. God will do what God does. I do not believe it is God's plan to provide this gifting extensively through the Church age as normative for all of our Christian communities and for all of our evangelism.

I believe that some believers have a gift of faith and through their prayers people are healed. They may see fruitfulness in healing and so we see it as a gift of healing, but we make a distinction between the kind of healing Jesus did, and the kind of healing that Peter did, and the kind of healing that we tend to see today. And maybe I need to distinguish between a big "H" gift of Healing and a little "h" gift of healing, just like I did between a big "A", Apostle, and a little "a", apostle. The two types of healing gift are similar, but there is something very different about them.

The healing we see today is not automatic. We trust God's wisdom in his to heal or not, to leave a person with a thorn in the side or to take the thorn away, to remove the threat of death or to call a person home. We are trusting God in his goodness and wisdom. Sometimes he is going to heal miraculously and sometimes he is not.

My belief is that the kind of healing we see displayed in Acts by Peter and Paul, the bold acts of power that do not fail, that is another level of healing ability that affirms the Apostles, both in their verbal witness at the time and in their written witness that was recorded for us.

Let's move now to the witness that accompanied this miracle. The response of this crowd was the same as the response of the Pentecost crowd. Luke tells us, the people were full of wonder and amazement and they ran to see what was going on. As at Pentecost, Peter takes the opportunity afforded by the miracle to address the large crowd. His speech is recorded in Acts 3:12-26.

The Sermon (3:12-26)

¹² But when Peter saw *this*, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ¹³ "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, *the one* whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. ¹⁴ "But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ but put to death the Prince of life, *the one* whom God raised from the dead, *a fact* to which we are witnesses. ¹⁶ "And on the basis of faith in His name, *it is* the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which *comes* through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. ¹⁷ "And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. ¹⁸ "But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. ¹⁹ "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; ²⁰ and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, ²¹ whom heaven must receive until *the* period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. ²² "Moses said, 'THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR

BRETHREN; TO HIM YOU SHALL GIVE HEED to everything He says to you.²³ ‘And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’²⁴ “And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and *his* successors onward, also announced these days.²⁵ “It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.’²⁶ “For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one *of you* from your wicked ways.”

That’s good stuff. I’d love to hear more of Peter’s sermons during these days. Luke has chosen quite selectively what teaching to include from the leaders of the early Christian church. With two sermons from Peter, we have the opportunity to learn about Peter’s basic Gospel message, especially by paying attention to what he repeats in the two speeches, and also what he adds in this second one.

In both speeches Peter affirms that God has raised Jesus from the dead and that the Apostles are witnesses to the resurrection. He also affirms in both that God has glorified Jesus. In the first speech, the language Peter used was that God exalted Jesus. He also charges the Jews in both crowds with the death of Jesus. They bear primary responsibility rather than the Romans.

In this speech, Paul points out that Pilate had already decided to release Jesus before giving into the persistent pressure of the Jews. Peter indicates the irony of the sin that the crowd asked for the release of the murderer Barabbas so that they might see the Prince of Life put to death.

Having given witness to who Jesus is and charging the crowd with his death, Peter announces the connection between Jesus and the healed man. He says,

“And on the basis of faith in His name, *it is* the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which *comes* through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.”

How was this man healed? Peter indicates two crucial criteria. He is healed by faith. And he is healed by the name of Jesus. Let’s be careful here. The name of Jesus is not a magical mantra. To pray in the name of Jesus is not simply saying the right words to the end of the prayer. You know, “Lord, we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen.”

The name of Jesus is a way of identifying the person who is the object of the faith. To pray in his name is to make a request of the person Jesus according to who he has revealed himself to be. To pray in his name is an act of dependence on Jesus. We do not use the name of Jesus as a word of power to obtain what we will. That’s magic. We pray in the name of Jesus as an act of submission to him as Lord, with the hope of seeing his will accomplished. Not my will be done, but your will be done. That is the point of prayer. Not a word of power, but a dependent relationship where we lift up our concerns and our requests and our desires to him in order to see his will accomplished.

It is not mention of the name of Jesus that has healed this man. It is trust in Jesus as he has revealed himself to be, which results in Jesus choosing to exert power to heal this man. Jesus does the healing as Peter walks in the power of the Spirit.

Now, the object of faith is clear in Peter’s words. Jesus is the one we believe in. The one who has the faith is not so clear. Was it Peter’s faith in the name of Jesus that resulted in the healing of this man or was it the man’s faith in the name of Jesus that resulted in his healing?

The structure of Luke’s Greek sentence leaves the question open. It’s kind of ambiguous. It is not clear whose faith is he talking about. I lean towards the second, that it was the lame man’s faith that resulted in his healing. But then it’s interesting that Luke left out any hint of that in the healing story. Peter grabbed the man and pulled him up and he began leaping about. There is no indication of faith at all. There is hardly any time to have faith. But now here, Luke writes,

“And on the basis of faith in His name, *it is* the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which *comes* through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.

Notice that last bit, “The faith which comes through Him (*that “him” is Jesus*) has given him (*I think that “him” is the lame man*) this perfect health.” The faith which comes through Jesus has given the lame man his perfect health. The lame man’s faith comes through Jesus. As Jesus says in John 6:65, “No one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” Faith itself is a gift, or something that comes from God. Faith does have to believe in the name of Jesus according to how Jesus has revealed himself to be. Our faith needs to be in the true and right object. But faith is less a working of the mind to rationally figure out who Jesus is and more a seeing of the spirit granted by Jesus. Saving faith is seeing Jesus as he is. And though it needs to be based on who Jesus truly is, it does not take a seminary degree. It doesn’t take years and years of study to figure out who is Jesus so that I can have saving faith. It can happen in a blink of an eye, the grabbing of a wrist, to an uneducated man who has had no opportunity all his life but to sit and to beg. And he can see Jesus in an instance because faith is sight granted by Jesus.

Faith in the name of Jesus that leads to healing is precisely what Peter desires for the whole crowd. But not physical healing. Peter’s desire for all those present is spiritual healing. Having just boldly charged them with killing the Messiah, Peter goes on to build a little bridge between himself and his listeners. He speaks to them hard truth, but he is not trying to make it harder than it needs to be. He is being real, but he does want them to have life in Jesus. He wants them to accept what he is saying. And so, he acknowledges that even though they are complicit in killing Jesus, they were ignorant of the true nature of Jesus. “Brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also.” He also adds that it was necessary for God’s plan of salvation. You did act wickedly but it really did need to happen.

“But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.”

Those truths may soften the blow, but they do not let the people off the hook. We still don’t know how they’re going to respond. They must own their sin. They have to believe what Peter is saying and they have to respond. Peter says,

¹⁹ “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;”

Peter uses again this word, “repent,” in his call for a response to the Gospel message just as he did in his first speech. As we pointed out in our last lesson, the word, “repent,” means, “change your mind.” They are to change their mind about who Jesus Christ is and who God is. God is the God of Jesus Christ. And this idea can imply a return, but Peter adds that directly this time, saying, “Repent and return.” We all like sheep have gone astray. We’ve turned away. We’ve wandered. A return is always a necessary step of faith. Change your mind about your sin and return to relationship with your heavenly Father. Just think of the prodigal son. You get, repent-return, right there.

As with the first speech, Peter again includes Good News. The Gospel of grace is not only an escape from punishment. It is also an entrance into real life. Peter says,

¹⁹ “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away (*escape from punishment*), in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;”

And then Peter goes on to add an idea not included in the Pentecost sermon. Refreshment from the presence of the Lord is an idea for the here and now. “The Lord is my shepherd...he restores my soul.” You know, that happens now as I walk with God. And Peter is saying, “This will be true of you when you place your faith in Jesus.” The parallel idea in the first sermon was the experience of the promised Holy Spirit. Peter said, “If you will repent and be baptized, then the promise will be given to you.” You’ll experience the Holy Spirit. And the two go together, the Holy Spirit and this idea of

refreshment in the presence of the Lord. The Spirit of God pours out the love of the Father into our heart. He cries with your spirit, “Abba Father.” So, this refreshment experience of God is intertwined with being filled with the Spirit.

In this speech Peter adds a future element to the Good News. “Repent and return [so]

that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until *the* period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient times.”

We place our faith in Jesus both to experience the abundant life he promises now and to experience the restoration of all things that he will bring when he comes back.

As in his earlier speech, Peter supports his claims with two Old Testament references. These are short quotes. Both are from prophets, supporting Peter’s assertion in the previous verse that God spoke about the time of restoration through his holy prophets from ancient times. The first is truly ancient times, reaching back 1500 years to Deuteronomy 18:15 and 19.

²² “Moses said, ‘THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN; TO HIM YOU SHALL GIVE HEED TO everything He says to you. ²³ ‘And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’

Jews had come to expect the prophet like Moses referenced in Deuteronomy 18 to appear at the time of the Messiah. That’s why we read in John 1:21 scribes coming from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist whether he is the Prophet. They are expecting a prophet. The Baptist says, “No, I am not the Prophet.” Peter here affirms that Jesus is the Prophet like Moses. He was a covenant mediator. Other prophets pointed Israel back to the existing covenant. Moses doesn’t point people back to the Abrahamic covenant. Instead, Moses played the very special, rare role of mediating a new covenant between God and Israel. From the time of Moses, no prophet had mediated another new covenant for the whole people of God until Jesus. Jesus is the mediator Prophet of the New Covenant. He is the Prophet like Moses.

Peter’s words support his claim about Jesus, and also support his call to repentance, since rejection of the prophet like Moses means being cut off from the people of God. Well, if they’ve killed the Prophet, that’s a problem. They will be cut off. They need to repent and return.

Peter then claims that the prophets from Samuel on spoke of the days of the Messiah. In his last sermon he quoted Joel, one of the more recent prophets. Here he has just gone back before Samuel to Moses. In his second quote he is going to reach back into times more ancient still, another 500 years back to Abraham. These are our last verses, Acts 2:24-26,

²⁴ “And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and *his* successors onward, also announced these days. ²⁵ “It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.’ ²⁶ “For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one *of you* from your wicked ways.”

The promise to Abraham prophesies that in Abraham’s “seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That is Genesis 12:3. The word, “seed,” is a collective word. It can be taken as plural or as singular. All of a man’s descendants can be his seed or one descendant can be his seed. Peter’s follow-up statement refers to the seed in the singular. “God raised up his Servant and sent him to bless you...” The Servant is the seed of Abraham who blesses the nations of the earth, starting with Israel. Peter has already referred to Jesus in this speech as the Servant. Jesus is the Servant. Jesus is the seed. He will bless all the families of the earth. That blessing is beginning now in Jerusalem, first with the Jews.

As with the quote from Moses, Peter uses the promise to Abraham both to teach about Jesus and to emphasize his call to repentance. The quote ends in this way, “For you first, God raised up His

Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one *of you* from your wicked ways.” This is who Jesus is. Turn from your wicked ways. Repent and return.

Conclusion

Let’s conclude this lesson with a summary the basic Gospel message Peter has provided for us so far through his two speeches to crowds in Jerusalem. Here, quickly, seven elements.

- Jesus Christ was crucified by Pilate at the insistence of the Jews.
- God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.
- God glorified Jesus Christ who sits at his right hand.
- Jesus Christ is the one foretold in the Old Testament writings as Messiah, Prophet and Lord.
- You are sinful, and if you are a member of this present generation, you are particularly guilty of participating in the death of the Messiah.
- Your right response is to repent and believe. Belief is rightly expressed through baptism in the name of Jesus.
- When you repent and believe, you will be forgiven of your sin and you will experience refreshment in relationship with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Now, we can to that list that Peter and the Apostles claim to be eyewitnesses of the resurrection. He says, “We were witnesses to this.” That is going to end with them, so it is not an essential component of our Gospel. We do not claim to be eyewitnesses, though we do claim to base our witness on their eyewitness testimony. So far, Peter’s message has been exclusively to Jews in Jerusalem. For that reason, it will be interesting to compare with the Gospel preaching to come when this witness spreads out into Judea, Samaria, and beyond.

The call of the Gospel is a call to believe in Jesus Christ. When Jesus was asked by Galileans in John 6:28, “What must we do?”, Jesus responded, “Believe in him whom he has sent.” When the crowd at Pentecost asked, “What must we do?”, Peter responded, “Repent and be baptized.” Here Peter says, “Repent and return.” Peter’s words help us to think about the nature of true faith. He is not disagreeing with Jesus. And he is not adding something else that you have to do. What you have to do is, believe. We can express that by saying, “Believe and be baptized,” or we can express it by saying, “Repent and return.” Because saving faith involves a change of the mind about God and self, and a return to God.

In this speech, Peter’s charge was not, “Repent and believe,” but, “Repent and return.” But as we have noted, he set up faith as the main issue with his words about the healing of the lame man.

“And on the basis of faith in His name, *it is* the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which *comes* through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.

The implication set up by Peter is that just as this man was healed through faith in the name of Jesus, so you too can be healed spiritually through faith in the name of Jesus.

To believe in the name of Jesus is to believe in his true nature as he has revealed himself to be. Who is this Jesus? How does Peter describe Jesus? What names does Peter give to Jesus in his two speeches? Let’s end this lesson with that question. Saving faith is faith in the name of Jesus. How has Peter described Jesus? Peter has said, “He is the one foretold from ancient days, spoken of by Samuel and all the prophets. He is the Seed of Abraham. He is the Prophet like Moses. He is the Lord of David. He is the suffering Servant of Isaiah. He is the man Jesus the Nazarene. He is the Christ, Messiah. He is the Holy and Righteous One. He is the Prince of Life.”

This is his name, his nature. This is the Jesus we have believed in. This is the Jesus who has provided for our forgiveness and enabled refreshment in our relationship with God through faith in his name.

Reflection questions

1. Read the healing of the lame man in Acts 3:1-11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. In what way does the healing of the lame man serve as a sign? A sign to what?
3. Read Peter's speech in Acts 3:12-26. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
4. What new claims does this speech contribute to the Peter's witness of who Jesus is?
5. How does Peter's call for faith in the name of Jesus relate to his call to the crowd at Pentecost to repent and believe?
6. How does Peter's reference to the "restoration of all things" in 3:21 relate to the question the apostles asked about the restoration of the kingdom in 1:6? What is similar? What is different? What is being communicated about Jesus?
7. This story completes the first half of the first part of Acts. Luke as given us four stories: (1) the commission and ascension of Jesus, (2) the replacement of a 12th disciple, (3) Pentecost with Peter's sermon, and (4) the healing of the lame man with Peter's sermon. How do the two references to restoration of Israel and restoration of all things serve as a theme for these four stories?

Lesson 6: Acts 4:1-31 External Threat from the Jerusalem Establishment

Introduction



David Gooding, *True to Faith*.¹

The awakening in Jerusalem has led to the salvation of thousands of Jews. Believers and non-believers alike are in awe of the wonders and signs accomplished through the apostles. The four reports of Acts 1-3 have all been positive. The commission and ascension of Jesus, the replacement of the twelfth Apostle, the miracle of Pentecost followed by a sermon from Peter, and the miracle of the lame man followed by a second sermon from Peter. It's all going well. If we were there in those days, we could easily imagine the growth of the church taking over the heart of Israel with the Temple of Judaism becoming a Temple to the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. With all the excitement and power and jubilation that's going on, we could picture the Gentile nations streaming into Zion to hear the Word of the Lord proclaimed by the twelve Apostles. The vision of Isaiah 2:3-4 becomes possible.

³ And many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
That He may teach us concerning His ways
For the law will go forth from Zion

⁴ And He will judge between the nations,
And they will hammer their swords into plowshares
Nation will not lift up sword against nation

To the house of the God of Jacob;
And that we may walk in His paths."

And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

And will render decisions for many peoples;
And their spears into pruning hooks.

And never again will they learn war.

But as much as it may feel like this might be the right time for those who were present at this moment, this is not the time. Jesus Christ is not coming to restore the Kingdom to Israel. The restoration of all things is set for a far distant future. This is the time for witness. The nations will not stream in. Christians will have to stream out. The awakening is about to experience opposition.

The men who hold power and position in the dominant institutions of Israel are not excited by this stirring up of Jerusalem. They will attempt to end this new movement before it grows any larger. Threat against the new community will not be limited to external forces. They will also experience internal problems. They are growing fast. Will they be able to administrate a movement grown from 120 to over 5000 in a few days? Will the new members of the movement align with the teaching of the Apostles? Will the Apostles maintain their own integrity and focus as they grow in power and influence?

¹ David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 28-31.

The next four reports in Acts alternate between external threat and internal threat. We begin with an external threat. The new community is growing, it's dynamic, it's reformative. They bring new teaching, new methods, new life. They participate in the established norms of institutional religion, attending Temple prayer times and celebrating feast days. But not quietly. Their worship and teaching disturb the way things have always been done. And they go beyond, showing a dangerous independence from the established institutions. They listen to their own teachers. They have their own prayer times. They have their own rituals of baptism and the Lord's Supper. They meet in homes outside of Temple and synagogue. They are even independent from the financial system of the Temple and government, giving out of their own means to care for one another.

It is not quite correct to call this new movement, the Church, or to call the members, Christians. We could do that in retrospect, but nobody is calling it that now. But even using the word, member, at this stage of growth probably brings up the wrong idea. They are members of a movement by their own participation and conviction, but nobody has gone through membership classes. Nobody has got their names put on a list. This is a grassroots movement by Jews within the established society of Israel within the established religion of Judaism. It is not something different than Judaism at this point. It is a movement within Judaism. They are not trying to start a new religion. They are inviting all Jews to be true Jews in their reception and worship of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ. They understand themselves as fulfilling Old Testament religion, not opposing it. They don't think they need to convert the Temple into a worship of Jesus. The Temple ought to already be dedicated to the worship of the Son.

In their fervent convictions, they are critical of the current leadership. Quite literally, they have accused these leaders of murdering the Messiah. They would argue that the current religious institutions and practices need reformation before they can even be understood as rightly following the intent of Old Testament religion. And then, having reformed the current wineskin, they would need to give it up for a new wineskin. In that sense, the new movement is after more than reformation and revival of the Old. Their revival is to lead to something New, not disconnected from the Old, but understood as a fulfillment of the Old that leads to something different, in some ways radically different from the Old.

How do we expect the keepers of the institutions to respond? There were the keepers, the priests and nobility, the lawyers and clerks, Temple workers, synagogue leaders, religious laymen - they all take a great pride in the longevity of Judaism. They ground their identity and their family's identity in being Jewish, and we've always been Jewish, and this is the way we've always done things. They arrange their yearly schedule according to Jewish ritual and feasts. Their honor in society comes from regular attendance at synagogue and temple and raising up obedient sons and daughters to do the same. They are the establishment, the keepers of Jewish institutions.

We are familiar with this type of dynamic between the old conservatives and the new reformers. Historically, think about the Reformation. Martin Luther desired to reform the Roman Catholic Church according to biblical morality and doctrine. He was not out to start a new church, a new institution. But severe opposition led to something new that became labeled as Protestant. Similarly, John Wesley, a major figure of the great Evangelical Revival in Britain, had no initial desire to separate from the Anglican Church. He sought reform. But as more and more doors were closed on him and he had this growing flock that was outside of the Church, that opposition from the establishment, that Church, led to the ostracization led to them being labeled as, Methodists. And they began to organize and a new institution came into being.

If you live in a country with a strong state church, whether it's Eastern Orthodox, or Roman Catholic, or Anglican, or Lutheran, or Reformed, you can likely identify with the tension between the establishment and newer, Gospel-centered movements. It's going on all the time. You can also identify with this tension if you come from a place where you have belonged to an older, mainline, Christian institution, such as a Methodist, Episcopalian or Presbyterian denomination. There is

struggle between those who want to keep things the way they are, and those who want to see change and reformation. If you are around church long enough, I believe that it is inevitable that you will experience this tension to some degree on a local level as younger generations challenge the teaching, and morality, and enthusiasm of the older establishment. New is not always better. Old is not always better. The question for both the young challenge for reform and the old established conservatism comes down to the will of God for the community based on the Word of God and the mission God has given the church. We need to stay true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to the Word of God, and when we get out of alignment, we need correction.

In the example of the Jerusalem Awakening recorded in Acts 1-6, we see that the old establishment has wandered far from God. And we see that the new movement is in line with the will of God to bring about a new way of doing things, that fulfills the promises of the old, according to the New Covenant teaching of Jesus Christ.

Everything has gone splendidly up to this point. Jesus said, “Wait for the Holy Spirit and then witness to my name.” They have. And crowds of people responded in faith. But the keepers of Jewish religion, tradition and institutions are not going to sit by quietly while these Jesus followers upend society. In Acts 4, the establishment responds, giving us our first report of external threat.

We will address this external threat in three parts. We start with the arrest and defense of Peter and John in Acts 4:1-12. Then we consider the threat and release from the ruling Council in verses 13-22. And we end with the prayer and witness of the new community in verses 23-31.

We begin with the arrest and defense of Peter and John. This is Acts 4:1-12.

Arrest and Defense of Peter and John (4:1-12)

¹ As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple *guard* and the Sadducees came up to them, ² being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. ⁵ On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; ⁶ and Annas the high priest *was there*, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. ⁷ When they had placed them in the center, they *began to* inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, ⁹ if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health. ¹¹ “He is the *STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED* by you, *THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone.* ¹² And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

That is awesome. That’s when you imagine how you wish you would have done it. This is exactly it. We start with a strong contrast between the Temple leaders and the gathered crowd. The commotion in the Temple at prayer time has attracted official members of the establishment who, we are told, are disturbed that Peter is teaching the people and particularly disturbed by his assertion that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. In contrast, verse 4 reports, “But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.” Wow! Five thousand! Three thousand believed after Peter’s sermon at Pentecost. This sermon brings the new community up to five thousand. Peter’s witness continues to bear astonishing fruit.

The political and religious establishment in Jerusalem, however, is not excited about this spiritual enthusiasm. In this text, the response inside the Temple grounds comes from the priestly class:

priests, captain of the Temple guard, Sadducees. Let's clarify some of the establishment terminology we are going to encounter through Acts.

When left to themselves, the Sadducees and Pharisees engage in heated debate over the understanding and application of the Law. In the Gospels, their animosity towards Jesus brings them together. Both are movements within Judaism. Both are religious and political. The Pharisees support an oral tradition that clarifies and adds to the laws of Moses. Many Pharisees held positions as priests but also valued making a living through some craft, like Paul the tent maker.² This meant they could move from town to town and gave them influence throughout Israel. Even after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans later, the Pharisaic movement will live on through Rabbinic Judaism.

Sadducees were connected with the priestly class in Jerusalem. They held to a more limited application of the Law of Moses, leaving them open to criticism by the more observant Pharisees. They interpreted the Law as giving no promise of an afterlife and rejected the belief that the faithful would be resurrected. They were more concerned with the present life and the status quo, which ensured their own positions.

Luke gives two reasons why the Temple officials were disturbed. They were disturbed that Peter and John were teaching. That alone was a problem. What position or education do they have that gives them the right to instruct people who have come to the Temple to worship? In addition, they are disturbed by the claim Jesus was raised from the dead. This is a problematic claim for all Jerusalem's leaders, considering that they are the ones who had Jesus put to death. The resurrection vindicates Jesus and condemns them. It is an especially problematic idea for the Sadducees who deny the resurrection all together. Not only does Peter's claim of resurrection communicate they were wrong about Jesus in particular, but it also communicates that the whole Sadducean movement is wrong concerning the Biblical teaching of an afterlife.

In verse five we get another list of those who stand against Peter and John: rulers, elders and scribes. Ruler here refers to leaders of the priestly class, including the current high priest, and former high priests, and other priests high up in the hierarchy. The term, elders, includes non-priestly members of the Jewish nobility. And scribes are men who can read and write. In this context they are lawyers and administrators in Jerusalem.³ These men make up the ruling council known as the Sanhedrin, which will be referred to in verse 15 as the Council. F. F. Bruce calls the Sanhedrin, the Senate and the Supreme Court of the Jewish nation.⁴ The Sanhedrin existed within a Roman political model that allowed extensive, but still limited self-governance for the Jews. Though not a fixed rule in practice, the number of Sanhedrin members was theoretically 71 in reference to the 70 elders God told Moses to appoint in Numbers 11:16, with Moses making up the 71st member of that group. So the idea is that you have 70 representatives on the Council and then you have the high priest and that's 71. It can't be determined from the records whether the Sanhedrin met inside the Temple grounds or just outside of the Temple grounds.

This is the Jewish establishment that just two months previously voted to execute Jesus. They were led in that judgment by the high priest Caiaphas and his father-in-law, the ex-high priest Annas, both of whom are present also in this passage, being disturbed with the other members of the Sanhedrin by the activity of Peter and John.

² B. D. Chilton. *Judaism in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. B. Green & S. McKnight (Eds.). (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 403.

³ J. B. Polhill. *The New American Commentary: Acts*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992) 141.

⁴ FF. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 91.

Having clarified the opposition, we can pick back up in the trial of the two Apostles with the question posed in verse 7, “When they had placed them in the center, they *began to* inquire, ‘By what power, or in what name, have you done this?’”

We discussed in our last lesson how the name of Jesus is shorthand for the true nature of Jesus. His name is who he is; Jesus that Nazarene, a real man raised in a historical time and place; Jesus the Christ, the Son of David who will reign forever; Jesus, the prophet, the one like Moses who institutes New Covenant; Jesus the servant who came to lay down his life to bear our iniquities; Jesus the Son of God, distinct from and yet one with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. This is who Jesus is. This is his name.

Another nuance is implied by the Sanhedrin’s question. By what power or name do you do this asks, “To whom do you owe allegiance, to whom do you look to for power and authority? Who is your patron, or who is your Lord, or who is your God? By what name do you operate?” In this sense of the word, name, Peter and John act as ambassadors or servants on behalf of someone else. They do not act, in the name of Caesar or in the name of Herod or in the name of the high priest. They do not have letters from the high priest that’s allowing them to do what they’re doing. They act in the name of Jesus. Their commission is from Jesus. Peter does not hesitate to declare his allegiance. This is so good, I’m going to read it again. Verses 8-12.

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, ⁹ if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health. ¹¹ “He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, *but* WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER *stone*. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

That is bold. “The man you crucified just 50 days ago! That man you had on trial here before you! That man, Jesus the Messiah, the Nazarene! It is by his authority and power, by his name that the healing of this man has taken place. It is by his power and we act under his authority.”

Peter quotes here from Psalm 118, which, by the way, is the same Psalm that contains the words shouted when Jesus entered into Jerusalem, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD! (Psalm 118:26).” That’s verse 26. Here, Peter quotes a different verse, verse 22, “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner *stone*.” Peter updates that prophecy, identifying the members of the Sanhedrin as the builders, “He is the stone which was rejected by you.”

Psalm 118 is a Psalm of thanksgiving for salvation. Verse 14 and 21 declare, “The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation... I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me, and You have become my salvation.” The stone rejected by the rulers has become the chief corner stone. That’s the prophecy of the Psalm and that’s what Peter says is happening right here. The whole edifice depends on the cornerstone. The cornerstone must be solid, it must be true. It must be unmovable. Having laid the cornerstone, the walls of the building run true if the angles of the cornerstone are perfectly fashioned at 90 degrees. Each wall that comes off that corner runs straight if the cornerstone runs straight. If the angle of the cornerstone does not run true, the walls angle in or angle out. Jesus is the cornerstone. When you understand who he is and build your life and institutions - movements, churches - based on the reality of his name, your walls run true.

The people of God need true leadership that saves, guides, teaches, protects. We need a Messiah who can save and lead humanity as a man and yet, without the weaknesses of man. The Messiah we need, the true cornerstone, must be both God and man. The true Messiah must both die and reign. The true Messiah came as the cornerstone that makes sense of the Old Testament promises and enables the construction of a New Covenant people. The leaders of Israel rejected this vision of the

Messiah. They rejected the idea that he could be the cornerstone of truth. They rejected Jesus. And they were wrong.

They could not prevent him from becoming the chief cornerstone. But they could ensure that the institutions that they led, that they held on to so tightly would veer off at wrong angles. They could ensure the demise of the Temple, the demise of Judaism as they knew it. Every good spiritual institution that wanders away from Jesus, wanders away from God, wanders away from truth, those institutions die. They may remain for ages to come as lifeless shells opposed to the God they claim but the life in them will go out. This is a warning to us.

Every Christian institution must regularly re-evaluate whether its purpose and allegiance continue to run true based on the chief cornerstone. Do we exist for the glory of God and his will? Do we align ourselves to his purposes, under his lordship, according to his Word? Do we remain committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as he has revealed himself to be?

Or do we exist to exist? To continue on the traditions we have established, living in a past that is truly past, holding on to our positions out of our own desire for prestige, value, and security? Have we veered away from the truth of who he is, such that our allegiance is given to a god fashioned for our own liking? And how long has this been true? Have we not noticed that the Lord has already left his Temple?

Jesus is the cornerstone. We can add cornerstone now to the list of names for Jesus Peter has given us in his two sermons. And Peter adds here another name here. His name is, Savior. "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12)." To this point, Peter has made clear that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. "Repent and return so that you may be forgiven and experience refreshment in the presence of the Lord." Here, Peter makes clear that not only is Jesus Savior, there is no other. He is exclusively Savior. Buddha has not died for you, nor could he. Mohammed has not died for you, nor could he. Mary has not died for you, nor could she. John F. Kennedy has not died for you, nor could he. No religious leader, or political leader, or humanitarian leader, or King, or President, or Pope, or Rabbi, or Imam, or Guru, or Saint has died for you, nor could they.

We have a universal problem. The wages of sin is death. We have one universal solution, the Godman who gave up his life for the sin of the world to take our place. Peter is exclusive because the solution is exclusive. For these Jews who claim allegiance to Yahweh, Peter's call to repent and return indicates that they have gone off on the wrong trajectory. They have based their understanding of Yahweh on the wrong corner stone. Their vision of Yahweh is, in fact, not Yahweh. The Yahweh who rejects Jesus Christ is not the Yahweh who is. The salvation of Yahweh comes through the name, Jesus Christ. "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

This is what Peter was teaching the crowd just before he was arrested. "And on the basis of faith in His name, *it is* the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which *comes* through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all." Faith in the name gave that man physical healing. Faith in the name of Jesus, and Jesus alone, is God's provision for your spiritual healing. The crowd responded with faith. Many more believed and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased to 5000. These members of the establishment sought a way to shut down this movement before it got completely out of hand. They are ready to take an initial shot at the leadership, but being political leaders, they are held back somewhat by the current atmosphere. The populace is with the Apostles because of the amazing, public miracle of healing a recognizable man they had all known to be lame for forty years.

In this environment, the Council only threatens Peter and John and then releases them. This is the middle section of our passage, verses 13-22.

Threat and Release of the Ruling Council (Acts 4:13-22)

¹³ Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and *began* to recognize them as having been with Jesus. ¹⁴ And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. ¹⁵ But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they *began* to confer with one another, ¹⁶ saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ "But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name." ¹⁸ And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; ²⁰ for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." ²¹ When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; ²² for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

Let's start with the initial observation. How do we take this observation from the members of the Sanhedrin?

Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and *began* to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

Uneducated and untrained. You know, these two were fishermen, right? How can they speak like they speak? How can they stand up so boldly and with such insightful use of Scripture and such clear conviction of their claims? How? How does this happen from uneducated and untrained men? They're amazed. Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would give them words to speak when they are opposed by people of power and influence in the world. That is happening right now. Peter's boldness has to call forth our respect. He is standing before the Senate and Supreme Court of the Jewish people, a body that brought about the crucifixion of Jesus, and rather than defend himself, he goes on the attack. "The name by which we healed is Jesus. He is the corner stone. You murdered him. Only by his name can a person be saved." That's aggressive. That's not defensive.

Luke has reminded us throughout that the Holy Spirit is at work. He is at work both in giving boldness and insight to the Apostles in their witness and in convicting the 5000 Jews who have turned to Jesus. We recognized that the Spirit is at work. This Peter who fearfully denied Jesus while standing in the courtyard of the high priest couple of months ago now himself is on trial, fearlessly testifying to Jesus, even reversing the charge to judge his judges.

How do we account for this radical change in Peter, from denier to witness? I have been taught as a young Christian that the change is due to the Holy Spirit. You know, what's the difference between Peter in the courtyard and Peter himself on trial? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had not come yet. The Holy Spirit is here now. And that makes sense to me. The indwelling power of the Spirit changes a man. I accept that the primary reason for the change is the Holy Spirit. Though I now want to say that it is a bit more complicated than that, that there is more to it. You do not place your faith in Christ, experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and then immediately become like Peter.

First, the charge that these men are uneducated and untrained men is a false charge based on the pretensions of the elite. Yes, by way of class, these two men are fishermen. The assumption is that, if you did not go to a Sanhedrin approved university then they can't truly be educated. It is the Ivy league schools, the Harvard and Yale, looking down on everybody else. Or just the university and college kids looking down on people who haven't gone to university. Like you can't be intelligent and knowledgeable if you haven't gone to university. In the Jerusalem system, the training and education

of these men would have come through the Temple establishment. Peter and John have no experience at all with the Temple establishment. They weren't trained here.

So, are they really uneducated? The Apostles heard the full sermons that Jesus gave through three years of ministry, not only the excerpts we get in the Gospels. They heard a lot more. Now, Luke has told us that Jesus opened the Scripture and explained to Apostles all about himself from the Law and the Prophets. Where do all the great Old Testament quotes come from in Peter's sermons? He is not uneducated. They learned about the Word of God and Kingdom of God from Jesus. They even got to discuss his sermons with him after the crowd left. And yes, they may have appeared pretty poor students at times, but that's ultimately the education process. The professors are not often dismayed by wise sayings of first and second year students. If they understood everything right away, they would not need educating.

We can also ask, are they untrained? No. They had better training for ministry than any of the men sitting in judgment against them. Peter and John saw Jesus preach about the kingdom of God, then they were sent out by Jesus in pairs, then they returned to Jesus to give feedback and receive further instruction. They were in training with Jesus.

And these men of power notice that Peter and John "had been with Jesus." But their elitist prejudice does not make the connection between being with Jesus and being educated and trained.

They were apprenticed to Jesus. They didn't just come to Jesus to sit in classrooms. That's not what a disciple is. They did sit at his feet, and that was a good thing. Mary was praised for that kind of thing, to sit and to learn from the instruction of Jesus. But along with that they learned actively with Jesus. They saw the model of Jesus. They were given instruction by Jesus. They were taught how to do things by Jesus. They learned prayer from the instruction and model of Jesus. They learned about wealth from the instruction and model of Jesus. They learned about morality from the instruction and model of Jesus. They learned compassion, and worship, and tough love from Jesus. And they learned this in the context of life and relationship. Jesus cared about them, spent time with them, taught them, discussed with them, gave them assignments, evaluated their ministry.

Were these men uneducated and untrained? Only if you limit your definition of education and training to the official, Rabbinical institutions.

I believe we need to add Peter's education and training as a component used by the Holy Spirit to explain how he is able to stand here and speak the way he speaks. He is bold, both because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and because he had been with Jesus over time.

I think we need to add a third element that worked in his character to make him into the man that he is as he stands firmly before the Sanhedrin. A critical element of Peter's formation is failure. Now, past failure does not automatically lead to future success. But on the other hand, it is impossible to grow in character without failure. I am often kicking myself for my failures, and I have these regrets built up, and I go back and think, "Why didn't I say that differently? Why didn't I do that differently?" And I just wish it had never been. But would I be who I am today if I hadn't failed in the way I had failed in the past? If I'm wishing away the failure, I am also wishing away the development that the failure brought, what I learned from the failure. And I do wish it away, some of them. The sinful ones, the painful ones, where I hurt other people. And yet, I also have to acknowledge that God has taken that and used it to mature me. Peter had a number of failures to grow from. The most significant was his denial of Jesus. Peter the leader was humbled. He boasted about his faithfulness to Jesus and then he failed to live up to his boast. Two keys for Peter's growth from failure are: one, he knew Jesus and: two, Jesus restored him. Otherwise the failure wouldn't have worked in his favor. But he knew he could come back to Jesus because he believed in Jesus. More importantly, Jesus reached out to him. The story of John 21 where Jesus three times causes Peter to confess, "I love you" was the love of Jesus, giving Peter a chance to overturn his denials. And each time Jesus entrusted him with responsibility. "Feed my sheep. - I love you. - Feed my sheep. - I love you. - Feed my sheep." That

does something to a man. To fail and then to be forgiven, to be able to get it out, and be restored to position.

Apprenticeship to Jesus, failure and restoration by Jesus and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, these are the things that changed Peter into the bold witness standing strong and giving testimony in the hall of power.

The Council members go on to issue a command, “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”

Peter and John continue in boldness, responding in verses 19 and 20,

“Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

There is one of your best examples for civil disobedience. You can compare that to Romans 13, where Paul instructs believers to civil obedience. When civil obedience requires disobedience to the command of God, we go with God. Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses.” Peter and John cannot stop speaking in his name. There are certain non-negotiables that prevent reconciliation. In the case of established religious institutions, if they reject foundational truths, such as the fact that salvation is found in no other name but Jesus, then reform is not possible. If that doesn’t change, reform cannot be. The Jewish hierarchy is not willing to budge on rejection of Jesus and the Apostles are not willing to budge on the centrality of Jesus. And we have an impasse.

Interestingly, Psalm 118 that contains the reference to the cornerstone, also contains this in verses 8-9. “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.” Peter and John are taking refuge in the Lord.

For now, from the human perspective, Peter and John are protected from the Sanhedrin by the populace who recognize the man healed as one who was lame for forty years, attesting to the validity and power of the miracle. The leaders say, “We can’t deny it. We can’t lie about it.” So the Sanhedrin has them beaten, but considering that Jesus was crucified after he stood before this Council, the beating is a lighter punishment. And they rejoice that they might suffer for Jesus.

We close this lesson with the response of the new community after this threat and release, a response of prayer and witness. This is Acts 4:23-31.

Prayer and Witness of the New Community (Acts 4:23-31)

²³ When they had been released, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard *this*, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, ²⁵ who by the Holy Spirit, *through* the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, ‘WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? ²⁶ ‘THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.’ ²⁷ “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, ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. ²⁹ “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, ³⁰ while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and *began* to speak the word of God with boldness.

I am impressed by the way the new community of believers uses God’s Word in prayer back to him as a way to frame their current circumstances. Prayer focuses how we see our circumstances.

Sometimes our prayer focus stays fixated on our own view of our circumstances. In our prayer we never really lift our eyes to God. And that is unfortunate. Much of the fruit of prayer comes when our focus shifts from the way we perceive our circumstances to the way God perceives our

circumstances. When our eyes lift up in prayer, off our troubles and onto God, we are then able to look back down at our circumstances from his perspective.

This community models that shift of perspective by using the Word of God to help them understand God's viewpoint. Prayer actively engages them in relational communication with God. They are looking up. They turn their eyes from the threat of the Jerusalem establishment to their Creator God. The Word of God then enables them to frame their circumstances in a way that agrees with God's thoughts and God's will.

These are their circumstances. God is doing something wonderful through their witness. But the highest powers in the city, who control the religious and political and social institutions have issued an edict to forbid further teaching and witnessing in the name of Jesus. Peter and John have already been tried and beaten. From a human perspective, it can only get worse if they continue on as they have been doing. How does God see this threat?

They start big in framing their prayer. "You God made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them (Exodus 20:11)." God is the right ruler of all things. Then they quote Psalm 2:1-2, establishing that the response of the men of influence is not a surprise.

WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.

First, the rulers are not gathered together primarily against the disciples. They are gathered together against the Lord and against his Christ. This principle of rulers taking their stand against God and his anointed one was recognized long ago, it's not new. So these gathered believers can understand the threat they have received as part of this long battle between the leaders of the world and God and his people.

That truth helps them understand what happened to Jesus. The Gentiles will rage against the Anointed One. "Yes. That happened. Pontius Pilate and Herod came against Jesus." And the peoples will engage in futile opposition. "That too. The peoples or nations includes Rome and Israel who both planned the execution of the Messiah." That intense opposition and cruel suffering inflicted on the Righteous One was predestined by God. So yes, these rage. And they're guilty. Pilate, and Herod, and Annas, and Caiaphas, and everybody around them, they are guilty of planning to undo the Anointed One. But God is in control. All of this was predestined.

"Predestined" here does not mean that God just looked ahead into the future, saw what was going to happen, and then declared that it would happen. "Predestined" means that God orchestrated events in such a way to bring about the end; to bring about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ at the hands of evil men. God knew that if Christ came in humility and truth, the forces of the world would want to snuff him out. And God controlled the timing. Jesus died at Passover because God wanted Jesus to die at Passover. That wasn't a nice coincidence of history. That was God's timing. The Roman and Jewish leaders acted out of their own will, determined to do evil. They were free and responsible agents. God knew he could count on the wickedness of their hearts. He proceeded with his plan, counting the cost, fully aware of the suffering ahead because he had predetermined the outcome.

As usual, the Biblical text does not attempt to reconcile the reality of God's sovereign will and man's accountability. The Bible teaches both as compatible truths. And rather than seeking an explanation to how God is sovereign, the new community recognizes the Biblical truth of God's sovereign will over events to find courage and understanding in their circumstances. They are not dismayed by opposition because they trust God has a plan, even if that plan includes suffering. Suffering is not a surprise to the Christian. The threat to shut down the Awakening does not mean that God has lost control and that God's plan is thwarted. The opposition is part of God's plan. He saw it coming ages ago.

Verses 29-30 give us the actual request.

And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.

Prayer based in Scripture has framed the circumstances in a way that leads to this particular request. The request is not that God would remove the threat. That would be an understandable and good request. And we do that all the time. “God, please, make it stop hurting.” “God, please, take away these evil leaders.” “God, change these circumstances.” Those aren’t bad requests. It is just not their request. Instead, they ask for confidence, boldness to continue in their witness despite the threats. They seem to express both a request that God would continue to work through healing and miracles and a confidence that God will continue to work through healing and miracles. Maybe it is more of the latter. It’s the confidence. As you do your part, God, please, help us to do our part. Help us to focus on what you are doing, not on what your enemies might do, so that we can be your servants in your work, not distracted by opposition or hardship or setback.

The prayer concludes with an affirmation that Jesus is central. “We know, God, that the miracles taking place are through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

This is a critical moment in the life of the new New Covenant community. In Exodus 19:18, Moses tells us that when God spoke at that critical moment in the life of the new Israel, “the whole mountain quaked violently.” We have already seen the similarity in the birth of the Church and the birth of Israel in the fire and the smoke of Sinai and Pentecost. In the early days of both Old Covenant and New Covenant peoples, when they were coming to be, God worked miracles to affirm the new communities of his presence during the critical days of their new formation. As the mountain shook then, the earthquakes now. The room they’re in shakes. And they are filled with the Holy Spirit.

The last phrase of the passage tells us that as a result of being filled with the Holy Spirit, “[they] began to speak the word of God with boldness.” And you could take that as something that happened right there in that prayer gathering. They began speaking the Word of God. That’s possible. I think it speaks more to what happened as they left the prayer gathering. They had asked God for courage to witness despite high-level opposition. And that is what happened. As they went back into their ministry, for the Apostles, or normal work and family life for the great majority, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness.

Rather than derail the early Church, the first major threat has further catalyzed their resolve to witness for Jesus. The threat that comes up in the next passage is more subtle and more dangerous, originating not from without but from within.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 4:1-22. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What motivates Jewish leaders to arrest Peter and John? How do you explain their harsh response after a great miracle has been performed?
3. What claims does Peter make about the gospel in his words to the Sanhedrin? What new claims or clarifications not yet mentioned in his previous two speeches?
4. In what way is it true that Peter and John were uneducated and untrained? In what way is it untrue that Peter and John were uneducated and untrained?
5. What do you think about Jesus’ method of preparing his disciples for ministry? Can his method be employed in some way in your own church or movement?
6. Read the community’s response in Acts 4:23-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
7. Apply the model of prayer by this community to a situation in your own life.

Lesson 7: Acts 4:32-5:16 Internal Threat

Introduction

In our last lesson we addressed an external threat to the new New Covenant community. The established leaders of Jerusalem arrested Peter and John in the middle of a sermon, tried them, beat them and commanded that they teach no longer in the name of Jesus. This external opposition brought the community of believers together in prayer and reinforced their conviction to persevere in bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

Luke's next report concerns an internal threat. This threat occurs in the context of sharing material wealth in the earliest Christian movement. Ananias and Saphira lie about their generosity. That lie is addressed by God seriously and severely. I put off discussing the issue of communal property when it was raised in chapter 2, so let's begin in the first half of this lesson by addressing that facet of the early Church in Jerusalem. Then in the second half of the lesson we will proceed with the internal threat of hypocrisy introduced into the community by Ananias and Saphira.

The issue of communal property is raised in the summary at the end of chapter 4 that bridges the external threat and the internal threat. This is Acts 4:32-35.

Communal Property in the New Covenant Community (4:32-35)

³² And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of *them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. ³⁴ For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales ³⁵ and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

The external threat drove the community to galvanizing prayer that reinvigorated their proclamation of Jesus Christ. They were not torn apart by the pressure of the threat but continued on in an impressive show of unity. They are of one heart and one soul. Those are not just words. The wealthy show it by selling property to care for their brothers and sisters in need. Continued witness has a practical impact in this early community.

The communal sharing of property we see here raises for us again that question of whether this report from Luke is meant to be descriptive or prescriptive. Is Luke telling us how all Christian communities ought to be or is he describing for us how a particular Christian community behaved under certain circumstances? Our approach to answering that question requires observing Scripture at different levels of focus. We start focused in very close and then expand our focus outwards to take in more and more text. First, we need to identify what the text we are looking at actually says. And in this case, we need to do that both with this passage, Acts 4:32-35, and with the parallel passage, Acts 2:42-47. Second, we need to expand our focus to what we know about the immediate context of these two passages. Third, we need to expand our focus even further to consider the context of the whole book of Acts. And fourth, we need to widen out to consider the context of the New Testament. We could go even one more step and consider the context of all of the Bible. But that is getting beyond what I want to do in this lesson. That would be good if we were considering the full approach to finances as taught in Scripture, but I'm focusing more specifically on how wealth is to be viewed within this New Covenant community.

1. What does the text say?

So first, what does the text say? Verse 32 tells us, "Not one of *them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them." Verse 34-35 tells us, "There was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need."

Chapter 2:44-45 had already told us something similar, “And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.”

What we see in the text, just what we observe without interpreting it, looks like pretty radical behavior.

First, there is a rejection of personal claim to wealth. “Not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own.”

Second, there is an assertion that possessions belong in some sense to all. “All things were common property to them.”

Third, that property was distributed by the Apostles, after the legal owners sold the land and gave that money to the Apostles.

Fourth, the proceeds are used exclusively here for the needy in the community. We are not told the proceeds pay the Apostles’ salary, or pay for the church buildings and the utilities. We are only told that the proceeds are distributed to those in need in this community of believers.

Fifth, as a result of this distribution of wealth, there is not a needy person among them.

Those are the facts we observe in the text.

2. What is the immediate context?

Second, we need to expand our focus to the immediate context of these two passages. We know this is a unique time in the history of God’s people. The Church has just been born in Jerusalem.

Thousands have believed. The first influx of believers included Jews and God-fearers from various locations throughout the Roman and Persian empires who are in Jerusalem for the Passover.

The Apostles are teaching daily in the Temple. Believers are gathering together daily for meals, for prayer, for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Healing miracles are being performed by all the Apostles. There is a lot of excitement. A lot is going on.

Luke has not reported any sermon by the Apostles that is encouraging this attitude of common ownership of property. They are not telling the believers to sell their goods and lay the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet. At least Luke hasn’t told us that they’re telling anybody that. The sharing of property seems to be a grass-roots response, or an internal response in these wealthy believers who are motivated, moved by the Holy Spirit to meet the needs of the community.

Two comments in the context suggest further connections. The Acts 2 passage ends by telling us the new believers were “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.” There is not a direct connection to “having favor with all the people” and sharing their possessions with those in need. But it does seem to be part of the whole package. The teaching, the miracles, the behavior of the believers creates a favorable impression by the non-believers in Jerusalem. If the favorability by non-believers is somewhat engendered by the observation that these Christians care for the needy among them, that would be an example of what Jesus said in John 13:35, “[they] will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I think there is a connection here between the favorable impression that is being made, and this very real, practical love being shown among these believers. Another connection is made in Acts 4:33. After reporting on the sharing of common property, Luke writes, “And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.” Luke mentions common property. Then he mentions the continued witness of the Apostles to the resurrection then he says, “and abundant grace was on them all.” What does he mean that abundant grace was on them all? You know, my mind first just thinks of the Gospel and forgiveness; and I’ve received the grace of Jesus Christ; I have a new identity; I’m loved. I’m thinking of the spiritual blessing of the Gospel, that is being poured out lavishly. But Luke makes a logical connection from this verse to

the next verse using the word, “for.” He says, “...abundant grace as on them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales.” This “abundant grace on them” is described for us by Luke as a care for all the people among them. The grace is not only spiritual. The grace is the Holy Spirit working in the wealthy to care for the poor. And the poor are experiencing that grace very practically. So, this immediate context around this communal sharing connects the proclamation of the Gospel with change in the behavior of believers that makes a positive impact on others. The abundance of grace is spiritual and material. This is not the Prosperity Gospel. This is not people becoming wealthy. In fact, it seems to be people giving up wealth. This is the Gospel making a real, sacrificial impact on the life of people. And that seems to be an important theme in these first chapters of Acts. Luke chooses what stories he is going to report on. And he has chosen to tell us twice about the sharing of communal property. And both internal threats to the early Church are going to have to do with money and the distribution of wealth. The Gospel in the early Church made an impact on believers. All the teaching we are getting is spiritual truths and forgiveness in Jesus. But then we are getting these stories and we are seeing how this spiritual message is making an impact on the material reality; the physical reality of believers in of how they see their responsibility to one another.

This flow of thought seems to be true in the immediate context. The Apostles are giving witness to Jesus. People are believing the witness. Belief is affecting how they see their possessions and their desire to meet the needs of others in the community. Because of their perspective about wealth and about each other, the wealthy are selling possessions to meet the needs of other believers. That sacrificial love expressed toward one another is one way that abundant grace is experienced in the community and is also one of the traits of this new community that finds favor with the people in the larger society.

We recognize that this is a special context. There is a major revival going on in Jerusalem. It is the unique situation of the birth of the Church. There may be thousands of visitors continuing on in Jerusalem who came for the Passover and believed. And yet, along with something special going on there is this practical effect in society. How do we know whether the behavior of these believers is a description of something very unique, very special or is a pattern for all communities of faith?

3. What does the rest of the book of Acts say?

Third, we need to take our focus out a little further and consider the context of the whole book of Acts. As we look at the rest of Acts, do the sermons of Peter and Paul encourage joint possession of all property or do we see evidence of the new Christian communities exhibiting the same behavior that is going on here in Jerusalem?

This is an interesting thing. Peter and Paul continue to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ wherever they go. But Luke never gives a report of their preaching that addresses this topic of common ownership. Luke also does not report on the practice of communal property among the growing Christian communities in Judea and in Samaria and out into the Gentile territories. We don’t see it or hear it in the rest of Acts.

This is not conclusive evidence that these churches did not share property in common. Luke may have simply not reported on it. But the silence is interesting, and it makes us wonder.

4. What do the New Testament Epistles say?

So fourth, we need to expand our focus even more to consider the context of the whole of the New Testament. And for the second time, I’m not going to focus on the Gospels. I’m going to focus on the Epistles. Because we want to know specifically what teaching is given to early churches and what description do we see in early churches in their behavior about this issue. This final step in determining whether a report in Acts is descriptive or prescriptive is especially important when we consider the genre difference between Acts and the Epistles.

Acts is narrative while the Epistles are prose discourse. The Epistles are letters written to churches and individuals to answer questions and provide instruction on correct doctrine and correct practice.

That is what the letters are. They are written more directly. Acts is telling us the story of what happened. That's why we have this problem of descriptive versus prescriptive, because Acts is narrative. We know Luke is writing about the experience of the early churches. We know he is describing to us what was taught and behaviors that were going on. And his narrative is theological, but it is still narrative. He does not directly enter into the narrative and explain what should apply to us. He is telling us the story. And creates a little more work for us to figure out what applies to us.

And as I said, the Epistles are more direct. They are full of imperative. Do this. Don't do that. They are not systematic theologies or instruction manuals. So they are not fully comprehensive. They are letters written into a particular context. So, we still have to pay attention to context. Still, the letters have this purpose, which is to give specific direction to the early Christian communities.

If we discover something in the narrative of Acts that might be prescriptive, we do well to double check our interpretation in the Epistles. Taking our current example, we see the sharing of common property here in Acts 2 and 4, but we do not see it played out in the rest of Acts. So we are wondering whether communal property was meant to be true of all Christian communities, and in wondering that we ask, "What about the Epistles? Do Paul and Peter and James instruct believers to view their possessions as common property? Are they directed to sell what they have and lay it at the feet of the elders in the churches?"

And quite frankly, the answer is going to be, "no." I'll challenge you to do a more thorough study of the New Testament teaching on this subject but I am not seeing instruction from these leaders to this first generation of believers to share everything they have in common. We see it at the time of the Jerusalem Awakening but we do not see it in the letters to Rome, or Galatia, or Ephesus, or Philippi, or Colossae, or Thessalonica. Paul does not tell Timothy or Titus to teach this about communal property in the churches that they are leading. Even though James is dealing with issues between rich and poor, he does not promote this idea of common possession of property. And we do not read it in Peter, or John, or Jude, or the letter to the Hebrews.

And this is not because the topic of money does not come up. Money is addressed regularly. For example, Paul writes to the Corinthians,

Each one *must do* just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

You know, are they to give? Yes, they are to give. And he writes to the Thessalonians,

¹¹ and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, ¹² so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need. (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12)

And to the Ephesians,

He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need. (Ephesians 4:28)

And to Timothy,

⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Timothy 5:8).

James writes,

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? (James 2:15–16)

And Peter instructs us to,

Be hospitable to one another without complaint (1 Peter 4:9).

We do not see in the New Testament Epistles exhortation to sell property or a teaching of communal ownership. Believers are to work in order to provide for their own family, so that they might have funds to share with others. They are to give from their heart, cheerfully as an act of worship.

Wisdom and Conviction

So how do we interpret what is going on with the sharing of property at the birth of the Church in Jerusalem and what principles there still might apply to us?

Because I do not see in the New Testament after Acts 5 either the teaching or the practice of communal ownership of property and because I do see other references that imply individual responsibility regarding wealth, I am led to interpret the sharing of property here in Jerusalem as a special occurrence within a specific context. I believe this is description about this great awakening, not prescription for all churches everywhere.

How then do I interpret this special moment in the life of the Church? That becomes more difficult. We have what the text has given us. It would be nice to have more. I wonder if there is a special need created by hundreds or thousands of people staying in Jerusalem during this revival. You know, maybe the extended revival creates a lot of need.

And that may be part of the story. I do not believe that is the whole story. The distribution of goods is for people who are in need, not people who traveled from outside. In chapter 6, this will specifically relate to widows. That seems less like the case of a feast lasting weeks longer than planned and more like a response to a social problem. I then wonder if the social problem is created when people chose to identify with Jesus Christ and are thus no longer cared for by existing Jewish structures. But we are not told that, not here. It could be part of the story. But at this early stage we do not have indication that these people are excluded from societal help because they are Christians. Financial loss as a consequence of following Jesus is going to happen. Again, the New Testament does not preach or teach Prosperity Gospel. But that loss of property does not seem to have happened yet.

Here in the early life of the Church we see the Gospel of Jesus Christ making a powerful impact on how these early believers feel about their own wealth and how they view the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ. They willingly view themselves as part of a unified community to which they have personal obligation. My need is your need. Your need is my need. Who will do something about that need? Well, if I can, I will. It's rising up out of individual responsibility and individual choice about how they use their wealth. So, they might see it as property that's for everybody. They are still the ones that are responsible for that property.

And on one hand, the selling of land and property to meet the needs of the poor is a limited solution. If everyone sells everything, then as soon as the community stops attracting new believers with more wealth, the wealth is gone. It was sold to care for needs. Believers need to keep land and homes and businesses for the ongoing care of others who are not well off. For the care of their families, and for the care of their brothers and sisters in Christ, and even for the help of people outside of the community. And what happens when they spend all the wealth? The financial wisdom of Scripture encourages believers to work hard, to save money, to provide for your families, and to share with others.

Taken without qualification, the behavior of the rich selling everything is not in the end a wise approach. Individual wealth is gone, so the members of the Church become poor.

My daughter Julia introduced our family to Andy Stanley's series on wisdom called, "askit." It's still out there on the Internet. It's great. Just search, "askit." As a result, it is not unusual that when someone in our family is struggling with a decision, someone else will ask the question from that series, "What's the wise thing to do?" Sounds almost too simple to be helpful, but really, we often know what the wise thing to do, we just don't want to do it, or we don't think about it. But as soon as you just ask the question, you're like, "Oh, yeah, I know what the wise thing is to do." It is just not always fun when one of us says something like, "Hey, let's have a Lord of the Rings marathon!" And

then someone else says, “Well, what is the wise thing to do?” And we all immediately know that watching an 11-hour film trilogy non-stop is not the wise thing to do. But it sure is the fun thing to do. And sometimes, we decide, sometimes fun trumps wise. We are going to do the fun thing.

As believers, sometimes generosity trumps wisdom. The accountants, the bankers cannot always run the use of finances in the Christian Church. The Holy Spirit led Mary to lavishly pour out expensive perfume valued at a year’s wages - a year’s wages! A year! - on the feet of Jesus in a moment. In minutes, and it’s gone. That wealth is gone. Mary was not acting according to the dictates of financial wisdom. And she gets criticized for it. “That could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor.” But then Jesus comes to her defense, “Leave her alone. This was done for me.” She has committed an extravagant act of worship out of love.

Sometimes conviction of the heart, conviction deep in the soul trumps wisdom. The Holy Spirit moves in us to behave in a way that might not look like the wisest course of action. We can critique the behavior of these first believers regarding this issue of communal sharing, not the best stewardship. You know, everybody stop selling everything you have. This is not a wise long-term financial plan. And yet, there is a deeper wisdom at work here based on gratitude to God and compassion for those in need. These brothers and sisters are acting out of a conviction stirred up in their hearts based on this deeper wisdom of seeing themselves as one in this community.

And it challenges us to do the same. I do not mean that we should encourage communal ownership of property. I believe the Biblical model of property is best described as stewardship. We own personal property. God allows for the ownership and the increase of wealth. But in our ownership, we are stewards of that wealth, stewards of that property. God is the true owner of all things. We are his stewards. We are not kings in our own right, separate from God. We are his vassals. The community does not have the authority or responsibility to determine how we should use our possessions. We as individuals have that authority and responsibility. But what we have is not simply ours; not if we have bowed our knee to God the Father and Jesus the Son. We give everything over to him. And then he gives it back into our hands, entrusting it to us stewards of what is truly his.

And usually, that stewardship should follow the dictates of Biblical wisdom regarding finances. We are to act wisely. But sometimes that stewardship, like with Mary, calls for something lavish. Or like with these early believers, a lavish generosity. You know, either love for God or love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, love for our fellow men and women, the gratitude and compassion displayed in the first Church is a model for us, even if it is not prescribing to us a required mode for the distribution of property. It is a model of sacrificial giving. It is a model of viewing our possessions as provision from God to serve his purposes. It is a model of compassion for brothers and sisters in need.

Luke has given us this summary about the giving going on in the early Church to show the impact of the Gospel. There was this external threat. It did not shut down the Gospel. They continued to preach the name of Jesus Christ and there was a continued effect in the community. He also gave us this summary to describe the context of a next threat, an internal threat that is going to shock the Christian community. It is the threat of hypocrisy. And it’s not only the hypocrisy that shocks the community, but how swiftly and severely God deals with the hypocrisy kinda leaves the community in fear. This is Acts 4:36-5:16.

The Threat of Hypocrisy In the New Covenant Community (4:36-5:11)

³⁶ Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷ and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. ¹ But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and kept back *some* of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet. ³ But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? ⁴ “While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart?

You have not lied to men but to God.”⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it.⁶ The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.⁷ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.⁸ And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”⁹ Then Peter *said* to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out *as well*.”¹⁰ And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.¹¹ And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

Following the general description of wealthy believers selling property to care for those in need, we get a specific report about one particular generous and compassionate believer. His name is Joseph. We know him by the nickname, Barnabas, given to him by the Apostles. Luke also tells us that the name means, “son of encouragement”, though scholars are not sure how that’s derived from the word, Barnabas. Son of encouragement - Barnabas. It doesn’t exactly mean that. We are not sure. But that’s okay. It is not always easy to figure out where nicknames come from. But Luke goes on and tells us what the nickname was intended to convey and that is that this guy is the son of encouragement. That’s how they thought of him. And it’s an apt description of what we see in Barnabas, first in his relationship with Paul and then later with Mark.

It is not unusual for Luke to introduce a person briefly in a story and then come back to that person later in the narrative. The first words said about Barnabas are intended to give us the measure of the man, so we will know something about his character when he does show up again later. We’ll be able to think back, “Oh, he was one of those guys who had some wealth, but he gave it for the good of the community. Introducing Barnabas here also sets up a contrast to Ananias and Saphira.

So, we read that Barnabas sold a piece of property and laid the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet. Then we get a contrast, “But...Ananias and Saphira kept some back.” God strikes down both of them. What exactly did they do wrong? Why did they do it? And why did God respond so severely?

What did they do wrong?

Starting with what they did wrong, what we know comes from Peter. The Spirit of God gives him discernment into Ananias’ heart attitude.

“Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”

Selling land is not compulsory in the early Christian community. Peter says, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?” These details add to our earlier consideration of common property. Ananias was not required as a Christian to sell this piece of property. Peter also adds, “And after it was sold, was it not under your control?” Ananias did not have to sell and if he did sell, he was not required to give the proceeds to the disciples. It was under his control what he wanted to do with the money.

The charge from Peter is that Ananias kept back part of the proceeds. But if Ananias was not under moral obligation to see his property and if he was not under obligation to give the Apostles the proceeds if he did sell the property, then his sin does not seem to be in simply keeping part of the money from the sell. He was free to decide what part to give. The sin seems to be that he lied about how much he gave. When Saphira comes in the question put to her regards the price. Peter questions, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” She responds, “Yes, that was the price.” Then she dies. The sin was not in holding some money back, but in holding some money back while giving the impression that they were giving the whole to the Apostles. It is the sin of a false testimony. It is the sin of hypocrisy.

Why did they do it?

They did it for the same reason we do it. They wanted the honor and praise. They wanted the honor that comes to someone who is sacrificially generous, the honor that comes to someone like Barnabas. They wanted to be seen as more giving than they really are. This is hypocrisy and it is not hard to imagine. It is very human. We get it. You know, we do good and for some reason want to shade what we have done so that it appears even better than it really was. Ironically, there was no need for them to lie. If they sold the land from a true heart for God and gave only half and admitted that they only gave half; they said, "Here's the land, you know, we sold it and we're going to give half to the Church," they would have been recognized as generous and compassionate. Just not maybe as generous and compassionate as Barnabas, sure, but still they would have done what they could do and they would have been seen as good.

I imagine that comparison to Barnabas stirred up a competitive, jealous motivation. So there is both this desire for honor and there is also this jealousy. They did not want to look less giving than Barnabas. You can imagine planning to do something good and noteworthy, and you're going to sacrifice, only to have someone else be even more generous, or more helpful, or more thoughtful, or do better than you. And they get the spotlight while your good deeds feel diminished. Satan uses comparison with other believers - just think Cain and Abel, it's at the beginning - to stir up jealousy and bitterness in our hearts, so that we will act the part of a hypocrite. The word, "hypocrite," comes from the Greek, "theater." It means, "to act or impersonate." That's such a natural tendency of the flesh, to act a little nicer at church than we really are. To dress a little nicer and to say "please" and "thank you" a little more. To cut the sarcasm. To watch our language while we're there. You know, we know we are a bit messed up and struggling with sin, but we don't want them to all know that we are messed up and struggling with sin. We want the honor that comes from being considered better than we really are. In fact, we have even fooled ourselves into thinking that we are better than we really are so we can fool ourselves into thinking that it's an honor that we really deserve. But we are still going to hide a lot of the darkness inside of us and we hope that nobody ever finds out about it. Because, to some degree we are all play-acting.

Comparison to Barnabas leads Ananias to put on a mask. He is play-acting the role of Barnabas, in order to receive the honor that comes to someone like Barnabas.

We get that Ananias' sin was in the lie about how much he gave. And we get that he was motivated by jealousy and the desire for honor. You know, we get these things because our own flesh can relate so easily.

But why does God respond so severely? That's one of the hardest things to get about this story.

First, I'd like to point out that it is God, not Peter. The Holy Spirit gives Peter the discernment to see through Ananias and Saphira. When public sin like this is uncovered, church leaders have a tough challenge in determining when and how to address it. You know, how strong do we need to be? God takes the decision for how to respond out of Peter's hands in this case. Peter does not strike Ananias down. Peter calls Ananias out for his lie. God strikes Ananias down. And then God strikes Saphira down. This is the severity of God.

Second, I'd like to point out that this severe response is consistent with the character of the God of the Old Testament. The God of the New Testament is a God of wrath. Look at how much Jesus talks about Hell if you don't think the God of New Testament is a God of wrath. He is a God of wrath just as he is a God of wrath in the Old Testament. And the God of the Old Testament is a God of grace, just as he is a God of grace in the New Testament. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Forget the false narrative that the God of the Old Testament is somehow more severe and less compassionate than the God the New. That is such a non-Biblical idea. God is a God of wrath, and justice, and holiness, and love, and compassion, and grace always.

Third, we know that God does not respond this severely to the vast majority of hypocritical actions by believers. And we know that because you and I are still alive. This is not the normal, or we would

be burned up. This is the problem of Exodus. How does fire exist on a burning bush? How does the holiness of God live with a flammable people? If God responded with death every time a believer sinned, we would all be dead. The cases of severe punishment in the Bible stand out and make an impression on us. But when we add them up, we recognize that there are often hundreds of years between the stories. And nowhere in the Bible is God consistently striking dead disobedient followers one after the other. I mean, even where we see it in the Pentateuch, it's a couple of times in the first generation and a couple of times in the second generation. So it's not happening all the time. It's a rare occurrence. So when God does, apparently he does so for unique reasons that have to do with something in the context. Something is going on.

One of the reasons God responds so severely here seems to have something to do with the birth of the Church. We have already seen comparison between the birth of the Church and the birth of the nation Israel. And that's another place we see the severe punishment of God is back at the birth of Israel in both the first generation out of Egypt and the second generation out of Egypt.

So here Luke repeats the term, "kept back," to describe what Ananias has done with the proceeds. F. F. Bruce points out in his commentary that that this word, "to keep back," is the same word used in the Greek version of Joshua chapter 7 when Achan keeps for himself property that has been placed under a ban by God. The second generation had overcome the disobedience of the first generation out of Egypt and had just entered the Promised land. They've experienced this victory over their enemies by the power of God. It's not really them but God is doing it. But then one of the men, this Achan, keeps property for himself that God has said, "Don't keep!" And he lies about it. And God strikes Achan and his family down.

It's a similar situation at the beginning of Israel that we have at the beginning of the Church. Those early days in the life of Israel were critical moments. And in a few cases, in a few rare cases, God punished swiftly to keep his people from immediately turning aside from him. God is not playing with his people. God is serious about Israel. And God is serious about the Church. These early days in Jerusalem are critical. And eventually hypocrisy will become a serious problem throughout the Church. It is today. It's all over. But not yet. We are right here at the beginning. We don't yet have Paul converted. We don't yet have the New Testament formed. These are early days, and they are important days, and God is protecting his people from hypocritical influencers, so that the Church will not be derailed right from the start.

It is tough to prove that God is protecting the Church because if he is, he did so successfully, leaving us to only wonder what the consequences might have been if he did not remove Ananias and Sapphira. What might have happened? What damage could they have done?

And just a little bit of imagination can help us at this point. The comparison here is made to Barnabas. Barnabas is the man who is going to be chosen to oversee the new church plant that the Apostles hear about going on up in Antioch. Barnabas is going to go to Antioch and while he's there doing ministry he is going to think of Paul, who has been sidelined after his conversion because the establishment became so intent on killing him that the Apostles sent him up to Tarsus. And Barnabas thinks about how much good would result if a man like Paul came and worked with me Antioch? So, Barnabas - son of encouragement - goes to Tarsus in search of Paul and persuades him to come to Antioch, and the rest is history.

But what if Barnabas was not the one chosen by the Apostles to go to Antioch? What if Ananias and Sapphira had succeeded in their deception? What if they had received the honor of Barnabas and had become trusted leaders in the New Covenant community? What if the Apostles choose a husband and wife team to go to Antioch? Does a man like Ananias, you know, he is being looked up to by the believers in Antioch - "Oh, you're the one the Apostles, you're so great, you're helping us," - does he ever go get a more famous man than himself like Paul, who he's never really going to compare to, does he go and get a better teacher like Paul to come and share in the ministry of Antioch? No. He never goes and gets Paul.

And if not, what about the later missionary journeys of Paul? What about all his New Testament letters? What about Luke, the traveling companion of Paul? What about the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts we are reading right now? It doesn't exist if Barnabas doesn't go and get Paul.

Now, this is all hypothetical. I am using my imagination. I am not saying that the Apostles would have sent Ananias to Antioch. I am only pointing out that we do not know what God was protecting the early Church from when he removed Ananias and Saphira. Hypocritical leaders can corrupt a movement. They can be the death of a movement. You've seen it happen. God protects the early Christian movement swiftly and decisively with severe justice and I think God deserves our trust in this. God knew what he was doing. It's hard but God had good reason for it being hard.

Luke tells us that because of the deaths of Ananias and Saphira, "a great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things." And this is not communicated as a negative. There is a right, holy fear in our relationship with God. Isaiah felt it when he saw the glory of God in his vision, crying out, "I am undone!" And Peter felt it in the boat when Jesus calmed the winds and the waves, "Away from me Lord, I am a sinful man." The early Christian movement feels in this moment a holy, sobering fear.

God is serious about the Church. The Church is his plan of salvation in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, to the remotest parts of the earth. The Church is his plan for displaying the glory of his grace and his justice and his goodness through the ages. The awakening in Jerusalem began with joy, great joy. But the joy cannot exist apart from suffering, not while humanity is still broken, and the nations rage against God. Every local body of Christ will continue to face external threats and internal threats. Responding to the external threat by the Jerusalem establishment, the believers prayed, and God solidified their resolve and the movement continued to grow. In response to this internal threat of hypocrisy, God stepped in to cut the cancer out. A holy fear falls over the people. What happens next? Does the mission stop? Are the believers afraid to go on? We conclude with Acts 5:12-16.

Conclusion (5:12-16)

¹² At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. ¹³ But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*, ¹⁵ to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. ¹⁶ Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

This threat has not derailed the people of God, the work of God. The awakening continues.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 4:32-35. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Would you be one of the one's with property or goods to sell for the benefit of others or would you more likely be one to receive help from the community? What emotions arise in you when you think about putting communal sharing of property into practice? Does the idea of communal sharing of property frighten you or threaten you? Or does the idea excite you?
3. Does the difference between descriptive narrative and prescriptive narrative seem valid to you?
4. Consider the method of interpretation used in this lesson by observing the text, the immediate context, the whole of Acts, and the New Testament epistles. Does the method seem to be a sound method of interpretation? Do you agree with the conclusions at each stage of interpretation or do you see a mistake or weakness in the interpretation?

5. What are your own conclusion about sharing resources with the Christian community? What principles seem to not apply in all cases and what principles seem to apply in all cases? What do you believe God is calling you to do?
6. Read Acts 4:36-5:11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
7. How do you resolve in your own mind the harshness of God's punishment of Ananias and Saphira? Does it help to recognize that God is a God of grace and justice in both the Old Testament and the New Testament?
8. Read Acts 5:12-16. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
9. Does the story of Ananias and Saphira motivate you towards integrity and holiness? How do you understand or explain the fear of the Lord as a positive aspect of your Christian experience?

Lesson 8: Acts 5:17-6:7 Further External and Internal Conflict

Introduction

Ananias and Sapphira threatened the moral integrity of the early Christian movement by exchanging a first love of Christ for a love of false honor. God protected his people from the damage their hypocrisy would have caused. Luke continues on after that story with two more threats that arose in the midst of the Jerusalem Awakening. In Acts 5:17-42, he reports on a second external threat which is an intensification of the earlier threat from the Jerusalem establishment, “Do not preach in the name of Jesus or else!” You remember that threat. In Acts 6:1-6, he gives a second report of an internal threat that again touches on the distribution of wealth in the community. But unlike Ananias and Sapphira, this threat does not arise from any clear sin. The threat is logistical. Even so, an unwise response to that internal threat could seriously damage the movement. These two threats bring us to the summary statement of Acts 6:7 which signals the end of Part I of Acts.

In this lesson, we will address the text in that order of external threat, internal threat, summary statement.

Let’s set up the context for this next iteration of establishment opposition: the external threat. The awakening continues. Thousands of Jews in Jerusalem have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Our update after Ananias and Sapphira in 5:14 reported, “And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.” That’s not without tension. The believers know they have been threatened by the highest court in the country, “[to not] speak or teach at all in in the name of Jesus (4:18).” They prayed together for boldness as a community and resolved to continue in open witness despite the command of the legal authorities. So now, every time they open their mouth to speak about Jesus, they do so at the risk of arrest and punishment.

There must be tension in the community, and yet, also excitement and joy. Multitudes are coming to Christ. The punishment of Ananias and Sapphira has sobered the community with a holy seriousness that motivates integrity in all they continue to do. Miracles of healing have risen to an unprecedented level, fixing God’s thumbprint of approval on their continued witness.

The established leaders of Jerusalem hover over this growing movement like a snake. They control the political and religious establishment. They control the Temple police force. They control communication with the Roman overlords. All the power of man is on their side. They know they can crush this movement. But they are nervous about potential repercussions from the populace. Knowing victory is inevitable, a snake will still move slowly, it’s hovering patiently over its prey to avoid a lucky blow from the victim that might cause harm. A snake, however, in its patience is not motivated by the very human emotion of jealousy that compels us to rash action. That is a part of this story. Here is the second report of threat. I will read it in two parts, starting with accusation and response, followed by deliberation and threat. First, we read about the Sanhedrin’s accusation and the Apostles’ response. This is Acts 5:17-32,

External Threat (Acts 5:17-42)

Accusation and Response (17-32)

¹⁷ But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, ²⁰ “Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.” ²¹ Upon hearing *this*, they entered into the temple about daybreak and *began* to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent *orders* to the prison house for them to be brought. ²² But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, ²³ saying, “We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside.” ²⁴ Now when the

captain of the temple *guard* and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this.²⁵ But someone came and reported to them, “The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”²⁶ Then the captain went along with the officers and *proceeded* to bring them *back* without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned).²⁷ When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them,²⁸ saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.”³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.³¹ He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

I briefly mentioned the analogy to Cain and Abel in our last lesson, hypothesizing that Ananias was motivate in part by jealousy of Barnabas. The comparison works even better here. When Abel sacrificed to the Lord, he received the approval of his heavenly Father. The Apostles have given their lives over to the service of God, and God has blessed them with outward approval through a multitude of followers, the respect of the populace, and a most undeniable abundance of healing miracles. And the approval on the Apostles is quite apparent. Cain’s sacrifice was not blessed with the Father’s approval. And rather than question the sin crouching in his own soul, rather than having it out with the Father, Cain turned his jealous anger on Abel, the one who was doing the will of the Father and receiving the blessing of the Father.

The leadership in Jerusalem is similarly blinded to the real problem. The real problem is in their own souls and has to do with their own relationship with the Father. The response to the Gospel message and the miracles of healing taking place ought to create a reality check for the leadership. They ought to be saying, “Wow, look at the approval of God in this movement! Why is that?” Instead, the Sadducees at the top of the Jerusalem establishment take their anger out on the ones whose sacrifice is approved of by God. Luke says, “They were filled with jealousy.” And this is what jealousy does in the human heart. Rather than causing us to look inward at our own sinfulness, jealousy lashes out at the one receiving the desired blessing.

This arrest and trial feels like a repetition of the previous arrest and trial. So, we might ask, if Luke is selecting his material so carefully, there’s so much he is not including, why include two threats that appear basically synonymous? Repetition in good literature is never merely synonymous. When something is repeated, the author has a reason for it. Even if an author says the exact same thing twice, by saying it twice he is creating an emphasis. He is communicating something. The repetition here intensifies for us both the seriousness of the opposition, we are going to see that opposition again, and the resolve of the Apostles that we see again. The repetition also heightens for us the tension in the narrative. Will the awakening overcome the opposition and bring about a spiritual renewal of the whole culture, starting right here in the capital, in Jerusalem? Or will the establishment eventually strike? And if the establishment strikes, will the blow be decisive? Can the new Christian movement survive?

The arrest order is an intensification. The previous arrest included only Peter and John. But this time all twelve of the Apostles are taken in. It’s the same thing, it’s just worse. And like before, they are left in jail overnight for a trial to come the next day before the Sanhedrin. But they do not have to wait for the outcome of the trial before they resume preaching in the name of Jesus. There is a positive intensification, too. God does something miraculously. He sets them free through the agency of an angel. And later inspectors would have a whole round of questions. How did they get past the guards without being seen? Were the guards put to sleep? Were the guards drugged? How did they get through locked doors? Were the doors unlocked and re-locked, or is there a secret way out? Is

this magic? Is there something spiritual going on? How do we explain this? Luke leaves us wondering, not answering any of these questions for us.

The officials are just as perplexed as we are. Luke tells us that the guard wonders what is going to become of this. And for good reason. If you're in charge of the guards, anybody's first thought has to be that the guards were in on it. Prisoners do not walk through walls without somebody seeing them. But even as the captain of the guards wonders, "What now?", a report comes that the Apostles are out teaching in the Temple." The guard goes to retrieve the Apostles, but they do so with some care, being worried that if they are too rough with the Apostles, the crowd might stone them. In a sense, that's a surprising worry. They have all the power on their side. But it suggests the volatility of the populace in Jerusalem. And Luke is giving us that bit of information to help us understand that their leadership does have to take into account the crowd.

With the apostles back under guard, standing before the Sanhedrin, the high priest levels a charge against them. This is in verse 28. I will break it into three parts. First, they are disobeying the previous judgment of the court not to teach in Jesus' name. Second, they have filled Jerusalem with their teaching. Not only are they teaching in Jesus' name, but they are doing it abundantly. And third, in their teaching they indict the members of the Sanhedrin with the murder of Jesus. All the parts of this charge are true. The high priest hasn't made any false accusation.

Peter responds on behalf of all the Apostles and the response looks just like it did in the previous trial, a little bit different words, there's a little expansion here. But it's the same resolve. Verses 29b-32,

"We must obey God rather than men.³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.³¹ He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Peter continues, as he has been, to speak boldly and with a consistent message. This is the Gospel. He is not changing his witness. As before, he claims obedience to God as the basis for their civil disobedience. Then he states the facts of this witness. God raised Jesus from the dead. The Sanhedrin had put him to death. After the resurrection, God exalted Jesus as Prince and Savior. Forgiveness comes through him. And Peter supports these claims with the further claim that all twelve men present are witnesses to these truths.

This repetition of claims might be enough to drive the members of the Sanhedrin to a violent judgment. We can expect the snake to strike. Peter adds one more additional claim that arouses their anger further. He claims that the Holy Spirit is witness to the truthfulness of the facts just stated. This statement is equally claim, equally charge against the Sanhedrin because Peter goes on and clarifies the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him, is witness. That indicts the members of the Sanhedrin. Peter is saying, "You have not received the Holy Spirit. If you had the Holy Spirit, you would joyfully agree with the witness of the Apostles. You stand opposed to us because God has not given to you the Holy Spirit."

Now, by standing against the testimony of the miracles and not reflecting on whether or not the message supported by those miracles might be true, the members of the Sanhedrin repeat the unforgivable sin that they committed in their judgment of Jesus. The unforgivable sin is to attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan.

That's the context of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit referred to by Jesus in Matthew 12:31. If the power of the Holy Spirit provides outward proof confirming the spiritual message of the Gospel, then those leaders who reject that outward proof are also rejecting the witness to the Messiah supported by those very miracles. We know, according to the Old Testament, he will come, healing the lame and giving sight to the blind. These men know the prophecies. They know that the Messiah comes

with healing hands. By denying the Holy Spirit, they deny the Messiah. And by denying the Messiah, they deny God's offer of forgiveness. That is why this is an unforgivable sin, because it leads to the rejection of the Savior - the only way to get forgiveness. They rejected the signs of the Holy Spirit when Jesus was among them. They reject the signs again now being performed by the witnesses Jesus has commissioned.

Notice in Peter's response how his words begin and end with obedience. He begins with a refusal to obey the Sanhedrin when that obedience runs contrary to obeying God. They will obey God. Peter ends by saying that the Holy Spirit is given to all who obey God. We will obey God. You are not obeying God.

How do you think the members of the Sanhedrin will respond to that defense? They had been moved by jealousy to arrest the Apostles. But they were held back from striking the Apostles by worry over possible repercussions from the masses if they took action. Because currently the masses heavily favor the Apostles. Fear of what masses might do dissolves in the heat of anger kindled by Peter's rebuke. Luke tells us what happens next in Acts 5:33-42,

Deliberation and Threat (5:33-42)

³³ But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. ³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. ³⁶ "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away *some* people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ "So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God." ⁴⁰ They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and *then* released them. ⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ.

Peter's blow struck deep and they cut to the heart. They are about to strike back. But before they do, the heat of their anger is tempered by the coolness of one of their members. Gamaliel is a recognized historical figure honored by Jews. Here is the introduction F. F. Bruce gives him in his comments on verses 34-35. I'm just going to read what he says.

There was present at this meeting of the Sanhedrin a Pharisaic leader of quite exceptional eminence, Gamaliel the Elder, the greatest teacher of the day. According to later tradition he was a disciple of Hillel, whom he succeeded as head of his school. But those earlier traditions which reflect some direct memory of Gamaliel and his teaching do not associate him with the school of Hillel; they speak rather of others as belonging to the school of Gamaliel, as though he founded a school of his own. According to Acts 22:3, Paul of Tarsus was one of his pupils. He was remembered in later generations as the embodiment of pure Pharisaism. "When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died," it was said, "the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and 'separateness' died." He now rose up in court and directed that the apostles should be taken out of the council-chamber in order that he might speak his mind freely to his colleagues. Gamaliel warned the others not to do anything rash. His advice consisted of "sound Pharisaic teaching; God is over all, and needs no help from men for the fulfillment of His purposes; all men must do is to obey, and leave the issue to Him."⁵

⁵ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 114-115.

After clearing the room, Gamaliel provides two examples in support of his advice to let the apostles go. Bruce informs us that we do not have any collaborating historical information regarding the first man mentioned, Theudas. We do have some recorded information outside the Bible regarding this Judas the Galilean. Just after the birth of Jesus, it was in a census - not the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem but a later census - Judas led a revolt against Rome, arguing that taxes should be paid only to God as Israel's true king and not to any foreign ruler. The Romans crushed Judas and his followers.⁶ Both movements, the one led by Theudas and the one led by Judas, came to nothing.

Gamaliel's point is articulated in 38-39,

³⁸ So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.

Gamaliel argues spiritual principles. At first glance, his advice does not seem to have anything to do with realpolitik. This is not practical politics. This is spiritual counsel. And perhaps his intervention simply gives the members of the Sanhedrin time to cool down and remember their worry about the favor the Apostles hold with the populace, and they become patient again. But I imagine the Sadducees detected some practical reason in Gamaliel's advice. It's given, as a true Pharisee, "let's just trust God," but I believe there is something behind it. Something very practical. Politics in the first century must always take Rome into account. Israel is not her own master. Religious revolt in Israel rejects the overlordship of any foreign empire. Any kind of revolt that is religious puts the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees, the whole establishment in danger. Because it is going to be a proclamation that God is king. And that's a dangerous message that must ultimately crash up against Rome. In Gamaliel's examples, both movements are crushed. Who does the crushing? This is where I think the practical advice lies. It's not the Sanhedrin. Rome does the crushing, not the Jerusalem establishment. Gamaliel is not only saying, leave them to God. He is saying, leave them to God and the Romans. If they become enough of a problem, the Roman authorities will deal with them. If the populace wants to be angry then, let them be angry at Rome, not us. But in the extremely unlikely event they succeed against Rome, that will prove God is with them. That's the only way that's going to happen. And, in fact, that is what happens.

The Gospel is going to succeed against Rome but not in a military or political way. Peter has just proclaimed Jesus as Prince and Savior. And everybody in those days, all people, they hear that? Those are fighting words and that implies a military king. You know, salvation comes when the leader liberates a nation from the rule of Rome. But as Jesus told the Roman governor Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." Something else is going on here. Not being of this world, the political leaders of this world, they do not know what to make of it. When they try to judge what is going on with this movement, even this language of Prince and Savior, they are going to misinterpret it. The agenda is all different. Until Jesus comes again to set up a physical reign, the kingdom of God will reign in the hearts of men and women who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength," and, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That makes no sense politically. By the end of the book of Acts, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ will have spread throughout the empire of Rome. In the very last verse of the book, we find Paul established under house arrest, "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered (Acts 28:31)." Gamaliel is right. If this movement is of God then the kingdoms of the world will not be able to stop it.

The Apostles are let off, but they are not let off kindly. The Council still has them whipped before ordering them not to speak in the name of Jesus. They know that the Apostles are going to go out and speak in the name of Jesus. The Apostles rejoice that they are granted the honor to experience

⁶ Bruce 116-117.

shame in the name of Jesus. Because, unlike Ananias, who was seeking honor through hypocrisy, the Apostles recognize the honor of being identified with Jesus. And so what is intended as shame becomes honor. Because they receive their honor from God, not from society. I would wish I would respond similarly, that when I get shamed for taking a public stand with Jesus, that my response would be one of joy, that I see my Lord Jesus, who was shamed publicly on the cross but who rejected that shame because he knew he was standing with God and he took his honor from God. I'd love to be able to respond like that. I must be honest that I don't. I tend to take the shame of the world strongly to heart. I think at this stage of the movement that this response is courageous. It is beyond what I would do. At the same time, I think the Apostles do get some strength in their response through the fruitfulness of their ministries. I imagine it is harder to suffer shame for the sake of Jesus when no one comes to know Jesus and no outward miracles are taking place. That kind of seemingly fruitless suffering will come upon the Christian movement, but not yet. If that's what you're experiencing, it is a bit different. It is even harder than what the Apostles are experiencing here. You've got to remember they are seeing thousands come to Jesus. And I think if we knew that was the result, we might be able to experience a little more suffering. At this moment suffering is accompanied by significant reward. The intensified external threat fails. The ministry of the Apostles continues.

Verse 42, the last verse of chapter 5, tells us, "And every day, in the temple and from house to house they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." We might view the teaching in the Temple as more evangelistic, intended for the broader community, and the teaching from house to house as more for the strengthening of believers. Though we have to assume believers listened to the teaching in the Temple, so that's not just for nonbelievers, and believers also brought non-believing friends and relatives to the meetings in the home. So perhaps the difference is not so much in the audience as in the environment, the preaching in the Temple is a larger public gathering. The teaching in homes is smaller, more intimate. The Apostles recognize value in both. And their core message in both stays the same. Jesus is the Christ.

Following God's protection from this external threat, Luke reports on a second internal threat. This is in Acts 6:1-6 and we'll go through this a little more quickly,

Internal Threat (Acts 6:1-6)

¹ Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of food*. ² So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³ "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. ⁶ And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

Luke reminds us again that the movement continues to grow. He says, "at this time," and it is at this time while the disciples were increasing in number that another problem arises. The problem is connected to growth. A small community of 50 or so may only have three or four widows in the community. They are known personally, and you know if they are being cared for or not. The movement in Jerusalem has grown quickly by thousands. There could be hundreds of widows in need of care and some of them are being missed.

For some reason, the Greek-speaking widows who grew up outside of Israel are the ones being overlooked whereas the native widows are not. This does not necessarily indicate intentional prejudice by the native Jews who grew up in Israel. Perhaps the Hebrew widows have better interpersonal connections to the movement. They are less likely to be forgotten or missed. Or maybe

the system for distribution is more natural to them. That's one of the regular problems our family faced in the Croatian school system. Rules and expectations were often unspoken; how to go about getting your books, what additional materials to bring to class, how to find out about parent-teacher meetings, when to expect schedule changes. It was not always that the other parents knew these things. They just knew when to ask and who to ask. They had grown up in a similar system. And regarding changes to what they grew up with, they had nieces and nephews who had more recently gone through that system. So who was most likely to show up late, or miss an assignment, or not know to bring bread to class on one special day in the year? Who doesn't know that? The foreigners.

So I do not see a charge in the text of intentional prejudice here. But I do see a lack of awareness regarding the needs of an ethnic minority in the community. Those who have grown up outside of Israel are being overlooked. And there are a number of ways the Apostles' response to this threat could go badly. From a worst-case point of view, they could have denied the problem. Or they could have blamed the ethnic minority for creating a problem - you guys are the problem. They could have diminished the problem out of an overly spiritualized understanding of walking with God, not viewing the physical care of widows as something worth their time to address. On the other hand, they could jump into the solving the problem wholeheartedly, refocusing their attention onto managing the logistical challenges of a growing movement.

Luke's narrative lets us know that the Apostles successfully addressed this threat by reporting to us a positive outcome. In verse 5 we read that the Apostles' "statement found approval with the whole congregation." The Greek-speaking minority thinks this is good and the native Hebrews think it's good. It's approval with the whole. And in verse 7 we read that the growth continues. God continues to build the movement.

Here are four aspects of the Apostles' response that stand out to me.

First, the apostles resist missional drift. Determine to stay true to their calling they assert, "we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Everyone in the Christian community becomes a witness to the hope they have found in Jesus. Still, the Apostles have received a special, full-time vocation to spiritual ministry through the commission of Jesus Christ. They have a job to do as Apostles. And they will remain focused on that spiritual work of prayer and teaching. It's critical that they stay focused on the mission given by Jesus.

Second, the Apostles recognize the importance of the need raised in the community by appointing capable leaders to address this issue. That is how you know they take it so seriously. We might read verse 2 as a downgrading of the act of service, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." If we just had that, we might think it's condescending. But the Apostles also instruct the community to find "seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task." They are looking for high-level leaders. These men could be leading in the spiritual ministry the Apostles are doing. We are going to see that Stephen is a leader in prayer and in the Word. And that's the kind of men the Apostles want taken from that spiritual kind of ministry, or at least some of their time from that ministry, to focus on this task. Which shows that the Apostles are taking the problem quite seriously.

It looks like a both/and perspective of Christian ministry rather than an either/or perspective. The work of the Church is not either about spiritual truth or about care for people's physical needs. It's about both. The text does imply ordering of these needs. The greater need, the more central mission of the Church is the spiritual proclamation of Jesus Christ. Though, it's often true that we must meet physical needs first in order to help people recognize or give attention to their spiritual needs. But we don't meet their physical needs just so that they'll pay attention to their spiritual needs. Both kinds of need are integrated together. We are whole people. We are whole people. We are spiritual, we are physical, we are relational. Love addresses the various needs of the whole person.

Recognizing two different ministry focuses in this text helps us to think about the calling in the body of Christ, about giftedness in the body of Christ. The Apostles stay true to the vocational calling given

to them by Jesus. And they instruct the Church to call other men to fulfill the ministry of care. That is also a valid calling. And even though we don't have direct comment about spiritual gifting or personality gifting here, this text validates the variety of gifts by validating the importance of these different ministries. The Twelve contribute to the important ministry of prayer and preaching. The Seven contribute to the important ministry of administration and care. Different believers may favor one endeavor over the other through the natural and spiritual motivations of personal giftedness, through God has made us to be may cause us to value this need more than that need. And it's wise for us to recognize that even if we favor one over the other personally, this text helps us to see that these ministries go together.

And in that, I think the text provides a good foundational model, at least it begins to get us thinking about the basic distinction of church leadership. We see Paul make a distinction between elders and deacons in 1 Timothy. And I think you can see the foundation here being laid for elders giving leadership to the spiritual needs of the church community and deacons giving leadership to the administrative and physical needs of the church community. At this point in Acts, in the birth of the Church, we don't have those roles defined so we'll have to see through the story do these roles get defined. However, they are going to be defined we do well to follow the Apostles' qualifications for leadership in the Christian body that they might be "men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom." That's who we want to lead, whether in a position of elder or position of deacon.

Third, I do not see the Apostles micromanaging here. They instruct the community to select other leaders. The Apostles do not appoint these men. And then they trust these men to carry out the task.

Fourth, and finally, the ethnic tension is recognized and addressed in the solution. It's not actually initiated by the Apostles. The community does this by choosing Hellenistic Jews - Greek-speaking Jews - to fill these positions. All seven of the men chosen have Greek names; Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. Nicolas is not even a Jew. He is a proselyte from Antioch.

In addressing this ethnic problem, the leaders of this specific ethnic community are brought in and given both the responsibility and authority to provide a solution. The Apostles show their approval of the community's choice by confirming the Seven. They pray for these men and lay hands on them. In the Jewish tradition, we know that members of the Sanhedrin were inducted through the laying on of hands. It seems to represent that those who have been given special authority are now conferring authority onto others to perform a certain ministry or task. The Apostles don't lay hands on them so they might receive the Holy Spirit. That happened elsewhere in Acts. That is not what is going on here. These men are already full of the Holy Spirit. Their laying hands on them is a formal recognition that they have the authority to address this issue. We see a number of internal challenges with this one threat.

Material needs in the community can create all kinds of challenges. And maintaining the importance of Gospel witness is a challenge. Ethnic tension is a challenge. Here at the beginning of the Church, the Apostles worked together with the community and other leaders in the community to solve the problem in a way that shows love to those in need and maintains the mission of the Church to proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ.

We have now come to the end of the first part of Acts. As he does through the book, Luke ends this first major part with the summary statement. We find that statement in Acts 6:7.

Summary Ending of Part I (Acts 6:7)

⁷ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus declares to his Apostles, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem..." The Apostles filled the gap left by Judas. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. And they began to witness. The result has been astounding.

Neither external threat nor internal threat has derailed the awakening. Even a great many of the priests have come to faith in Jesus. Notice that language, “They have become obedient to the faith.” The prophecy of Jesus has been fulfilled. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem.”

But this is not the time of restoration. A king will not now be seated in Zion. Nations will not stream in. The Jerusalem Awakening is about to end.

We will pick our story up again with Stephen in our next lesson.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 5:17-42. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What is different about this arrest and trial from the previous arrest and trial (consider primarily the attitudes and behaviors of the leaders of Israel)? Is there any difference?
3. What claims does Peter repeat at this trial that we have already heard in his previous speeches? What new claims or clarifications are made by Peter?
4. What do you think motivates Gamaliel? What is he recommending and why?
5. Read Acts 6:1-7. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. Imagine how this situation could have really gone wrong. What would have been some poor ways to handle this problem?
7. What does the need for the apostles to continue their ministry combined with the need for men to be appointed for this new task suggest about the needs of your church or movement?
8. In the summary of 6:7 Luke uses the phrase obedient to the faith. Paul uses this phrase at the beginning and end of the letter to the Romans (1:5; 16:26). Paul’s use in Romans probably includes two ideas. First, faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is an act of obedience. To be obedient to the faith is to yield to the truth of the gospel message both in your mind and in your will. Second, obedience of faith indicates a new direction of life. When you have yielded in faith to Jesus Christ, you then begin to live according to the implications of the faith.

How does this phrase serve well, both in describing priests who have come to believe and as part of the summary of this whole first section of Acts? (Note the use of the word obedience used earlier in the text of the previous external threat 5:17-42).

Lesson 9: Acts 6:8-15 and 7:54-60 Stephen's Arrest and Death

Introduction

In this lesson, we begin the second major section of Acts, Acts 6:8-9:31 The Church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria. Before we begin, I have a trivia question for you. Who is this phrase talking about in the book of Acts, "The God of glory appeared to [blank]"? Who goes in the "blank"? Who does the God of glory appear to? Who comes to mind first? The God of glory appeared to...? I'll let you think about that and come back to it.

We have two goals for this lesson. First, we are going to zoom out on this whole second section to consider the text from a wide-angle view. How has Luke organized this second section? A lot of benefit comes from reflecting on how Biblical author's structure or arrange their literary communication. The structure itself communicates meaning and provides a framework for understanding the parts. I love both zooming in to the phrases and sentences and following the story or the flow of thought, and then zooming out to reflect on how the various passages that are all collected together, how are they arranged, what do they communicate as a whole.

What was Luke's main theological emphasis in the first major section? When we look at the whole, what has he accomplished so far? And how is he developing that or adding to it in this second major section? We are starting this lesson with that kind of wide-zoom perspective. After considering that overview, we will zoom in to the beginning and end of Stephen's story, so we will get into some text this lesson and we'll consider those two short passages. We will save Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin, that long speech, for our next lesson.

Overview of Acts, Part II

The Gospel Received in Judea and Samaria			
6:8-8:3 The Gospel and Judaism's Orthodox Worship (Stephen's Witness to Fellow Jews)	8:4-25 The Gospel and Samaria's Unorthodox Worship (Philip's Witness in Samaria)	8:26-40 The Gospel of the Suffering Servant (Philip's Witness to the Ethiopian)	9:1-30 The Gospel of the Son of God (Paul's Conversion)
9:31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it continued to increase.			

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.⁷

Understanding Luke's Division of the Text

We begin with an overview of Acts Part II, chapter 6 verse 8 to the end of chapter 9.

⁷ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

That's Luke's summary statement in 6:7. That's the end of our first major section of Acts. Skipping ahead to the next summary statement in 9:31, the end of the second section, we read,

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

The first summary statement tells us "the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem" and the second summary statement tells us "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up." Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 gave us a pattern to watch for. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." That's the pattern we are seeing. Our first section covered the Jerusalem Awakening. Our second section addresses the Gospel's spread into Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.

⁷ David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 133.

We might then expect the first story of our second section to take us out of Jerusalem. Instead, we find ourselves still in Jerusalem with a story about Stephen arrested for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in the city.

Stephen is one of the seven men just chosen to handle distribution of funds to the Greek-speaking widows. His story here seems to be a continuation of that story. Maybe the summary in 6:7 is not where Luke intended to end the first part. Maybe he intended for us to see the first section extending all the way to the end of Stephen's story at the end of chapter 7. Then our next section could start in chapter 8 with the persecution that propels believers out into Samaria and Judea.

That would make a clean cut between two sections, like laying one board down, end to end with another board. By ending the first section at the end of chapter 7, the Jerusalem Awakening would line up smoothly with the move of the Gospel out into Judea, Samaria, and Galilee that begins in chapter 8.

But that kind of alignment would miss an important aspect of Luke's style that we have already considered. Luke does not fit the boards smoothly together end to end. Luke creates a dovetail that attaches each section into the next one, like a puzzle piece fitting into another. We saw Luke use this method in connecting his Gospel - the Gospel of Luke - to the Book of Acts. The Gospel ended with the commission of Jesus and his ascension into Heaven. Instead of picking up chronologically at the beginning of Acts with a story that comes after that ascension, Luke begins Acts with a second telling of the commission and ascension. It is not a word-for-word repetition. The perspective of commission and ascension in Luke's is written as a conclusion to the Gospel. The report at the beginning of Acts gives us new information that works as an introduction for this book. And the resulting effect is a fitting together of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts through a stylistic overlapping.

Luke uses this same overlapping technique in the transition between each of the six major sections, or major parts of Acts. It doesn't happen just right here in chapter 6. We are going to see this kind of overlapping every time we come to a summary statement. So, the reports following each summary will connect back to the report that preceded the summary, while also propelling us forward into a new section. Stephen is present both before and after the summary statement in Acts 6:7, but we are to take the narrative as two separate reports. This is not one story about Stephen. It's two separate stories that fit Luke's arrangement of two separate major sections of Acts.

Along with this overlapping style, we see in the two stories including Stephen another stylistic technique. Stephen is introduced in the report about the Greek-speaking widows, but the story is not about Stephen. The story is about this threat to the early Church, that has to do with apparent prejudice or overlooking of a certain ethnic group in the community in the distribution of funds. That is what the story is about. Not about Stephen. And this is another one of Luke's repeated techniques. He introduces individuals in reports where they play a secondary role before giving us a report where that person is going to play a primary role. Luke introduced Barnabas in the story about Ananias and Sapphira. And we will come back to Barnabas later, where he plays a much greater role in the story of the spread of the Church into Antioch and going and getting Paul. Luke introduced Stephen and Philip in the story about the widows and we return to both later. In this story about Stephen, he is going to introduce a young man, just briefly, named Saul, who is present at the trial and death of Stephen, it's just a secondary reference to him. But then we're going to come back, of course, to Paul later. The effect with this technique is that we already know something about each person when we encounter them in a story where they played a major role. They have already been introduced for us. And recognizing this technique encourages us to view the story of the Greek-speaking widows as separate, though related to, the story of Stephen's arrest and trial. They are two different stories but Stephen, kind of, creates a link between the two.

Both of these stories where Stephen is referenced help balance out the section in which they are contained. So, one story is the end of the first major section, the other story is the beginning of the

second major section. The first section contained eight reports divided into two halves of four reports each. We began with the four positive reports of Jesus' commission and ascension, the replacement of the 12th disciple, the miracle of Pentecost with Peter's speech, and the miracle of healing the lame man with Peter's second speech. This is the setup for the Spirit being poured forth and the witness going out and then the very positive response. The second half of the first section includes another four reports, this time highlighting threats to the new community. We have the external threat of Peter and John's arrest, the internal threat of Ananias' and Saphira's hypocrisy, the external threat of the 12 Disciples' arrest, and the internal threat of overlooking the Greek-speaking widows. So, in this first section we have got two halves with four stories each, and in the second half we have four threats, two external and two internal. And Luke includes the story about the widows to help create this balance, to get a fourth story in this second section and a second threat, internal threat, in the second section. And he is doing it primarily to teach us something about the early Christian movement, but he also uses it to introduce Stephen, kind of as a secondary purpose, before we get to the story where Stephen plays a major role.

The Four Reports of Acts, Part II

The second major section of Acts is the shortest of the six main parts. It only covers four reports in just under four chapters. The section starts with the persecution of Stephen. That's the first report. Then reports on the Gospel spread to Samaria, the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, and the conversion of Paul.

When we considering the Acts 1:8 pattern of the Gospel moving from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the remotest parts of the earth, that whole pattern is covered in this second section, at least ethnically if not yet geographically. We begin the section with Stephen in Jerusalem, then we move from full Jewish to half-Jewish when we move to Samaria, and then symbolically we move to the Gentile world with the conversion of the Ethiopian. In the big picture view of Acts, the Gospel is not propelled to the remotest parts of the earth until Paul's missionary journeys in the second half of the book. But when we look in closer at these sections, we see smaller waves lapping at the shore of Gentile territory in these earlier sections before the bigger waves of Paul's journeys flood the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

So, we see the reports in this second major section of Acts showing the beginning of geographic and ethnic expansion of the Gospel out of Jerusalem. That is the narrative pattern provided by the four reports. Something more is also going on here.

As Luke reports to us the history of the Gospel's spread, he is also theologically defining and defending the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The story is not only about how the Gospel spread out from Jerusalem, but also about the nature of the Gospel that did spread. We have already seen the theological development of the Gospel communicated through the narrative of our first major section. Luke does not only tell us that 3000 Jews placed their faith in Jesus on the day of Pentecost. He also gives us Peter's speech about the Gospel. We hear from Peter's own mouth the content of his message. And Luke further refines that core Gospel message through Peter's speech after the healing of the lame man and through both times that Peter defends himself when he's on trial. So we got all this content from Peter about the Gospel. Not just the fact that the Gospel is spreading, but what is the Gospel.

Let's remind ourselves of the core message communicated through the words of Peter in the first section. We are looking at all the words of Peter in kind of drawing up what are the elements of the Gospel that we see him proclaiming. And first, the message preached by Peter each of the four times he spoke to the Jews was fully Christ-centered. Every time Peter opens his mouth, he is talking about Jesus, or he is saying something that's going to give him a segue to be able to talk about Jesus. This is what Peter proclaimed. He proclaimed Jesus. But what did he proclaim about Jesus? Jesus, declared to be both son of man and son of God, is the Messiah. Jesus was rejected and murdered on a cross by you, Jews of Jerusalem through the agency of the Roman government. Jesus was raised from the

dead by God. Jesus was exalted to his right hand. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophetic promises of salvation found in the Jewish Scriptures. Forgiveness of sin is experienced through faith in Jesus and is expressed through repentance of sin and acknowledgment of Jesus as Savior. Forgiveness is exclusive to Jesus. There is no salvation apart from his name. Those who believe in Jesus are filled with the promised Holy Spirit, who enables believers to live as witnesses for Jesus. This salvation in the name of Jesus is for Jews and is for the blessing of all nations. And Jesus will return to bring about, not only the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, but the restoration of all things. This is the basic Gospel message communicated to us by Luke through the words of Peter.

Along with the words of Peter, Luke's choice of narrative reports further adds to our understanding of this Gospel message and this new Gospel community. Through the report of the replacement of the 12th Apostle and the story of Pentecost, we recognize the Gospel as a fulfillment of the Old Covenant promises and the start of a New Covenant people of God. Something new is going on here. This is the birth of the Church, the birth of the New Covenant people. With the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we recognize that the God of the New Covenant is just as holy as the God of the Old Covenant and expects his New Covenant people to live with sincere commitment to integrity. To treat God and the relationship with God as holy. Furthermore, the story of Ananias and Sapphira together with the story of the Greek-speaking widows and the repeated references about believers contributing out of their wealth to meet one another's needs, all those stories emphasize from the beginning of the Christian movement that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while meeting the most essential spiritual needs of human beings, also recognizes the material needs of human beings. The Gospel is very real and caring about the whole person in time and in space and in community. The Gospel is meant to be lived out, we see, in a community of fellowship, care, commitment to the Word of God, and with a central focus on Jesus Christ.

This is Luke's initial definition and defense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this first major section. That's what he has accomplished theologically so far for us. The second major section of Acts will provide further definition and defense as believers encounter new opportunities and new threats. In the four reports of this second major section, we move from Jerusalem to Samaria to a Gentile God-fearer, to a Pharisee who hates Christians, who becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles. David Gooding in his commentary on Acts emphasizes what we learn about the Gospel in each of these four encounters. Stephen's clash with the Sanhedrin teaches us something about the Gospel and orthodox Jewish religion. The spread into Samaria teaches us something about the Gospel and the unorthodox Samaritan religion. The witness to the Ethiopian highlights the Gospel of the Suffering Servant. And the conversion of Paul highlights the Gospel of the Son of God. And we'll have to look at that. We'll take Gooding's perspective and see what we see in these four stories.

In our interpretation of the book of Acts, we want to become very familiar with the narrative. We do start there. We are trying to figure out the story, so that we can also observe the theology that Luke intends to communicate through the story, through the narrative. When we are able to hold in our minds the four reports of this section - you know, I've got them up here in my mind; okay, first we have Stephen in Jerusalem interacting with Orthodox Jews, and then we have Phillip and the Apostles interacting in Samaria; you know, how does the Gospel work out there in Samaria when it's a half-way between Judaism and something else, and then it goes to this Ethiopian eunuch, what's the emphasis there, and when it goes to Paul, what's communicated to Paul about who is this Jesus - and so we have these reports in our mind, we can observe the section both from a wide-angle view that takes into account all the stories together, and then we can also zoom in view and consider each story in its details.

At the beginning of this lesson, I asked, "Where in the book of Acts do we read the phrase, 'The God of glory appeared to [blank]'?" Who is that talking about? Who comes to mind? When you're thinking about the book of Acts and the God of glory appearing to somebody, who do you think of? I was hoping that you would think of Paul's conversion at the end of this section. You know, he is Saul. I'm going to call him Paul all the time. But he is Saul the Pharisee to whom Jesus appears to him in

blinding, bright light. And then he's going to become Paul. That is not where this quote comes from. The quote comes from the first line of Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin, "The God of glory appeared to Abraham." We have the glory of God appearing at the beginning of this major section when Stephen starts to speak, and then at the end. There is actually a story of the God of glory appearing to Paul.

At the beginning of the section Stephen is reminding us that the God of glory called Abraham out from among the Gentiles to establish a special people who would become a witness to all the nations. At the end of this section the God of glory appears to Paul, calling him out from this special people to go to the Gentiles as a witness.

The people of God are to re-envision how they understand their basic calling. In the Old Covenant, the people of God are defined as a geopolitical entity. They are a nation with a land, with the Temple at the heart of that land. They do go out in missions, the Pharisees. They go and they proclaim Yahweh and living according to Moses. But they primarily envision the nations of the Earth coming to Jerusalem. Worldwide evangelization in the Old Covenant envisions the nations streaming into Zion. God has cast a new vision through the New Covenant. It is a new wineskin. It's not simply an upgrade of the old. We are not just modernizing the old traditions. God has planned some really new stuff here: the new wineskin. Part of that is that people of God are no longer tied to a geography or to a political nation. They are those who believe in Jesus Christ. And so, the Temple is no longer central to who the people of God are. The Law of Moses is fulfilled.

We have seen the core Gospel message proclaimed by Peter in the first section of Acts. And it's all about Jesus and salvation and forgiveness. Jesus is Messiah. Jesus will come back. Jesus is Lord. He is exalted. He is with God. And we have already seen push-back from the establishment. Well, what happens when we take this further? When the implications of the Gospel, not just about Jesus, but the implication of what we believe in Jesus affects our relationship to the Temple and our relationship to the law of Moses? What happens when that that begins to be clearly communicated as the leaders of the Christian movement are communicating their understanding of the Temple, their understanding of the Law of Moses, and they're communicating it to people who see themselves as keepers of Orthodox Jewish religion? That's where this second section starts. So, let's zoom in closer and consider the persecution of Stephen. Before moving out to the unorthodoxy of Samaria, we are first considering the response of first-century Orthodox Judaism to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Persecution of Stephen

So far, the Christian movement is not separate from Judaism. We can't think about it like we do today. The disagreement is not Jews versus Christians. The disagreement is between Orthodox Jews and Messianic Jews. The clash is within Judaism between Jews who reject Jesus as the Messiah and want to hold onto their understanding of Jewish worship and life and those Jews who declare Jesus as the Messiah and, therefore, understand worship and life from a new Gospel vision. Can both groups exist in one Jerusalem, one Judaism? And it's not like this hasn't happened before. The Essenes, if you're familiar with them, this community that lived out near the Dead Sea and where we get the Dead Sea scrolls from, they were very committed to the Law of Moses, but they thought that the Temple system is so corrupt that there is no way that they could integrate their understanding of righteousness and holiness with what was going on in Jerusalem. So, they pulled themselves away. So far, we see Christians not doing that. These Christians are attending Temple worship and they are still participating in the festivals of Old Covenant in Jerusalem.

Well, can first-century Orthodox Jews allow for this sect of Christian Jews to go about showing up at Temple worship while still meeting from house to house with their own rabbis, proclaiming salvation in the name of Jesus? And can believers in Jesus continue to practice a New Covenant form of Judaism without pushing for significant change in the religious ritual and life of fellow Jews?

The story of Stephen is a story of New Covenant preaching crashing up against committed Orthodox Judaism. They will make charges against Stephen, and Stephen will speak out against those charges. The interchange teaches us something about the impasse between orthodox religions that do not see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as central to their beliefs, and a practice of faith that does see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as central.

The report of Stephen is long. That's why I am dividing it in two lessons. For the rest of this lesson, we will concentrate on the narrative which includes the initial confrontation at the beginning of the story, in Acts 6:8-15 and then the death of Stephen at the end of the story, in Acts 7:54-60. We will dig into the long middle part, the speech of Stephen, in our next lesson.

The conflict that arises in response to Stephen's ministry is reported in Acts 6:8-15. Here it is.

Arrest 6:8-15

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, *including* both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and *against* God." ¹² And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. ¹³ They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵ And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

Stephen's Exceptional Character

Luke sings Stephen's praises highly. The men chosen to administrate the distribution of funds to the Greek-speaking widows were to be full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Stephen was then specifically identified as full of faith and the Holy Spirit. And now here in this story he is acknowledged as full of grace and power. What does that mean? To be full of grace and power? Grace could be a reference to the character of Stephen. When John refers to Jesus as full of grace and truth in John 1:14, he is referencing the name of God in Exodus 34:6, meaning that Jesus is full of lovingkindness, you know, grace is lovingkindness, and truth. It's his character, it's who he is. I do not think that is the intent of Luke's phrase here. Speaking about spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6, Paul writes that we have different gifts - that word is literally, "graces" - according to the grace given us. I believe this sense of grace as gifting is the idea Luke has in mind in this story. This use makes sense when we connect the fact that Stephen, being full of grace and power, is performing great wonders and signs and is speaking with the wisdom of the Spirit.

This sense of the word, "grace," as gifting of the Holy Spirit also works with the other two references of being full of something by creating a third pairing with the Holy Spirit. The other two referenced pairs mention the Holy Spirit directly. The use of grace as gifting implies the work of the Holy Spirit in Stephen. And if we change grace to Spirit and then consider the three pairs, Stephen is full of the Spirit and wisdom, full of the Spirit and faith, and full of grace, or full the Spirit and power. The wisdom, faith, and power Stephen displays in ministry flow from the fact that he is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Wisdom, faith and power are not automatic for a believer who is filled with the Holy Spirit. We know this when we consider the believers described in 1 Corinthians. A young Christian can be filled with the Spirit and exercise some powerful gifting apart from wisdom and faith. Luke's three references help define for us what kind of spirit-filled leadership we should look for or aspire to.

We do aspire to spiritual power. Why do we want spiritual power? That's another question. And that's a question that is actually going to get addressed in the next story in Samaria. There's going to

be a guy there who wants spiritual power but not out of the same heart as Stephen. The body of Christ aspires to be more than that which is humanly possible. We are not only a community of human beings. We are a community of human beings indwelt by the Spirit of God to proclaim the character of God, to love God, and to love our neighbor; to be a witness of who God is as we serve other people, just like our Lord and Savior served us. We imitate his love. So, this is our heart, and we want power to be able to carry out this mission. We want our leadership, our care, our witness, our giving, our speaking, our service, our love to be empowered through a dependence on the Holy Spirit working in and through us. The power of the Spirit in us is able to bring about spiritual fruit we cannot produce on our own. It only comes through abiding in Christ. We are the branches. He is the vine. We want to see that kind of power. Especially the power of love and proclamation of truth that makes and impact deeply in the lives of other people.

In the case of the Apostles and select others, like Stephen, the power of the Holy Spirit is made manifest not only through acts of love and proclamation but through miraculous signs and wonders. And that kind of power is attractive in leadership. But that kind of power alone, does not ensure good, Christian leadership. The gifts of the Spirit were at work in Corinth, but often disconnected from the fruit of the Spirit. There was a lacking of maturity. There was power without love. And Paul described that spiritual power to be a clanging gong, unhelpful, even ultimately damaging to the Christian movement.

Along with the power of the Holy Spirit, Stephen displayed two other attributes. And these are important to understand who he was as a leader. Stephen was also full of faith. The idea of faith includes both dependence on the person of Jesus Christ as well as submission to the Gospel truth about Jesus Christ. Power does not always lead to a mature understanding and proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus. In Corinth, the focus on the outward manifestation of spiritual gifts led to a corruption of the Gospel, a wrong view of morality, a wrong view about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So power from the Holy Spirit doesn't automatically equal a right understanding of the faith. The Gospel was not understood or communicated rightly in that church.

As we will see from his long speech in chapter 7, Stephen's message is not going to be about the Holy Spirit. He does not speak about the power of the gifts. Stephen's message is about Jesus Christ and the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ. The healing power displayed by Stephen is not the salvation he proclaims. He is not calling people to be healed in the power of the Holy Spirit. Those miracles are a witness to his words. He is glad for people to be healed through the power of the Spirit in the name of Jesus because he cares about people. But he also has a right understanding that their spiritual need is to have faith in Jesus and to walk with Jesus. His words line up with the Christ-centered faith Peter proclaimed in the first section of Acts.

In addition to being a man of power and a man of faith, Stephen is recognized as a man of wisdom. That quality is referred to in two different contexts with Stephen. It will take a man of wisdom to help distribute funds to the Greek-speaking widows. There is a need in Christian community for practical wisdom that understands finances and people and logistics, that understands ethnic differences. Stephen has that kind of wisdom. We are also told in this story that Stephen's opponents could not cope with "the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking." Stephen's wisdom also extends to a knowledge of the Word of God and the ability to communicate the Word of God in the defense of the Gospel against hostile opponents. That's not easy. We're going to see in his speech the grasp that Stephen has both on the Word and how to proclaim the Word.

In short, Stephen is an exceptional Christian leader. He displays a rare gifting of power not often seen apart from the Apostles. And with that power he was also full of faith. He understands the Gospel. He walks in dependence on Jesus. And he is full of wisdom, both practical wisdom in the care and service of people, and in proclamation of wisdom in proclaiming the Gospel.

The fact that Stephen performed miraculous wonders and signs raises some interesting questions without giving us much information to go on. We see in Stephen that the Holy Spirit did gift men

other than the Apostles to do miracles. In the previous section, wonders and signs were primarily described as healing miracles, so that seems to be what is in mind here. So, Stephen is performing healing miracles on a level similar to the Apostles.

The Apostles had laid their hands on Stephen, along with the other six chosen to administer funds to the Greek-speaking widows. Later, in the story of the Gospel going to Samaria, Samaritans do not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter goes and lays his hands on them. Did that happen with Stephen? Well, no. Stephen was already described as full of the Holy Spirit as one of the qualifications for the men who would administer the funds. So we do not know if his first miracles happened before he was appointed to his role by the Apostles or later. The text does not say. But in his case, the laying on of hands by the Apostles is not a conference of the Holy Spirit and of power: it is a recognition of authority to perform the task that he has been appointed to do. He is already full of the Spirit.

My opinion is that God empowered early believers, particularly the twelve Apostles, to perform signs and wonders in order to affirm with obvious power the Apostolic message that was eventually recorded for us in the New Testament. We can see here that the empowerment to do miracles was not limited to the Apostles but was extended to other members of the community. I like things to be well-defined with clear limits and boundaries and explanations. But so often, that's not the way God works. Not with his grace and his power. He pours out grace lavishly and abundantly. His gifting spills over. I am reminded of the pouring out of the Spirit on the 70 elders in Numbers chapter 11 and the two men who did not come up to Moses to the tent of meeting but still they were prophesying by the Spirit in the camp, and Joshua was upset about that. You know, that's not the way things ought to work but Moses was like, well, that's the Spirit then let them go. I am also reminded of King Saul, who ultimately would turn out to be a pretty bad king, being filled with the Spirit and dancing and prophesying at the beginning of his call. It may be true that the miraculous gifts were given as signs to confirm the Apostolic message. But at the same time there may be a messy lavishness to the outpouring of the Spirit. In the case of Stephen, we are going to get from him a long witness affirming Jesus Christ as Messiah. So Luke's acknowledgment that he performed signs and wonders show that his message was affirmed with power. The members of the Sanhedrin would have heard report of his miracles. And it would have increased their accountability to the message that he is now proclaiming to them.

Stephen's opponents

We noted in the last lesson that the men chosen to administer charitable gifts to the Greek-speaking widows also all had Greek names, suggesting that they grew up in Greek culture of the Roman Empire: that they grew up as Jews in the Greek culture of the Roman Empire somewhere and not in the Hebrew culture of Jerusalem and Judea. Stephen's call to ministry, as one with a Greek name and so we presume, a Greek culture, Stephen's call to ministry was to the believing Greek-speaking widows, but also in proclamation of the Gospel and in teaching to the believing and non-believing Greek-speaking Jewish community.

He must have become known as a leading witness for the Gospel among Greek speakers. That would explain why members of a Greek-speaking synagogue sought to debate him. The title of this particular synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freedmen, implies that the synagogue was originally founded for Jews who had become slaves to Romans and were later set free. The term, "freedman," could also apply to sons of freed slaves. The title suggests the origin of the synagogue but does not necessarily imply that all the current members were former slaves or sons of former slaves. This synagogue attracted a range of Greek-speaking worshipers including Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa, as well as Asia and Cilicia in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor. Paul himself was from Tarsus in Cilicia. He was one of those Jews who didn't grow up in Jerusalem and Judea, so it is tempting to think he may have attended this synagogue. You know, who knows? But he also refers to himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews, probably celebrating the fact that his parents brought him up with strong Hebrew, Jewish culture even if he was living outside of Jerusalem. And this

suggests that Paul would have attended a synagogue that was more identified with Hebrew culture, and not one that was a gathering of those outside, who have this Greek culture.

We might think that Greek-speaking Jews would be more open than someone like Paul, who calls himself a Hebrew of Hebrews. But sometimes those brought up in the diaspora outside of the home country, and I guess this is true of Paul, who was brought up outside, can feel like they have more to prove to maintain their cultural identity. I have noticed a couple of examples in my own experience of living in Europe. Albanians in Albania can be open to the idea that a person can be Muslim or Christian and still be Albanian. They have some historical culture of that. There are Christian Albanians living in Albania. Whereas Albanians living outside of Albania see their Albanian identity and their Muslim identity as one and the same. Christian Albanians who preach the Gospel to them are traitors to their own culture and a threat to their Albanian identity. Albanian colleagues of mine who came to Christ in Albania have been physically abused while witnessing to Albanians who grew up in Macedonia. A similar reality seems to exist with Croats living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who hold on to Roman Catholicism as core to their identity more fiercely than Croats who live in Zagreb, the capital.

So, I can imagine these Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem holding very tightly to their own understanding of Judaism. Their hatred of Stephen arises out of a perceived attack on their identity. Whereas a native of Israel might feel more confident in his or her Jewishness. They might not like what Stephen is saying, but it might not strike as deeply. I imagine Greek-speaking Jews feel that if they do not hold on to their Orthodox Jewish religion, then for them what does it even mean to be Jewish? Because they didn't grow up here. And Stephen unsettles them.

And they cannot defeat Stephen in a struggle of words, so they act deceitfully convincing some men to bring charges against him. We cannot help but notice the similarity with the false witnesses who accused Jesus. Even the charge regarding the Temple is the same: he is going to destroy the Temple. So, they brought that charge against Jesus. Now they are bringing that charge against Stephen.

The charges made against Stephen

His opponents claim, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and *against* God." The false witnesses explain Stephen's blasphemy this way,

This man incessantly speaks against this holy place (that's the Temple) and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, (and they mean that negatively; Nazarene, you know, he's not really from Judea or Jerusalem) this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place (the Temple) and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.

They repeat that claim that was supposed to have made by Jesus. And whether true or false, the charges against the Temple and the Law of Moses, they strike at the heart of Orthodox Jewish practice. We are moving past Peter's insistence that Jesus is the Messiah, and we are now considering the implications of Jesus being the Messiah. If I, as a Jew, accept that Jesus is the Christ, what impact does that have on my Jewish religion, specifically on Temple worship and the Law of Moses?

Jewish identity is at stake. And it is not only a question for them. This is an important question for us. How does living under the New Covenant change my obligations to the Old Covenant? So, how do I understand New Covenant and Old Covenant? And then the question is also important for me if I grow up in a certain denomination, or certain Christian faith, or certain Christian religion, and as I grow up, I start to perceive I don't hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or the morality that is being communicated here seems so different from what the Bible teaches. I start to have problems with the orthodox faith that is being communicated to me by my particular denomination, but I might be very tied to that, it's very deeply who I am, it's part of my identity, then what do I do? What do I do with this Gospel of salvation through grace by faith in Jesus Christ and the Christian principles I've learned growing up? This challenge between Bible-based Christianity and maybe some other

Christian tradition that I've grown up in is a very real question, similar to these Jews who were being challenged with their tradition. Seems to have supposed to lead right into the Gospel. They should grow in their tradition and then embrace Jesus as the Messiah. But that's not what happened. Somewhere along the way their tradition veered off and now they have no love for Jesus. They are not embracing him. The majority are not.

In our next lesson we will consider Stephen's response to the charges that were made against him. And so, let me give you some questions to think about before our next lesson. So, before we get to that next lesson, read through Stephen's speech in Acts 7 with these questions in mind.

- (1) Does Stephen respond to the charges that he promotes the destruction of the Temple and changes to the Law of Moses? Those were the charges just given. Does he respond to those in his speech?
- (2) If he does respond to the charges, how does he respond? What is his defense?
- (3) If he does not respond to the charges, then what is the purpose of his speech? What is he doing?

Stephen's speech is masterful. And again, it looks like it's narrative, so much of it, but it's narrative with a point. He is definitely communicating theology. And to get what Stephen is doing requires focusing in on close observation of the text. So, I really encourage you to, at least, read it over a couple of times before our next lesson so you have the text fresh in mind.

After the false charges are announced everyone's eyes turn to see how Stephen's going to respond. And Luke comments that they "saw his face like the face of an angel." That's a tough phrase to interpret. The one thing I am convinced of is that we are not supposed to imagine this kind of Rembrandt kind of painting of a wistful, delicate face, you know, the Renaissance version of Stephen on trial, with this clean-shaven, young man, almost feminine, wistfully, with his head tilted, gazing off into the distance. He only sees spiritual reality. That's not what "angelic" means in the Bible.

"Angelic" could here communicate a composure, a strength of confidence, and intensity. There is a possible connection with Moses. At the end of this narrative Stephen is going to gaze intently into Heaven and he is going to see the glory of God. It's not just Abraham who sees the glory of God and Paul who sees the glory of God in this story, but Stephen is going to see the glory of God. Moses saw the glory of God. His face shone with light when he was exposed to that glory. Literally shone with light. So rather than rejecting the law of Moses as he has been accused of, Stephen's looking like an angel might in some sense be understood that he is a model Moses, a little Moses. You know, he is delivering truth from God to the people of Israel. And Jews believed that God gave the Law to Moses through the mediation of angels. Angels are messengers who communicate God's will. Stephen boldly speaks the Word of God with confidence. And he speaks full of the Holy Spirit with power, and faith, and wisdom. So, I don't know that we're supposed to imagine Stephen as glowing like Moses glowed, because the text doesn't say that, so I don't know that we should put that on it. I mean, it could be that, of course, God could do that. But I can also imagine a sense of the Holy Spirit's power being expressed through Stephen that made this impression on the council. They look at him and there's an impression that he is angel-like, whatever that means.

The narrative continues with the longest speech reported by Luke in the Book of Acts. That's what we'll look at next time. And that speech ends with these harsh words.

⁵² "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³ you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Stephen follows Peter in accusing the Jews of Jerusalem, even all these leaders, with the murder of the Messiah, because they did it. That's why he accuses them. This is the Sanhedrin that went to Pilate and lobbied for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And these are the ones who said, "We have no King but Caesar!" That's this group. The first time Peter made this accusation 3000 Jews repented of their

crime, of murdering the Messiah, and placed their faith in that Messiah. So, a great response. Both times Peter stood before the Sanhedrin he made the same charge, and he was threatened but he was released. How will these leaders now respond to this charge made by Stephen on this occasion? Let's read the end of the story in Acts 7:54-60.

Execution 7:54-60

⁵⁴ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they *began* gnashing their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; ⁵⁶ and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. ⁵⁸ When they had driven him out of the city, they *began* stoning *him*; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen's accusation brings out a visceral response. Members of the Council are cut to the quick and they gnash their teeth. The text literally says, "cut in their hearts." It is the same verb used in 5:33 when Peter last addressed the Sanhedrin. But Gamaliel does not speak out this time to defuse the situation as he did before. "Gnashing of teeth" is an expression that communicates despair sometimes, but here it communicates rage. When we go through the text of the speech, we will consider why Stephen's words built up an unstoppable rage. We cannot fully explain why the Council or people were held in check before at Peter's words but proved beyond restraint here. We will be able to show that Stephen's words really did contribute to this response. But why did it spill over here, and not before? The best way to understand why they were restrained before but not restrained now is to consider the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John when he said, "My time has not yet come." That is how Jesus explained not being stoned ahead of time. God had a plan for Jesus. Many times he was not put to death. One time he was. Until that time, his opponents were held in check or thwarted by God.

Many times Peter will not be put to death. One time he will be. It is not yet Peter's time. It is Stephen's.

This is one of the tricky things about wisdom. We are told that Stephen is full of wisdom. Were his words wise in this case? When we ask, "What is the wise thing to do?" The majority of the time we would say, "Don't antagonize the men who have the power to kill you." Or we might say, "Don't make the Gospel unnecessarily offensive." Or "Live to fight another day." And that's all wise.

And yet, even though Biblical wisdom has much to say about being prepared and being cautious and Proverbs are full of swallowing rash words, especially when you're standing before a King, even with all that, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord, not the fear of death. There are definitely occasions when young believers speak rashly, or harsh, or imprecisely, unnecessarily antagonizing. But wisdom does not recognize peace as the highest goal. Orthodox religions must yield to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They must be told they're on a wrong track. If they do not, then those religions keep their followers safely bound, nice and comfortable, on a road to Hell, to eternal damnation, separation from God. Accepted ritual, custom, tradition, and behaviors must be held up to and judged by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the moral vision of the Bible. In this case, the Orthodox religion of first-century Judaism turned away from the bright glory of God revealed in Jesus. The leaders of the people screwed their eyes shut to that light and held on to the darkness of man-made traditions and rituals.

Stephen spoke wisely. He stood on the rock who is Jesus Christ. And he proclaimed the truth to the so-called shepherds of Israel.

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. ⁵⁸ When they had driven him out of the city, they *began* stoning *him*; and the

witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” ⁶⁰ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.

The Jews are not supposed to kill people apart from permission from the Romans. They can get into big trouble for this. The Romans allowed them to practice their Law, except for capital punishment. There was exception made for blasphemy in the Temple, which is one reason why that charge was probably brought against Jesus and brought against Stephen. It’s still a risky thing to enact that kind of execution. They don’t know if they’re going to get in trouble by the Romans. But here there’s such an emotional response, it boils over, and it seems like in this case, you don’t know what the Romans are going to do, but in this case, they just turn their eyes. So, that fear that might have kept the leaders back before was a real fear, but in this case, it turns out the Romans let it go. In his death, Stephen modeled himself after his Savior. As Jesus gave his spirit into the hands of God, Stephen gave his spirit into the hands of God, as Jesus forgave his executioners, Stephen forgave his executioners. Stephen’s desire is not just to be a little Moses. His real desire is to be a little Jesus. He modeled himself after Jesus. The wisdom of Stephen did not involve a desperate hold onto this life. While alive, he lived out his faith in Jesus serving others both through his words and through his actions, caring for widows, caring for people, proclaiming the Gospel to those who needed to hear it. In his death, he went to be with his Lord and Savior.

On this day, a passionate and self-assured young Pharisee named Saul watched over the robes of his countrymen as they stoned Stephen to death. Later, this same young man would be given the new name Paul and he would come to learn for himself the wisdom of Stephen. We will see him write it in a letter to the Philippians. He will learn what Stephen knew. “To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 6:8-15. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Considering also the previous sections, Acts 6:1-7, what kind of man was Stephen? What kind of man was he? Where did he come from? How was he gifted? What character traits stand out?
3. What were Stephen’s opponents like?
4. What charges were brought against Stephen?
5. Read Acts 7:54-60. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. Does the story of Stephen’s execution fit with who he was and who his opponents were?
7. What parallels do you see between Stephen and Jesus in both passages?

Lesson 10: Acts 7:1-53 Stephen's Speech

Introduction

God chose Stephen as a leader for the Greek-speaking Jews among the newly born Church of Jerusalem. Stephen was a man full of grace and power, wisdom and faith and most importantly full of the Holy Spirit. Stephen participated in the distribution of funds to widows. Like the Apostles, he performed great wonders and signs among the people, and he boldly proclaimed the Good News of salvation through Jesus the Messiah.

Stephen's signs of power may have won him favor in the Greek-speaking community. But his fruitful proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior won him enemies; enemies who secretly spread about false charges of blasphemy to stir up opposition against him. This tactic led to Stephen's arrest and ultimately his death.

Luke reported to us what happened to Stephen. But not only what happened. He has also recorded for us Stephen's speech at his trial. And it is the longest recorded speech in the book of Acts; twice as long as the part of Peter's speech at Pentecost that Luke gave us in chapter two, and twice as long as Paul's defense before King Agrippa. Why did Luke choose to give us all of Stephen's defense?

It is easy to skim through the speech as an Old Testament history refresher. But as helpful as that might be for us, the members of the Sanhedrin did not need refreshing on the Old Testament from Stephen. Stephen was making a point. And Luke found that point valuable enough to be retold in full.

The best place to start with the question, "Why is this speech here?", is with the context of the trial. Charges have been leveled against Stephen. The high priest asks in 7:1, "Are these things so?" "What about the charges, Stephen? Are they true? What do you have to say for yourself?" That question from high priest is our question, too. Is Stephen going to defend himself against the charges?

Let's remind ourselves what those charges were. Acts 6:13-14,

"This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

The general accusation has been one of blasphemy. The specific accusations have to do with the Temple and the Law of Moses. They say that Stephen claims Jesus will destroy the Temple and Jesus will alter the customs handed down in the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. The Temple in Jerusalem and the Law of Moses are crucial components, not only of Jewish religion, but of Jewish identity.

Focusing on those ideas of Temple and Law, we have moved past the central theme of the first major section of Acts. Peter's speeches have all focused on Jesus as the crucified and glorified Messiah. He is the son of God. Salvation is found in no other name.

If we accept Peter's witness of Jesus as the Messiah to be true, what implications does that truth have on the Temple as central to Jewish worship, and on the Law of Moses as central to ritual and moral obedience? We have seen the witness to Jesus clash up against the Jewish establishment. We are now taking another step, asking, "What are the theological implications to orthodox Jewish religion if Jesus is the Messiah?" What does that change? What does that affect?

That's the importance of Stephen's defense. What happens to traditional religion when Jesus is recognized as central?

Stephen is not going to defend himself against the charges. Stephen recognizes that a more fundamental question must be addressed before we can address the effect of the Gospel on traditional worship and traditional customs. Stephen is going to provide a defense of his position but he's going to do it by going on offense against his accusers.

The question is not, “Has Jesus taught an abolishment of the Temple and the Law?” but rather, “Why have you not yielded in your mind and heart to Jesus, who is God’s Messiah?”

Who is Jesus Christ and what is your response to him? That’s what we should be talking about. If you reject Jesus Christ, you will reject the implications of the Gospel on traditional Judaism. If you accept Jesus Christ, then we can delve into questions about the Temple and the Law. Is Jesus God’s appointed leader? And have you yielded to him as God’s appointed leader?

In retelling Old Testament history, Stephen shows that God has chosen Israel by grace and promised salvation to Israel. God accomplishes that salvation through leaders he has chosen and appointed to the task. Israel has regularly repudiated God’s chosen leaders, leading to exile. And yet, salvation has still been obtained by grace and is offered to all who would yield to the salvation provided. Abraham, Joseph, and Moses all foreshadow Jesus.

We start with Abraham, who Stephen uses to provide context for God’s promise of salvation. This is Acts 7:2-8.

Abraham (7:2-8)

² And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, ‘LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.’ ⁴ Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, *God* had him move to this country in which you are now living. ⁵ But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and *yet*, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. ⁶ But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. ⁷ ‘AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,’ said God, ‘AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.’ ⁸ And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so *Abraham* became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac *became the father of* Jacob, and Jacob *of* the twelve patriarchs.”

At first glance this appears to be a retelling of common history. But Abraham’s story spans 14 chapters in Genesis. Stephen condenses that to one paragraph. He chooses which parts to emphasize. And he ends up covering a lot of ground in a very short amount of text. Notice these seven points Stephen has just established.

- (1) First, the God of glory chose Abraham, appearing to him and giving him a commission.
- (2) Second, Abraham obeyed. God said, “Leave.” Abraham left.
- (3) Third, God made a promise of grace, a promise of land, and descendants.
- (4) Fourth, God foretold a period of exile.
- (5) Fifth, God foretold deliverance from exile.
- (6) Sixth, after exile Israelites would serve God in the promised land. To serve in this sense includes the idea of worship.
- (7) Seventh, God made a covenant with Abraham. This covenant was made in addition to the promise and included stipulations. The primary, symbolic stipulation of circumcision is the one mentioned here.

We can summarize these points into three themes the reoccur through Stephen’s speech: (1) the theme of God-appointed leadership, (2) the theme of promised deliverance from exile, (3) and the theme of covenant obedience, or covenant disobedience as we will see in the next two examples.

Next, Stephen passes over Isaac and Jacob quickly to get to Joseph, his second example of God appointed leadership. The covenant people comes to be through Abraham. The covenant people will be saved through Joseph. This is Acts 7:9-16.

Joseph (7:9-16)

⁹ “The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, ¹⁰ and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. ¹¹ Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction *with it*, and our fathers could find no food. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers *there* the first time. ¹³ On the second *visit* Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ Then Joseph sent *word* and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons *in all*. ¹⁵ And Jacob went down to Egypt and *there* he and our fathers died. ¹⁶ *From there* they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”

Stephen’s first point about Joseph is that his brothers sold him into Egypt out of jealousy. Stephen wants to show us this. Not only has God appointed leaders for the salvation of Israel. Israel has repeatedly rejected the leaders appointed for their salvation.

We know the story of Joseph’s covenant obedience. We remember what he said to Potiphar’s wife, “How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” Now, everybody there knows that Joseph is a covenant keeper. God’s hand remains with Joseph. And at each point he is granted favor and wisdom. God develops him into the leader he needs to be for the deliverance of Israel.

Jacob’s move to Egypt with his whole family sets the stage for a long exile. Stephen affirms the ongoing connection to the Promised Land by mentioning the burial of Jacob and Joseph in Shechem.

Abraham and Joseph have set us up for Stephen’s primary example of Moses, another leader appointed by God for the deliverance of Israel, and yet, rejected by Israel. The rejection of Moses is significant because it is also a rejection of the Law God delivered through Moses.

In Stephen’s summary, Moses is chosen by God and rejected by Israel twice. We start with the first choosing of Moses in 17-22.

Moses (7:17-43)

Chosen by God (17-22)

¹⁷ “But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, ¹⁸ until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. ¹⁹ It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. ²⁰ It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father’s home. ²¹ And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. ²² Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.”

Stephen returns to the promise to Abraham. God promised Abraham descendants and he promised Abraham that those descendants would live in the promised land. God also foretold the exile in Egypt and deliverance from exile. Stephen established all of this when he mentioned Abraham. The time for fulfillment is now under Moses.

Through this whole example, the language referring to Moses foreshadows the salvation that comes through Jesus. What do you think the language, “as the time of promise approaches” would mean to a first-century Jew if they did not know you were talking about Moses? “As the time of promise approaches...?” What time of promise did they believe was approaching? They would hear that language as a reference to the Messiah. He is the promised one they were looking for in their generation.

As the time of promise approached back then, the Israelites experience oppression by a king who knew nothing about Joseph. That is another suggestive choice of words to quote from Exodus.

Pharaoh, “knew nothing of Joseph” and so the people of God were oppressed. Oppression follows a lack of knowledge about God’s appointed leader.

In light of that oppression God provides a new leader. Moses is described as “lovely in the sight of God” and as “educated in all the learning of the Egyptians”. He is “a man of power in words and deeds.” We can imagine Jesus described as “lovely in God’s sight...a man of power in words and deeds.” And Moses foreshadows Jesus.

And in the life of Moses, God’s sovereignty is clear. God chose Moses. God arranged for Moses to gain exposure to the high court of Egypt while somehow still being nurtured by his own mother. So he knows Egypt, he knows Israel. Moses is God’s appointed leader for the salvation of his people. But he will be rejected, verses 23-29.

Rejected by Israel (23-29)

²³ “But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. ²⁴ And when he saw one of *them* being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵ And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them **deliverance** through him, but they did not understand. ²⁶ On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?’ ²⁷ But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, ‘**WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US?**’ ²⁸ ‘YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?’ ²⁹ At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.

Stephen does not wholly justify Moses in striking down the Egyptian. He says that Moses’ idea to visit his brethren “entered his mind”, not that God told him to visit to brethren. He also says that Moses “supposed his brethren understood that God was granting deliverance through him.” Stephen does not say that this was God’s plan for Moses to now deliver Israel. In the Exodus narrative, I believe we are to assume that Moses acted rashly, not outside of God’s calling for him, but outside of God’s timing.

Stephen’s language allows for us to understand fault in Moses, but for the purpose of his argument to the Sanhedrin, he does not focus on Moses’ immaturity in his initial attempt to deliver Israel, just like he didn’t focus on Joseph’s immaturity in telling his brothers about his dreams. Instead, Stephen focuses on another point that clearly comes out in the original text. He focuses on the Israelites’ rejection of Moses by recalling the quote, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?” That’s what they are asking. Well, God. God has made him ruler and judge.

But God was not done with his sovereign preparation of Moses at this point. Moses needed to learn how to shepherd Israel, how to survive in the wilderness and above all, how to be humble. Stephen skips over those forty years of training to the point where God is ready to affirm his choice of Moses by calling him and giving him the commission to deliver Israel from Egypt. This is Acts 7:30-37.

Called by God (30-37)

³⁰ “After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look *more* closely, there came the voice of the Lord: ³² ‘I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.’ Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. ³³ BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, ‘TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. ³⁴ ‘I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.’ ³⁵ This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘**WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?**’ is the one whom God sent *to be both a ruler and a deliverer* with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. ³⁶ This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷ This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.’

The God of glory does not live in the land of Israel. He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. He later appeared to Moses at Mt. Sinai in the Midian wilderness. If you could travel to that spot today you would not find anything particularly special about it. It's scrub land. It's rocky. The ground is holy at that moment because God is there. Stephen's examples of God appearing to Abraham and Moses outside of Israel support the point he is getting ready to make in a minute, that God is not confined to a Temple made by men. God's holiness is wherever God is. And God is everywhere.

In calling Moses, God had decided that it was now time to fulfill his covenant promise to deliver Israel. And he determined that Moses would be the leader he would use to accomplish that purpose. Stephen repeats the earlier questioning of Moses' authority. He says now, "This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent *to be* both a ruler and a deliverer."

Stephen has intended for us to see both Joseph and Moses as forerunners of Jesus. Joseph was appointed by God. Rejected by his family. And still used to deliver Israel. Moses was appointed by God. Rejected by the Israelites. And still used to deliver Israel. Jesus was appointed by God. Rejected by the Israelites. And still used to deliver Israel. You can hear the words that those Israelites put into the mouth of Sanhedrin, "Who made you (Jesus) a ruler and a judge?" Stephen's answer, "God did."

The comparison to Jesus has been implied. It's there but it's not stated directly. Stephen gives us a clear hint that he means us to be thinking about Jesus when he quotes Deuteronomy 18:15 saying, "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.'" That quote does not support any point that Stephen has yet made in the story. Why is he now talking about the prophecy of a prophet? It only makes sense if we recognize Stephen as saying, "This is the Moses who told us to expect a prophet of a New Covenant who would one day come to save us from our sin. Jesus. Moses was talking about Jesus." That's what Stephen's saying here. Stephen is not being that direct. But he does not need to be. In the context of early Jewish witness for Christ, everyone was looking for the Prophet and the Christians were saying Jesus is the Prophet. He is the one Moses talked about. Peter made that point. He quoted the same Deuteronomy passage back in Acts 3:22 during his speech about Jesus after the healing of the lame man.

Moses foreshadows Jesus who is to come as the mediator of a New Covenant. Moses was the mediator-prophet of the Old Covenant. One like him is going to be the mediator of the New Covenant. The people of Israel, questioning, "Who made you ruler and judge?" foreshadow the response of the Sanhedrin to Jesus. Stephen emphasizes the repudiation of Moses and the law delivered by Moses in verses 38-43.

Repudiated by Israel (38-43)

³⁸ "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and *who was* with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. ³⁹ Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, ⁴⁰ SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT—WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' ⁴¹ At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴² But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? ⁴³ 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

Not only was Moses the leader appointed by God. God delivered directly to him the words of the Old Covenant that were passed on to Israel. Stephen mentioned the covenant of circumcision when he spoke of Abraham. Now he comes back to the idea of Law. God's deliverance is established by a promise. Along with his promise, God also communicates expectations for his people through

Covenant. The promise is the basis for Covenant relationship. It is received by grace through faith. Having been accepted through grace, the stipulations of Covenant show the people how to live in relationship with God.

Moses received these Covenant stipulations and he communicated them to Israel. Israel rejected both Moses and the teaching God delivered through Moses. Again, this is how Stephen describes it.

³⁹ Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, ⁴⁰ SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT—WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' ⁴¹ At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

God's word provides definition for who God is. You know, make no idols. I don't want you to consider me as an idol. Worship no other gods before me. I am not one of many. I am The One. So, to receive God by faith means receiving God according to the way God has defined himself, not according to how we would define him. We worship God according to who he says he is. When we turn away from that definition, when we make God, when we make an idol with our own hands, with our own minds, we turn to false worship, whether we call the object of our worship God or not. If we've made that image, then it is not true worship of the true God. The people of Israel, along with their leaders, including Aaron, turned to false worship while Moses was still up on Mt. Sinai. He is up there, getting the Tabernacle pattern.

Paul in the letter to the Romans makes the connection with our vision of who God is and our behavior. Turning away from God's revelation of himself impacts the human mind and heart, leading to a degradation of our behavior. There is consequence to turning away from God. Paul says it this way in Romans 1:21 and 24.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened...Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

That language of God giving them over to their sin, it's not original with Paul. Stephen uses that language right here long before Paul did. He says,

⁴² But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; - you see, that's not God turning away first; they turned away from God and made an image with their own hands, and then God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven - as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL?' ⁴³ 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

Israel turned away from God. God gave them over to their false worship, turning himself away from them. Stephen connects the turning away at Sinai with an abiding thorn in the flesh of Israel, with idolatry. From the time of deliverance from Egypt to the second exile in Babylon, the Israelites continually struggled with idolatry. And they would do well for a time and then fall right back in, over and over. A remnant would remain faithful to God through Old Testament history, but the majority were more often given over to idolatry than not.

Stephen's reference to Moloch and Rompha points, I believe, to a time later in Israel's history. He is quoting from Amos 5:25-27, who wrote during the time of the Assyrian threat about 800 years after Moses. The temptation to idolatry is displayed at Sinai. The quote of Amos reminds us that it carried through the history of Israel, eventually resulting in Babylonian exile.

Stephen's quote uses the Greek Septuagint translation of Amos. F. F. Bruce explains that the terms used both by the Hebrew Masoretic text, which is not the text that Stephen quoted from, and the

terms used by the Greek translation, the Septuagint, they both indicate the worship of Saturn.⁸ Serving the host of heaven here refers to worship of the various gods and goddesses represented by the planets and the stars. No distinction is made by the ancients between the god and planet. They're pretty much one and the same. And in this text both Moloch and Rompha seem to refer to Saturn. And I don't think we're supposed to believe that the people of Israel during the wandering in the desert were worshiping the god of Saturn. This is Stephen conflating the idea that idolatry began in the desert and it was a problem, and so it's as if this worship of the host of heaven started there. It's going to be an on-going problem that God allows. He gives his people over to this problem because of their continual rejection of him.

By bringing his account of history all the way up to the Babylonian exile, Stephen has brought us to two present realities. First, Israel seems to have kicked the idolatry habit after Babylon. Jesus never gets onto the leadership of Israel, to the Sadducees and the Pharisees and all the other people he rebukes for idolatry. He doesn't rebuke them for idolatry. Temple worship and obedience to the Law have become the new idol. This is their way to bring about the coming of Messiah. If only enough of Israel will fully commit to full obedience, the Messiah will come. There is even this idea: if on one Sabbath all of Israel would be obedient for one Sabbath, Messiah would come. So, there's a strong focus on Temple worship and on obedience to the Law to bring about the will of God. Second, we should recognize the first-century perspective that Israel was not out of exile. There is this idea that the Babylonian exile wasn't fully over. The people had returned to the land. The Temple had been restored, but kingship had not. And that final element is crucial. Israel has not been freed from foreign domination. And Israel would not be fully out of exile until Israel was independent, ruled by her own king, the promised Son of David.

Stephen's hearers would have been much more attuned to this theme of exile than we are. I think they would have noticed it from the beginning in Stephen's first words about Abraham. Stephen connected the story to his present audience when he said, "God removed Abraham to this country in which you are now living." He connects the history to them. Then he says, "But God said to this effect, that his offspring would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years. And whatever nation to which they shall be in bondage I myself will judge." The Jews of Stephen's day would filter that story of exile through their own experience. They know he is talking about Egypt, but they're going to be thinking Babylon, and they're going to be thinking a present problem. As God delivered from Egypt, God will deliver us. As God brought us back from Babylon, he will free us from bondage in our own land. When Stephen said, "And whatever nation to which they shall be in bondage I myself will judge," that promise? There must have been people in his audience immediately thinking about that promise as the promise to judge Rome who was holding them in bondage. We don't quite get this. We think that Stephen is giving us a history lesson but as soon as he starts talking about Abraham, and the land, and the exile, this present audience is listening closely. The language of exile was present in their minds, and they thought about it according to their current situation and their current hopes.

They were the ones in exile. They did not see it as an exile to sin, but an exile to Rome. Foreign domination. And they were looking for the Messiah, not to set them free from sin. They thought they were doing pretty good with that. They were the righteous ones. But they need freedom from Rome. And this is the rebuke Stephen is setting up with the exile language. Your hope is for Messiah. Messiah has come to end the exile. But you murdered him.

Stephen has established this pattern.

God has provided Israel with a promise, a covenant, and faithful leadership. Israel has repudiated God's leaders and proved unfaithful to the Covenant. In spite of Israel's disobedience, God has fulfilled the promise to save.

⁸ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 145.

With that pattern in mind, Stephen considers briefly the charges leveled against him. First, concerning Temple worship. Let's read 44-50.

Temple Worship (7:44-50)

⁴⁴ "Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed *him* to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. ⁴⁵ And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. ⁴⁶ *David* found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. ⁴⁸ However, the Most High does not dwell in *houses* made by *human* hands; as the prophet says: ⁴⁹ 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?' ⁵⁰ 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'

Stephen recognizes the special grace God extended to Israel in his provision of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple built by Solomon. That's a special place. It has a special purpose. However, as he has already hinted at by the God of glory appearing to Abraham in Mesopotamia and Moses on Mt. Sinai, "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands." He is not limited to a locality.

The New Covenant understanding of Temple does not reject the value of the physical Temple. The New Covenant recognizes the fulfillment of the Temple's purpose now that Jesus Christ has come. It is a shadow of something more real. It is symbolic, and its purpose is fulfilled. This understanding is in line with the Old Testament recognition that the Temple is symbolically God's home, not actually God's home. Stephen makes this point by quoting Isaiah 66:1-2.

The prophet says: ⁴⁹ 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?' ⁵⁰ 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'

Stephen could say a lot more about the New Testament understanding of Temple, but he determines to address the heart condition of his opponents, rather than defending a right understanding of Temple. Addressing their heart condition is going to be Stephen's response to the charge that he promotes a change to the Law of Moses. Stephen does not really answer that accusation. He turns the accusation around. This is in verses 51-53, the end of the speech, and this concerns the Law.

Law Obedience Now (7:51-53)

⁵¹ "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. ⁵² Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³ you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Stephen uses Mosaic language, calling these men stiff-necked and uncircumcised. You can check out Deuteronomy 10:16. He has reminded his hearers of Israel's betrayal of Joseph and rejection of Moses. He adds here the ongoing persecution of the prophets. He has classed these member of the Sanhedrin with the unfaithful shepherds of Israelite history. They are even worse. Whereas those who came before rejected God's servants, they have murdered God's son, the Righteous One. Concerning the charge of changing the Law, Stephen responds by describing his accusers as those, "who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Stephen is not going to address charges about what Jesus said concerning the Temple and the Law until the Sanhedrin addresses the charge against them of murdering the Messiah. The brothers sold Joseph. The Israelites betrayed Moses. You have killed the Messiah. The question, "Who is Jesus?" must be answered before Stephen can address the relationship of the New Covenant to Temple and the Law.

Did Stephen need to speak so directly and so strongly? It is not clear that he spoke more directly or strongly than Peter did. Though his words about the Temple and the Law may have cut an even deeper wound in the twisted identity the Jewish leaders and people had created for themselves. Traditional religions hold on tightly to certain ideas, certain traditions. There are just certain things you do not criticize, like Mary with Roman Catholics or cookies with Moravians. You just don't go there. Some things are sacrosanct. You can't talk about them as though they are theological ideas because people hold on to them so closely. I see a connection with the riot Paul is going to stir up in Ephesus when the people get the point that his Gospel denounces the temple of Artemis at Ephesus. When they get that, then they're just thrown into this riot because it affects the identity of what makes us important. And just as they identified with the temple of Artemis, the people of Jerusalem identified with the Temple of Yahweh. People who have grown up in strongly traditional religions sometimes lose sight of God as the one who gives them their definition. They define themselves instead by their history, and traditions, and rituals, and behaviors. And they come to believe that that's the definition God has given. They don't see that those are man-made traditions. And sometimes they're good traditions, and it's okay that it, in some sense, defines who you are in a secondary sort of way. But not if you grasp hold of it contrary to what God says about you.

Stephen's approach to traditional religion is to step back and begin and again with Jesus. Okay, you guys are holding on to the Temple and holding on to the Law, and we'll get there, but let's step back for a minute. He challenges the human religious attitude that seeks to define God and theology from a human perspective, to make God out of our own hands. Stephen starts with Jesus Christ at the center.

I am not saying that we need to put Jesus and the Gospel at the center and develop our theology from there. That's close but that's not exactly what I'm saying. I am saying we need to recognize that Jesus is the center. We don't put him there. And we to receive our theology from him. We don't create it. And yet, we're going to have to do a lot of human work trying to understand it and trying to put it together. But we've got to hold it a bit loosely. We have to recognize that our theological systems are all going to leave the bounds of Bible at some point. And so, we hold that loosely because our theology is received. The Word is our authority. We do not define God. We don't define Jesus. God defines God. God defines Jesus. We do not define Temple worship. He does. We do not define morality. He does. We do not define the Covenant expectations. He does. We don't define theology. He does.

We do not put him in the center and then figure out our theology from there. We recognize he is in the center and work to understand the theology we receive from him through his Word.

This is the problem Stephen faces. He cannot debate the right worship of the Temple and the right observance of Mosaic Law, while his traditionally religious opponents interpret the Bible according to their humanly developed traditions and reject the newness that comes through Jesus Christ. Not only does Stephen need his opponents to intellectually recognize Jesus as the center. He needs them to yield in heart to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and give themselves over to understanding the Scripture as received from Jesus. And he needs to see in them the fear of Abraham, the fear of Joseph, the fear of Moses, to receive from God. They need to say, "Forgive us Lord!" And then, "Teach us Lord!" It's an intellectual response and a heart response.

A believer who begins with Jesus and the Gospel at the center and then strives to understand the world according to the teaching received from God in his Word, that kind of believer can engage with someone who holds to a strongly traditional religion, whether it's Jewish or a traditional Christian

church. But at some point, the believer is going to have to be very clear that Jesus must be acknowledged as man and God, and salvation must be recognized as a gift of grace received through faith, and the Bible must be acknowledged as the one truly authoritative source for life and practice. Otherwise, you can't go further together. Without those three things - that Jesus is man and God, that salvation is by grace through faith, and that the Bible is the one truly authoritative source - we can't really move forward together. We can only have side discussions.

Stephen recognizes what is at stake both for the Christian movement and for the non-believing Jews in Jerusalem. And this is a difference between communicating with traditionally religious believers, who are just believers in the system, and communicating with the leaders, who are maintaining that system and refuse to let it go. The traditional religion of Israel held on to by these leaders, the members of Sanhedrin, will keep the people of Israel bound under a false hope. So Stephen is not just witnessing to anybody. Stephen is being put on trial by the highest court and he feels the responsibility to publicly call this court to account. But for the glory of God, for the sake of Christian movement, and for the sake of all the people of Jerusalem, Stephen is not willing here to compromise. Jesus is the Messiah and before we go further together, you have to acknowledge that.

As witnesses for Jesus Christ, we will have to do the same. The Gospel preached by Peter through the first major section of Acts, will not yield to traditional religion. Jesus is the Christ. Forgiveness comes through faith in him. There is no other name by which a person can be saved. Traditional religion must yield to the Gospel of Jesus Christ or be called to account.

Reflection questions

Observe Stephen's speech in stages with these three primary questions in mind.

1. Does Stephen attempt to answer the charges brought against him?
 2. What answer does Stephen give to the charges brought against him?
 3. What is Stephen's aim in this speech other than answering the charges brought against him?
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1. Read Acts 7:1-8. What is the main point or points of this section? What stands out as problematic or confusing?
 2. Read Acts 7:9-16. What is the main point or points of this section? What stands out as problematic or confusing?
 3. Read Acts 7:17-43. What is the main point or points of this section? What stands out as problematic or confusing?
 4. Read Acts 7:44-53. What is the main point or points of this section? What stands out as problematic or confusing?
 5. After observing the speech, how would you answer the three primary questions suggested above?

Lesson 11: Acts 8:1-24 The Samaritan Awakening

Introduction

The story of Stephen's witness to Christ and resulting death served several purposes for Luke. Theologically, the story challenges the worship and practice of Orthodox Judaism to yield to the lordship of Jesus Christ and accept in him the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and inauguration of the New Covenant. Literarily, Stephen's story serves as an overlapping transition from the first major division of Acts to the second major division of Acts, moving from a description of the Church's growth in Jerusalem to a description of the spread of the Church into Judea and Samaria. Historically, Stephen's story is our story. His conviction, his courage, his hope that "to live is Christ and to die is gain," that truth and character displayed in his story is part of our heritage as Christians. He is "our" Stephen. Also, historically, his story is a pivotal moment. Before Stephen's trial the authorities in Jerusalem restrained themselves from the use of force against the growing Christian movement. At the conclusion of Stephen's trial violence is unleashed.

Believers in Jesus were lighting a fire in Jerusalem, a large bonfire full of warmth and light, calling all who believe to gather around in fellowship and worship. Outside that community gathered around the light there are thousands looking in, many attracted by what they saw, by the fellowship and the miracles, and the message. Others stood outside with judgment, disapproval, jealousy and hatred. The trial of Stephen unleashed that hatred. The leaders of Jerusalem took advantage of the moment to continue the violence. They marched in with strong boots to stamp out the blazing fire.

In kicking out the fire, embers are launched into the surrounding region. Will those embers fall on damp, rocky soil only to lose their light and warmth with no effect? No. The surrounding countryside will catch fire as believers are forced out from Jerusalem. Judea, Samaria, the coastal cities, Galilee, even as far north as Antioch, persecuted Christians will spread the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. We begin here with the awakening of Samaria.

We can divide Acts 8:1-24 into three sections. We start with an introduction, then we read about Philip's fruitful witness in Samaria, and then we read about Peter's apostolic affirmation that God is, indeed, at work in Samaria. Rather than read the whole text at once, we will address these three sections individually, starting with the introduction in Acts 8:1-3.

Introduction of the Gospel Spread Outward (8:1-3)

¹ Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. ³ But Saul *began* ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

Saul as the Embodiment of Jewish Animosity Toward Jesus

Luke gives us more information about Saul. That is his Hebrew name. We find out in the letter to the Philippians that he was of the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe that produced the famous King Saul that came before King David. Maybe he is named after the king or some other relative. It was an honored name in the tribe of Benjamin. Paul is not a new name that Saul will receive. Paul is his Greek name. This is not a new name with a new meaning like the one Peter got. This is like my friend Biljana who goes by Bibi when she is in the States, so that Americans can pronounce her name. Paul works better for Greek speakers. Luke will start calling Saul, Paul when the gentile ministry gets fully under way. Since we know him as Paul, I'll start referring to him as Paul now. I might flip back and forth between Paul and Saul.

Luke mentioned Paul at the end of chapter 7. He is giving us more information about Paul now, introducing us, like he does, to Paul before Paul's story truly gets underway. Paul is not simply one major figure of Acts that is being introduced here. Paul is the primary human figure in the story of Acts. If Acts were a novel or a play, we would say that Paul is the hero of the story, similar to how Moses is the primary human figure in Exodus. Of course, God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are the main focus of the story. But as far as human beings go, this is very much a story about Paul. One of the main purposes of Acts is the defense of Paul, which, at the same time and more importantly, is a defense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ promoted by Paul.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a Gospel of changed lives. That is no more clearly displayed than in the life of Saul. The Hebrew of Hebrews who would come to be known exclusively by his Greek name because of his ministry to the Gentiles. But first, we meet Paul watching over the robes of Stephen's executioners, which they removed so that they might better throw the stones that crush Stephen to death. This is not an origin story of repentance, or self-doubt, or revulsion at the unjust evil being carried out before his eyes. This is not the moment that moves Paul softens or begins to empathize. Luke tells us, "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death." He watched with righteous indignation. He watched as a protector of Israel, as a defender of the faith. Not only did he completely reject Stephen's Gospel message, but he fully agreed with the sentence of death and the immediate execution of that sentence. He had no qualms about the shift from formal trial to mob attack. This was righteous in his eyes. Paul was in hearty agreement.

In the death of Stephen, Paul sees clearly his calling from God to lead in the eradication of this cancerous Christian tumor growing in the heart of Israel. He begins to ravish the Church. That is a violent word. He enters into the private space of people's homes, knocking on doors, as we might imagine from the KGB or the Gestapo. With the approval of the government and certainly also with Temple soldiers backing him up, Saul dragged Christian mothers and fathers from their homes, from their children to lock them in prison. We can imagine that he would have done worse if the Roman authorities allowed the Sanhedrin to execute Christians. But apart from blasphemy in the Temple, the quick execution of Stephen is an exception to the rule. So, the worst Paul can do is drag these believers into prison.

Persecution Leading to the Spread of the Gospel

Along with giving us more introduction to Paul, these verses also introduce us to the persecution that followed Stephen's death. As some believers are imprisoned, others flee Jerusalem, being scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. We do not know why, but the Apostles chose to remain in Jerusalem and somehow, by the will of God, escaped imprisonment. That's a story I'd love to hear. Why did they stay? How were they allowed to stay? I've heard it preached that the Apostles show a reluctance to embark on the mission to Samaria and the Gentiles and that's why the persecution was necessary. It's true they still don't get the implication of Jesus' command to go to the remotest part of the earth. They are going to need some help in understanding the full inclusion of Gentiles. But I don't think we can say that staying in Jerusalem is a sign of disobedience. I don't think we can say that because I don't see it clearly in the text. We are going to see Peter venturing out and traveling around, witnessing for Christ. But at this moment, I see more courage than reluctance. They are all known. Certainly, they are in more danger in Jerusalem than anyone else. Yet, they stay to continue on as witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem and as leaders of the growing Church centered there.

Stephen is buried and devout men lament over him. Just as one Joseph and Nicodemus buried Jesus, these men publicly identify with Stephen even at risk of their own reputation and safety. This is one more instance where we see the comparison made between Stephen and his Lord. Stephen is like his Lord. And it takes us back to those dark days of uncertainty for Christ-followers in Jerusalem after the crucifixion.

I imagine many Christian Jews left Jerusalem at this time to return to their homes or to the homes of relatives. The Gospel spread out into different communities as regular, everyday believers continued

living life, but now in a new place outside of Jerusalem. Some of the believers who left Jerusalem went with a sense of calling. They left with ministry in mind, as evangelists and missionaries. And let me make a technical point of how I'm going to use the word, "missionary," through our series of Acts. I'm using, "missionary," to mean someone who is making disciples cross-culturally. And that's essential. You're not doing missions if you're sharing the Good News with somebody who is from your same culture. You're being an evangelist. Not all Christians are called to be missionaries, not in that sense. It doesn't mean all Christians have to go a long way off. If you live beside somebody who is from a different culture, you're engaging in work with people who are of a different culture, and you witness, you try to share the Gospel with them, then you're doing a work of missionary. The missionary does not necessarily have to cross geographic distance, but a missionary is always one who is crossing cultural distance.

Philip is an evangelist and a missionary. He is one of the embers launched out by the stamping feet of persecution. He does not go far geographically – it's only 20 miles (30 kilometers) to the city of Samaria where he is but he has traveled some distance culturally. He has gone from Judea to Samaria. Samaritans do share cultural similarities with their Jewish cousins, but also significant differences in ethnicity, and language, and religion, and history. So, Philip lands in Samaria, a new place culturally. Will the Gospel message fizzle out among these unorthodox people who accept some of the Bible but twist it around to fit into their culture? Or will the Gospel message light a fire?

Acts 8:4-13 describes for us Philip's ministry to the Samaritans.

Philip's Fruitful Witness in Samaria (8:4-13)

⁴ Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and *began* proclaiming Christ to them. ⁶ The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. ⁷ For *in the case of* many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out *of them* shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much rejoicing in that city. ⁹ Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; ¹⁰ and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." ¹¹ And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. ¹² But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

The Ember and the Soil

Philip goes down to Samaria. Don't let that directional language confuse you. You may tend to think of down as south on a map and up as north. In Acts, whenever you leave Jerusalem, you are going down. Jerusalem is considered the center, and Jerusalem is located in a high mountain range. So you always go down from Jerusalem and up to Jerusalem.

Philip was one of the seven men chosen, along with Stephen, to assist with the distribution of funds to the Greek-speaking Jewish widows in Jerusalem back in chapter six. He was considered a man full of the Spirit and wisdom. Also, like Stephen and the Apostles, Philip was gifted by God to perform miraculous signs, casting out demons and healing the sick. Luke specifically mentions healing of the lame, which reminds us of the miracle performed by Peter in chapter 3.

Philip's location is referred to as "the city of Samaria." F. F. Bruce remarks that the most immediate assumption would be that Luke is referring to the city, Samaria, rebuilt by Herod the Great and called Sebaste. But that city was a Hellenistic city whereas the ministry of Philip emphasizes work among true Samaritans. So, Bruce thinks the city of Samaria referred to here is a town near Shechem in the region where Jesus had witnessed to the woman at the well.

The ethnic divide between Jews and Samaritans began a long time before this, with the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. The conquering Assyrians deported much of the Jewish population and imported other conquered peoples. They intermarried, creating an ethnically diverse people related to the Jews. About 200 years later, when Ezra and Nehemiah returned to rebuild Jerusalem after the Southern Kingdom's exile to Babylon, the Samaritan population was not allowed to share in the rebuilding of the Temple. Still holding to their own interpretation of the books of Moses, the Samaritans built their own temple on their own mountain, Mount Gerizim. Which is why the Samaritan woman at the well said to Jesus in John 4:20, "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain [She is referring to Mount Gerizim.], and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

Around 128 BC, when the Jewish leaders, the Maccabees, revolted against foreign domination and gained control of Palestine, they destroyed the Samaritan temple on Gerizim. They considered the Samaritan temple to be a heretical parody of the Temple in Jerusalem. So we can understand that there is real animosity between Jews and Samaritans. It's the animosity that serves for the basis for Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. You know, Jews despise Samaritans. Samaritans hate Jews. Why would a Samaritan help a Jew? Jesus rejected that ethnic divide. He rejected it theoretically through this parable by defining the Samaritan as the good neighbor. You know, who is my neighbor? The Samaritan. And then he went further, rejecting the divide with his own actions when he chose to travel through Samaria and invited a Samaritan woman, and then her whole village to receive salvation through belief in him. Jesus had already set the foundation.

Now, after the death of Jesus, Philip comes back to the region where Jesus saw a ripe harvest field. But would these Samaritans accept Philip's message? Would the harvest field still be ripe for Phillip? There are some cultural bridges to work from. There is a shared recognition of the books of Moses. There is a shared expectation of a Jewish Messiah. There is a shared opposition against the hierarchy in Jerusalem so that the violence of the Jewish leaders against the Christians kind of put them in the same camp with the Samaritans. But there is also a significant religious divide, an ethnic divide, a historical divide that has been developed in a spirit of distrust. So, the potential cultural bridges that exist between Samaritans and Jews - you know, why you'd the Gospel might be able to go to Samaria - it doesn't guarantee a way across a divide that's been widened by centuries of animosity.

But when you add up all the human reasons people might receive the gospel and all the reasons people might reject the gospel, you just can't know what the Holy Spirit is going to do until the Holy Spirit does it. In this mission to Samaria, God acts powerfully. The ember kicked out from Jerusalem catches the soil on fire. Samaritans wake up from the darkness and see Jesus.

The Power Struggle

Now, in the case of Israel, the miraculous signs of Jesus were prophesied ahead of time and work to affirm that was who he claimed to be. Isaiah has said the Messiah would heal the lame and restore sight to the blind. Jesus healed the lame and restored sight to the blind. The signs affirmed his claims as Messiah. God continued to empower the Apostles and other members of the early Church, like Stephen and Philip, to do similar miracles as Jesus did in order to affirm the message they proclaimed about Jesus. In Samaria, the power of the miracles also worked against the spiritual powers recognized by the Samaritans in their unorthodox worship.

Simon was doing some kind of power and now the people have a real reason to look away from Simon to something new, because there is another power at play. A power struggle ensues similar to the power struggle between Moses and the magicians of Egypt. Simon is recognized as being great in the use of magical arts. He has astonished crowds of people. He claimed to be someone great. We do not know the specifics of his spiritual claims but the people connect his magical powers with their belief in God. They have mixed together first-century spiritualism with the books of Moses. And they call Simon, "The Great Power of God." He is an impostor who has himself endorsed this false belief that his power comes from God.

And we do not see a direct power encounter like with Moses and the Egyptian magicians, where they'd both do a series of miracles. We see two choices. There is the power of Simon's magic and then there's the power of Philip's miracles. The power of the Holy Spirit working through Philip proves more convincing to the Samaritans, leading many to believe in the message preached by Philip. And as they place their faith in Jesus Christ, Philip baptizes them. Even Simon the magician believes and is baptized. The text says he is amazed by the miracles Philip performs, which implies to me that he has no idea how to do what Philip does.

What others have sensed Simon knows to be true. His magic is nowhere near the same thing as Philip's miracles. Simon's wonder at the miracles Philip performs suggests to me that his magic was not true spiritual power, but tricks he performed to pretend to be someone great. And he seemed to be very good at it, good enough to know true power when he sees it. And so, Simon believes. Another life is changed. But changed how much? We will have some questions in a minute about Simon when Peter comes. But Phillip was willing to include Simon based on his own testimony of faith.

Philip's baptism of the Samaritans expresses his full acceptance of their new birth in Christ. Philip believes that Samaritans are genuinely believing. That's the implication of his baptizing them. He wouldn't baptize them if he didn't believe there was true belief going on. The full implication is not yet clear to leaders in Jerusalem. What does this mean for the Gospel going out and what does this mean for the requirements of the Old Covenant? This is more of a half-step towards the Gentiles, not a full step. The Samaritans have Jewish blood. The Samaritans practice the Laws of Moses even if they have temple worship confused. The Samaritans are going to be eating kosher, so that's not even going to be brought into question is this okay or is this not okay. Samaritans had come to faith through Jesus. We know Jesus approves. Samaritans speak a similar language and have a shared history. So, we may be a little surprised as Jewish Christians by the inclusion of Samaritans as true members of the New Covenant people of God. But we are not too surprised. We can fit this into our theological worldview.

Still, the Apostles want to see for themselves this awakening of Samaritans. So, Peter and John make the trip down from Jerusalem. And Peter affirms, as an Apostle, the work that God is doing. That affirmation of the work in Samaria is recorded in Acts 8:14-24.

Peter's Affirmation of God's Work in Samaria (8:14-24)

¹⁴ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰ But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." ²⁴ But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Receiving the Word of God

We use different words and phrases when referring to the moment of new birth when a person believes. We might say, "she placed her faith in Jesus," or, "he believed," or, "he received Jesus." Here Luke says, "Samaria had received the word of God." That is the phrase he uses. And that was the phrase he used when writing about Pentecost, "those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41)." He uses the same phrase

referring later to Cornelius household, “Gentiles received the word... (Acts 11:1).” The Bereans also will “receive the word with great eagerness (Acts 17:11).” In this sense, receiving the word about Jesus is the same as receiving Jesus or believing in Jesus. Truth faith requires an assent to truth content. There is a message being delivered that we believe.

Luke’s use of the phrase at Pentecost, here referring to Samaritans and in Acts 11 referring to Gentiles seems intentional. He is using the same phrase each time on purpose. The Gospel spreads to individuals. Individuals must believe in Jesus and receive forgiveness for their specific sins and experience new life in Christ. When we say that the Gospel spreads to a group, we mean that individuals in that group have come to faith. But we can then say it spreads to groups. We just recognized what we mean by that. The Jews at Pentecost received the Word. The emphasis there in Acts 2 was more clearly individual but it also applied to the group. The Jews of Jerusalem received the Word of truth about Jesus. That does not mean all the Jews of Jerusalem. It’s not the whole group, but it means a group of Jews in Jerusalem. Luke’s comment, “Samaria had received the word of God”, emphasizes the group. He doesn’t say that Samaritans received the Word of God but Samaria, the place, received the Word of God. And this is a significant step forward in the spread of the Gospel. We move from Jews in Judea now to individual Samaritans in Samaria. A significant number of individual Samaritans had acknowledged the truth of the Gospel, so that we can say, Samaria, the place, the people, have received the Word. It does not mean all Samaritans. We know that. It means the Gospel has crossed a significant cultural bridge. The same language will be used when the members of Cornelius’ household believe to emphasize the crossing of another cultural bridge to reach Gentiles. The Gentiles will receive the Word.

In all three examples, the reception of the Gospel succeeds against human explanation. We just wouldn’t expect it. The Jerusalem Jews at Pentecost are accused by Peter of murdering the Messiah. That’s part of his message. And yet, instead of stoning Peter, they receive the Word and repent, 3000 of them. The Samaritans are told a Jewish Messiah has come. The Jews are right in their worship of Yahweh. The Samaritans receive the Word of God even though it affirms the Jews, not themselves, to truly be God’s Old Covenant people. Then this Roman centurion is told that this inconsequential people on the edge of the Roman empire happen to be God’s chosen ones and that the true King of creation comes from them, but he was crucified like a criminal on a Roman cross. Humanly speaking, it is almost inconceivable that a Roman military officer would accept such a message. And yet, he and his household receive that word as true. You never really know what the Holy Spirit is going to do, until the Holy Spirit does it. So, receiving the Word of God as Luke has used it means, yielding of your own worldview to the Gospel, and accepting of what Scripture says about who God truly is, who Jesus truly is, and who you truly are.

Receiving the Holy Spirit

Samaritans received the Word of God. Peter and John came to see for themselves. And they found something curious. The Samaritans had believed and had been baptized by Philip but had not yet received the Holy Spirit. The prophecy of Joel about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit was directed to Jews. So maybe the Samaritans aren’t supposed to receive the Holy Spirit? But that doesn’t seem to be the assumption here. Peter and John seemed to have no problem believing that the prophecy applied to the Samaritans, as well. And maybe because of their shared Jewish heritage, I don’t know, but Peter and John pray for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit. Luke writes,

¹⁶ For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

The order here seems similar to what we saw at Pentecost. The group of 70 praying in the upper room had all believed in Jesus as Messiah. And yet, they had to wait for some time after belief before the Holy Spirit was poured out on them as believers. These Samaritans have also already believed. Philip affirmed their profession of faith by baptizing them. And then later, after Peter and John had

come, they receive the Holy Spirit. The text does not say specifically that they spoke in tongues when they received the Holy Spirit. But it would make sense for the Apostles to expect the receiving of the Holy Spirit in Samaria to be the same as the outpouring they received at Pentecost. Also, Simon's recognition that the laying on of hands brings about the reception of the Holy Spirit suggests that there was some kind of spiritual manifestation associated with the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Simon would not have likely have been impressed by Peter laying his hands on a Samaritan believer and then simply declaring him filled with the Holy Spirit by faith, without there being any kind of sign. Speaking in tongues, like at Pentecost, is the best option for a kind of visible manifestation of the Spirit that would have affirmed to the Apostles that the Samaritans had indeed received the Spirit and would have impressed Simon that something powerful had just happened. So even though the text doesn't say they spoke in tongues when they received the Spirit, I think it's quite valid to assume that they did.

Now we have again that challenging question of Biblical narrative. How much of this is a description of a special occurrence that occurred at a particular time and place, and how much of it is prescriptive for us? What about this experience should we understand as normative to our own Christian experience? Does the receiving of the Holy Spirit normally come after a person believes, like at Pentecost? Like with these Samaritans? Should we always expect speaking in tongues to accompany the receiving of the Holy Spirit, like at Pentecost and like, probably, here in Samaria? What about laying on of hands by the Apostles? Is that necessary for the receiving of the Holy Spirit? We are still not ready to answer those questions, not ready to interpret what about the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit was descriptive and what was prescriptive. And we're not ready because we have one more significant example we need to get to, so that we can do a good job of considering this question in the broader context of Acts. And that example is going to be in chapter 11, with the conversion of Cornelius and his household, and their reception of the Holy Spirit. So when we get there we'll address these questions.

Christian power - relational, not magical

What I would like to discuss now with this passage is Simon's response to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, as a representative of the unorthodox spirituality in Samaria. And in our day Simon is probably a pretty good mix of, kind of, our secular culture that's influenced by Christianity, but it's influenced by a lot of other spiritual views, and it kind of comes up with this mixed up worldview of what spirituality truly is. Simon views the spiritual power of the Apostles as real magic. They have discovered the secret to harnessing spiritual power. Simon wants to harness spiritual power. He offers to pay for the secret.

And that offer is offensive for multiple reasons. First, he interprets the Holy Spirit as a power source that human beings can manipulate. This is such a wrong, and yet normal view of Christianity, normal view of religion, that we do religion in order to manipulate God to get him on our side or to get him to bless our lives. So, not only is this a wrong view that is really common in society, it's a danger for all Christians. We are tempted to think our prayers, our faith, our religious intensity, our good behavior, you know, some mix of that is a formula that can cause the Spirit to act according to our desires. But no matter how much we pray, or how sincere we are in our prayer, or how intensely we cry out, or how good we are in our praise, the Spirit is living God. He is not manipulated. He acts according to his will in harmony with the will of the Father and the Son. The right way to relate to God and in relationship to the Holy Spirit is relational. We make request to God as sons and daughters, not manipulating him but trusting him to act with a "yes" or a "no" or a "maybe." He is in charge. He is Father. There is no special formula of prayer, or ritual, or behavior to control God and the work of the Holy Spirit. If we think we've found it, we are going down the wrong road. So that's offensive. You don't manipulate the Spirit, Simon.

Second, Simon's offer offends by misinterpreting the motives of the Apostles as though money could move them to grant him this ability, even if they somehow could.

²⁰ But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.

Simon understood religion as a source of spiritual power that could be useful for his life. And we can all be tempted to see Christianity as primarily about providing us the life we want according to our own terms. Often that is how people come to Christ. God reaches into our real world of need. And he provides for us. Just like he had been providing for people in Jerusalem. He provided for the widows. Maybe he protects you financially, or saves your marriage, or saves you from a bad relationship before marriage. Or maybe he gives you true friends or gets you on the right track with your studies or in your job. Maybe he helps you grow up. Maybe he somehow entered into the pressing need of your life and granted you favor. And that favor may have caused you to turn, in true faith, to Jesus. But we also easily internalize the wrong message that religion is primarily about fixing all the problems in our life. Because that’s what happened. I was in trouble. God came and saved me. So, that’s what this Christianity is about. It’s about getting my life together. I get to on side with God and God fixes things. Instead of understanding Christian religion as it truly is, which is primarily about coming into right relationship with God, worshiping him, and through that relationship becoming the person that God has created you to be, that you might truly reflect his image. We actually need ongoing problems in our life to help form our character, to help us focus on God in faith, to help us to truly be Christ-like. God’s main plan is not to get our whole life together and smoothed out. God is much more about our relationship with him and who we are becoming.

Simon may have professed faith in Jesus Christ. But his character and his worldview are still very much defined by his culture and his old self. He spent very little time with Jesus yet. And he is tempted to regard the power of God as something he can harness for his life. And he can gain prestige or money if he can understand the right ritual or prayer or behavior that the Apostles are using to manipulate the Holy Spirit. He misunderstands relationship with God, and he misunderstand the character of the disciples. Which means he also has a very wrong understanding of Christian ministry.

He sees ministry for God as a way to regain the prestige and income he lost when he gave up the magic business to follow Jesus. It must have been a heady thing to be known as “the Great One of God.” He followed everyone else when a new amazing source of power showed up. But the old life still holds temptation. His old life was about spiritual power and recognition and money, and that’s still got a grip on him.

A year ago, I was at a conference, and a student asked me what I thought about Kanye West’s Sunday Service. I want to be careful because I believe that famous people can come to know Jesus truly. But my response was, “That is a terrible position he is putting himself in. And for Christian leaders around him to encourage him is terribly irresponsible.” I believe in changed lives. And I believe that changed lives happen in a moment. I also believe that character changes over time. Power, wealth, and influence exert significant control over human beings. And we see this over and over when famous people come to faith in Christ and then Christians want to use their witness, and we put them up in positions of leadership before they’ve had any chance to develop. Sports stars, musicians, and actors, they might have been truly changed by Jesus, but now we are expecting them to model Christ-like character and to speak from a Biblical worldview without giving them any time to develop that character, and they are in a very, very difficult place to develop character, being in the limelight of power, and influence, and money. It’s a terribly difficult situation they are being thrust into. If Kanye West’s life has been changed by Jesus, the absolute last thing he needs to be doing is jumping into leading a Christian worship spectacle. And just for his own sake, he needs to stop, but also for the sake of people he’s influencing and that he is eventually going to hurt because he does not have the character of Christ yet. He is not ready for this.

Simon's desires are very much defined by who he was. Peter sees it, saying to him, "Repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

What bitterness does Peter see in Simon? I assume he sees the bitterness of loss combined with the bitterness of jealousy. Simon had recognition and honor in his former life when he passed off his magic as real spiritual power. He gave that up when he placed his faith in Jesus.

I should pause and ask a question that you might have. We might wonder, "Did he truly believe in Jesus?" The story implies he did. He was baptized. In our study of John, however, we saw examples of people claiming to have believed and to being to walk with Jesus, and yet they were believing in their own version of the Messiah, and they didn't really have saving faith in Jesus. So, it's 100% just because the text says he believed. We don't know what he believed. It seems to me to imply that he had true belief, but I am okay with leaving the question open here. I am not sure it is essential to the story. This is part of the story when you're doing ministry and people are professing faith in Christ, it's not clear yet who has truly believed and who has not truly believed, and you find out over time. And sometimes the ones who fall quickly actually will get back up and walk. They were true believers who fell. Others seem to carry on for a while, but it never really catches, and it takes some time to find out they never really believed.

What is essential is that Simon has made a profession of faith and he has even been baptized. He has identified himself with the name, Jesus. Falling into bitterness and bondage is possible for those who do not truly believe and possible for those who truly believe. So, it's a warning to all of us. We are excited about the newness of our relationship with God, about the offer of forgiveness, and love, and acceptance. We get excited by the story that makes sense and gives us purpose. But our minds are not immediately renewed. And our flesh is not immediately purified. We come to Christ with all kinds of wrong understanding. We come still broken, not yet fully healed. We bring our old habits and values and temptations into our new relationship with Jesus. And we may be freed from some old habits immediately. There is no longer any draw for us. Other desires might never fully go away. Either way, we need a lot of growth of character just to start becoming like Jesus. And that takes time.

Simon might have initially lost the desire to become someone great. He gave it all up for Jesus, and when it was just Phillip, and everything was going on. But then Peter and John show up. And not only can they perform miracles like Philip did, but they can confer power to other people. They lay their hands on Samaritans, and Samaritans manifest tongues, or gifts, or whatever it was that displayed the Holy Spirit power. As Simon watches the Apostles' ministry, he discovers that the desire for power and recognition has not gone away after all. He becomes jealous of Philip and Peter and John. He wants what they have. But he cannot get it. So, he becomes bitter. He gets to the point where he is even willing to make an offer to pay for the ability to do the ministry the Apostles are doing.

Peter describes this desire for a ministry that God has not granted as bondage. Simon wants the gifts and the ministry role he sees in the leaders. He had been a leader. He had been an influencer. Why should he not be allowed to step into the top of Christians ministry here in Samaria? In his jealousy, he does not likely give thought to the long process that brought Peter and John to where they are now. You know, their whole journey with Jesus over years is what made them fit for the ministry they were performing. That journey, and the specific calling of God, and the specific gifting of God.

Simon is fueled by old desires that are transferred into this new community. He cannot appreciate his own place in the community. He wants what he is in no shape to receive. And his desire has him in bondage to bitterness.

That's an experience, at some level, we can identify with. Who have you wanted to be? What have you wanted to do? What have you wanted to do for God? When you stopped trusting God to provide you with that opportunity, what means did you use in your own flesh to try and obtain that which you were not given by God? And when you were not able to obtain it, when did you become bitter,

or jealous, or upset with God, or did you just give up? Or when did you become upset with the people God chose instead of you?

It is a hard thing to want to be who we are not and yet trust God with who we are.

Peter tells Simon to pray that God would forgive him the intention of his heart. I am not sure what to make of Simon's response. He answered, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

I think God wanted repentance directly from Simon. He wanted to hear from Simon. And yet, sometimes when we are caught up in the temptation of our old way of seeing and doing, the most we can bring ourselves to do is ask for help. If Simon had heard the story of Ananias and Sapphira, his request for prayer from Peter might take on a more urgent tone. He had set himself forward as a Samaritan example of hypocritical leadership. He is in danger. He wanted to buy influence and give direction to the new Christian movement out of a hypocritical heart. Fear of God expressed in a request for prayer from Peter might be exactly the right way to respond.

Simon becomes a warning to us, and let's end with this. We come to Christ with a lot of baggage. We might get caught up in the immediate excitement of new birth and all the change that happens right away, such that we do not recognize how much growth still lies ahead. Simon is a warning to trust God with our formation, and with the ministry, and opportunities he has for us. Simon is also a warning to give others time to grow without hurrying them into ministry positions beyond their capabilities, paying attention not so much to young leaders; to their talents, or their social ability, or their influence, but paying a lot more attention to the Christ-likeness of their character.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 8:1-13. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What motivates the spread of the gospel out from Jerusalem? Is that surprising to you?
3. What kind of man does Philip seem to be? Consider also Acts 6:1-8.
4. How is the ministry of Philip in Samaria similar or different from the ministry of Peter and the Apostles in Jerusalem? Consider both what Philip does and what happens among the Samaritans.
5. Read Acts 8:14-24. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. Why do you think Peter was sent?
7. What difference exists now that Peter has arrived?
8. How would you explain that difference?
9. How do you understand Simon? What was the status of his belief? What did he want and what motivated him? Why did Peter respond as he did?

Lesson 12: Acts 8:25-40 Inclusion of an Ethiopian Eunuch

Introduction

Peter and John do not appear to have stayed long in Samaria. That's one request I would have for Luke. I would love more indication of how long things take. Luke is good with giving us names. We get a lot of names of people in Acts. So, we can reconstruct a broad timeline from major events. For example, the crucifixion, resurrection and Pentecost happened in 30 A.D., that's our starting point. And we know from Roman sources that Herod Agrippa died in Caesarea in 44 A.D. That's in Acts 12. That gives us 14 years for the first half of Acts where Peter is our main figure, from Acts 1:1 through 12:24 - 30 A.D. to 44 A.D. How to break down that 14 years takes a lot of guesswork. Later in the book, Luke will give us more time frame. He will tell us that Paul spent a year in Antioch, then on his second missionary journey he was a year and a half in Corinth, then on the third journey, he was two years in Ephesus, then at least two years in prison in Caesarea, and two years under house arrest in Rome.

Luke gives us these long periods when Paul was in one place. So, I am going to make an assumption that Peter and John and Philip are in Samaria less than a year, because if it had been longer, I think Luke would have told us. But knowing how long Paul was in Damascus and Luke does not tell us about that, you know, we don't find out about that until we read the Letter to the Galatians, I am just guessing they didn't stay so long in Samaria. Their ministries seem to be more on the move. Though on the move over a significant amount of time. We have to keep that in mind. 14 years for this first half of Acts.

Acts 8:25 reports about Peter and John,

²⁵ So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

They are making that 20 mile, 30 kilometer, or so trek back to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel as they go, to Samaritans. They did not go to Samaria to become pastors of a church. They affirmed both for themselves and for the Samaritans that the New Covenant Word of God had truly been received. They taught. And they returned to Jerusalem. But they did not return straight away. They are not pure administrators on a business trip. You know, let's just go there, witness it, get back. We go done, affirm the work and get back. Their heart was to see people come into relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. And they take time along their journey to witness in the villages that they pass by.

Philip is also not called by God as a pastor of a local church. He seems to be serving in the role of traveling evangelist. Sometimes he is doing cross-cultural work, sometimes not. In Acts 8:5 he is "proclaiming Christ to [Samaritans]." In Acts 8:35 he, "preached Jesus to [the Ethiopian]." In Acts 8:40, moving along the Judean coastline from Azotus northward to Caesarea, "he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities," presumably Jewish cities. "Proclaiming Christ (to Samaritans)...preaching Jesus (to a gentile)...preaching the gospel (to Jews)..." that's how Luke describes Philip's ministry. Philip aims to preach the Good News of Jesus in the whole region to everybody, whoever he meets, whatever their culture.

He was pushed out of Jerusalem by the circumstances of persecution. God uses events in our lives to move us forward in his will. Philip is also led directly in this case by an angel of the Lord. And at some point we're going to need to talk about angels, because they keep appearing in the story of Acts. I'll wait a little longer. The second time Peter gets released from prison by an angel will be a good place

to stop and think about the truth that, though human beings are by far the primary messengers spreading the Gospel to other human beings, we are not the only beings in relationship with God, participating in carrying out His will. There is this whole spiritual realm that we just occasionally get glimpses of. We will come back to that in chapter 12. For now, we recognize the unique experience Philip has, along with a select group of men and women through the biblical story, to receive direct marching orders from God delivered by an angel.

The reference to the angel, the appearance of the angel may suggest an important event in the spread of the Gospel is about to happen. Angels most often appear in the Bible, especially from Daniel on, to give us a word about the Messiah at a significant moment. It really makes me wonder about this man is going to have back in Ethiopia. But that's not part of this story. In this story of Philip and the Ethiopian we are going to see the Gospel moving further out culturally. The Samaritans are a half-step away from the Jews. The Ethiopians are a giant full step away from the Jews. This is a story of inclusion. And it is not only the inclusion of an Ethiopian. It is the inclusion of an Ethiopian eunuch. That will be important. At the same time that this is a story of the Gospel crossing cultural boundaries, it is also a story of God's sovereign action to bring an individual into relationship with Himself. God cared deeply about this Ethiopian seeker. And I think it shows that God cares deeply for Ethiopians who would benefit from the message that the seeker is going to take back with him. So, God sent an angel to tell Philip to go because God wanted Phillip to meet this man. Acts 8:26-40.

Philip's Witness to the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40)

²⁶ But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert *road*.) ²⁷ So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." ³⁰ Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. ³³ "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH." ³⁴ The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. ³⁶ As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁷ And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." ³⁸ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

About the Encounter

Luke uses a repetition of short action verbs as command and response. This is the classic Biblical formula for obedience. The angel says, "Get up and go...So he got up and went." That repetition in the command and response emphasizes immediate obedience and shows us Philip's heart for God. "God tells me what to do, I do it. He says, 'Get up and go to Gaza, I am going to get up and go to Gaza.'" You might say you would, too, if an angel told you. But the Bible has stories about people questioning angels, so we might not ought assume our obedience would be automatic just because it

was an angel. Though I do imagine an angel would help clear up whether we are hearing God right or not.

God's instructions to Philip are not very precise. He is not told where he needs to be on the road to Gaza or what time he needs to be on the road to Gaza. Just get going and leave what's next to God. God often gives us the next step without telling us what is going to happen after that step, or even why we're taking that step. We get up and go.

On the road down to and through Jerusalem, Philip may have passed hundreds of people. One of the more intimidating people he passes is a court official from a foreign land. He is very wealthy, riding in a chariot. He is a political figure of influence. His skin is the full black of Africa, not the olive color of the Jew. His people are fierce warriors. Barbaric in Jewish eyes. He travels with a group, surely having his own protection. Riding, he sits up high, not on the same level as another walker on the road. And he is not looking at Philip. He is not inviting any kind of conversation. His head is down, reading.

His retinue is intimidating. He is not approachable at all. This is certainly not the person. You know, you're looking around at the person you're supposed to meet, and you catch their eyes, and you say, "Oh, that's who I'm looking for? This can't be the guy!" But then it is. The Spirit of God instructs Philip, "Go up and join his chariot." I do not know if this was an audible voice in the mind or a strong impression. It certainly sounds like it was an audible instruction. "Go up and join his chariot!" God is being very clear to Philip. Philip, for his part, obeys. He runs up to the chariot. I don't think the running is exuberance on Philip's part. I don't think there's any other way to keep up with a fast-moving chariot. He has to jog alongside just to keep up.

Fortunately, the Ethiopian likes to read out loud. I am not sure if he was reading just for himself, or if he was reading to a fellow traveler, or if he wanted his driver to hear the Bible. Whatever the reason, it provides an immediate bridge for Philip. For all the potential barriers that exists between these two men, every hesitation and problem that could rise up in Philip's mind to prevent him from speaking, "There is no way I am talking to that guy. He looks powerful and dangerous, and even if I don't get speared by one of his men, I'd look pretty foolish jogging alongside his chariot, trying to speak," in spite of all the potential, reasonable barriers, the man is reading out loud the book of Isaiah! Bam! It's an immediate bridge!

"Do you understand what you are reading?" [Philip gasped as he's running along.] "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

And what is the Ethiopian man reading? Of all the Old Testament passages he could be reading, he is reading the most clear prophetic passage of the atonement of Jesus Christ that you can find in the Old Testament. I sometimes read this passage to students without telling them where it is from in the Bible, and then I'm going to ask them if they know and they always guess it is from the New Testament, and probably written by Paul. Let's read a little more of the context to get the full impact. Luke quotes Isaiah 53:7b-8a. I am going to start earlier and go a little further. This is Isaiah 53:4-9.

4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore,	And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,	Smitten of God, and afflicted.
5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions,	He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being <i>fell</i> upon Him,	And by His scourging we are healed.
6 All of us like sheep have gone astray,	Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all	To fall on Him.

7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, So He did not open His mouth.	Yet He did not open His mouth; And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away; That He was cut off out of the land of the living	And as for His generation, who considered For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke <i>was due</i> ?
9 His grave was assigned with wicked men, Because He had done no violence,	Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

“Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?”, asks the seeking Ethiopian. That’s good Bible observation. He is not trying to interpret what he does not know. He is asking questions of the text. “Who is the prophet talking about?”

And could there be a better possible lead-in to explaining the Gospel of Jesus Christ? From a human point of view, Philip obeyed God when God directed. He did not hide during the persecution. He left Jerusalem with the plan of talking to people about Jesus. He obeyed when the angel said, “Get up and go.” And then for his part, the Ethiopian is seeking truth. He came to Jerusalem to worship the God of the Jews. And he spent some serious money to acquire the scroll of Isaiah, and he has it with him in the chariot. And that’s what these men have done. We do not know if that is his only reason or if he was here on court business. But on his own volition he took time in Jerusalem to worship and he spent some serious money to acquire the scroll of Isaiah, and he has it with him in the chariot. That’s what these men have done.

From God’s side, God gave Philip the courage and will to witness. God is at work in our hearts to will and to do. God worked in the Ethiopian’s life, creating a desire and somehow bringing people into his life to point him to Jerusalem as a source of truth. God arranged for Philip and the Ethiopian to arrive on that road at that moment together. And God prompted the mind of the Ethiopian so that he would be reading. And not only reading, but of all the Old Testament books, he would be reading Isaiah. And out of 1300 verses in Isaiah, he would be reading from the middle of chapter 53 about Jesus Christ.

With everyone ready and in place, God spoke to Philip by His Spirit, “Go up and join his chariot.” God is sovereign in our lives. God’s eye was on this Ethiopian to bring him into his Kingdom. God’s eye was on Philip to bless him with the joy of helping bring this man into the Kingdom. God’s eye is on you, and the road you’re on, and the people you’re going to meet. God is sovereign in our lives.

“Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. ³⁶ As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”

God has called this moment to happen. There is no need to wait for baptism when the circumstances of faith are so clear. The eunuch is ready to identify himself with Jesus Christ. Philip has confidence in his profession of faith. The eunuch is going back to Ethiopia, so there is no foreseeable option for him to first get involved in a Christian community and go through baptism classes. Philip is not going to see him again. I love the detail Luke gives us in the conversation. “Look! Water! Why not?”

And then we get verse 37. It is one of those rare verses that may not be authentic to the original writing of Scripture. My Bible leaves it in the text but makes a note telling me that this verse does not appear in the earlier, more reliable manuscripts. And there is nothing wrong with the verse. It fits well with what we have been reading in Acts. It’s just that there’s a group of ancient manuscripts that have the verse, and there’s a group of ancient manuscripts that don’t have the verse, so where we usually have harmony now we have a problem. Here’s the verse,

³⁷ And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

So, there's nothing wrong with the verse. It's just that we're not sure are the manuscripts without it right or is the manuscript with it right. And it is hard to imagine why any scribe would leave this verse out while copying the text of Acts. Why do some manuscripts not have it, if it was original? Why would you drop this verse out? It is not so hard to imagine why a well-intentioned scribe might insert it. Baptism should follow a genuine statement of faith. And without verse 37 being there, we are left assuming that Philip challenged the Ethiopian to believe and that the Ethiopian indeed understood and believed in Jesus. And with the context Luke has given us so far, it's a safe assumption. When we look at the message Peter has preached four times, and we look at the message of Philip in Samaria that he preaches before he baptizes, we don't need an explicit statement in the text telling us that Philip would have expected the eunuch to believe and that the eunuch would need some kind of confession of faith before baptism. We can assume that from what we have read so far in Acts. But it appears that at some point a scribe wanted to make sure that we understand this, that nobody gets baptized without believing and so,

³⁷ And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Whether stated explicitly as we have in verse 37, or we're supposed to understand it implicitly, this is the kind of assertion of faith required for baptism that Philip would have sought. Having recognized the eunuch's sincere confession, what would Philip do? "Here's water! Why can't I be baptized?" We read on,

³⁸ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

It was that quick. One afternoon together and the Ethiopian's life is changed forever. He goes on his way rejoicing. His life and those he would influence back in his homeland. And something else spiritual happens here, and it's not explained but somehow, Philip's just gone down to Azotus.

Let's talk a little more about how the Ethiopian is presented here in this passage and about how Jesus is presented in the passage.

About the Ethiopian

About the Ethiopian, going a little deeper into who he was will help us understand better the significance of this conversation. Candace is not a name, but a title for the Queen Mother whose kingdom "probably centered in the region of Upper Nubia (Meroë) rather than in modern-day Ethiopia."⁹ That region south of Egypt along the Nile river is located in modern-day Sudan, it's north of modern-day Ethiopia.

In appearance, the Ethiopian eunuch would have been black African, not Egyptian. He is Nubian. He would have been raised in a polytheistic religion of many gods and spirits. Most likely he had at some point been castrated, having his testicles cut off. Eunuchs had a trustworthy reputation in the Ancient Near East and were particularly associated with care of the king's harem and for royal women. It was not unusual for a eunuch to be given financial responsibility. They were considered trustworthy, and it could be at a very high level like it was with this man.

⁹ D. A. Hubbard. "Candace" in *The New Bible Dictionary* D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.). (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 164–165.

He apparently gained knowledge of Yahweh through some Jewish source. We read in Acts 2 that some of those at Pentecost were Jews from Egypt. How did they get there? Way back, Jeremiah records how he himself was forcibly taken to Egypt with a remnant of Jews who escaped the deportation to Babylon in 600 BC. They stayed a while in Judea, but then they got scared and they fled to Egypt and they settled there. F. F. Bruce estimates as many as 100,000 Jews were settled in Egypt and Libya by the first century A.D. So there's sizeable Jewish communities. The Jewish concept of one true God who communicated a clear law for relationship with Him and a high view of morality, attracted pagans disillusioned or disappointed with their own religious system. So, it wasn't uncommon that there were God-fearers who were seeking something deeper, something more true and who were willing to submit to a religious culture that was different from their own.

Judaism did present a number of obstacles for non-Jews. If you wanted to be serious about Yahweh, they made it hard to just add Him in as one of the gods you worshiped. You don't play with Yahweh. There were requirements. The Old Covenant requirements touched every area of life, creating a distinct religious culture. A God-fearer could pray to and worship Yahweh, even attend the synagogue, but remained at a distance, not considered Jewish. A proselyte, as opposed to a God-fearer, a proselyte to Judaism would submit to following Old Covenant requirements, such as keeping the Sabbath, obeying the food and other cleanliness laws, and being circumcised if a male. Jews did not move towards the culture of seekers. Seekers were theologically required to move towards the culture of the Jews because of Old Covenant requirements. You know, requirements put in place by God. Not just cultural but Biblical. Though, by this time the requirements had grown considerably. The religious culture was Old Covenant plus. But at its base there were significant Biblical requirements even if you removed the human tradition that was built on top of that.

In addition to their religious culture barriers, this particular man faced another significant barrier to inclusion. God spoke through Moses, saying in Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter into the assembly of the LORD." Other translations just say clearly, "No one who is a eunuch shall enter the assembly of the Lord." By the Word of God, eunuchs could not fully join the worship assembly of Israel in the Temple. The command sounds like a harsh exclusion. Recognizing that one of the purposes of the Law was to minimize sin in the culture of Israel, we should also recognize the protective power of the Law. God established a number of laws intended to protect the Israelites from unwisely adopting or continuing cultural practices prevalent in Egypt and Canaan. Castrating men as eunuchs, an acceptable practice promoted under certain circumstances, was now forbidden in Israel because of this Law. Not only is it forbidden, but there is an associated punishment to deter its practice. All Jewish adults are to participate in the assembly. Castration would exclude participation. As a result of this protective law established at the beginning of Israel on Mount Sinai, we do not see castration practiced in Israel. That's why you don't read about Jewish eunuchs because of this law.

We might think it would be easy to prevent castration from happening without such a strict law of exclusion from assembly. Just tell guys, "Don't do it!", and you'd think they wouldn't do it. But oddly enough, the practice came back in the Christian era. A misguided glorification of celibacy led to the even more misguided, perverted practice of castration among some extreme monastic orders. Worse was the practice of castrating pre-pubescent boys to maintain a falsetto singing voice into adulthood. That was a real thing. The last castrato of the Sistine Chapel Choir lived as late as 1922 before it has finally been abolished and the last guy died. The Christian Church could have really benefited from understanding the intent of the Old Testament law of the eunuch to protect boys and men from castration. The emphasis is not on exclusion for the sake of exclusion. The emphasis is, don't do this. Do not have this as part of your culture. If you do, they will be excluded. Which, by the way, doesn't mean exclusion from salvation. It is exclusion from the assembly. It doesn't mean they cannot be

saved by faith through Yahweh. It's similar, but for different reasons, with the law of the leper. They're excluded for contagious reasons. The eunuchs were excluded so the practice would not be adopted in Israel. But in both cases, both the eunuch and the leper, exclusion from assembly does not mean exclusion from salvation. That's important to keep in mind.

The positive intent of the law to minimize sin and protect individuals from a damaging practice, even though there were good reasons for it, still created a difficult barrier for men like this Ethiopian eunuch who were from a culture where this law didn't protect them before they were castrated, or before they chose to be castrated. So now, even if he were to convert to Judaism, he would not be able to enter into the fullness of community because of the mutilation he experienced before. It was something that could not be undone. So what hope could somebody like him find in the religion of Israel?

I wonder very much whether he had read on already further in the book of Isaiah. And I imagine he had. I think there's a reason this guy likes Isaiah. It's because two chapters after the passage Philip hears him reading in his chariot there is another passage that would speak deeply to him. It's in Isaiah 56:1-5. So listen to this.

1 Thus says the LORD,

“Preserve justice and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come
And My righteousness to be revealed.

2 "How blessed is the man who does this,
Who keeps from profaning the sabbath,
And the son of man who takes hold of it;
And keeps his hand from doing any evil."

3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely separate me from His people.” Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”

4 For thus says the LORD,

“To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,
And choose what pleases Me,
And hold fast My covenant,

5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, And a name better than that of sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.

Luke gives us so many first names in the book of Acts, he tells us who people are, I wonder why this man's name is not provided. I believe the reason is that the message of the story is bigger than he is. And it's important for us to recognize that he is an Ethiopian. He is a foreigner, and he is a eunuch. He is one who is ceremonially excluded. He's a real foreigner. He's not a half-step from the Jews, not even the more significant step to Hellenistic culture, like the Romans, who speak the same language as the Jews, but he is further out there. He is an Ethiopian, exotic maybe, but far removed, he is other. And he is a eunuch whose body has been mutilated for social purposes and is specifically pointed out as being excluded. God promises through Isaiah that the foreigner who seeks him will not be separated and the eunuch who seeks him will not be a dry tree. They will not be cut off. That's language for the eunuch. Your mutilation will be overcome by spiritual blessing. What was prophesied by Isaiah and it was technically true under Old Covenant, is made immediately accessible through the New Covenant Gospel.

The Law of the Lord established barriers for the protection of Israelite citizens. But it wasn't an impossible barrier to cross for those who truly wanted to worship the Lord. You know, Ruth was welcomed in. Rahab, and Tamar, and Naaman were welcomed in. Isaiah assures the eunuch with his prophecy that, if he were to seek Yahweh with his heart, fear Him and show his faith through obedience, he would be welcomed in. And Yahweh would give him an everlasting name.

This story at this point in the book of Acts reveals to the reader that something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ is tearing down the wall that divides, making a more open way for foreigners and even eunuchs to come to Yahweh. When the eunuch asked, “What prevents me from being baptized?” If we were a good Jew like Philip, we would immediately be thinking, “Well, you are a eunuch. And I

don't know what to do about that. I know Deuteronomy. But I'm not sure how it applies. I've never witnessed to a eunuch before." Philip, however, did not hesitate. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has torn down the religious cultural barrier, the purity barrier. The veil of the curtain was ripped in two and, in Jesus Christ, we can go into the Holy of Holies without fear. "Well, if you believe in Jesus Christ, what reason is there you should not be baptized, my Ethiopian eunuch brother? I cannot think of one." And they go down into the water together.

Jewish man and black African man together in the water certainly rejects racial divisions that, unfortunately, get put up in the Christian Church. So, this is a message for us today. At first thought, it seems to me that I am not likely to come into contact with a eunuch. But then I think, what about the transgender movement, steadily growing in acceptability as a practice in modern cultures? Does Philip's response to the eunuch have anything to say how I ought to treat someone who has gone through gender reassignment surgery? It seems to me it does. It is an extreme case of somebody in our modern culture that we might consider outside the camp of Christianity. There are other, less extreme, depending on how you grew up or what kind of church you come from, whether we're talking about tattoos, or hair color, or dressing, or piercings, or some kind of decision someone earlier in their life that seems to put them just too far outside of the camp. We're going to expect a lot from them before we let them in. Teenage pregnancy, drug use, prison time, homosexual behavior? You know, whatever past taboos you have broken that had put you beyond the pale, or that make somebody unacceptable. And even if we don't say it intellectually, all of our feeling when we're in conversation creates a barrier.

Is transgender surgery that thing that puts people too far out, that they can't be welcomed into the family? That God is not going to give them a name as son and daughters? Was that true of eunuchs? Were eunuchs outside? Those who have been mutilated for social purposes? Were they outside the pale?

"To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,
And choose what pleases Me,
And hold fast My covenant,
5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial,
And a name better than that of sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.

Yes, they have cut their body. But if they turn away from a false identity of their own making or of societies making and they turn back to me, and they hold on to me, I will not cut them off. I will give them a name.

To be clear, I stand against transgender surgery. This is not a promotion of that life decision, which I think is the perversion of the identity God has given someone at birth. At the same time, I believe that God offers to anyone who has gone through transgender surgery the same offer Peter has communicated throughout his speeches. Repent and return to God and you will find forgiveness and experience refreshment. No one is excluded by their past. Everyone willing to submit to God and receive the name He would give them, to receive the identity that God would offer, everyone who would receive that from God is welcome to come into the family of God.

About Jesus

Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch tells us something about the gospel of Jesus Christ as an open call to all who will come. It also tells us something about Jesus that has only been alluded to briefly so far in the book of Acts. Peter calls Jesus a servant during his sermon in chapter 3, after His healing of the lame man. The Suffering Servant is a prophetic reference to the Messiah repeated by Isaiah. That reference to Jesus is made direct here in this conversation between Philip and the eunuch. It even gives Luke the chance to quote the Scripture from a real conversation.

And the way that Luke has told the two stories about Philip sets up a contrast. In Samaria, Simon the magician had embraced the title, “the Great Power of God.” And though he seems to have given up

such aspiration initially, we see later a bitterness in his heart when God denies him the power of the Spirit that's working through Peter and John. He still wants to be "the great power of God". It's a grasping of an identity that God will not share with him.

The true Great Power of God has come into the world. And He was crucified. He came, humbling himself as a servant, obedient, even obedient to the point of death. Simon is not the Great Power of God. The story being told here - who is this speaking? Who does Isaiah speak about? Who bears our iniquities? Who is buried in the grave of the rich man? - The greatness of Jesus was revealed in humility and sacrificial love. That truth is highlighted through the Ethiopian's quote of Isaiah.

Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. (Isaiah 53:7b)

Humbling himself, he was exalted. Because this, too, is his name, “Servant of God.” He lowered himself below all people, so that he might save all people.

Philip's witness to the Ethiopian alerts the readers of Acts that something radically different is happening. The barrier has been torn down. Everyone who will believe in Jesus Christ is welcome to enter the family of God and receive an everlasting name. The Gospel is not staying with the Jews in Jerusalem. It is going out to every person of every people, to the remotest parts of the Earth.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 8:25-40. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. How was Philip prepared for this encounter?
3. How was the Ethiopian prepared for this encounter?
4. Reflect on a gospel encounter in your life when you knew that God was at work in that moment. It can be a moment when someone was sharing the gospel with you or when you were sharing the gospel with someone else. What stands out to you about that moment?
5. What cultural barriers did Philip cross to witness earlier to the Samaritans?
6. What further cultural barriers did Philip cross to witness with the Ethiopian?
7. The Ethiopian was also a Eunuch. The process of becoming a Eunuch was forbidden in Mosaic law with the severe penalty that a eunuch was forbidden to worship in the temple. As a result, Jews are never known for practicing castration. The harsh law successfully eliminated the practice. Even so, Philip, strongly disagreeing with the practice, crossed a social barrier to witness to the Eunuch and gladly baptized him that day.
Who is socially taboo in your society? What kind of practices or behaviors are considered way out of bounds by Christians? Make a list of five or six different practices or behaviors.
8. What does this story have to say about the Christian response to people who fit the list?

Lesson 13: Acts 9:1-31 The Persecutor Transformed Into Ambassador

Introduction

Acts part I ended with the summary statement,

The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7).

Acts part II began with the death of Stephen, the event that ended the Jerusalem awakening and propelled persecuted believers out into the countryside. There are four reports in part two. The first, Stephen's trial and death, showed a Gospel clash with orthodox Judaism; the second gave us a glimpse at the Gospel's inroads into unorthodox Samaritanism; the third revealed the Gospel's inclusion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, highlighting Jesus as the servant of God; and this fourth story will depict the Gospel's transformation of the persecutor Saul, highlighting Jesus as the Son of God.

The introduction of the story comes in Acts 9:1-2.

¹ Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ² and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Luke sets up the story of Paul's conversion by reminding us of the intensity of his zeal against the Christian movement. He breaths threats and murder. He cannot let it go. He has discovered his calling. You can imagine Paul reaching into the Old Testament for inspiration. He is Phineas of old, the priest who ran a spear through the Jewish man and Moabite woman who flaunted immorality and idolatry in the face of God at the very end of the forty years of wandering in the desert. Did not Phineas bring an end to the plague of God? Did he not turn the hearts of the Israelites back to God leading to victory over Moab and preparing the way for the conquest on Canaan? Paul is the righteous warrior, fighting for the soul of Israel. He will stamp out this blasphemous sect wherever the cancer spreads.

We cannot be sure how long Paul persecuted the Christian Church in Jerusalem and Judea before he took it upon himself to pursue them out of country, starting in Damascus. We have to work with various markers in the Biblical text to put together the chronological puzzle. Paul will make a reference in his second letter to the Corinthians stating that Aretas was in control of Damascus when he was lowered down in the basket to escape (2 Corinthians 11:32). The death of King Aretas is a known event that occurred in 40 AD. So, recognizing that the crucifixion and Pentecost occurred in 30 AD, that gives us 10 years for the Jerusalem Awakening, the persecution that followed, and the time Paul spent in Damascus. So, Paul's work to stamp out the Church in Judea could have easily lasted a couple of years before he goes and gets letters to address the situation in Damascus.

The population of Jews in Damascus is quite large. Josephus, writing about the Judean revolt, an event that took place 25 years after this, claimed the Romans killed 10,500 Jews of Damascus. Paul's concern is that the Christian cancer propelled out of Jerusalem has landed in a large Jewish community numbering in the thousands, may be tens of thousands.

Paul's request for letters from the high priest to specifically go to synagogues in Damascus suggest that he is not going after Gentile citizens who have become believers, and probably not going after Jews native to Damascus. He is targeting Jews who fled the persecution in Jerusalem, who are still legally under the authority of the high priest.

A couple centuries before this period, under the short-lived autonomy of the Hasmoneans, Rome agreed to extradite Jewish criminals back to Jerusalem. 1 Maccabees 15:21 records the Roman ambassador writing to Ptolemy VIII of Egypt, "If any pestilent men have fled to you from their own country [Judea], hand them over to Simon the high priest, so that he may punish them according to their law" (1 Macc. 15:21). Josephus affirms that the right of extradition was maintained when Rome

took control of Judea.¹⁰ That is what's happening here. Though Damascus is not under Jewish governance, the high priest apparently had the legal right granted by Rome to extradite back to Jerusalem Jews in Damascus charged with a crime by the Jewish government. Later in the book of Acts, we will see that Paul himself is protected from automatic extradition to a court in Jerusalem because he is not only Jewish, he is also a Roman citizen. That right of citizenship with its protection is not granted to most of the non-Latins living in the Roman Empire. It is a valuable status that Paul has and he's going to use it later. Here, he is using the Roman law to his own benefit to go to Damascus, under the authority of the high priest, to bring back Jews who have fled.

Paul's target in these introductory verses is described as the Way. Men and women belonging to the Way are to be brought back. They are not being called Christians, yet. Even after they begin to be called Christians by others, this name "the Way" continues to be used by Christians to describe themselves. It will be repeated in chapters 19, 22, and 24. And there are a couple other references that help us understand the name. What do they mean when they call themselves, the Way?

Crying out in Philippi, the demon possessed girl will say of Paul and Luke and the rest of their team, "they are servants of the Most High God who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation (Acts 16:17)." Where does the way lead you? It is a way of salvation. Then in Ephesus Priscilla and Aquila are going to recognize that Apollos has been "instructed in the way of the Lord," and they instruct him in "the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:25-26). So, whose way is it? The way of the Lord, the way of God. There is a more subtle reference by Peter. It comes in his first Pentecost sermon when he quotes David in Psalm 16, saying,

YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY. 'YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.' (Acts 2:27-28).

The way of salvation, the way of the Lord, the way of life, I can't help but think of the most famous reference to the way, when Jesus said of himself on the night before his arrest, "I am the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6)." I have to think that is where the name came from. The way.

C. S. Lewis loved the idea of journey as a metaphor for the Christian life. You are on your way somewhere. And you have a destination that you are journeying to. A journey can depict obstacle, and adventure, and monotony, and peace. There is room for failure and success and just walking. You meet other people on your journey. You can gather together a band of people who walk together on the journey. You grow on your way.

Tolkien loved this idea, too. "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." That's not a bad description of the story we just looked at in Acts. Philip was serving happily in Samaria when God said, "Get up and go." And Philip got up and went. He got on the way at the command of his Lord. There was another man peacefully traveling along his way, coming out of Jerusalem.

You never know what is going to happen when you put your foot on the road. What happened this day to Philip the Jew and a royal eunuch from Ethiopia is that they met on the road, they spoke for some time about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

[Then] they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:38-39).

On his way, he met the Way and went on his way rejoicing.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 180.

Paul is on his way. And his vision is clear. His mission is firm. He steps onto the road. It is a dangerous business. Let's read what happens.

Paul's Conversion: Blinded by Light in Order to See (9:3-9)

³ As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." ⁷ The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Jesus does not ask Paul why he is persecuting the Church. He asked, "Why are you persecuting me?" Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to convict the world of the truth regarding Himself. And he commissioned His disciples to join in the work of witness. When those disciples, participating in the witnessing ministry of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus, are persecuted, Jesus takes it personally. "Why are you persecuting me?", he says. He stands behind those who believe in His name and give witness to Him. They will be vindicated.

What kind of a shock must Paul have experienced? "Who are you Lord?... I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." "Everything the Apostles had been saying is true. That guy Stephen we killed. Everything he was saying... Jesus is the Messiah, rejected, murdered, buried, risen, exalted." What do you imagine Paul felt? Joy? I'm not sure about that at the beginning. More likely, fear. Humiliation. Guilt. Remorse. Shock.

The others hear the voice, but they do not see. Paul sees spiritual reality when he sees Jesus, but he is immediately reminded of his unseeing. When he opens his eyes, he does not see. And that has been his life up to this moment. Fervently convinced that he saw, he in truth was blind as a dead man.

In the last words of Acts, speaking to Jewish leaders while under house arrest, Paul is going to quote what God said to Isaiah after Isaiah saw the glory of God. It's going to come from Isaiah chapter 6. That's where Isaiah told his story of his own calling. And he begins chapter 6, "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne..." As a human being, the experience of seeing Yahweh revealed in His glory, overwhelmed Isaiah, not with joy, but with fear and dismay. He cried out,

Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

Seeing, Isaiah cries out, "I am undone!" Seeing God truly pierces into a human being. All our sin, and pride, and indifference, our self-centered love is laid bare. Everything is peeled back, our false security, our hidden self, our utter dependence on factors that we can't control, our weakness, our helplessness, our mortality, our guilt, our presumption, our secrets, the ugliness of our soul. All is laid out on the dissection table under bright light and intense magnification, held up in comparison to the purity, and goodness, and power of God. When you see God, God sees you and you know you are seen. And how do we look in the light of His glory? If we can bear to look at ourselves at that moment, we will not like at all what we see. We will desperately reach out for fig leaves to cover the nakedness of our soul.

The searing pain of being revealed by the piercing light of God's glory would leave us undone - woe is me! - but for the grace of God. He sees truly. And even in the corruption, he sees His image, and He sees how to redeem that image. He knows the price it's going to cost, and He is willing to pay it. He did not leave Isaiah on the dissection table.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth *with it* and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." (Isaiah 6:6-7)

Isaiah's redemption was granted on credit, paid 700 years later when the God of glory suffered Himself to be executed on a rough, Roman cross.

Isaiah saw. Sadly, he would be one among a small remnant. The majority of his fellow Israelites would remain in darkness. Paul understood his situation, working among his people, as parallel. Just as the Jews of Isaiah's day refused to see, leading to the exile of the Northern Kingdom under the strong arm of the Assyrians, also in his day the majority of Jews would refuse to see and so enter into an exile of spiritual darkness, while Gentiles flooded in. At the end of this book, Paul quotes Isaiah 6:10 to the Jewish leaders in Rome. This is what God tells Isaiah about his calling. This is what you look forward to in ministry.

²⁷ FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES;
OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM." ' (Isaiah 6:10; Acts 28:27)

The Jewish nation had shut their eyes to Jesus. Paul had shut his eyes to Jesus, the great Light foretold by Isaiah. They did not embrace the Light when he came to Earth. They hated the Light. They sought to shut out the Light. They preferred darkness. God appears in the light of His glory to Paul. He cannot shut out the light. It shines all around, piercing through his eyes, into his soul and, becoming blind, Paul sees. The proud Pharisee is humbled. He does not eat. He does not drink. In darkness for three days, he will remain just as his Lord remained for three days in the darkness of the grave.

Jesus does not leave Paul alone in the dark. He sends someone to him. Acts 9:10-19,

Paul's Conversion: Made Able to See Now that He Sees (9:10-19a)

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord *said* to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; ¹⁹ and he took food and was strengthened.

Ananias is a disciple of Christ. We hear a little more about him when Paul later tells his testimony to the Jerusalem mob in chapter 22. We are told there that he is "devout by the standard of the Law, *and* well-spoken of by all the Jews who lived there." So, he seems to be a Jew from Damascus, which suggests Paul's initial fears were true, the Word of the Lord had spread from Jerusalem, had taken root, and begun to grow, and people like Ananias had believed.

Ananias has a vision of the Lord and he is told to go find Paul. He responds,

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”

We could take that statement as resistance to the command of the Lord, like Moses in Exodus 4: “Not me! Not me, Lord! Send somebody else!”, but since God does not respond negatively and He doesn’t have to convince Ananias, I assume we are not to suppose refusal here. This may indicate fear. That would be reasonable. And in light of that fear, Ananias may be clarifying what he must do. But when God gives that clarification, saying, “Go,” Ananias goes. This is obedience.

Paul’s journey has taken a sharp 180-degree turn, from persecutor of Jesus Christ to ambassador of Jesus Christ. Paul tells us later in Acts what Jesus said to him. In this story we hear it from God speaking to Ananias. And this is the calling,

“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

We’re going to see the story become true. What God proclaims will happen. God is sovereign here. Paul will bear His name before Gentiles. Paul will take His name and witness to sons of Israel. Paul will speak before kings. It is hard to imagine Paul not becoming the Apostle to the Gentiles. God’s sovereign hand is very active in his conversion and in his commission. Luke does not even bother to tell us that Paul has believed in Jesus. Paul is overwhelmed by the glory of God. He did not choose God. God chose him. We do recognize Paul’s faith in the immediate transformation of his life. He believes in Jesus. We’ll see that as he begins to witness immediately.

Like the Apostles, the filling of the Holy Spirit does not come at the moment of Paul’s belief, which I assume happened three days before Ananias came. I believe Paul believed immediately when he saw Jesus. He doesn’t receive the Holy Spirit at that time. Instead, Paul meets Jesus and believes, God keeps him blind for three days, he is commissioned, he regains sight, and then he is filled with the Spirit, either just before, or during, or after baptism. It is somehow connected with baptism. And then we see the transformation of his life in the next verses. This is Acts 9:19-22.

Paul’s Conversion: Seeing Paul Points Others to the Light (9:19b-22)

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,²⁰ and immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”²¹ All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and *who* had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”²² But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

Jesus has not been called the Son of God, yet, in the book of Acts. This clear reference to His divine nature is shocking coming so soon after belief from the lips of a devout Pharisee who did not walk with Jesus prior to his conversion. This is one of the huge stumbling blocks. We hear that Paul has proven that Jesus is the Messiah. Well, that’s a challenge to prove. But that He is the Son of God? A belief in the Trinity, that the Son and the Father are both God; this is a huge struggle for the Jewish mind to wrap around. Paul’s witness to Jesus as the Son of God is testimony to the power of his experience with Jesus and the degree to which the Holy Spirit has opened his eyes to understand the Scripture to which he had dedicated himself, though until now, has not correctly understood. But now he sees it.

Paul still has room to grow. The text tells us that he “kept increasing in strength.” The power of his proclamation was strong from the start. He had a testimony of a changed life. He had all the knowledge as the Pharisee. And he saw Jesus to be true and was proclaiming him as Son of God and as Christ, and he is speaking what he knows to be true. That proclamation still has room to grow, and he increases in strength over time.

How long Paul stayed in Damascus, growing in his knowledge of the Gospel, is an interesting question, not at all apparent here in Acts. Consider the last verse of this paragraph and the first verse of the next paragraph. And how much time does it sound elapses? This is verse 22-23.

²² But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ. ²³ When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him...

And it goes on.

The next paragraph is going to conclude the story of Paul's conversion with the account of him escaping Damascus by a basket and going back to Jerusalem. So, we are at the end of his time in Damascus, end of that last paragraph. But how much time really passes in verses 22-23 between the report that Paul kept increasing in strength in his proclamation and the plot to do away with him? Luke writes, "When many days had elapsed..." But many days is a relative concept. Many days could be 5 days or 5 years. It feels shorter here as Luke is moving the story along. But reading the letter to the Galatians, we found out that it is a big gap. A lot of time exists here in these "many days." Paul writes the Galatians to explain when he first discussed with the Apostles the Gospel of Jesus. So he's talking about this story. "I came to believe in Damascus and then there was some time before I went to Jerusalem." So this is what he says in Galatians 1:17-18.

¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas...

You went to Arabia? Luke didn't say anything about going to Arabia. And three years? Apparently, Luke's "many days" is three years. And it's a good reminder of a truth we have already pointed out. In a book that covers 30 years in only 28 chapters, the author must be selective about what he chooses to report. Acts covers a whole generation. We become aware that not only is the Acts of the Apostles not about the missionary work of all the Apostles, but even with the two Apostles Luke does focus on, Peter and Paul, we are getting only a selection of what they said and did.

It's the same with the Gospels which are not nearly long enough to cover everything Jesus said and did. If John did not decide to write his Gospel late in life, we would never have heard about the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Not until we got to Heaven. And there we would be shocked. Luke, how could you leave that out? So, wouldn't it be nice, like with the Gospels, to have another book like Acts that fills in more of the history Luke was not able to get to? But we don't have that. We've got Acts and the letters. Then we get some additional information a little bit that can help fill out more of the story.

So, we find out by Paul's own pen in Galatians that he was three years in Damascus but not the whole time in Damascus. He comes to Christ in Damascus and immediately shares his witness of Jesus in the synagogues. (Notice that reference is to synagogues rather than synagogue, plural, not singular. This is a large community of Jews.) So, he's witnessing in the synagogues. But after he began his witness among the Jews of Damascus, he then goes to Arabia after which he returns to Damascus. And the whole period is three years. We are not sure how much was Damascus and how much was Arabia.

But you really have to wonder, what is he doing in Arabia? We get so little talk of Arabia in the Bible it seems like it's a reference out of nowhere. Until we understand that, at this period of time, that Damascus is actually under the control of King of Arabia. I mentioned in our introduction Paul's reference to King Aretus in 2 Corinthians, which helps us to have some boundaries of dating. Because we know Aretus died in 40 AD. If Paul was in Damascus and Arabia 3 years and Aretus was still alive when Paul fled, then the absolute latest Paul could have arrived in Damascus was 37 A.D., so three years before 40 A.D. But when I look at a Bible map, I assume that Damascus is controlled by the Roman province of Syria. That's not true, not at this point in time. It is controlled by the King of Arabia, more commonly referred to in historical studies as the King of Nabatea. Nabatea or Nabatia, I'm sure I pronounced it wrong. I'm going to go with Nabatea.

Nabatea, formerly independent, but now a client kingdom of Rome, was ruling the territory between Egypt and Judea. That is the whole Midian wilderness where Mt. Sinai is located and where that first

Jewish generation out of Egypt spent 40 years in exile. That whole wilderness is Nabatea. Nabatea also controls the territory around the eastern side of the Jordan river, so where the Moabites and the Amorites lived, going all the way up to Damascus. If you are familiar with the word, Transjordan, you know, to cross the Jordan to the territory on the other side of the Jordan, at this point in time that's controlled by Nabatea, or Arabia.

Aretus had not always been in control of Damascus. But he had married his daughter to Herod Antipas, and that Herod was the one who controlled Galilee at the time of Jesus and beheaded John the Baptist. Well, he divorced the daughter of Aretus, so that he could marry his own niece, who was also his sister-in-law, which is the act that John the Baptist heavily criticized and eventually lead to his execution. Well, Aretus did not take well Herod Antipas divorcing his daughter. In response, he attacked the forces of Herod, won a surprising victory and, as a result, took control of Damascus. There's this whole soap-opera behind the events that lead to Paul being in Damascus when Damascus is under control of the Nabateans. When Paul says he is going to Arabia, he is already in a sense in Arabia, in Damascus, and he's just moving out east. Rome will eventually send their own troops to sort that out, but during the time Paul is in Damascus, it is under control of the Nabataeans.

The Nabateans are ethnically Bedouins. They do consist of tribes and some are nomadic, but they also have significant cities. And it is into their territory Paul goes, so presumably goes to the cities. That's what we, at least, see later in his life as his ministry strategy. So, Luke does not tell us about this in Acts. We're going off the little bit we get in Galatians. I am spending a little on it because it helps us to think about Paul's timeline and his own growth and his own growth before he returns to Jerusalem. So, things are happening here.

Another tempting question to ask, is "Why?" Why did Paul go into Arabia? The three-year period is interestingly close to the three years the Apostles spent with Jesus, receiving training from Jesus before they began their work of witness in Jerusalem. Could have Arabia been an extended period of reflection and development for Paul? Was it like a spiritual retreat? Mount Sinai is in Arabia. Did he journey to Mount Sinai?

I think Paul's time would include spiritual formation. Though it is a bit hard to imagine Paul not going somewhere to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He began a ministry of proclamation immediately in Damascus after he saw Jesus. He did not wait. And Jesus had told him, "Go to Gentiles!" And he is currently in a Gentile city controlled by the Gentile kingdom of Nabatea. He is there when Jesus says, "Go to Gentiles!" So, what Gentiles does Paul naturally think of? Arabia would be quite natural. So, it's hard to imagine evangelistic ministry not being a primary reason for Paul venturing out from Damascus. You know, Damascus is a base and then he ventures out into Arabia. And of course, God also used it as a time for Paul to continue to reflect on the Scriptures, and the Gospel, and the New Covenant, to develop and grow in this new way of walking with God in Jesus Christ. Yes, maybe he made a trip to Mt. Sinai in the Nabatean territory, following the footsteps of Elijah. That's interesting to think about. It would have been a long trek south. I don't really think it's likely. I think it's more likely that he stayed closer to Damascus, witnessing in the nearby cities, interacting with some of these Jews who had been persecuted, who were potentially followers of Christ in His lifetime. There is a community of believers here that he is interacting with, and if he stays close to Damascus, it explains why he ends up back in Damascus to conclude our story.

So, one more question I have. Why didn't Luke mention Paul's ministry in Arabia? He is selective in the stories he reports. But it only took Paul one sentence in Galatians. Luke could have introduced that.

And I don't think this is a question I can fully answer. You know, I'm guessing. It is not really possible to get behind the text into the mind of the author. We know what he has written. We don't know what he hasn't written. We don't know what he's been thinking. He doesn't tell us. So, we can guess but I'll suggest a possible reason.

Luke is here still introducing Paul. We got the early mention of Paul at the end of Stephen's story. Now we get a full story of Paul where he is the main character, this is about his conversion, but we

are not ready shift the whole book onto a focus to Paul's ministry. That is going to be the second half of Acts. We still have one more part in the first half of Acts where Peter is the main Apostle under focus. To give an account of Paul's early ministry here would take us off track of the story Luke is telling. The primary work God has for Paul occurs in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. He's not going to go east. Jerusalem is at the Eastern edge. Paul is going to go west, towards Rome. And that's the story we're going to get. So, while the witness in Arabia is very interesting, it is not the focus here in chapter 9, and it is not going to be the focus when we get to Paul's ministry.

And one more thing. If one of the reasons Luke writes Acts is to provide a defense of Paul before a Roman court, if it was written to Theophilus who is a high member of society and this was, hopefully, to get on record, then Paul's activity outside of the Roman empire does not fit with Luke's intended scope. Whether Luke intends this work to aid in Paul's defense, he has intentionally limited his scope. He is not trying to give us a full history of the spread of the Gospel in the first century. He is not telling us the stories of the other Apostles. He has chosen to focus on Peter and Paul. And in focusing on Peter and Paul, he is concentrating on the growth of the Christian movement in the Roman Empire, beginning in Jerusalem. Commenting on Paul's immediate ministry in Damascus and on the fact that Paul grew in strength, that covers the details Luke needs to convey at this point in the story.

Now, we have a little more to go in this story. The conclusion tells us about Paul's reception in Jerusalem and explains why he is not in Jerusalem, but in Tarsus, when Barnabas later recruits him to come teach in Antioch. The report ends in 9:23-31.

The Persecutor Returns to Jerusalem as an Ambassador (9:23-31)

²³ When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through *an opening in the wall*, lowering him in a large basket. ²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic *Jews*; but they were attempting to put him to death. ³⁰ But when the brethren learned *of it*, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. ³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Paul is on a dangerous journey. He was persecutor. He will be persecuted. Jesus said up front, "He must learn how much he will suffer for my name." Not only did Paul become an immediate target of the Jewish establishment, he also has to get past the barriers caused by his previous zeal. He scares people. Christians do not trust him. And rightly so. But one person does. Or is, at least, willing to give him a chance. Barnabas, the son of encouragement, risks believing that God has transformed Paul.

We don't know how Barnabas knew the whole story. Had he heard from friends who had been to Damascus or did he simply go for coffee with Paul and ask first-hand? You know, "Tell me your story." However, he heard the story, the story makes an impact on him, so he takes Paul to meet with the Apostles and he, himself, repeats Paul's story to them. He doesn't say, "Hey, Paul tell the story!" He tells the story! And by retelling the story, Barnabas communicates his belief in the story. He is not asking them to assess Paul. He has assessed Paul and now communicates Paul's story with conviction of its truthfulness.

Following this introduction to the Apostolic community, Paul continues the ministry he had begun in Damascus, speaking boldly in the name of Jesus. You can imagine how hated he was. How loved and hated. His former compatriots would hate him as a traitor. And those persecuted would love the

story of his changed life. Though I imagine it is more complicated. Some Christians whose family members' lives had been ended or destroyed by Paul would likely struggle with God over Paul's conversion. Yeah, he can be converted, but there's no justice, there's no punishment, there's no retribution. This would be hard for many in the Christian community. Christian community involves a network of relationships with as many different personal responses and interactions as there are people. In Paul, the believers in Jerusalem are challenged with the transformative power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Can a life like that really be changed? And they are challenged with the need to trust in God's sovereignty, and in His mercy, and in His plan.

The Apostles trust God's work in Paul's life. They extend to him forgiveness and acceptance. And briefly, Paul joins with them in their ministry in Jerusalem. But his old friends did hate him and they sought to have him put to death. God is not quite ready to lift Paul up to his unique role so he is sent away for several years, continuing to witness and to grow, continuing his journey with Jesus until the point along the way that God is ready to bring him back into this story that Luke is telling.

Coming to the end of Paul's conversion story, we also come to the end of the second main part of Acts, indicated by Luke's second summary statement.

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Persecution did not stamp out the Gospel. The work of Jesus Christ is not stopped. There is intense persecution for a while. Apparently, that fades out when Paul is removed. The summary statement says, "So", this is after the conversion of Paul, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up." So, we're in a lull of intense persecution against Christians. This is a moment of peace. The Jewish authorities tried to stamp out the fire, but inadvertently kicked up sparks that spread into the surrounding countryside. And so, the Gospel moved forward, just as Jesus foretold "from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria." The move of the Gospel is both geographic and ethnic. Through Philip's story we see the Gospel making the half-step from Jew to Samaritan, and the full step from Jew to Ethiopian eunuch. Starting this part of Acts with the appearance of the God of glory to Abraham, we end with the appearance of the Son in glory to Paul. Like Abraham, he is a man of God's choosing. Abraham was promised he would be a blessing to the nations. Jesus Christ is that blessing to the nations. Paul will be His ambassador.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 9:1-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Use the metaphor of sight, blindness and light to describe Paul's spiritual state before meeting Jesus, meeting Jesus and after meeting Jesus.
3. Now use the metaphor to describe your own experience before knowing Jesus, meeting Jesus and after meeting Jesus.
4. In what way do you identify with Paul?
5. In what way do you identify with Ananias?
6. In what way to you identify with the apostles or Barnabas?
7. What words stand out to you in Acts 9:31, the summary of Acts, part II?
8. Considering Acts 1:8, 6:7 and 9:31, think back over the story that Luke has told up to this point. What stands out to you?

Lesson 14: Acts 9:32-43 Gospel witness through signs and charity

Introduction

The Jerusalem Church Acknowledges Gentile Inclusion	
9:32-11:18 The Gospel Released from Jewish Social Isolationism	11:19-12:23 The Gospel Freed from Jewish Administrative Centralism
9:32-35 Peter Heals Aeneas	11:19-26 Believers from Jerusalem Witness in Antioch
9:36-43 Peter Raises Dorcus	11:27-30 Believers from Antioch Give Famine Relief
10:1-48 Peter Witnesses to Cornelius' Household	12:1-19 Peter Rescued from Herod
11:1-18 Peter Defends His Witness to Gentiles	12:20-23 Herod Struck Down by God
12:24 But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.	

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.¹¹

We enter into the third major part of Acts with the two miracle stories of Aeneas and Tabitha. And I can't help but wonder why Luke gives us these two very brief accounts of healing. The highlighted sections in Acts part three are clearly the conversion of Cornelius' household and the planting of the church in Antioch. The Gospel is spreading both geographically and ethnically. Peter himself has preached to Jews, to Samaritans, and now, in this third part of Acts he is going to preach to Gentiles. The Church back in Jerusalem, though shocked, will affirm Peter's baptism of Gentiles without requiring obedience to the Old Covenant laws of circumcision, or food restrictions, or Sabbath obedience. Recognition of Gentile inclusion as full members of the people of God along with their Jewish brothers and sisters seems to be the big idea here. So, why these two little accounts of healing?

We cannot get behind the text into Luke's mind to the exact reasons he chose these two accounts over other accounts or why he did not just move straight into the Cornelius story. But we can acknowledge reasons that are apparent to us in the text for these stories. Our clues will come from looking at the structure of Acts, part three and at the content of the two reports. Let's start with the structure. What do these two reports add to the structure of this part of Acts? Four things...

First, Luke uses the stories to preserve his pattern of overlapping main parts. Remember, he doesn't end one part with a clean cut and then start the other, but he overlaps the content of his major parts. Having given us the expansion of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria in part two and having ended that part with the conversion of Paul, we could easily move on to Antioch and then out to the remote places of the Earth from there. Instead, Luke keeps us in Judea with Peter with these stories.

¹¹ David Gooding. *True to Faith* (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 196.

Second, these two stories give us an introduction to the main account about Cornelius. We get to hear about what Peter is doing and how he got to Joppa, which is where Cornelius' servants will find him.

Third, the story helps create a balanced structure of pairs for this part of Acts. We will encounter four pairs of stories grouped together in two movements. The two pairs in the first movement are these two stories of healing by Peter; and then the two stories that have to do with Cornelius, the first describes how Peter came to bring the Gospel to Cornelius' household, and the second repeats the account for a gathering of leaders in Jerusalem. Those two pairs of stories make up the first movement. The second movement begins with a pair of stories in Antioch. We see how the church was planted and watered. Then we get an account of the believers in Antioch responding to the need for famine relief in Judea. After those two stories in Antioch, we get two stories that have to do with Peter and Herod.

It's a nicely balanced section. To recap, this whole part of Acts has eight stories. Those eight stories are grouped in two movements of four stories each, and the four stories are grouped into two pairs. That's how I'm going to teach Acts part three, covering each pair of stories for a total of four lessons. We are starting today with the first pair of stories.

Fourth, my final reason these stories help Luke build his structure, these two stories, which are the first pair of stories in the first movement, balance nicely with the first pair of stories in the second movement. You could put the two pairs of stories side by side and see connections between each story. That means putting the story of Aeneas beside the story of the Gospel coming to Antioch, and putting the story of Tabitha beside the story of famine relief sent by Antioch.

With the healing of Aeneas, Peter is traveling through the region, and with the story of the Gospel coming to Antioch, persecuted believers are traveling through the region. With Aeneas the believers are called saints, and in Antioch they are called Christians. After the healing of Aeneas many "turned to the Lord", and that same phrase is used next after the preaching in Antioch when many "turned to the Lord".

The second stories in these two pairs also connect. We hear about Tabitha and her good deeds of kindness, then we hear about the believers in Antioch giving for famine relief.

Luke's structure balances very nicely, connecting in several different ways. If it is all too hard to see in your mind, I encourage you to check out the transcript for this lesson at observetheword.com. When I post the transcript, I will put a chart in with the text of the lesson. And I will post a file with all my structure charts for Acts which I have taken from David Gooding's book, *True to the Faith*. Check that out sometime.

So, why did Luke choose these two stories about Peter to start off this part of Acts? Just looking at the structure we see several reasons why these two stories work well here. The content is also important. These stories are not just filler. There is more going on here than we might catch if we move too quickly from the conversion of Paul to the story of Cornelius. Luke is communicating several ideas in the content of these accounts.

Let's consider that content now, starting with the healing of Aeneas reported in Acts 9:32-35.

Peter heals Aeneas from paralysis (9:32-35)

³² Now as Peter was traveling through all *those regions*, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. ³³ There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. ³⁴ Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." Immediately he got up. ³⁵ And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

We are not told that Peter came down to the church at Lydda, but to the saints at Lydda. Luke does use the word, “church,” through Acts, though the English word does not convey the most accurate meaning. “Church” typically reminds us of a building, or of a place. The Greek, “ekklesia,” is literally, “assembly.” It only brings to mind a gathering of people. In the Greek it doesn’t bring the place in mind at all. Recognizing that, we see the idea of, “ekklesia,” or, “assembly,” here. The saints who are at Lydda are the assembly, they are the Church.

Most often in Acts, Luke refers to the people of the ekklesia or assembly as, “the brethren”. Sometimes they are called, “those who have believed”. And just four times they are called, “the saints”.

They are called saints when Ananias points out to God that Paul did much harm to God’s saints in Jerusalem. That was earlier in this chapter. The second and third “saints” use comes once each in our present pair of stories. The saints are the believers in Lydda and the believers in Joppa. We get a fourth reference in chapter 26 when, referring back to the harm he did to the Church, Paul tells Agrippa how he locked up many saints in prison.

That English word, “saint,” is also a little problematic. The Greek simply reads, “the holy ones.” To be holy is to be both pure and set apart. The holy ones, the saints are the ones cleansed by Jesus Christ and set apart for special use. The reference is not to some particularly holy person, more holy than the other holy people. Peter is not the saint here, or not the only saint here. This is a reference to all believers. And that is the consistent use of this word through the entire Bible. Peter came to the gathered believers, to the saints, the holy ones of Lydda.

And there is an interesting idea there. It’s worth pausing. Just pause for a moment and think of yourself as a holy one. If you belong to the Church, if you’re a believer in Jesus Christ, then you are a holy one. Just try that on. Say it to yourself. I am a holy one. I am cleansed by the sacrifice of Jesus and set apart as one of God’s own for a special purpose. I am a holy one. How does that make you feel just to say that? I am a holy one. Maybe it makes you feel a little uncomfortable. Maybe it motivates. Maybe it gives you a sense of the weight, or the seriousness of who you are in Jesus Christ. I am called to be holy as my God is holy because he has already made me holy in Jesus. We are the saints.

How is it that we have a gathered church of saints in Lydda? I’ve read the opinion that Philip stopped here on his way up the coast from Azotus to Caesarea. The direct route by the ancient coastal road that runs all the way from Egypt to Syria would have taken Philip through Joppa, not through Lydda.¹² So we don’t know if Philip had anything to do with this fellowship. He may have stuck to the coast road, he may have ventured inland. Maybe he was in Lydda, maybe not.

The best guess for most young churches around this period is that the founding nucleus came from the Jerusalem Awakening, where thousands attending the feast of Pentecost had believed. Some may have returned home after the feast and others may have fled because of persecution.

The Church, born in Jerusalem, had almost immediately begun to spread out into Judea. And now Peter is making a tour of some believing assemblies in the region. Based on his ministry in Jerusalem and then in Samaria, we can assume that he is giving witness to Jesus Christ as he goes and teaching the Good News of the New Covenant. He is strengthening believers and inviting non-believers to believe.

Lydda is the center of a small region just on the southern border of the Plain of Sharon, a fertile land running north all the way to Caesarea, with sandy Mediterranean beaches on the western side and Judean foothills on its eastern side. Peter will end up following Philip’s path up to Caesarea, as he follows God’s lead. We have him starting here at Lydda.

¹² J. J. Bimson and F. P. Kane. *New Bible Atlas, electronic ed.* (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 65.

The account at Lydda is very brief. Aeneas has been paralyzed eight years. Peter tells him to get up and make his bed. And immediately, he does. The healing is instantaneous. This is the special gift of healing we see so rarely through the pages of Scripture. You may have this impression it happens a lot. It does not happen a lot from Genesis on through Revelation. But we are seeing it here. We do see several cases. There's a major cluster of this kind of miracle at the beginning of the Church through the ministry of Jesus and through His disciples. Peter's command for the man to make his bed reminds me of Jesus telling the lame man in John 5, "Take up your mat and walk." And the immediate action of the healing suggests the power of the healing. This is immediate healing.

So, what does the content of this story add to Luke's narrative? We learn that Peter did not stay in Jerusalem, for one thing. You know, he is out visiting the growing Church. Also, the awakening begun in Jerusalem continues to expand. The text says, "and all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw [the healed man], and they turned to the Lord." This is the awakening at Lydda. Even if the "all" is a generalization, not meaning every single person in Lydda, but practically all or the multitudes, it is an amazing report. And it is not limited to Lydda. Luke says, "all who lived at Lydda and Sharon". And Sharon is not just a town. Sharon is the fertile plain, spreading northward from Lydda up to Caesarea. All heard and believed. You know, this is throwing out a little bit of seed that's multiplying hundredfold. This is very fruitful.

And while many hear, and believe, and rejoice, tragedy falls on the saints in Joppa. So they call Peter to come quickly. This is the second story recorded in verses 36-43.

Peter raises Tabitha from the dead (9:36-43)

³⁶ Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated *in Greek* is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. ³⁷ And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, "Do not delay in coming to us." ³⁹ So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. ⁴⁰ But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴² It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner *named* Simon.

Joppa is northwest of Lydda, on the coast. It is a long storied town. Looking backwards in time from Peter's day, Joppa was mentioned in the Armana letters written from Canaan to Egypt in the 14th century B.C., around the time of Joshua's conquest. Looking forward in time from Peter's day, Joppa, called, Jaffa, is merged with Tel-Aviv as the second largest city in Israel. Researching Jaffa, I discovered that my favorite cookie to serve for student Bible study in Croatia, Jaffa cakes, get their name from Biblical Joppa. The succulent oranges from the fruitful Plain of Sharon are Jaffa oranges. Jaffa cakes are a sponge cookie with an orange jelly dipped in chocolate. And I really wanted to make that fit with our story somehow, but just can't. I don't have a good illustration for Jaffa cakes. I just love Jaffa cakes. Wish I had a box now. And I'm excited that they come from this region.

Our story has to do with a particular saint who was not an evangelist and not a missionary. Her gifting was one of mercy, or care. Our gifting is the particular way the Holy Spirit motivates and empowers us to love other people. You know, we have this way to love that's coming out from us. We're being moved by the Spirit of God. And Tabitha was motivated to love other believers by meeting their emotional and material needs. She "was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity." She just must have been a delight. And her actions were empowered by the Holy Spirit. The fruit of her love is displayed at how the church responds after her death. The saints send to Peter,

“Come quickly, come urgently. Something awful has happened. Tabitha has died.” And then the widows are gathered in her home, and when Peter arrives, they show him the garments Tabitha had made for them. Her kindness made an impact on the saints.

Tabitha is her Aramaic name. Luke is able to translate the name into Greek because it has a meaning. Tabitha means, “gazelle.” That’s what the word, “Dorcas,” means in Greek. Graceful and beautiful in her acts of love. I assume you know a Tabitha, a woman or a man who communicates genuine affection through words and actions. That’s their gifting by the Holy Spirit.

Luke reminds us in this story of Tabitha that the Gospel is not *either* proclamation of the Good News *or* care for physical needs. It is not an either/or. It is a both/and. We love people both by helping them come to know true life through Jesus Christ and by caring for their material needs.

We are spiritual, and social, and emotional, and physical beings. We have lots of needs. And not every Christian is best formed to meet every need. We are all called to see people as whole, to recognize that each one is mind, and body, and spirit, and emotion. And we can care for each need. And we can care for each need. Each of us can give some thought to the whole person. Still, the Holy Spirit gifts us differently. As a body, we seek to meet every need through the variety of ways the Holy Spirit motivates and empowers. But different individuals are really gifted in different areas. We need Peters, and we need Tabithas. And I don’t think I am making too big a deal of this from this short story of Tabitha.

Luke connects the Gospel witness with material care in several places. This is a consistent theme. We have Peter and Tabitha together in this story. In our pair of stories from Antioch, we will have Barnabas and Paul conducting a ministry of proclamation along with the story of believers contributing for famine relief.

We can also look back to our first six chapters of Acts and the birth of the Church. Remember, Peter’s speeches are full of witness to Jesus Christ, conviction of sin, and invitation to believe. And in the background of that witness to Jesus Christ, Luke twice mentions how believers share possessions in common, take care for those in need, and he described two threats to the Church that had to do with material goods; the hypocrisy of Ananias and Saphira, and the failure to distribute funds fairly to the Greek-speaking widows.

Now, as the Gospel moves out of Jerusalem to Judea and Syria this same idea continues in the story, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, rightly understood, motivates and empowers believers to both acts of witness and acts of care. The healings themselves show this dual action of love. Peter cured Aeneas from paralysis. That is physical care. That miracle then became a sign, pointing many to Jesus Christ. That’s witness. The same is true of Tabitha. Raising her from the dead is an act of mercy, maybe not to Tabitha, but certainly for those who love her and are cared for by her. And then her resurrection becomes a powerful sign, “It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”

The details of this particular sign connect Peter to a miracle Jesus performed. I saw it a little bit with the miracle to Aeneas, where He says, “Pick up your mat and walk!” We can see a connection there. And this one is stronger. In Luke chapter 8, the synagogue ruler Jairus comes to Jesus and implores him to come to his home to heal his daughter. Here in Acts 9 saints in Joppa come to Peter and urge him to come quickly to Tabitha’s home. When Jesus arrives at Jairus’ house, he sees women weeping in mourning for the dead girl. Here, as Peter arrives, there are women weeping in mourning for Tabitha. Jesus took the dead girl by the hand and commanded, “Child, arise.” She stood up. Peter here says, “Tabitha, arise.” Then he takes her by the hand, and she stands.

The resurrection of Tabitha is a sign that the power of Jesus is fully working through his servant Peter, even to the point of raising a woman from the dead. And the parallelism of the miracles is just

pointing us right back at Jesus. And then, the resurrection of Tabitha provides wonderful opportunity for Peter to proclaim the resurrection of the dead in Jesus Christ.

I wonder if Peter made for them a connection back to Isaiah 35:1-6, which has several points of reference with what has just happened in Joppa. See if you catch any parallels.

¹ The wilderness and the desert will be glad, Like the crocus	And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; ² It will blossom profusely
And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, They will see the glory of the LORD,	The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. The majesty of our God.
³ Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. “Take courage, fear not. The recompense of God will come,	⁴ Say to those with anxious heart, Behold, your God will come <i>with</i> vengeance; But He will save you.”
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened ⁶ Then the lame will leap like a deer, For waters will break forth in the wilderness	And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. And streams in the Arabah.

Did you hear some of the references? There’s a reference to Sharon, to the blossoming profusely, to glory, to strengthening the anxious heart. I love the connection with the phrase, “The lame will leap like a deer.” That one line seems to me to encapsulate both miracles, Aeneas the lame and Tabitha the deer. So, I don’t know if Peter mentioned that.

Peter would have been careful not to let anyone give him credit for this miracle. He would point others to Jesus. We don’t have his words here, but we can remember what he said to the Sanhedrin after the healing of man born lame in Acts 4:10-12. He might say now, “As to how Tabitha was raised from the dead...

¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health. ¹¹ He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, *but* WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER *stone*. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

He might have said that. Something like that, not exactly like that. He doesn’t accuse Jews outside of Jerusalem of crucifying Jesus, so it would be adjusted. But he would be sure to let us know that it’s the name of Jesus, not the name of Peter, and that there is no other name. There is salvation nowhere else except in Jesus. We can be sure he is communicating those things. Let’s end by going back to my original question. Why are these little two stories here? Why did Luke include them in his record?

There are several structural reasons. The stories continue the overlapping pattern with the last major part of Acts by keeping us with Peter witnessing to Jews. The stories also provide a good introduction to the story of Cornelius by explaining how Peter came to Joppa, you know, why he is in the house of Simon the tanner. And the stories help create the balanced structure of pairs that make up this third part of Acts. Those are structural reasons to put these stories here.

There are also content reasons to provide these stories. There is important content here in these short accounts that we would miss if the stories were left out. First, these two stories provide examples of the Gospel spreading outwards from Jerusalem. They are not only miracles, but they are both emphasizing that many come to the Lord. We are seeing the Gospel planted in the fertile Plain of Sharon with very positive response.

Second, Tabitha's story gives Luke another opportunity to remind us of the life-changing impact of the Gospel. Witness to Jesus Christ brings forth acts of love and kindness in the power of the Holy Spirit. The widows were not gathered in that house because they had seen miracles. They were gathered in that house because Tabitha made clothes for them with her own hands. While keeping the witness of Jesus Christ firmly in the foreground, and this is our main picture throughout the book of Acts, it's witness, Luke continues to remind us of this material impact on Christian community made by believers living in line with the Gospel of Jesus.

Third, we see the miracles of Peter connecting him to the miracles of Jesus. Jesus said to His disciples they would do greater works. That does not mean they would greater miracles. I think that's the wrong interpretation. Jesus did an unsurpassable miracle when He raised Himself from the dead. "I lay down my life so that I may take it up again (John 10:17)." Peter will not do that. He could never say that. But Peter does raise Tabitha from the dead in a way that mirrors when Jesus rose Jairus' daughter from the dead. So, Peter is continuing the work of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The greater works are the fruit of changed lives. Jesus' followers surpass Him - surpass Jesus - in the scope of the impact they make. Thousands, millions more people are going to be impacted by Jesus' followers than by Jesus physically Himself when He was walking this Earth. And not only millions more but geographically the scope is huge. Jesus stayed in a very small place. His followers are going to take it to the ends of the Earth. The love of Jesus works into more hearts and spread much further than Jesus ever walked. Through followers like Peter, gifted in proclamation, and through followers like Tabitha, gifted in care. Through followers like you, however you are gifted, to love people in the name of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Believers like these, believers like us make an eternal impact on the lives of individuals, Jesus' promise that His followers would do greater works is fulfilled and is being fulfilled. And we can say in reality, these greater works are His works through us. The glory still goes to Jesus. I am not loving, I am not motivated, and I'm not empowered on my own, but it's through the Spirit of Christ with the direction of Christ. We are the body of Christ. We are His mouth, and His hands, His eyes, and His feet, motivated and empowered by the Holy Spirit. So the acts we are doing are the acts of Jesus Christ. By Him, and through Him, and to Him belongs all the glory as His Gospel continues to spread and continues to make an impact on people.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 9:32-43. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Miracles do not always lead to saving faith (Luke 17:11-19), but in both the healing of Aeneas and raising of Tabitha the miracle does led to saving faith for many.
 - a. Do you see parallels between these miracles and the miracles of Jesus?
 - b. Why is it significant that Peter is the messenger who is performing these miracles in these two communities?
 - c. What connection do you see between word and miracles?
3. How would you describe the relationship between word and deed, according to what you see in Tabitha's story?
4. Who in your Christian community reminds you of Tabitha? Why?
5. How would you express the importance of people like Tabitha for Christian communities?
6. How do these two stories set us up for the next story of Peter taking the gospel to Cornelius' household? Without going too much into detail, what similarities do you see? What differences?

Lesson 15: Acts 10:1-48 Culture, Covenant and the Inclusion of Gentiles

Introduction

We've come now to a critical moment for the future of Christianity. At this moment, in Acts chapter 10, before we go any further in the story, we can imagine Christianity becoming stuck as a Jewish movement. Peter traveling throughout Judea and Samaria encouraging the faithful in Christ Jesus, who by culture, continue to practice the Old Covenant commands just as always. Looking from outside in, there is no major cultural shift. Christians are just another sub-group of Jews. You've got your Pharisees, and your Sadducees, and your Zealots, and your Essenes out by the Dead Sea, and now these Christians. Pick one. They are all Jewish.

Try for a moment to imagine that you have never heard of Christianity. You are studying comparative religions, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, the big three. And you start reading in your assigned text book the chapter on first-century Jewish denominations, Pharisees, Sadducees, Christians. They are the ones who think the Jewish Messiah has already come. And you are surprised to learn that they still exist. They call themselves Messianic Jews and some non-Jews even attend their synagogues. Interesting.

In Acts chapter 10, this is one of those moments where you can imagine a very, very different trajectory for the Christian movement. No worldwide impact. No going to all nations. Christianity remains a Jewish sub-group. Only those non-Jews willing to adopt Jewish culture become included. This is a critical moment. Will Peter cross the bridge from Old Covenant to New Covenant? Can he shake off his commitment to Old Covenant requirements and his own internal prejudice which he is not even fully aware of?

Well, we know he does. But he is going to need a lot of help to do so.

First, stepping back and considering this whole third part of Acts, we have two movements made up of two pairs of stories each. So, we start with the two healings; then we have the two accounts related to Cornelius; the two accounts in Antioch; and the two accounts related to Herod. Central to the story are Peter's recognition that God does not distinguish between Jew and Gentile; and the planting of a church of Jews and Gentiles in the significant Gentile city of Antioch.

David Gooding recognizes in all these stories a shift away from Jerusalem. The shift is both cultural and administrative. Jewish culture will not dominate the growing Christian movement. And Jerusalem will not be established as a central hub of top-down administration for the growing movement. We are going to see a significant shift in the nature of the people of God, which under the Old Covenant was intentionally Jewish in religious culture and was intentionally centralized with administrative leadership of priests and king in Jerusalem. The New Covenant is a new wineskin, not Old Covenant 2.0. With the New Covenant, God is transitioning to a different plan, a different vision for the cultural and administrative make-up of his people.

We've already noted how the New Covenant vision for reaching the world is one of going out rather than pulling in. The Old Covenant prophetic vision saw the Gentiles streaming into Zion. Jesus directed a move out from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the remotest parts of the earth. That movement outward is what we will see through the book of Acts. New Covenant evangelism and missions does not wait for non-believers to come in. New Covenant evangelism and missions goes out.

The first going out was initiated by the persecution that followed Stephen's death. In our first two stories in this third part of Acts, we see Peter going out, not because of persecution but because of what appears to be intentional ministry strategy. He is outside of Jerusalem, giving witness to Christ,

strengthening the saints in the towns on the southern end of the plain of Sharon. Peter did not plant these churches, and it is not clear that he is exerting any administrative control over them. As we go through Acts, we will see the role of the Apostles diminish even in Jerusalem where James the elder will take the lead role. Church tradition tells us that the Apostles saw themselves as missionaries tasked as sent ones to take the Gospel out. They go out. They don't stay to administrate.

The second pair of stories, after those two miracle stories with Peter, address a cultural shift away from a Jewish center. The cultural shift is enabled by a theological transition from what it means to be the people of God in the Old Covenant to a new definition for what it means to be the people of God in the New Covenant. The transition is going to be both theological and cultural because the Old Covenant requirements created a really distinct religious culture for Israel. So, when you move away from those theological requirements, then it changes the culture. It is important to recognize this difference between theological requirements and culture in order to correctly understand Peter's struggle regarding entering into a Gentile home to give witness to Jesus. The challenge for Peter is not merely cultural. It is not merely the case of a missionary forcing himself to eat a grub, or to drink Yak milk. You know, the hard things missionaries do to cross-culture. But this for Peter is something deeper, something more. The challenge is theological. He is being required to accept a transition away from the word of God that he was taught all his life.

Our two stories here include the conversion of Cornelius' household described in chapter 10 and Peter's report of these events to the brothers in Jerusalem, which is described in chapter 11, verses 1-18. Working together, these stories raise two very significant issues I want to address. The first issue concerns Gentile inclusion into the New Covenant in light of the Old Covenant restrictions. How are we to understand the transition from Old to New that makes Gentile inclusion possible? The second issue I want to address concerns the work of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues experienced by the members of Cornelius' household.

In this lesson we will cover the conversion that happens in chapter 10 and the first issue of how to understand the inclusion of Gentiles into covenant. So then I'll wait for our next lesson to cover Peter's defense of his actions back in Jerusalem and to then also consider the second issue of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles.

So, for this lesson: culture, covenant, and the inclusion of Gentiles. Let's dive into the narrative. The story occurs over four successive days. We start with the first day, reported in Acts 10:1-8.

Day 1: God's Message to Cornelius (10:1-8)

¹ Now *there was* a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, ² a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the *Jewish* people and prayed to God continually. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had *just* come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" ⁴ And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ "Now dispatch *some* men to Joppa and send for a man *named* Simon, who is also called Peter; ⁶ he is staying with a tanner *named* Simon, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, ⁸ and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Caesarea is as Gentile a city as we can get while still in Judea. It is the Roman capital of the province. Herod the Great built the city on the site of a smaller town, giving it a man-made harbor, theater, an amphitheater, and even a temple dedicated to Caesar. Jews were a minority in the city.

Luke tells us Cornelius belonged to the Italian cohort or battalion. A cohort made up of Roman legionaries consisted of 600 men. A cohort made up of men in the provinces consisted of 1000 men. Supposedly there were no legionary cohorts in Judea at the time, so either Cornelius is an officer in a battalion originally raised in Italy but now consisting of provincial troops, or he has retired from the Italian cohort, and he keeps his rank and his designation, but he settled in Caesarea. So we're not sure.

Unembellished details like this support Luke's reputation as a historian. They also tell us something about the man, Cornelius. He is Roman. He is military. And he is an officer. He is definitely not Jewish in his culture or worldview, though the Jewish worldview has begun to have an effect on him. He feared God. We do not know if he feared God, exclusively. It would be a significant step for a Roman to worship the God of Judea. That would be a big step. It would be a gigantic step for a Roman to worship the God of the Jews as the one and only true God.

We are not sure how far along the continuum of fearing God this centurion has come. Luke does indicate the significant impact faith in God has made on his wallet and his day planner. Not only did he give his money in charity to Jews in need, but he gave generously. And not only did he give his time in prayer to God, but he gave it continuously. Faith in God has made a big impact in his day-to-day priorities.

In fact, the angel who appears says, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God." His time and money show the sincerity of his faith. He is a true seeker of God. He has knocked. And now God is opening the door.

I really like the specificity of the directions the angel gives. "Drive south until you come to Joppa. And when you get in town, take the street running along the coast and look for the sign of a tanner. You will probably smell it before you see it. Ask for Simon. And then there is gonna be another Simon staying with him. You really can't make a mistake. Two Simons in a tanner's home on the coast in Joppa. Oh, and the second Simon is also called, The Rock - Peter. He is the one you want."

Cornelius is open about his faith in his household. He summons two personal servants and a devout soldier and explains everything, and he sends them to Joppa immediately. Now we turn in our story to Peter in Joppa. Cornelius is prepared. Peter needs to be prepared. This is day 2. This is Acts 10:9-23a.

Day 2: God's Message to Peter (10:9-23a)

⁹ On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; ¹¹ and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, ¹² and there were in it all *kinds of* four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." ¹⁵ Again a voice *came* to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky. ¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; ¹⁸ and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you." ²⁰ "But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." ²¹ Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" ²² They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was *divinely* directed by a holy angel to send for you *to come* to his house and hear a message from you." ²³ So he invited them in and gave them lodging.

Our scene has moved about 50 miles, just over 60 kilometers, south to Joppa. The day starts at 6 in the morning, so the sixth hour of the day is noon. Peter is hungry for lunch. The roof has a flat top. He has gone up to pray while he is waiting, and he falls into a trance.

In the trance Peter sees a portion of the animal kingdom. “Crawling creatures” here seems to refer to reptiles. There is no mention of insects or sea creatures. But this group will do. According to the food laws in Leviticus 11, some of the four-footed animals are considered clean, cow and sheep for example, while others are considered unclean, like the camel and pig. All reptiles are considered unclean. Among the birds, pigeon and chicken are clean, but raptors and scavengers, like the eagle and buzzard are unclean. One of the principles seems to be that all scavengers are unclean. The animals associated with eating dead flesh, whether mammals, or sea creatures, or birds: pig, crab or vulture - all unclean.

There might be some protective reasoning in that. God is protecting the Israelites from the more toxic meat of scavengers. The connection to death fits the primary purpose of the ceremonial laws, which was to make a symbolic statement about spiritual truth. Clean and unclean animals are clean and unclean symbolically to remind the Israelites of the moral uncleanness of sin and to call them to the cleanliness, purity in their walk with God. This symbolic teaching purpose extends to the whole ceremonial cleanliness code, including the code regarding food, but also regarding dead bodies, human and animal, contagious diseases, bodily fluids. And in all that, there does seem to be a secondary, hygienic or medical value and two primary purposes. One primary purpose is the symbolic pedagogical purpose: pointing to the reality of moral and spiritual cleanliness. A second primary purpose is to separate the Israelites from the pagan worship of their Gentile neighbors. The cleanliness code creates a barrier that Gentiles can choose to pass through if they will accept Jewish law, but Jews are forbidden to cross for the protection of their monotheistic society.

There is purpose in the ceremonial cleanliness code, but to be ceremonially unclean is not the same thing as actually being morally unclean. It is a designation assigned by God for specific purposes. So, to eat bacon is not sinful in and of itself, but when God says, “don’t do something,” then it is sin to knowingly disobey His clear command. So, to break these commands while under Old Covenant, while they’re still enforced, is the immorality of rebellion. That’s the life Peter grew up in.

Now, Peter has already recognized some sort of shift away from the ceremonial laws of clean and unclean. This is suggested by the fact that he is staying with a tanner. By nature of their vocation, by dealing daily with the skin of dead animals, tanners are continuously unclean in a symbolic, ceremonial sense. It’s tough for them to get to the Temple. People who come into contact with tanners then can easily become unclean. And yet, here is Peter, staying in the house of a tanner, seemingly unconcerned with being ceremonially unclean himself. Peter has made a small step away from the ceremonial cleanliness code within his own Jewish culture. God is going to push him out to a much larger step away from the Old Covenant cleanliness code.

God puts Peter into a trance and shows him animals, both clean and unclean. And Peter is told in his vision, “Get up, kill and eat.” He is not surprised at being told to kill and eat. Peter does not pick up his food in plastic wrap from the meat section at the grocery store. He is familiar with this fact of life, that to eat meat one has to kill an animal. So that doesn’t surprise him. He is surprised at the implication that he can kill and eat any of the animals he chooses, and so, ignore Levitical law.

“By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” ¹⁵ Again a voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

Peter’s resistance is both theological and cultural. To understand the cognitive dissonance Peter is going through, the mental dismay, we need to consider the nature of the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. And to do that, we need to consider two essential questions of covenant. When we enter into covenant with God, there are two different questions that must be asked. This is true of the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the New Covenant.

The first question of covenant asks, “What makes me righteous enough to be in covenant relationship with God?” We can answer that question in terms of Law and grace, with Law being what we do and grace being what God does. On a scale from 0 to 100%, how much of this question depends on Law, and how much on grace? How much depends on what I do and how much depends on what God does for me? What makes me righteous enough to be in covenant relationship with God?

When I ask this first question of Covenant of students, I get a range of answers. What percentage is God’s part and what percentage is our part? 50% law, 50% grace. No, no, no. 100% law, 0% grace. 10% law, 90% grace. Well, the Biblical answer for the first question of Covenant is clear and emphatic. The only way for you to be righteous enough to enter into covenant relationship with holy God is if you enter in based 0% on the law that you keep and 100% on the grace that God gives to you. This is really counter-intuitive to all human religious systems. All of our systems are about the law we keep. And that is not Bible. It’s not Old Covenant. It’s not New Covenant. You can only enter by grace. If even 0.1% depends on you, you will mess it up and become guilty of the whole Law. Perfection is required. Perfection of thought, of word, and action. God’s holiness is too high for anything less. And so, for us perfection is found for us only in Jesus Christ, as a gift of grace.

After this event, later in his ministry, Peter is going forget what happened in this vision and happened with Cornelius, and he is going to slip back towards Jewish food requirements to the exclusion of Gentile brothers and sisters. And it’s going to happen while he is visiting the church in Antioch. Paul tells us about this in Galatians 2, this incident where Peter affirms a public division between Jew and Gentile. Jews eat at one table, Gentiles eat at another table. Paul rebukes Peter by focusing him back on to this first question of covenant. “Peter, remember! You’ve got to remember, Peter!” We read what he said to Peter in Galatians 2:15-16.

“(Peter,) We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we (even we who have the Law of Moses) we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”

It doesn’t work. It was never the intention. This was true under Old Covenant, and it continued to be true under the New Covenant. The Law points us to our need for grace. For all Biblical covenants, the answer to the first question remains the same. “What makes me righteous enough to be in relationship with holy God?” Grace! 100% Grace! The righteousness that gives you standing with God is wholly a gift that you receive by faith. As Paul tells the Romans, “If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace (Romans 11:6).”

Now, this is not the big question that’s really troubling Peter here. He may have the questions mixed up a little bit, but it’s the second question of Covenant that Peter is really having resistance to. Having established the basis for relationship with God, and that it’s 100% by grace, we are now ready to ask that second question, “How then shall I live? Having entered into relationship with God by grace through faith, how then shall I live? What are God’s expectations of me?” And that’s what covenant does. Covenant lays out the expectations of the King of Kings. How does He want His people to live? And so, the answer to that question is not the same for all Biblical covenants. Abraham was given an answer. But that answer was kind of subsumed, updated in the Mosaic Covenant which was given for all Israel. But then, that answer is changed when that Covenant ends and a New Covenant begins. So, this is an essential point. If you are under the Old Covenant then the laws, the stipulations, the commands of that covenant are all good and they all apply to you. They do not exist as a standard to make you acceptable to God. That doesn’t work in any covenant. They do exist as God’s moral and ritual expectations for you, as a child, a servant of God, for how you should seek to love Him, and serve Him, and worship Him with your life. How do I love my Heavenly Father? How do I worship my God? How do I serve my King? How do I do that? This is the question of a true

believer. And the Old Covenant answers that question. Old Covenant believers ought to pursue with mind and heart and strength the stipulations of the Covenant. Those laws are righteous, holy and good, a means God has given by which His people express love and gratitude and worship in relationship to Him.

The transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant brings about a change of stipulations. The question is the same - "How, then, shall we live? What are God's expectations?" But the expectations have changed. The moral expectations have not changed. The moral reality remains the same. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His moral nature does not change, and so the moral commands are largely repeated in the New Covenant writings. The transition from Old to New does not essentially bring about a new vision of morality. God's moral will doesn't change. There are two other major areas of change that do occur when we ask the question, "How then shall I live? Not as an Old Covenant member of the people of God, but as a New Covenant member of the people of God." So, what does change?

First, the civil code of the Old Covenant is no longer required. The calendar laws, the punishments, the civil actions. The people of God is no longer to be organized as a geopolitical entity. That civil law was an essential part of the Old Covenant vision for Israel, the people of God, a real nation in a real place. Geopolitical. The New Covenant people of God are organized spiritually as those who believe in Jesus Christ. We are a remnant in all cultures. And those of us who have entered into union with Him, we are now the Church. And so, the civil code is not included in the New Covenant.

Second, the ceremonial code that symbolically pointed to Jesus has been both fulfilled and therefore ended in Jesus Christ. The sacrificial law, the temple law, the food laws, these have all ended with the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. God lets it fall out.

Second, the ceremonial code that symbolically pointed to Jesus has both been fulfilled, and therefore ended in Jesus Christ. So, the sacrificial law, the Temple law, the food laws - these have all ended in transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. Jews may still choose to apply Old Covenant civil code in their laws and the laws of Israel. They can still hold those codes and follow Old Testament Law. They can choose to continue to apply Old Covenant ceremonial behaviors as a way to honor God. So the early Christians, they're going to Temple. And we're going to see Christians at the end of Acts who are making vows, and even offering sacrifice. And they're keeping the food laws. But they are not requirements. And there is no longer any theological basis requiring obedience. Jews are not to continue living under the Old Covenant while Gentiles embrace the New Covenant. It's not that kind of division. All of God's people are now under a New Covenant. The Old has ended in Christ. Continuance in Old Covenant practice is no longer a theological requirement, though you can still do it if you find it wise. Old Covenant laws and practices can be part of your culture. That's not forbidden under New Covenant.

This is the struggle for Peter. The theological basis for these distinctly Jewish cultural practices has been removed. So, we might say that they are now merely cultural, whereas before they were commanded and, therefore, became cultural. God has said, the food laws are no longer required. Sacrifice is no longer required. Does that mean you should stop doing these things? Well, that is a question of wisdom. You can continue in these practices if they do not prevent you from loving God and loving your brothers and sisters in Christ. But when these behaviors contradict the Gospel and contradict expectations expressed by God in the New Covenant, you need to let the Old go.

Peter has got to face that reality. And it is tough. Cultural values are deep seated. Peter and his Jewish brethren easily accept some aspects of the New Covenant. Other aspects of the New Covenant challenge these values that they feel so deeply, they just can't get over them. And keeping the food laws is one of those values that are so ingrained in an observant Jew like Peter that he cannot help feeling revulsion, it's an emotive response at the thought of eating something unclean.

My brother told me a story. While he was serving as a missionary, he had a surreal experience. He passed by a butcher shop, and he looked at a strange animal, skinned and hung up on a hook for sale.

As his eyes scanned down the body of the animal, he was just looking in curiosity, his mind focused in on the un-skinned face of a German Shepherd. And at that moment his emotions revolted in disgust.

I try to use that as a way to imagine Peter's response. The sheet lowering down. He is curious. And all these animals are running around. No problem. But when the voice says, "Kill and eat anything," Peter's response is not the response of a person who love to eat bacon if he were just allowed. Uh-uh. No! The rat, the vulture, the pig, the camel, the dog, the thought of eating those animals, it wasn't just a choice. It's detestable. But is it sinful? Well, it was when he was a boy. His cultural revulsion for eating such meat came out of a correct theological understanding of correct Old Covenant expectations, requirements. Those requirements have ended. Peter's values are still ingrained.

The food laws are a part of who he is, a part of what it means for him to be Jewish. It is not so easy for him to unravel the theology from the culture. There are some parallels here to everybody who grows up in a religious household. So, the rules of your church or the rules of your family. It's not always easy to unravel, you know, why did we do that? Why couldn't we listen to that, or sing that, or play that, or why do we have to wear that, or we couldn't watch that, or eat that, or we couldn't hang out with them. Was there any reason why? And it just feels wrong now. How do I unravel my cultural values from Biblical theology? It's not easy and I believe that is why God is going to such lengths to reassure Peter. We see in this whole story that God is doing a lot to make sure Peter gets the message.

And it is not all completely new to Peter. When Jesus was on earth, Peter had heard him say,

"Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man (Mark 7:14-15)."

The disciples, including Peter, didn't understand and they questioned Jesus at that time about what he meant. And Jesus said to them,

"Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated (Mark 7:18-19)?"

And then Mark even goes on to add as a side comment, "Thus [Jesus] declared all foods clean."

Peter had heard this before, but he is pretty nervous about getting it right. He does not feel the freedom in himself to eat. There is a revulsion. It feels wrong. So, God sets up this whole story to help convince Peter of the correct application to the word of truth that he has already received from Jesus. "It's okay, Peter. This is New Covenant." Under the New Covenant the ceremonial cleanliness laws fall away and when the ceremonial cleanliness laws fall away, the barrier to interact with Gentiles falls away. That was the big problem with going into a Gentile home. You know they do not follow the food laws along with whatever other cleanliness laws they are breaking. And if contact with the Gentile does not make you unclean, you know when you go as a guest into an ancient Near Eastern home, you are going to be served food. And you know that politeness will demand that you eat the food. So, it's just a lot safer to stay outside. You just don't go into a Gentile home.

But that which was right under Old Covenant is no longer required. The barrier has been removed, and God is taking some pains to help Peter unravel the theology of the New Covenant from his deeply held cultural values.

First, God repeats the vision three times to make sure Peter gets it. It's not a nightmare vision you had because, you know, sunstroke and hunger. It's repeated. And then, while Peter is still perplexed about the vision, and this is God's excellent sense of timing, God has the men from Cornelius show up right then, so when the Holy Spirit speaks to Peter and says, "Go down to these men! They're right there." And God does not send the servants with a simple request from Cornelius. God has already done some pre-prep. He sends them with the claim that a holy angel initiated the invitation from that end.

So, the timing, the nature of the message on top of the vision are enough to convince Peter to go and see. And he's going to take day 3 to travel and then he'll enter into Caesarea on day 4. Listen to the dialogue that occurs when Peter arrives in Acts 10:23b-48.

Day 3-4: God's Saving Work In a Gentile House (9:23b-48)

And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.²⁴ On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for him and had called together his relatives and close friends.²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped *him*.²⁶ But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am *just* a man."²⁷ As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled.

²⁸ And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean."²⁹ "That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me."³⁰ Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments,³¹ and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.'³² 'Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon *the* tanner by the sea.'³³ "So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

³⁴ Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality,³⁵ but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him."³⁶ "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)—³⁷ you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed."³⁸ "*You know of* Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and *how* He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him."³⁹ "We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross."⁴⁰ "God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible,⁴¹ not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, *that is*, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead."⁴² "And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead."⁴³ "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

This is good! There are three paragraphs here. First, in 23b-27, we find Cornelius waiting with close friends and relatives. Presumably, there are also servants and soldiers present, like the three he sent to Peter. And Cornelius has already called them together. That speaks to his excitement to have everyone close to him hear the message this servant of God would bring.

When Peter arrives, Cornelius falls to his feet to worship him. That's a reminder, I think, that Cornelius, while fearing God and praying to God, is coming out of a different worldview. He does not understand how to correctly interpret Peter's role. An angel has announced Peter. So maybe, perhaps, Peter is greater than the angel? So Cornelius falls down. Peter corrects Cornelius, "Stand up, I too am just a man." And Peter enters and sees a crowd assembled.

The second paragraph, verses 28-33, begins with Peter answering the question everybody is thinking. "Good Jews do not enter into our homes. How is it now that this guy enters in? What relationship will his message have to the God of Israel if he, being a Jew, is disobedient to the Law of God? You know, what is his view of the Scripture if he is not keeping the Law?"

So, Peter explains without being asked,

“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for.”

Then he asks a question of his own, “So I ask for what reason you have sent for me.”

The answer is a fabulous set up for an evangelist. Cornelius retells part of the story, explaining that a man in shining garments told him his prayer to God was answered and he should send to Joppa for a man named Peter. He concludes, “Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.” That’s an awesome set up! “Here we are. Tell us what God wants us to know.”

So, in the third paragraph, verses 34 to 43, Peter tells them. He speaks a message that parallels the four evangelistic speeches we heard him preach in Jerusalem in Acts 2 through 5. There’s no major change here. Well, two significant changes. First, he does not accuse this Gentiles of murdering the Messiah. That is a charge we only see being made in the early sermons to the Jews of Jerusalem, this direct accusation of murdering Jesus. Second, before starting, and this is different, Peter comments on what he has learned these past few days.

“I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality,³⁵ but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.”

Peter is not saying that under the Old Covenant God did show partiality and now God no longer shows partiality. The change is not with God. The change is with Peter’s understanding. He seems to be saying that in his own practice of the cleanliness code, he assumed partiality. And that’s a natural fault of the sin in all religious people to assume some special privilege with God based on our particular obedience to a certain theology, or custom, or practice. We need to see ourselves as special. And when we do that, we then have this prejudice against people who do religion in a different way.

The ritual system that God created as barrier between Jews and the pagan practices of non-Jews easily became a source of pride and prejudice for observant Jews. God shook Peter when he forced Peter to re-evaluate the food laws in light of the New Covenant. Having been shaken, Peter was then able to take a new look at his own presuppositions, and he saw this false presumption that Jews are better than Gentiles.

The first question of Covenant has always provided an open door to anyone who would receive the grace of God by faith. That was true under Old Covenant. It wasn’t just for Jews. Gentiles had always been acceptable by faith. Abraham himself was called out of the Gentiles, the Egyptians who went up with the Israelites from the Exodus were acceptable to God. Rahab, Ruth, Naaman were acceptable to God. The people of Nineveh who responded to Jonah’s witness were acceptable to God. God doesn’t show partiality.

But the Old Covenant answer to the second question of covenant which emphasized this protection of the people required a significant step culturally for Gentiles who wanted to participate in covenant relationship with Yahweh. Gentiles would need to accept the religious requirements of the Mosaic Law. They would have to step away from their own culture towards a different culture.

The New Covenant answer to the second question of covenant lowers the protective element of ritual requirement. It doesn’t protect us so much with all these customs and rituals, which enables God’s New Covenant people to more easily enter into pagan culture and allows Gentiles to retain much of their native culture. It’s not forbidden under New Covenant. This freedom of culture is both a blessing and also the source of new challenges for the people of God. And we will come back to some those challenges when we get to chapter 15.

For now, Peter has come to understand that the move to the New Covenant removes the ceremonial barrier between Jew and Gentile, and he has faced his own prejudice towards Gentiles, coming to the realization that God indeed does not show partiality over one ethnic group or the other.

This understanding frees Peter to enter into this Gentile home and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to this Gentile audience in pretty much the exact same terms that he has preached the Gospel to Jews.

He acknowledges his listeners' awareness of the ministry of Jesus. "You all know what has been happening in the land through Jesus." He claims to be a witness, which is what he regularly does. He gives testimony to Jesus' crucifixion and to His resurrection. He emphasizes the bodily resurrection of Jesus by claiming that they ate and drank with Jesus. He names Jesus as the judge of the living and the dead. He claims the prophets gave witness to this. And though these are Gentiles, they are aware enough of Jewish faith to appreciate that Peter is saying that his Gospel is in line with Jewish Scripture, and the prophets declare this. And he concludes by claiming that everyone who believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of sin.

Those last words parallel Peter's quote from Joel 2:32 in his first sermon at Pentecost, "And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21)." And I imagine that that word, "everyone," - it's in both places, "Everyone who calls on the name will be saved", "Everyone who believes," - that word, "everyone," must have had an impact on Peter at Pentecost. You know, as he was preaching to Jews and God-fearers from all over the Roman and Parthian Empires who had come to be in Jerusalem. But "everyone" at that point in time meant "everyone" who was willing to be like us. Everyone who has embraced our culture, who has come to the feast of Pentecost. It felt like "everyone."

But Peter's concept of "everyone" needs to be enlarged, and is here being enlarged to include not just everyone who is willing to come towards us, but everyone of any culture everywhere who seeks God and wants to walk with him. It must have been a very different experience for Peter then at Pentecost, now here preaching to this Gentile audience in a Gentile home in a Gentile majority city. The word, "everyone," means so much more.

Peter did not change his Gospel presentation much at all for them. He only leaves out an invitation to repent and believe, but that's because the Holy Spirit beats him to it. He would have said that. But here is the effect of Peter's witness, verses 44-48.

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?" ⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Can a person be born again in a moment? What about a room full of people? Can a room full of people be born again in a moment? But what about a room full of people who do not know much Bible at all and have grown up with a very different, non-Biblical worldview? Can they all be born again? Yes, they can.

Peter had barely finished his Gospel message. He did not even get to challenge them to believe. It was not necessary. God had already done the work. And he had been working on Cornelius for years. The religious customs of an imperial Roman soldier left Cornelius wanting for something more. And he found it when he was posted in Israel. His longing drew him to Yahweh. What he understood of God moved him into prayer, motivated him to give, to care for people around him. He was so hungry to believe that he invited everyone close to him to come hear this message. His heart was ripe. And

the integrity of his own search for truth had had a significant effect on his relatives, and friends, and servants. The whole field was white for harvest. A whole house church was born into Christ that day. Peter recognized the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as proof that the Gospel had genuinely been received. So, he ordered that they be baptized, then and there, in the name of Jesus.

I'll end by repeating the two significant lessons God taught Peter through this. First, Peter moved forward in his understanding that the Old Covenant had come to an end and with it the cleanliness code was now optional. In this lesson I have just touched on the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant and the importance of distinguishing between the two questions of covenant. I'm not going deeper into the two questions of covenant in this series. If you would like to understand better Biblical Covenant, I recommend my series on interpreting the Pentateuch. If you want just a couple of lessons, I recommend the Pentateuch lesson on Genesis 12-15, "Abraham I," and the Romans series lesson on Romans 3:21-30. I address the question of covenant in both of those places. I've also posted a link on my homepage at observetheword.com to a pdf article called, *The Two Questions of Covenant*. And we will come back to this concept, it will be important, in Acts 15.

Peter's first lesson was about the end of the cleanliness code which removed the ceremonial barrier between him and Gentiles. His second lesson had to do with his own prejudice as a Jew which assumed God's special favor. I'll end with his words on this lesson he learned.

"I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him...everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:34b-35, 43b)."

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 10:1-48. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Did God appear to Cornelius (10:1-8) more for the sake of Cornelius or for the sake of Peter? Explain your answer.
3. Why do you think God showed Peter the vision three times? What does that suggest about Peter? What does it suggest about the message?
4. What is the significance of verse 23a?
5. What specific laws or customs does God direct Peter to break in this story? What is the basis for those laws or customs?
6. What underlying message does God want Peter to learn?
7. How do you understand the Old Covenant's relationship to that message? Is God teaching Peter a new idea that was not present in the Old Testament?
8. Imagine the scene of Peter preaching and the members of Cornelius' household speaking in tongues. What do you think that was like? What is the significance of speaking in tongues in this situation?

Lesson 16: Acts 11:1-18 Cornelius' Household and Speaking in Tongues

Introduction

How do we understand the role of the gift of tongues in the Church today? There is a major disagreement among Bible-believing Christians on this topic. And the book of Acts is a primary source in that disagreement. It is not a question I'm going to fully address today. However, how we understand the gift of tongues in Acts affects how we understand the gift of tongues today. That's the piece of the question that falls under this study: correctly interpreting what we observe in the text of Acts.

I am working from the belief that the text of Scripture should define our theology and how we understand our spiritual experiences. Experience and theological tradition should not take primary place in defining how we interpret the text. And that is a challenge. We come to the Bible with our own spiritual experiences and with the experiences that we've seen in other people, and we want the Bible to help us make sense of it all.

For example, when we come to Acts and ask the question, "Is speaking in tongues an outward sign of the internal baptism of the Holy Spirit?", believers who have had a negative experience with speaking in tongues might easily be guided by that negative experience in their interpretation of the text, just as believers who have had a positive experience with speaking in tongues might easily be guided by their positive experience when they interpret the text.

On one extreme there are theological traditions that downplay the role of the Holy Spirit so much that the only place you ever hear Him mentioned is the doxology, "Praise, Father, Son and Holy Ghost." And there He is called a "ghost." Not very inviting. Other traditions emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit so much that you might go to an evangelistic meeting and never hear the name, Jesus, at the meeting. It is all about feeling the Holy Spirit.

Neither of these more extreme theological traditions should feel comfortable with the book of Acts, which regularly refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, and always in a way that points to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.

In this lesson, I am not speaking to the extremes of the disagreement. And I am not speaking to Christians who place theology, tradition, and personal experience on an equal or higher footing than the Bible. I am assuming that the Bible is the primary authority for defining our theology and experience. And I am assuming the importance of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. Still, with those assumptions there are some significant challenges to correctly interpreting the gifts of the Spirit and baptism of the Spirit. Bible-believing Christians who seek first to understand God's Word, and who are in Christ, and who are filled with the Holy Spirit still disagree on the best way to define some points of theology about the Holy Spirit. There is an internal disagreement among Bible-believing Christians.

I will be addressing this particular question of whether speaking in tongues is an outward sign of the internal baptism of the Holy Spirit because it is a very good question that arises out of the text of Acts. Our study of Acts is driving the question. It is a question we ought to be asking, in light of our two current stories; the salvation of Cornelius and his household; and the follow-up report by Peter to the believers in Jerusalem.

The role of tongues in the salvation experience of Cornelius and his household is another one of these issues that we encounter in Biblical narrative about which we have to ask, "what in this is prescriptive for all believers?", it becomes a norm we apply in the Church age, and "what is descriptive of this particular incident?", something that happened to them but does not necessarily speak to our own experience. We've encountered several examples of this prescriptive/descriptive challenge in the narrative literature of Acts. The first one I pointed out was the interesting example of drawing lots to see who would fill Judas' place as an Apostle. That's interesting because it was a clear practice described in Acts and yet, almost nobody draws lots today to discern God's will in

major leadership choices. You don't see that in the churches. We are fine with that being a descriptive example of what happened and it's not prescriptive for how we should choose our leaders. We also considered Peter's language in his first evangelistic sermon, his challenge to the Jewish crowd to repent and be baptized. And we can ask, "Were Peter's words a norm that we ought to use when we share the Gospel?" Should the four-laws or whatever method end with the challenge, 'Repent and be baptized?' Or does this sermon described by Luke give us a pattern or principle to use in our evangelism without demanding we repeat the exact same challenge?" It's not a norm that needs to apply whenever we do evangelism. I spent a little more time addressing the communal sharing of property in the early Christian fellowship: a clear practice back then that we do not repeat today, and I spent more time on the special, miraculous gifts of healing practiced by the Apostles. Should we expect miracles of healing to happen today in our churches with the same amount of power and frequency as we see in the record of the Jerusalem awakening? That's another prescriptive/descriptive question.

This challenge of discerning between the descriptive and prescriptive in Biblical narrative affects a lot of issues. I suggested in these previous two examples a process we can use to help us interpret narrative text like Acts carefully and faithfully. I will follow that same interpretive process here that I used in those previous lessons.

When trying to understand whether we are dealing with a unique experience versus a norm for the Church, context really is king. Our interpretation of what we observe in the text is driven by context. And not only by the immediate context of the narrative, but by an expanding context that moves from the immediate passage outward in consideration of the surrounding context, then in consideration of the whole context of Acts, then to the context of the New Testament epistles.

1. What does the text say?

Applying that process to role of tongues in the salvation experience of Cornelius and his household, we start with simple observation. What does the text say? The pouring out of the Holy Spirit occurs in Acts 10:44-48, so that text is our starting point.

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?" ⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

We observe that the gift of the Holy Spirit is poured out on all who were listening to the message. The circumcised believers, that is the Jewish believers, were amazed. It is not clear exactly why they are amazed. To be amazed means something's happening that you did not expect to happen. Did they assume that God would not accept Gentiles? "Why are we even here?" Or did they assume the Gentiles would need to go through a process of obedience to ceremonial law before they could be born again?

We need to pay close attention to the phrase, "the gift of the Spirit." In this case, speaking in tongues is not being referred to as, the gift of the Spirit. That's the point of the logical connector "for" in the following sentence. They recognized that the gift of the Spirit had been poured out for, or because, they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God.

The gift of the Spirit is not "tongues" in this passage. "Tongues" is proof of the gift of the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is the Spirit. Peter used the same language at Pentecost, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children." The Spirit is the promise. He is a unique

gift given to believers in the New Covenant age. Speaking in tongues is a visible manifestation of the Spirit's presence in the individual.

Perhaps this is what surprised the Jewish observers most. The promised Holy Spirit, prophesied by Joel is for Gentiles, too. Not only are they included, they are fully included with the same spiritual standing as the Jews.

Peter understands this manifestation of tongues as a sign of saving faith, so he then orders that these Gentiles be baptized. That answers one question for us. In this instance, speaking in tongues is indeed a sign to Peter that these men and women had been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Tongues is proof, in this story, of true belief.

The question not answered is whether we should always or even often expect tongues to be manifested when a person truly believes in Jesus. It happened to them. Should we expect it to happen as a norm?

2. What is the immediate context?

The next step is to consider the immediate context of the passage. We considered the whole conversion story last week. So, let's move on to Peter's report back in Jerusalem. He will sum up for us the events we have already considered. This is Acts 11:1-18.

¹ Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, ³ saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

⁴ But Peter began *speaking* and *proceeded* to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, ⁶ and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. ⁷ "I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ "But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ "But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' ¹⁰ "This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. ¹¹ "And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were *staying*, having been sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² "The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house. ¹³ "And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; ¹⁴ and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵ "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ "Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

¹⁸ When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads* to life."

Peter's reception back in Jerusalem begins with an accusation. "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." Peter had struggled himself with going to Cornelius' house. God had to impress upon him the new theological reality that the Old Covenant ceremonial law had ended. God also gave him eyes to look inwardly at his own prejudice. The brethren in Jerusalem now face the same challenge. They are experiencing the same kind of cognitive dissonance, the same dismay when they hear that Peter disregarded the cleanliness code. God brought Peter into a new understanding. Now it is up to Peter to bring his fellow Jewish believers also to this new understanding.

So, Peter explains to them about the vision, the leading of the Spirit, the appearance of the angel and the manifestation of tongues. We also find out a piece of new information. When Cornelius and his

household began to speak in tongues and praise God, Peter remembered the Word of Jesus, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Peter’s understanding of the experience is grounded in the Words of Jesus.

Peter’s explanation convinces the brothers in Jerusalem that God’s offer of forgiveness is extended also to Gentiles. The issue is not fully resolved. Members of the Jewish church will continue to struggle with the nature of Gentile inclusion, leading to the Jerusalem council in chapter 15. But for now, the idea that Gentiles can be born again is affirmed.

In the telling of the story, Peter clarifies two questions. He clarifies both the nature of this manifestation of tongues and a purpose for the manifestation. At Cornelius’ house he had said, “[they] have received the Holy Spirit just as we did.” Here he says, “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.” Peter is referring to Pentecost, the beginning. The manifestation of tongues Peter witnessed in Cornelius’ house was the same kind of miracle that he and the others experienced on the day of Pentecost. That miracle was the miracle of speaking truth about God in an actual foreign language not known to the speaker. What makes such a strong impact on Peter at Cornelius’ house is that the miracle he sees occurring with Cornelius is the same miracle. Peter does not say, “I wonder what is going on here? This is new. I’ve never experienced the Spirit like this before.” No. He says, “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.” This is a spiritual experience that is not new to Peter but what’s new is that it’s happening to Gentiles.

God uses the repetition of the same kind of manifestation of the Spirit to impress on Peter, and on those six Jewish brothers that were with him, and now on the believers in Jerusalem, that the Gentiles are included into Christ just as we are.

So first, Peter’s words here clarify that we are talking about the same kind of speaking in tongues as at Pentecost. Second, Peter’s words indicate God’s purpose that the Jewish believers would have a powerful sign of Gentile inclusion. This miracle is for the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to acknowledge that these Gentiles have truly believed.

This is the conclusion of Peter and of the gathered believers in Jerusalem.

¹⁷ “Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” ¹⁸ When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to life*.”

One last observation from Acts 11:1-18. Peter here links the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the baptism of the Holy Spirit by quoting the words of Jesus that he had remembered. It appears in this passage that to be born again through faith in Jesus and to be baptized in the Holy Spirit are the same thing, or they happen at the same time. That is what is described at Cornelius’ house. But we need to expand our context out to consider other examples of the outpouring of the Spirit to see if the pattern in Acts is consistent.

3. What does the rest of the book of Acts say?

Our third step is to expand out to the whole book of Acts. There are four passages in Acts that describe the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. All four passages have a unique sequence of events.

At Pentecost in Acts 2, the Jewish believers who spoke in tongues had believed in Jesus for some time. For example, we could say of the Apostle John that he believed in the resurrection of Jesus from the moment he ran into the empty tomb (John 20:8). Now, some 50 days later, he is experiencing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There is considerable separation between his faith in Jesus and his experience of the Spirit. There is also no connection to baptism or the laying on of hands in the Pentecost account.

In Samaria in Acts 8, many Samaritans believe in Jesus and are baptized by Philip but do not experience the manifestation of the Spirit until Peter and John come from Jerusalem and lay hands

on them. We are specifically told that the Holy Spirit “had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16).” This account does not mention speaking in tongues, but I believe that kind of manifestation should be assumed, since Simon the magician becomes jealous as he witnesses the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Samaritans through Peter and John. I don’t think he would have become jealous if Peter and John laid hands on the people and said, “Now you have the Holy Spirit,” and then those people went away and there was no physical manifestation, there was nothing for Simon to see. I believe he must have seen some outward effect. I think speaking in tongues is the most likely, since this passage parallels our other passages that explicitly name speaking in tongues. So, that’s my interpretive guess. The outward manifestation of the Spirit that made Simon so jealous was the miracle of speaking in tongues. I’ll just continue with that assumption.

That’s two stories. Then at Cornelius’ home in Acts 10, the Holy Spirit falls on Gentile believers before Peter can even challenge them to believe. They speak in tongues and are baptized afterwards.

Finally, in Acts 19, a group of 12 who had received the baptism of John but lacked knowledge about Jesus believe what Paul is saying and receive baptism in the name of Jesus. Paul then lays hands on them, the Spirit comes on them, and they speak in tongues and prophesy.

I’ll leave it to you to go back and consider each passage and make your own chart of similarities and differences. I am going to focus in on the separation between belief and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that we see in the Pentecost example and the Samaritan example.

We can apply what we observe in these four passages to two questions. Is speaking in tongues the normal Christian experience that gives witness to the inner baptism of the Holy Spirit? And is the baptism of the Holy Spirit something distinct from the new birth that occurs when a person places their faith in Jesus, such that it is, at times, a second experience that comes after forgiveness of sins?

On the one hand, we see speaking in tongues functioning as proof of Spirit baptism in the Cornelius example. That’s the conclusion Peter draws. And we have the Pentecost and Samaria examples showing us that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit might occur many days after the moment of saving faith.

On the other hand, we might wonder why the gift of tongues is mentioned only in these four examples in the whole of the book of Acts. Is there something special about these cases? The Ethiopian Eunuch is baptized without any mention of tongues. Paul regains his sight and is filled with the Holy Spirit without mention of immediately speaking in tongues. We do not get a mention of tongues at Antioch when the Gospel goes there, or at any of the churches Paul plants. We know Paul practiced the gift of speaking in tongues. He’ll tell us that in the letter to the Corinthians. And we know members of the Corinthian church spoke in tongues. Should we draw any conclusion from the silence of Acts in all of these other cases, except for the four examples?

4. What do the New Testament Epistles say?

We have gone as far as we can with Acts. We have made our observations and there are still some questions. Our next step is to expand our context out to include the New Testament epistles. In Acts, we are dealing with narrative, which often describes events without giving explanation. And some of those events are unique or transitional. The letters to the churches provide us with a source of direct teaching and explanation for the growing body of Christ.

Our major source for teaching about the gift of tongues is in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In fact, this is our only source for teaching about the gift of tongues. The gift is not clearly mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. It often depends on your theology whether you will see tongues somewhere else in an indirect case, such as the groaning of the Spirit in Romans 8:26. But we are not told that that’s an instance of speaking in tongues. The only direct discussion teaching about tongues is 1 Corinthians 12-14. So if you are interested in studying the gift of tongues, that’s really the place you should go.

Part of that study should include Paul's two other spiritual gift passages in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, even though they don't mention the gift of tongues. In all three places (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians), Paul uses the body analogy to give us an image for our individuality through a unique distribution of gifts among members, that's what makes us different; our personality, our gifts; and we also see our unity through spiritual inclusion in Jesus Christ into one body. One body, unity. Many members, diversity.

Speaking about the gift of the Spirit, Paul also highlights love in all three places (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians) as critical to the use of spiritual gifts and to maturity of the body. For Paul, the fruit of the Spirit, beginning with love, is more important than the gifts of the Spirit. Jesus did not say, "They will know you by the gifts of the Spirit." He did say, "they will know you by your love (John 13:34)." The gifts are given as a way for us to love one another in the power of the Spirit as we exercise the different roles and gifts of teaching, and serving, and showing mercy, and leading. Unfortunately, in Corinth the gifts have become a major source of division.

Again, Paul's reminder that we are born into one body is especially important for our current discussion. I will read a short piece of his teaching to the Corinthians. This is from 1 Corinthians 12:7-13.

⁷ But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another *various* kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. ¹² For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Wow! You really get oneness here. There is one Spirit, one Spirit, one Spirit. So, many gifts, but one Spirit and one body. Paul's point about diversity indicates that the gift of tongues is not a gift given to all believers as proof of the Spirit's filling. Tongues were a sign of the Spirit's presence in the four examples provided in Acts, but it would be inconsistent with Paul's teaching here to assume from Acts that all believers are intended to experience one gift in particular. To one is given one gift and to another is given another gift. The gift of tongues is part of this list. The Spirit distributes to each one individually as He wills, according to His purpose. It was His purpose to distribute the gift of tongues in Acts in these four places, but here he's saying that's not the norm. The norm is that there's a variety of gifts that spread over to the individual members of the body. This direct teaching is helping us think about the examples we have back in Acts.

Paul goes on to teach, "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." The baptism of the Holy Spirit is what includes a person into the body of Christ. This is the new birth experience. Paul makes a similar argument in Ephesians 2 where he speaks of the mutual inclusion of Jew and Gentile into one body saying, "for through [Jesus] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:18)." Paul makes the point even stronger in Romans 8:9.

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

Paul's language equates baptism of the Spirit with the new birth. Christians are born again into one body. If you are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, you belong to Christ. If the Spirit is not in you, then you do not belong to Christ. To give one more example of Paul's language here is Titus 3:5-6.

⁵ He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...

We see here Paul connecting together our forgiveness in Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit, the washing of the Spirit. In his mercy, the Father washes us clean by pouring the Spirit out on us through Jesus. That's the new birth experience. That's where we get forgiveness, it's through the washing, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There are not two critical experiences. There is one critical experience. To be born again in Jesus and to be baptized by the Spirit are two different ways to describe the same spiritual experience that occurs when a person truly believes in Jesus.

An interesting exercise is to read through the New Testament letters looking for exhortation to a second experience of the Spirit. You believe. Now you need to be baptized in the Spirit. Or, now you need a second cure. You need to go further. If baptism of the Spirit is a second experience that unlocks Christian power, we would expect the teachers of the New Testament to lead us in that direction, to point us to that experience. What we see instead is a constant calling back to our experience of new birth in Jesus Christ. These are our two New Covenant Rituals. Baptism celebrates that internal baptism of the Holy Spirit that happens when you first believe. And the Lord's Supper is a constant looking back to the cross. Or we can apply it individually: a constantly looking back in ourselves to that moment that we unite in Christ in His death and in His resurrection. The New Testament writers call people back to their relationship with Jesus, not forward to some other experience. We go deeper into Christ. We do not graduate beyond Christ. We are taught to accept what is already true of us in Jesus that we may not be applying. But the Spirit already indwells us. The challenge for us is not to unlock some new experience but to learn to live by faith, to abide in Christ, to be filled with His Spirit who already indwells us, to walk with God. This is the language, the call of the New Testament authors.

5. How do we apply the New Testament context to the narrative passages in Acts?

Coming back to Acts, if the New Testament letters connect our new birth in Jesus together with the baptism of the Holy Spirit as one experience, then how do we understand the separation between faith in Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit that we see in Acts at Pentecost and in Samaria?

Acts records a moment in salvation history that is both transitional and unique. We are transitioning from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, and we are witnessing the unique birth of the Church.

In this transitional period, God the Father has given it into the Son's hands to pour out the Spirit after the Son ascends into Heaven, rather than immediately upon His resurrection from the dead. So, John running into the tomb, believing in Jesus could not receive the Holy Spirit because in God's timing, God is going to say, "Wait." Those who immediately believed in the resurrection of Jesus would have to wait until Pentecost to receive the Holy Spirit. They are not required to go and wait in Jerusalem to establish the norm for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. You know that everybody has to wait fifty days after. They are required to go and wait because the beginning of the Church has not yet happened. God's choice was to pour out the Spirit at Pentecost. The feast at which the Jews celebrated the birth of Israel would also be the feast at which the Church is born. And it would be a feast where we have Jews and God-fearers gathered from all over the known world. That's why the Apostles and other initial believers experienced delay between when they believed and when they received the Holy Spirit.

Recognizing the period of transition from the Old Covenant reality to New Covenant reality explains the separation between belief and outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, but why is there also a time delay in Samaria?

We understand that delay by recognizing the pattern in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that occurs in the first half of Acts. The Spirit falls on Jews at Pentecost, and they speak in tongues; the Spirit falls on Samaritans in Samaria and they speak in tongues; the Spirit falls on Gentiles in Caesarea and they speak in tongues. The response of Peter and the other Jewish leaders is one of surprise. They are not expecting this. "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to faith*." And this may be why we don't see the importance of the pattern, because it's kind of obvious to us: the Gospel is for everybody. It was not obvious in the beginning. It wasn't obvious that it was for everybody without everybody becoming Jewish, or adopting Old Covenant Law. This is something new that is being worked out.

Jesus prophesied in Acts 1:8 both the geographic and ethnic spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the remotest parts of the Earth. That spread is pictured at Pentecost, you know, in one moment when we have Jews and God-fearers from so many different nations believing in Jesus. The miracle of tongues at Pentecost symbolically overturns the confusion created at the Tower of Babel. There were many languages nobody understood. Here, through the many languages the people understand the Gospel. And they understand in their heart language. They really understand it.

So, Jesus has told His disciples to participate in the ethnic expansion of the Gospel. But in the newness of the New Covenant, the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem are still struggling in defining the people of God as especially Jewish. That's the thing about Pentecost. It does look like everybody from all around, everywhere, can come and place their faith in Jesus. But all of these people look very Jewish. And even those who weren't Jewish were acting Jewish. They were here at Pentecost. So, the leaders of the Jerusalem church needed to see clearly that the door has been opened to all peoples without requiring those peoples to adopt Old Covenant Jewish culture. In Samaria, God holds off the coming of the Spirit until after Peter and John arrive, and in so doing creates a two-way link. The Samaritans now connect the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Apostolic teaching of Peter and John, which is important because we don't yet have a New Testament. So, the new movement is going to depend on the teaching of the Apostles as authoritative. So that's one way the link goes. But there's also a link back. Now the Apostles connect the reception of the promised Spirit with these half-Jewish Samaritans. Like, oh! Okay. These really are our brothers! They also have the Spirit.

The same two-way link occurs in Caesarea. Cornelius and his household connect true faith with the Apostolic preaching of Peter, and Peter connects the reception of the Spirit among the Gentiles with simple faith in Jesus. In fact, that's really the emphasis of this story: it is getting Peter to see that the Gentiles are included by faith, not by becoming Jewish. So, this is how I interpret these events. God designed a three-part outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile as a way to affirm the transition to the New Covenant definition of the people of God as all who place their faith in Jesus, regardless of their ethnicity or culture.

John will later write about his vision of this reality in Revelation 7:9-10.

⁹ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches *were* in their hands; ¹⁰ and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Everyone is included. And the Apostles needed to know that. After this unique period of this transitional outpouring of the Holy Spirit to Jew, then Samaritan, then Gentile, after this we see through the New Covenant record the consistent identification of the new birth experience with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We are not going to see it separated anymore. We only clearly see the separation at Pentecost and in Samaria. Apart from this unique beginning, New Covenant believers are indwelt immediately by the Spirit when they place their faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

To wrap-up this lesson, here are three quick things, three related issues.

1. Is tongues evidence of the new birth?

In our four Acts examples, yes, I do believe that tongues is evidence of new birth at Pentecost, and in Samaria, and at Cornelius' house, and later with those twelve at Ephesus. This evidence was provided for specific purposes in the transitional period. We do not see tongues relied upon as evidence of the new birth in all of Acts or in any of the New Testament epistles. We see it in these four moments. But it is not the norm for the New Covenant people of God. Tongues is a gift that's given to some, not to all. It is not the normal evidence of being filled or baptized with the Holy Spirit.

2. Should we expect a second experience of the Spirit that comes after we believe in Jesus?

Should we expect the second experience of the Spirit? Well, in one sense, yes, and in another sense, no. I would say you should expect a second experience, and a third experience, and a fourth experience; you should expect to have a variety of experiences in your walk with Christ. Some of those experiences might be uniquely liberating or life-changing. But there is only one critical moment.

Now, I would not define any of those subsequent experiences as the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the internal reality that we celebrate with the outward ritual of baptism. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is synonymous with new birth, with the indwelling of the Spirit, with being united in Christ. These are all various expressions for the same spiritual reality that follows the moment a person truly believes in Jesus. Sometimes that moment is expressed outwardly, maybe with great joy or with some kind of sign. Sometimes it's received with an inner kind of piece. And sometimes there is no sign at all. There's a faith moment. A new birth without any kind of confirmation from our emotions or outward manifestations.

To attach the language of the baptism of the Holy Spirit to an experience that occurs after someone places their faith in Christ is to make a theological mistake with the language of the New Testament. That is not to say that the experience the person experienced is invalid or a mistake. It could be a very powerful experience. When we are born again, we are baptized by the Spirit. And yet, growth in Christ can look very different for different believers for different reasons. To give just an example, it is possible for someone to come to faith in Jesus and have no mentorship in how to live the Christian life and so, they continue to strive to live the Christian life in the power of their own flesh. If that person later comes to an understanding of how to abide in Christ by faith, of how to rely on His power instead of their own, that person might experience a powerful sense of liberation in their Christian walk. Seeking to define that experience, they might be taught, or they might notice themselves this language of the baptism of the Spirit in the Bible, and they will say, "This is the moment when I was baptized in the Spirit, not back then." My disagreement would not be with the experience of that believer. I can affirm that they have come to a powerful crossroad in their faith. My disagreement is with using the Biblical term, "baptism of the Spirit," to describe what has just happened. That individual was baptized by the Spirit into Christ when they first believed. And we could argue whether they really just didn't believe, or now it's their first moment of belief. But that's so hard to know. It is possible to believe and then later have a very powerful experience. And we don't need to then deny the original belief, even if it's not so clear. So, this individual will assume that they truly did believe before, but that was when they were baptized by the Spirit. And now they have, for the first time, begun to yield to the filling of the Spirit to work through them. And it is a new and unique experience in their walk with Christ.

Even if I cannot come to agreement about the language with some of my brothers and sisters in Christ who use the term, "baptism of the Spirit," differently than I do, what I would really like to see agreement on is the idea that Christian maturity is not a search for some new spiritual experience. It's not something you learn through your visions, or your dreams, or I have to have this whatever I'm calling, "the baptism of the Spirit," so that I can attain maturity. Christian maturity involves learning to live in light of our new birth in Christ. It's about going deeper into our relationship with Jesus as we walk with Him and obey Him. It involves continually look back to the moment of our new birth and preaching to ourselves the truth of the Gospel as we learn to live in those truths. We don't have to go up in Heaven to grab some new truth, or down at the Earth to grab something else. It's right there before you. It's the words you spoke when you placed your faith in Jesus. You didn't understand everything you were saying and of course you don't know how to live in it. But it's learning to live in the truths of the Gospel that'll lead us, over time, to walking faithfully, loving faithfully in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's what brings about spiritual maturity. An example of what I'm talking about: to preach the truths of the Gospel, you can't do much better than the four phrases of Galatians 2:20. Preaching this to yourself each day and learning to live in it.

I have been crucified with Christ;
and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me;
and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

These truths keep us very Christ-centered. And we don't want to forget the Holy Spirit so we can jump ahead to Galatians 5 and remember the fruit of the Spirit. In 5:25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." So, living by faith in the Son of God is walking in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and it's seeing the fruit of the Spirit developed in us.

3. Where do we see the Holy Spirit at work in the book of Acts?

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit manifested in the gift of tongues that we see in Acts should catch our attention and should raise questions. But the Spirit is not present only in these four stories. So, we don't want to let the power of these stories eclipse the steady work, the steady guidance and power provided by the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people through the whole narrative.

Jesus said, "wait for the Spirit and then witness." The Spirit of God empowers and directs the people of God as they give witness to new life in Jesus, both through their words, and through the reality of the new life in them, we give witness. The Spirit's presence, His guidance, His power is a major theme in the book of Acts, and we're going to keep coming back to it as we go through this series.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 11:1-18. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What connection is there between speaking in tongues and new birth in Christ? When we consider important theological questions like this that arise out of a passage of historical narrative we need a method to help us determine what is unique to the specific context and what applies more broadly. Studying the issue in an increasing scope of context is a method that helps us interpret the issue outside the narrow context of the passage. We start with the immediate context.
Re-read 10:44-48. What does the text say?
3. Now consider the immediate context. What information is added in Acts 11:1-18 that helps you understand the phenomena in 10:44-48? How do Peter and the apostles speak about the people in Cornelius' household speaking in tongues and the Holy Spirit? What do they take away from the phenomena?
4. Now consider the broader context of the book of Acts. Read over the experience of Pentecost in Acts 2, the experience of the Samaritans in Acts 8 and the experience of the men Paul met in Acts 19. What stands out to you as similar in these passages and different? What else stands out as important?
5. The next step is to consider the rest of the New Testament. The most important passage is 1 Corinthians 12-14. What information in that passage adds to your understanding?
6. How about Romans 8 and Ephesians 5:18?
7. Why do you think there is not much more emphasis in the New Testament on speaking in tongues or being filled with the Spirit?
8. Consider the three concluding points in this lesson. Do these points sound correct to you? What would you add or change? What Scripture would you use to support your interpretation?

Lesson 17: Acts 11:19-30 The Healthy Christian Community Planted at Antioch

Introduction

We have in the book of Acts a valuable window into the kind of Christian community born from the witness of the disciples who walked with Jesus and from the fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Reading this story in Acts, one of the questions I think we ought to be asking is, “What makes a healthy Christian community?” What marks or attributes did Luke choose to highlight for us? We ought to ask both for the health of our own Christian community, and also out of a desire to see the Church spread in healthy way. We want to plant healthy Christian communities.

Luke gave us this kind of window in Acts 2:42-47. We saw in that very first expression of Christian community believers eating together, praising God together, giving out of their own wealth to care for fellow believers in need. We saw a community committed to the Apostle’s teaching, to fellowship, to the celebration of the Lord’s supper, and to prayer.

We get another opportunity to consider a healthy Christian fellowship here in Acts 11:19-30. How was the church in Antioch established? What attributes do we see in this story that could make a difference in our own communities?

Before we look for those attributes in the text let’s first consider the place of this story in the history of Gospel expansion. The planting of the church in Antioch is a unique moment. It is the first record of a Gentile fellowship in Gentile territory.

The Gospel Bridges Cultures at Antioch

As hard as the thought was for Peter to enter into a Gentile home, other Jewish believers had already broken the Jew/Gentile barrier. Propelled out of Jerusalem by the persecution following Stephen’s trial and execution, Philip crossed a major cultural barrier when he shared the Gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch. Others took the Gospel North to Gentiles in Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria. Like sparks blown on the wind, they lit a fire among Gentiles that would eventually spread throughout the entire Roman Empire.

In our last two pairs of stories about Peter’s ministry in Judea, we saw the Gospel move away from social isolationism as just another Jewish sect. We see in those stories how the Gospel leaps the cultural boundaries set in place by Old Covenant law. This is now the New Covenant. The healthy spread of the Church does not require new believers to enter into a socially isolated culture completely set off from the communities where new fellowships are planted. This is not the same system with the spread of Judaism and people having to become Proselytes and leave Gentile culture to enter into Jewish culture. It’s not required by the Gospel. It’s not required but it does still often happen. It is the practice of the Church. Missionaries quite naturally take their own culture with them wherever they go and sometimes fail to even consider that a healthy Christian fellowship in another culture should look quite different than what they are used to from a healthy Christian fellowship in their own culture. We can’t really separate our Christianity from culture. But we can operate on the principle that the Gospel is not bound by a particular culture and is free to take on new expressions when established in new places. This is a significant difference that God made in the transition from Old Covenant requirements to New Covenant requirements, and it’s going to cause us to have to think about what principles or what attributes make a Christian community, a healthy Christian community. If it’s not these cultural markers, then what is it? What makes a healthy Christian fellowship?

We saw the move from social isolationism in the last pair of stories as God led Peter across the threshold of a Gentile home. In our next two pairs of stories, this move away from Jewish isolationism will be verified and we will see a move away from central administrative control. The

leaders of the church in Jerusalem did not commission missionaries to plant a church in Antioch. And we are not going to see the church in Jerusalem attempt to establish control over the church in Antioch, at least not in this story. The story of the struggle for prestige among bishops of Jerusalem, and Antioch, and Alexandria, and Rome, that's later in Church history. That does not seem to have any apparent connection with the way church leadership is expressed in the book of Acts. Here in the book of Acts the Gospel is freed from social isolationism as a Jewish sect and freed from the administrative control of Jerusalem.

Antioch at the time of Paul

The name, Antioch, might not impress us as a major urban center, but in the first century it was immediately recognizable by anyone living in or around the Roman Empire. The province known as Syria, it was much older than Rome, it was under Persian control when Alexander the Great conquered all of the Biblical lands from Macedonia all the way to India. After his death in 323 BC, the huge area of conquest was divided into roughly four parts, consisting of Macedonia (his homeland), Asia Minor (where Paul is going to do a lot of missionary journeys), Egypt, and the largest portion, which was under the Seleucids, stretching from Syria through Mesopotamia and Iran all the way to India. In 300 BC, Seleucid I founded Antioch on his eastern border and named it after his father. The city flourished.

So, by the time of Acts, Antioch had been around for three centuries as a major city in a wealthy territory, controlling the trade route from Mesopotamia and India in the East to Rome in the West. All that wealth is going to flow through Antioch. Here is a bit of description from Timothy George's Galatians commentary. I'll just read the whole quote that he writes.

"During the New Testament period Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire [only behind Rome and Alexandria] and boasted a population of more than half a million. Its political importance derived from the fact that it served as the capital city of the Roman province of Syria. A series of Roman emperors beginning with Julius Caesar lavished attention and resources upon this "Rome of the East," furnishing it with theaters, aqueducts, public baths, a great basilica, and a famous colonnaded main street adorned with a marble pavement and vaulted stone roofs.

The Jewish community formed a significant segment of the city's population, numbering some sixty-five thousand during the New Testament era. The Jews at Antioch were generally tolerated by the Roman overlords but were occasionally harassed and persecuted there as in other large cities throughout the empire. [Not long before the arrival of the gospel] , the emperor Caligula (A.D. 37–41) had instigated a virulent attack against the Jews of Antioch. During this crisis many Jews were killed and their synagogues burned. The same kind of harassment was being carried out in Palestine as well and may account for the overly zealous attitude of many Jewish Christians there concerning issues of circumcision, food laws, and adherence to worship in the temple.

[...] Jerusalem was the epicenter for a kind of Jewish Christianity that was decisively shaped by the presence of the temple, strong Pharisaic and Zealot influences, and a Torah-centered interpretation of Christianity. Antioch, on the other hand, was far to the north of Jerusalem; it stood at the geographical and political crossroads of East and West, a veritable melting pot of diverse civilizations and cultures.¹³

That sets up a context for this community of believers that is going to be established in this major urban city and that is going to, from there, reach out into the Roman world. I'll read both of our Antioch stories together. They only take up 12 verses. Acts 11:19-30,

¹³ George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, pp. 170–172). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Another Look at a Healthy Christian Community (Acts 11:19–30)

¹⁹ So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and *began* speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. ²³ Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and *began* to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain *true* to the Lord; ²⁴ for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. ²⁵ And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

²⁷ Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them named Agabus stood up and *began* to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the *reign* of Claudius. ²⁹ And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send *a contribution* for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. ³⁰ And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

A Gospel Community Planted in a Gentile Culture

The reference to Jewish believers spreading the Gospel up through Phoenicia, which would include cities like Tyre and Sidon, and then on to Cyprus and Antioch may describe the only example of Jewish believers taking the Gospel message beyond Judea. But I doubt that. We've noted more than once that Luke provides for us only a part of the story. Luke is describing the spread of the early Church, but not comprehensively. He has other goals. One major goal is a defense of Paul. And in that defense Luke is defining and defending the Gospel message preached by Paul. This is the true Gospel message and is completely in line with the preaching of Peter.

With these goals in mind, Luke does not go into the missionary actions of the other Apostles. Luke also does not cover the whole spread of the Gospel after Pentecost. We do not know about any Jews who may have returned home after Pentecost before the persecution. After the persecution he writes in Acts 8:4, "those who had been scattered went about preaching the word." Well, how many, and about where? Where did they go preaching the Word? He only gives us, at that point, one example - example of Phillip. Here again he refers to those scattered and mentions one route out of Judea up the Phoenician coastal plain then west to the island of Cyprus and east to Antioch. I think we should assume that these are not the only destinations of the Jews who left Jerusalem after Pentecost. Jews took their new faith in Jesus back to the other regions named in Acts 2, places like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Libya, Pontus, Rome, and Arabia.

One big question in the New Testament is, how do we have such a developed church in Rome for Paul to write to? Paul had never been there. Yet, he writes that their "faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world (Romans 1:8). And Paul mentions several house churches in Rome in the closing greeting of chapter 16 of the letter. How did these churches come to be? The best guess is that some of the Jews from Rome at Pentecost mentioned in Acts 2:10 came to faith in Christ and returned to Rome before or after the persecution. They witnessed to the fellow Jews and to God-fearers in the synagogue and the church grew from there. We get that kind of occurrence here in Luke 11. Jewish believers definitely went to Antioch. Where else did they go? Luke does not say. He leaves us free to wonder.

Luke does tell us that these believers moving up the coast towards Antioch preached the Gospel only to Jews. It reminds me in Church history of the ministry performed by Anglicans in the 1700's, you know, the British Empire was spread around the world. But, for example, when the young John Wesley sailed north to America as an Anglican minister, he had no thought of proclaiming the Gospel to native North Americans. His ministry was for the British citizens living in North America. He may have traveled a long way from home, and he was serving an important function, but he was not a missionary. At least not in the more technical sense I am using in this series on the book of Acts. In that sense, a missionary is someone who proclaims the Gospel and builds up the Church cross-culturally. Geographic distance does not define missions work. Cultural distance defines missions work. Whether you're crossing culture in your same neighborhood, or whether you're crossing culture halfway across the world, it's that crossing of the culture to share the Gospel, to build up the Church, that's what makes it mission work.

In the 1700's, Anglican clergy throughout the world generally taught and preached and provided service for their own people. They were scattered but they weren't doing missions work. They accepted natives who came to them culturally; who became anglicized but they didn't significantly reach out into those cultures. The great Protestant mission movement that would take the Gospel across culture, around the world is just beginning to bear fruits in Wesley's days through the Moravians and would not truly be born until the turn of the 19th century through pioneers like William Carey. So we see that this temptation to do ministry to our own that was happening as these believers in Acts 11 went up the coast and preached just to Jews, this is something that will carry through Church history.

The vision to take the Gospel to every people group has waxed and waned through Christian history. Here in Acts 11, I think we see both the natural inclination to stick to our own people group, and also the latent drive of the Gospel to cross over cultural barriers. It is often not easy for us to proclaim the Gospel in our own culture, much less in other cultures. The Jews going up the coast had a natural connection with fellow Jews wherever they went. Not only did they share culture and ethnicity, they shared a Biblical world view. Like Peter and Stephen, they could begin their conversation with Abraham and they could bridge over to Jesus from David or the prophets. They share that with fellow Jews. They believed in one God, they revered the Holy Scriptures, they expected a Messiah. It would seem much easier to preach the Gospel to fellow Jews. After all, the Messiah was for them. And that might have been another reason the message initially went to the Jews. Many of these believers would still struggle with the same ideas of cleanliness and commitment to Old Covenant law that Peter struggled with before God made the implications of the Gospel for Gentiles clear to him. It's not clear yet to all these that had gone out.

Nevertheless, the Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations. That is the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. That is the desire of God. That is the heart of the Holy Spirit. And some of these Jewish believers caught onto that vision and began sharing the Gospel with Gentiles in Antioch. Maybe it started, as we will see often with Paul, in the Jewish synagogues of Antioch with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. The assumption might be that to start with Jews makes more sense. But as we see in the mission field today, the strongly religious people might have the closest worldview to the Gospel, but that worldview sometimes acts like a vaccination. We think it's going to be easier to reach them, but they've been vaccinated. They have received an imitation of the real thing that makes them resistant to catching true faith when it comes. Later in Acts, we are going to see this regular pattern with Paul where Jews initial respond positively only to become very resistant, while Gentiles who come from a more distant worldview seem better equipped to understand and accept the Gospel message. It seems not unlikely that something similar happened in Antioch. And as

Gentiles began to accept the Gospel message, by God's grace, the Jewish believers who had brought the message embraced the Gentiles as brothers and sisters in Christ and did not withhold from them the Gospel. According to Luke, "the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord."

The fellowship of believers in Antioch becomes the most important center for Gospel mission to Gentiles in the first generation of Christianity. Paul's three missionary journeys will be launched from Antioch. And the church at Antioch will stand with Paul in the struggle to keep the Gospel free from Old Covenant requirements. The church in Antioch appears strong in theology, and practice, and vision to spread the Gospel. What kind of foundation produced this healthy Christian movement? From the human perspective, we can identify several attributes that contribute to the spiritual health of the church in Antioch. None of those attributes is as important as the phrase we just quoted, "the hand of the Lord was with them." Christians can do all the right things, with the right heart, covered in prayer and still see very little response if God does not bring about a spiritual awakening in the hearts of men and women. We abide in Jesus. Jesus produces the fruit. In this case God's hand was with them. God had a plan for Antioch that involved a large number of Gentiles turning to the Lord.

Eight Principles of Healthy Community Displayed in Antioch

Recognizing that God is the primary and essential worker in the growth of the Antioch community, what did the people involved in the story do right? God calls us to engage with heart and mind and strength, to go about the work of the Gospel in wisdom. What wisdom can we take away from this report of the planting of the church in Antioch? I see several possible factors to consider.

First, I see the freedom of the original team of believers to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and plant a Christian community. We don't know their makeup, the makeup of this original team. They could have been young, and inexperienced, and just excited, and they were unexpectedly cast out of Jerusalem, they were making their way back home, and sharing the love of Jesus wherever they go. Or they may have had more experienced leadership. This may have been more of a plan. When they got cast out, maybe they met, and they determined to go as missionaries. Back in Acts 6, of the seven men full of the Spirit and of wisdom chosen by believers in Jerusalem to ensure fair distribution of charity to the Greek-speaking widows, one was a Gentile from Antioch, named Nicolas. Now Luke identified him specifically as a proselyte from Antioch. It is tempting to imagine that Nicolas led this group of Jewish believers to this ministry among fellow Gentiles. And he's a Gentile, he's a proselyte. So, he led them to the Gentiles in his own city of Antioch. But we can't know that.

We can't know the makeup of this band of believers. And even not knowing who they are, we can see in them a sense of freedom to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus and start this new church fellowship. We do not see them commissioned by elders in Jerusalem. We do not see them asking for permission to witness. They do not write back to Jerusalem with a request for instructions or help for leadership.

And they are also not concerned that their congregation is made up of Gentiles. I am using the term, Gentiles, though the term Luke uses is, Hellenists, which might be translated as, Greeks, in your version. It is the same word used back in 6:1 describing the Hellenistic or Greek-speaking widows. It does not mean people who are actually Greek. It is a cultural designation. Art and philosophy had risen to a high level in Greece and was spread from Macedonia to India by Alexander the Great. The Romans adopted a lot of the culture of the Greeks. A list of Roman gods is basically a renaming of the Greek gods. The Romans have adopted this Greek culture. The word, Hellenist, in the Roman Empire is something like the word, Western, today. People fell on different points of the Hellenistic continuum. It kind of depends on your perspective, where you're coming from. For example, a Korean kid in Seoul who listens to hip-hop and wears a baseball cap might be called "Western" by his parents. But he wouldn't be called "Western" by somebody from Europe. A Korean kid who grew up

in California and speaks only broken Korean would certainly appear western to relatives back in Korea. But he may have habits and values that make him appear Korean to his non-Korean friends in California.

The Hellenists or Greek speakers mentioned in Acts 6 are all Jews, with the exception of Nicolas. Those Greek speakers who opposed Stephen – but being a Greek speaker doesn't then guarantee what your culture is going to look like; sometimes it's the people who grow up outside of the country who want to hold even more strongly to the values of the country. So, then you have two different kinds of Greek-speaking Jews. – Those Greek speakers who opposed Stephen appear more fiercely Jewish than Judean Jews. But those who joined Stephen were already a step closer to the Gentile culture than Jews like Peter and John. So, they were potentially more open. Those who came to Antioch were third-culture kids who grew up as Jews but not in Judea. They grew up in Cyrene and in Cyprus. They spoke fluent Greek. Even though there is a cultural gap for them to cross in sharing the Gospel with Gentiles in Antioch, there is also similarity. They are not as far removed culturally as the Celts to the West or Indians to the East. That would be a much bigger cultural step. It's significant for Jews to go to Gentiles but at least these are Hellenized Jews going to Hellenistic Gentiles. They share something in common, having all grown up in the Roman Empire with a common language and a Greek-influenced culture. These Hellenistic Jews, they seem to lean into this side of their own identity as they witness to Gentile Hellenists in Antioch. They do not try to make them into Jews. They freely share what was freely given to them. The Gospel goes forth freely.

Second, I see the wisdom of the church in Jerusalem taking some responsibility for the health of the movement in Antioch and not just assuming this new church plant was fine on its own. Though there does not seem to be any attempt at administrative control over the church in Antioch, the Apostles are responsible for the spread of the Apostolic message, which is the New Covenant teaching they had received from Jesus. That is their commission. And it is wise to send a representative to evaluate this work that is being reported to them. You know, what is the theological foundation of this new community up in Antioch? It's wise to send somebody to see.

Third, not only were they wise to take the initiative to send someone to assess the movement, but they were wise in choosing a leader who would not take over the work, but would enhance the work. Luke describes Barnabas as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." We were first introduced to Barnabas as a man who sold one of his own fields to care for people in need. This man has character. He is generous. We were also told that his nickname was, "Son of Encouragement." And we got to see that nickname in action when he took it on himself to meet Paul and introduce him to the Apostles when everybody was still scared of Paul. We were also told that he was from the island of Cyprus: one of the places founding members of the Antioch community are from. From the standpoint of faith, of character, of personality, and culture Barnabas seems an excellent choice if the intent is to partner with and encourage a work already begun. He is not the man you send if you want to take over the work.

Fourth, I see the importance of exhortation and teaching. The Church started with the proclamation of the Gospel. And that's the foundation. It's this simple message of faith. Growth takes both perseverance in that message of faith and ongoing grounding in Biblical truth. Knowing the need for perseverance, Barnabas exhorted "them all with resolute heart to remain *true* to the Lord." And he was certainly able to teach, to help continue to ground them in the truth of God's Word.

My fifth point has to do with Barnabas going to get Saul. Though I am not sure exactly what principle we should emphasize here. It's really tempting to read into it a lot. God has raised up truly exceptional men and women over the course of salvation history. Paul is one of those people. The great majority of healthy Christian fellowships through history are not led by superstars. In fact, a

number of unhealthy Christian movements have been planted by truly exceptional believers whose extreme gifts rubbed off in an unhealthy way on the churches or movements they lead. The point here is not that the spiritual health of our church demands we call a pastor as exceptional as Paul. I'm sure that's not the point.

Barnabas was well equipped to provide the teaching that the Antioch fellowship needed. His decision to go get Paul may have been more of a blessing for Paul in the long run than for Antioch. Paul has been out of the picture for about 8 years now. Part of me wants to imagine that he has been working on a small scale in Tarsus during this whole time, just kind of quietly off to the side, when Barnabas goes and rescues him out of obscurity. That's a picture I imagine. But there is some indication that Paul may have been quite busy spreading the Gospel during these eight years. After the council in Jerusalem in chapter 15, Paul and Silas are going to take a letter from that council to the Gentiles in the churches in Cilicia. That will be another one of those moments when we get there that we have to pause and say, "Wait a minute, Luke; what churches in Cilicia? You have not told us about anybody going to witness in Cilicia." And then we will look up on our Bible map and find out that Paul's hometown of Tarsus was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia. And Paul was there for about 8 years. And maybe Paul had already done a missionary journey around his home province without anybody telling us about it.

So, we don't know if Paul was quietly serving in his hometown fellowship or out and about planting churches in Cilicia. Whatever the case, Barnabas thought Paul would be a good match for Antioch and Antioch would be a good match for Paul. And he was right. I'll draw my fifth and sixth observations from this move by Barnabas.

Fifth, as a leader, Barnabas is making space for other people to participate in the work of the Church. And sixth, Barnabas seeks to fill that space by matching the need with giftedness. Stepping back from teaching, which may not have been his top gift, but he could have done it, Barnabas creates the need. And then he goes to get someone he knows to be an excellent teacher. He may even be aware of the need Paul has to use his giftedness in this way. It's not just good for Antioch. It's good for Paul. Barnabas here chooses to lead as a coach instead of a player. He steps back, creating a space for ministry. And then he finds someone who would be great in that specific role and recruits that person to fill that role.

Seventh, the disciples are here first called Christians and I believe that says something about their own sense of self-identity. There are two words here to consider. They are disciples. And they are called Christians. Members of a healthy Christian movement see themselves as disciples. They see themselves as learners, and not just book learners. They are learning truth. They are learning about The Book. They are learning a new way to see the world. At the same time, they are learning obedience and practice. They are learning to pray, and to give, and to care, and to witness. And who are these men and women disciples of? That's the part I love. They are not disciples of Barnabas or disciples of Paul. They are not first here called, Lutherans, after Luther, or, Calvinists, after Calvin. They are disciples of Christ to the degree that they take on that name. They are Christians. They are those who follow, who walk with, who walk in the footsteps of Christ.

It seems significant that this designation would be given to a Gentile church. The Jewish believers had begun to refer to their movement as, "the Way." We've seen that already in Acts, and Paul will use that term at the end of Acts. It is not a bad term. Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life. It's a Christ-centered term. The term, Christian, might not work so well in the Jewish context. All the Jews were looking for the coming of the Christ, the Messiah. When Jewish believers did get called by reference to Jesus, they weren't called, "Christians." They were called, "Nazarenes." "You follow that guy from Nazareth." But now out of the Jewish context, when the people of Antioch wanted a way to

refer to the people who were following this new faith, they called them by a name that must have constantly been on the lips of the believers. And it's not really a name; it's a title. Those outside the movement kept hearing about Christ. "These are the ones who will not stop trying to convince you that a Jew named Jesus is King in heaven. He is, apparently, an Anointed One. He is the Christ. They don't stop talking about him, so we call them Christians." That's the mark of a healthy movement, when you ask those outside the movement, "What are they going on about? What's their favorite topic of conversation?" You know, and it's not predestination, it's not baptism, and it's not their favorite college basketball team, or their favorite European football team. What are they going on about? And those outside answer, "I don't know. Something about Jesus, who they call, the Christ." You have identified yourself so much with Jesus that this is how people outside the movement identify you. That's pretty awesome!

I'll make one last observation. We have two stories here about Antioch. The first story is about the planting of the Church. The second is about their response to a coming famine in Jerusalem. My eighth observation comes from that second story. A healthy Christian church embraces both their responsibility to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and gives out of their own resources to care for people in need. It's a both/and. The focus of Acts is on the primary mission of the Church, which is to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, lives are changed, bringing believers into a new orientation that seeks, first, to love God and, second, to love people. Loving people involves caring for their material needs. We saw that at the birth of the Church in Jerusalem, when believers shared property to care for other believers. We saw it with the distribution of funds to the widows. We saw it in Joppa where Tabitha was known for her care of the poor. And we see it here again in Antioch, when this Gentile church learns that there is a coming famine in Judea. They are not commanded to give. Nobody is requiring anything from them. They are simply made aware of the need. And they respond. They determine in their own hearts to contribute. And they send Paul and Barnabas with the relief funds as a gift of love to their Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

God's hand was at work in establishing this church. And the leaders he provided for them, the initial leaders, and the leaders in Jerusalem, and then Barnabas, they made some wise decisions that would promote her growth and maturity. And they are wise decisions that we can see. Instead of trying to reduplicate our own culture, this text gives us principles that we can try and reduplicate in any culture. From this healthy Christian community of Jew and Gentile, God is going to launch a missionary movement that will plant similar communities of faith all over the Roman Empire. And that's a vision for us, as well. A desire for health and maturity in our own communities so that we can also participate in planting healthy Christian communities all over the world.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 11:19-30. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What positive principles stand out to you when you consider how the gospel came to Antioch, before Barnabas arrived?
3. How do you understand Barnabas' responsibility? Why did the apostles send him? What was he supposed to do? Did he have an administrative function? How was he received?
4. What positive principles stand out to you when you consider Barnabas and Paul's ministries in Antioch?
5. What positive principle stands out to you when you consider the believers' response to the prophecy of famine in Judea?
6. Look over the eight principles of a healthy church suggested above. Do any of these stand out to you?
7. Considering the principles you have come up with and the principles suggested above, what is one that you believe your community does especially well?
8. What is one that you believe your community could work to improve?

Lesson 18: Acts 12:1-24 The Power of God, the Power of Man, and Angels

Introduction

Context of the Christian Worldview

God's power; man's power. The two stories in Acts 12 give us a chance to consider this irrational, continuous struggle of human powerholders wagging their finger back and forth in God's face. I have an enduring memory of sitting in my in-laws' house on the floor, telling my three-year old daughter, "Come to daddy." She was in trouble. "Come to Daddy." Hesitation. "Come to Daddy." She turned away and refused to come. I walked over, picked her up, brought her to me. "When Daddy says come, you come. Let's try again." I got up, but her back where she was, sat back down in my place, and said, "Come to Daddy." She turned toward me face on, looked me in the eye and stomped both feet in place. The battle of the wills was on. It doesn't matter how incongruous the power differential was but there was a will there that was not going to submit.

God's power; man's power. There is no comparison between the two. Still, man plants both feet, wags his finger and turns to his own plans. And he gets away with it. And not only will God allow him to turn his own way, God will allow men and women to interfere with Him, to oppress, to harm His own people involved in the spread of His own Kingdom.

Here is one of the difficult things about being a Christian. You have submitted yourselves into the hands of God who has ultimate power, who loves you deeply and yet, who will allow you to suffer. Our faith asserts the absolute supremacy of God in all matters while also recognizing that God may allow evil people to do us harm. Our good and all-powerful Father often chooses not to step in and protect us. We really do look to the end of life and to the end of this age for justice to be sorted out. And that's a tough reality to learn to live with. It is a major aspect of spiritual maturity - persistence in our belief in the goodness of God and in our trust in his love even when He allows pain and suffering to come at the hands of evil people.

The more powerful party does not always win. Though we probably need to redefine what we mean about winning. What does it mean to win in opposition to God?

The pair of stories in Acts chapter 12 set up for us the contrast between divine power and human power. In these stories, we see both God's willingness to allow evil to cause pain, and we see God stepping in to protect. The first story is about an angel sent by God to rescue Peter from execution. But the story begins with the death of James, the brother of John, the close friend of Peter. There is victory and defeat in the same story.

In North Carolina, when a hurricane or tornado comes through, it is not unusual for a person interviewed on television to give thanks that God is good. God is good! My house was saved! God is good! Our church was protected! God is good! And that is the right response, isn't it? God is good. But then there is this strange juxtaposition as you look around at all the destruction, at all that. There is this one house standing and all the houses are destroyed. Or this one church made it, but the other one is flooded or burnt down. What does that mean for those people? Is God still good? My house didn't make it. Is God good? My church has burned down. Is God good? Or are we saying that those people deserved it, or that church deserved it? You know, they were bad, they deserved it. God is good. No, of course not! That's not what the person meant when they said that. They are just so grateful that God has protected them. And it's okay to say that God is good, He protected me. As long as we're clear that God is not just good when he protects us. God is good all the time, when He protects and when He does not protect.

Here are four points of faith before we get into these two stories.

(1) God is always, by far, without comparison, more powerful than any man, woman or nation. Human power does not compare. (2) God at times allows human power to carry out human will even when that will does damage to God's people and their service of Him. (3) Even when we suffer, whether by natural disaster or human will, God is good, and God's love endures. (4) In the final day,

justice will be accomplished and those who have trusted in Christ as their Savior will be whole and will flourish.

I am not planning to argue those beliefs in this lesson. This is not the place for it. I did want to make a statement of the Christian worldview to serve as context as we consider these two stories.

We assume in our first story that Peter proclaimed God as persistently good. God was good for Peter when James died, and God was good when Peter was freed from prison, and he did not die. The two are not the same emotionally. The church grieved over the loss of James, and God is good. The church rejoiced over the protection of Peter, and God is good.

My personal experience, our personal experiences are not the barometer for the character of God. He allows the best, men like James, to suffer and die by the sword. And He works actively in our lives to protect and provide. Both are true. Human authority does, at times, win battles against the people of God. But there is an end to all things. God never loses in the end. Bet on God for the long game.

Context of Acts Part III

We have two stories here in chapter 12. This has been our pattern in this third part of Acts. We had the pair of stories with Peter healing in Lydda and Joppa. Then we had the pair of stories with Peter witnessing to Cornelius and then defending that witness. Then we had the pair of stories in Antioch with the growth of the church and that church's response to famine. And now we have a pair of stories about Herod. This is our last pair of stories. This is going to conclude the third part of Acts.

These stories help accentuate the second of two big picture themes for this third part of Acts. First, we consider how the Gospel freed Christianity from Jewish social isolationism. Peter went into Cornelius' household. Gentiles are declared clean by God through faith in Jesus apart from obedience to Old Covenant code. This truth freed Christianity to interact with all peoples around. There is no social isolationism like there was in the Old Covenant, under Judaism. Second, we also noted how the Gospel freed Christianity from administrative centralism. The early Christian Church was not controlled by a new priesthood in one central place like Jerusalem. Antioch was planted and developed in partnership with Jerusalem. Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem, but not to exert administrative control, reporting back to the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Now in Acts 12, we further recognize not only is the Christian Church not to be controlled by a centralized priesthood, it is also not to be controlled by the political administration of human government. Herod is that representation of human power through representation of human government.

Human government always wants to control the Church. That's a theme through history. And it goes badly. The Church of Jesus Christ must be free to act according to the values of Scripture under the authority of God. It cannot submit to the authority of everchanging human politics. Christianity doesn't really work well when it's depending on the power of government or the power of man. Christianity bears fruit through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 12, Herod wants to appease the state-sponsored religion by executing leaders of this flourishing, grass-roots Christian movement. He does not have the wisdom of Gamaliel that we saw earlier. You know, just leave them alone and we'll see if they're of God or not. He moves his hand against God, and it goes badly for him. He misreads what he sees as an early victory against James. He has a chance to learn and repent. He does not take it.

I've titled this lesson, "The Power of God, The Power of Man, And Angels." That's because in our first story, God exerts his power through an angel. He uses a mediator to come and rescue Peter. We have seen angels show up in Acts, but we have not talked about them yet. So, this is our chance. We've also seen the name of Herod show up before, and we haven't talked about the Herods. So, we'll take our chance there, too. In the first story, considering the power of God, I am going to address also the role of angels. And in the second story, considering the power of man, I will address the Herodian dynasty. Overall, we're looking at the resistance of the Gospel to centralized administrative control, specifically of the governmental type. We have already looked at the priesthood. Now, this is government that would control.

Peter Released from Prison (12:1-19)

Our first story is in Acts 12:1-19.

¹ Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. ² And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. ³ When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. ⁵ So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. ⁶ On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." ⁹ And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. ¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." ¹² And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened *the door*, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place. ¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers *as to* what could have become of Peter. ¹⁹ When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away *to execution*. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

The Report

This is not first report of a Christian dying for his faith, but it is the first report of one of the twelve Apostles being put to death for his belief in Jesus. The traditional record has all the Apostles except for John eventually dying for their witness. Why James and not Peter? As Jesus told Peter at the end of the Gospel of John, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me." God has a race marked out for each one of us. We do not judge the goodness of God in comparison with the races other people must run. We fix our eyes on Jesus and follow Him on the path He has for us. Peter's race is not yet done. James has reached the finish line.

Peter does get caught up in a political game. I don't think Herod's primary concern is the elimination of Christianity. Herod's primary concern has to do with his own political position. Herod favors the status quo of traditional Judaism. The Jewish historian Josephus paints Herod as positive in his support and practice of the Jewish faith. So, there's good relation there. The power of Herod and the power of the priesthood are connected. The Roman government had designated Herod as the authority who had the right to appoint the Jewish high priest. This does not mean that Herod's designs are always appreciated and promoted by the Sanhedrin. The Herodians had their opponents. At this moment, Herod desires to build good will with the Jewish leadership. And good will is political capital. You want it when you can get it. So, executing James brought about that positive response.

And Herod wants more. So, he arrests Peter, planning to make a spectacle of him before the people after Passover, at the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. When you read the story, you can see how serious Herod is about making sure Peter doesn't escape. He has got four squads of soldiers set to guard him. And he is in prison, and he is between two soldiers, and he's bound with two chains, and there's guards on the door, and there's another guard on the next door. It makes you think that, okay, Herod's aware of what happened in chapter 5 when all the Apostles were in prison and an angel at that point came and they were let out of prison. And Herod's not going to let that happen here. He's got Peter secured. There's no way this guy is escaping.

Peter is in prison because Herod is waiting for his moment. There is urgency because that moment comes at the end of the week. We've got one week. The church is praying fervently for Peter. You can imagine, during this normally festive week, bands of believers gathered in various homes, and they're not rejoicing. They are still grieving the loss of James and they are praying worriedly that Peter might follow. They had certainly also prayed for James. You cannot imagine that they didn't. And God did not answer that request. So, they don't know what's God going to do with Peter. Prayer does not guarantee an outcome. God's will guarantee the outcome. Prayer is a means by which we submit to the will of God. We do ask for things, and prayer may be a factor God uses as He is executing His plans. It may be God's will that if His people pray, then He will act in particular way. He may have decided that in advance. You know, if my people don't care, I'm not going to do it, but if my people do pray, I'm going to do it. We cannot see the mind of God and all the different factors that go into the wisdom of His plans. We know prayer matters. We know we are told to pray. We also know prayer does not control God. We trust His decision. God did not choose to answer the prayers asking Him to set James free. He didn't do that. He is going to choose to answer the prayers to release Peter.

While those believers are gathered for prayer, God sends an angel as a means of exerting His power. The angel sets Peter free, and Peter shows up at the prayer meeting. You can imagine Luke smiling as he is writing down this part of the story. I expect it was told over and over for years. You know, how they were meeting at Mark's house. "You know Mark. His Greek name is John. He struggled early in ministry but was taken under Barnaba's wing and eventually became close to Peter. He is the one that wrote the Gospel of Mark. While we were at his house. Well, not his house. His mother's house. And she had some wealth. It was a nice house. It had an outer court, like a house of the high priest, and there was this gate to the outer court. Well, Rhoda, Mark's mother's servant girl went to answer the door, and when she heard Peter's voice, she got so excited she turned right around and ran into the house, announcing with joy Peter's arrival. And we are all sitting there praying for Peter. And then she comes running in. And - can you believe it? Well, no. We didn't believe it. We thought maybe it was Peter's angel or something weird going on. Then we went to the door and, lo and behold. It was Peter! It was the best prayer meeting ever I've ever been to in my life." You can imagine the storytelling that goes on after that.

Peter did not stick around. His life was in danger, so he went into hiding. When he says, "Report these things to James," he is speaking of James the elder. We know that James, the brother of John, has been executed. We will meet James the elder at the Jerusalem council in chapter 15. So, Herod cannot find Peter. And finally, he has to give up. He leaves Judea, thwarted in his plans for extra favor after the Passover. And he returns to Caesarea, his home base as the administrative center of the province.

Angels

All right. Back to the angel. This is not the first angelic escape from prison. An angel opened the prison door in chapter 5 freeing all the Apostles, and they immediately continue proclaiming Jesus in the Temple. An angel spoke to Philip, giving him orders from God that led him to the Ethiopian eunuch. An angel appeared to Cornelius, telling him to send for Peter to come proclaim the Good News. And angel will strike Herod dead in our next story. And an angel will appear to Paul in Acts 27, reassuring him in the middle of a shipwreck that he and all the sailors would be saved.

With all these references to angels in the Biblical text, how are we supposed to understand the role of angels in our own spiritual life? This is another one of those Biblical narrative questions. Should we take these reports of angels in Acts as merely descriptive or as also prescriptive? Should we simply accept that angels show up at unique moments in salvation history or should we be looking for angels in our own walk with God? Should we be asking for messages from angels?

Let's start with Acts and then consider the rest of the New Testament.

Angels in Acts

Grouping all these angelic appearances together here in Acts, it may seem like there are a lot of them, that angels appear quite often to Christians. But when we add the ones up I just mentioned, these are only six occurrences over a period of thirty years. And the appearances are all connected to major leaders in the early Church, except for that one that strikes Herod dead. But he is a king. We do not have any references of angels at work in the lives of regular believers. We just have this one unexplained comment when the people gathered praying and Rhoda comes in, and they explained the voice of Peter by saying, "It is his angel." Well, okay, now what does that mean? That is worth thinking about. What do they mean when they say it's his angel? Are there personal or guardian angels? But in the story, we just have the believers, they are searching for an explanation of this apparition of Peter's voice. We don't know if their comment comes from an accurate recognition of spiritual reality, that these believers were saying something true, we all have an angel and maybe he can speak with our voice; or was it from Jewish tradition about angels. You know, they're reaching. They're trying to figure out how to explain this weird occurrence. But it is a comment. And it is in the Bible. And we don't get explanation here. So, we are going to have to interpret that comment based on what we read elsewhere.

What are the angels doing in Acts? That's another question. Primarily, they're giving message. Angels interact with people in Acts and throughout Scripture as messengers delivering a message from God. In fact, that's what the word, "angel," or in Greek, "angelos," means. It means, "messenger." To give a report is, "apangelo." The same root is the word for Gospel, "evangel," a good message, a good news. If you take the beginning and end off the word "evangelism," you'll see the word "angel." It is the same root word, message or messenger. Angels are messengers and more. Twice here in Acts we have angels freeing Apostles from prison so that they might continue to proclaim the Good News. And we have the angel of wrath who executes Herod.

Whether or not we should expect angels to give us private messages from God or actively protect us is a question we cannot really answer from Acts. We would have to lean towards saying, "no," I think, when we consider the rarity and uniqueness of the appearances in Acts. But maybe Acts is just silent on the issue. To consider the part angels play in our walk with God and in the life of the Church, we need to turn to the rest of the New Testament to see if we have more information; is there other revelation that can tell us about how angels operate in our walk with God. I'll start with the Gospels and then look at the Epistles.

Angels in the Gospels

The word, "angel," appears 54 times in the Gospels. Just over half of those uses refer to angels in Heaven or angels coming with Jesus at the end. They do not refer to angels interacting with people on earth. Twenty-five of those references do describe angels meeting with people in three different situations. The first group of appearances happen around the birth of Jesus, with appearances to Zechariah, to Mary, to Joseph, and to the Shepherds in the field. The second group shows angels ministering to Jesus; first, after the temptation in the desert at the beginning of His earthly ministry and second, during His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane at the end of His earthly ministry. The third group of references occurs after the resurrection, when angels appear to the women who came to care for Jesus' body.

These examples affirm the number one reason in the Bible that angels interact with people. God sends angels as messengers. In the Gospels, the message is connected to the birth and resurrection of Jesus. To this very special moment of Jesus coming into the world. Angels are also shown in the Gospel to have the power to protect people and exert the power of God. We get reference to that. We don't see it happening, but we get reference. Jesus said at his arrest,

“Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53)

Matthew emphasized more than once that Jesus will come again in power with a host of angels, thousands upon thousands. Jesus will not need them. At a word from God all things came to be and at a word from God all things can be unmade. Angels are not necessary for God to accomplish His will. Yet, in God's wisdom, an army of angels will provide a concrete and fearful manifestation of his overwhelming power when Jesus returns to establish His Kingdom. And thinking about that, we do notice in the Gospels that though Jesus could call on a host of angels, He does not call on a host of angels. He has submitted Himself over to the power of men to be abused. He holds back His own power and I reckon God holds back the angels. They will wait and join Him when He comes again. He has not come again yet. So, the amount of times we are actually directly told about angels exerting power and protecting people like with the rescue of Peter are very, very small. We don't really see that in the Gospels. And overall, the number of times angels interact with people in the Gospels and Acts is rare, and most often it involves delivering a message from God in a very unique situation, like the birth of Jesus, or the resurrection of Jesus.

We do recognize that the reality of the angelic world is clearly affirmed in the Gospels and Acts. At the same time, those appearances happen at extremely unique points in salvation history, leaving us still with the question of Biblical narrative, “Are these examples simply descriptive of what happened at the time of Jesus and the spread of the Church, or prescriptive about how we should live our lives as believers under the New Covenant?” Should we be seeking guidance and protection from angels?

This is not yet answered in the Gospels. We need especially to consider the epistles, since these letters come after the establishing the New Covenant, after Jesus' resurrection, after the coming of the Spirit, and were written to give direct instruction in theology and the practice of Christianity. So, what do these works say?

Angels in the Epistles.

The word, “angel”, “angelos,” appears 100 times after Acts from Romans to Revelation. A full two-thirds of the 100 references are in Revelation. Many of these references describe angels in Heaven. Some of them describe angels speaking directly to John. This is clearly a unique case of an angel speaking to a man, because it results in the writing of a New Testament book. This is a one-of-a-kind set of appearances. And apart from the appearances to John described in Revelation, only one other reference in the Epistles describes angels interacting with Christians on Earth. Out of the 100. If we remove Revelation and John's interaction, there's only one other reference.

The book with the next most references to angels is Hebrews. Eleven of the thirteen references in that book come in the first two chapters as a comparison, showing that Jesus both lowered himself below angels when he became a man, and yet is superior to angels as the Son of God. We do find in Hebrews the one other example I mentioned of angels interacting with believers after the book of Acts. The author quotes Jesus writing in 13:2, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Interestingly, this one example is an example of people not being aware they have interacted with angels. The stranger you do a good deed for may be an angel, but the point of the verse is, you're not going to know it.

Now, from Romans to Jude, excluding Hebrews, there are another 30 references to angels. None of these references are reports of angels appearing to people or entering into our daily life to protect people. None of these references are exhortations from church leaders like Peter and Paul for

believers to pray to angels, or seek out angels, or expect appearances from angels. And that is interesting since both Peter and Paul had their own experiences with angels, but they are not encouraging anybody else to expect or seek out appearances with angels. It's not in any of their letters. So, apart from the one reference in Hebrews which tells us we might meet an angel without knowing it, not one of the 100 references from Romans to Revelation suggests that believers will knowingly interact with angels during their walk with God on earth. So, if you're hoping that interaction with angels ought to be a regular part of our spiritual experience, then you need to accept your disappointment because that is not the teaching of the New Testament.

Could it happen? Could you meet an angel and know it? Yes. Should you expect it? Absolutely not. Angels appearing to people is extremely, extremely rare in the Biblical witness. Now, of course, I am not saying at all that we should not believe in angels, or that angels aren't protecting us without our knowing about it. God's angels are very aware of what's going on Earth and are involved in a spiritual struggle that we don't see. Elisha prayed to God, and God opened the eyes of his servant to see a host of angels surrounding the army that surrounded Elisha. God's host is so much greater than any enemy that might assail us. God's angels are at work. We know that. But we also know it does not automatically mean that God is going to command that host to intervene on our behalf. He may. I am sure we are protected in a myriad of ways without knowing about it. How many times could I have died or seriously hurt someone else in my life from playing with matches as a kid, I started enough fires, or seeing what 100 mph feels like in a car as a teenager, you know, and on and on, all the stupid things I've done? There were many opportunities for me to die. So, I sincerely believe that God protected me. I imagine he employed angels to protect me. But in the Bible, He is not encouraging us to study deeply how the angelic realm works. There is this general knowledge that we need to have but we're not supposed to focus in on learning more about the angelic realm. That's not where our focus is supposed to be.

Angels do not exist as a power source for us to tap into. Angels are servants of God, fully submitted to His will. We are not encouraged to put our faith or focus into angels. We are to know of and believe in their reality. But that is enough. Our walk with God is a personal one with Jesus. I do not need to be asking angels to protect me, or guide me, or be with me, or comfort me. I ask the Father. I ask Jesus. We go directly to God in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge the mighty host with respect and a distant love even for these magnificent fellow servants of God. And we look forward to meeting angels in Heaven, to interacting with. It's going to be amazing. But we are not seeking relationship with angels now. It's nowhere in the Bible. God is not encouraging it.

We do get a bit of caution in references to the angels. Paul writes in Galatians 1:8, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed."

No true angel will ever contradict the written Word of God. You're not looking for visions from angels. You have the written Word. Our faith is grounded in the Bible, not in visions, from angels or otherwise. We may experience a vision or dream and it might encourage us. Great! But you always test it according to Scripture and you go with Scripture.

Here is one more warning in Colossians 2:18, "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,"

Our hearts are so easily tempted away from worship of God. Easy. I see this in Christian faiths that promote praying to saints and to Mary. The practice of asking for intervention from worthy believers who have died can seem harmless. You can rationalize that. You know, what's the difference in asking for prayer from a living believer or a dead believer? And yet, what I see in that practice, which is nowhere encouraged in the Bible, and that's the main point, is the tendency to develop relationship with dead saints at the expense of developing relationship with God the Father and God the Son. Whatever the person is seeking for in a saint or in a relationship with Mary, they ought to be seeking for through Jesus Christ, through God the Father. When we are asking for protection and care and

understanding from someone else, or mercy from someone else, we are not seeking those same things directly from our heavenly Father.

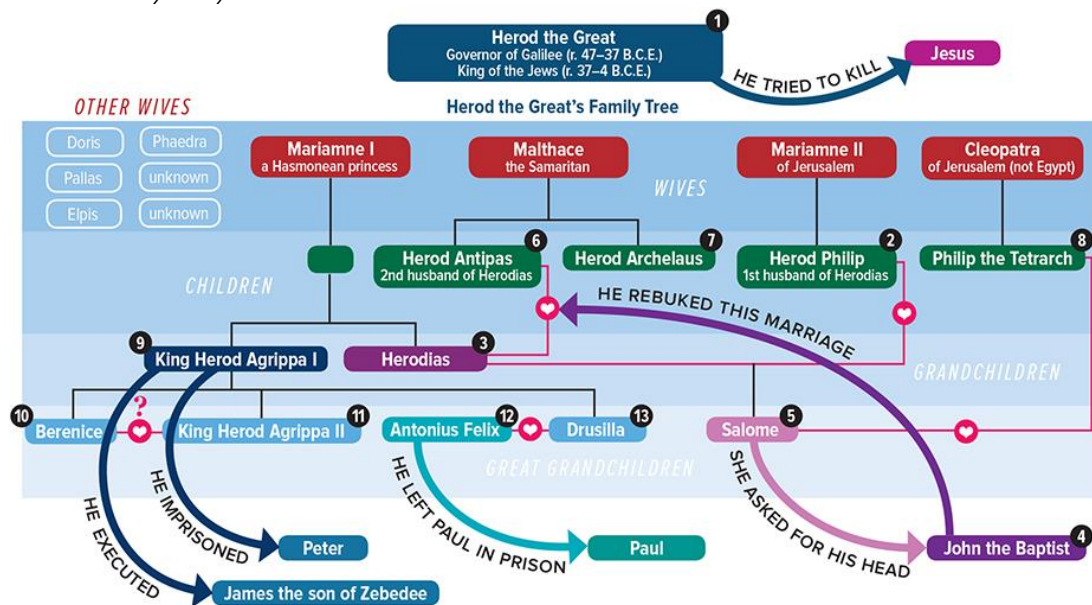
And I use that example because it is very similar to this idea of seeking out angels for help. What seems like a rational practice, you know, there are angelic beings. You can go into Daniel and read a little bit about the struggle of the angels. They're really there and even connected to our prayers so we can make it into some kind of rational idea that we ought to be seeking angels. What seems like a rational practice is nowhere encouraged in the Bible, and it is going to play on the tendency of the human heart towards idolatry. When you're seeking from someone, a dead saint or an angel, something that you ought to seek from God, then your human heart is just a step away from idolatry. Speaking to angels, at the least, sets us one step back in our relationship with God since we have to go to another being to get to Him. At the worst, seeking out angels becomes a form of angel worship, where we begin to give the glory and honor and central place due to God to another being. Putting angels in the place of God also opens the door to a type of New Age Christianity. And I've heard some Christians who are really excited about angels. There is something off there. It reminds me of the strange fire offered by Aaron's sons at the consecration of the Tabernacle back in the book of Numbers. God laid out clear instructions for service in the Tabernacle: this is how you're going to do it. And immediately, those two appointed priests began to improvise. And we read in that story, we know that God was aware that there was something wrong in their heart. There is unhealthy improvisation going on. We discover how to walk with God, serve God, love God by humbly submitting to God and learning from God according to the Word He has given us. We model ourselves after Jesus according to how Jesus is revealed in Scripture. We have freedom and opportunity for significant diversity within the principles of Scripture. We do not have freedom to improvise with dead saints or the world of angelic beings. That's so unwise. It opens the door to strange fire. What is the motive? What in your heart is driving you from God to something else? Or from Bible to something else? And at its very worst, it opens the door to the demonic, as Paul warns in 2 Corinthians 11:14, because demons can masquerade as angels of light.

The Biblical record shows that God wants us to be aware of the existence of the angelic world. But he does not want us to dwell on that world. That is true both of good angels and evil angels. I am not addressing the evil side here. We are going to have other opportunities in Acts to study spiritual warfare and the demonic. We do need to be aware of the reality of spiritual battle. But we do not make focused study of the realm of angels and demons beyond what we know in the Bible. The Bible limits our study by simply not giving us enough information. God doesn't want us to go there for His own wise reasons. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and run your race with Him. That's where Christians find the power that they live by - in relationship with Jesus.

Herod Struck Dead (12:20-25)

That's our first story, Peter rescued by an angel. Let's move on to the second of our pair of stories in Acts 12. Both stories contrast the power of God and the power of man. In the first, Herod exerted power to kill James and imprison Peter. God exerted power through an angel to thwart Herod and free Peter. In the second, Herod accepted the accolades of man. And through an angel, God struck him dead, eaten by worms, a fitting testimony to the inevitable result of the power of man raised up against the power of God. This is Acts 12:20-25.

²⁰ Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and *began* delivering an address to them. ²² The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" ²³ And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. ²⁴ But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

The Herodian Dynasty

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Herod is known to have died in Caesarea in 44 AD. So, this story helps us with our timeline of Acts by giving us a concrete reference point.

Speaking of Herod, have you ever noticed how often the name comes up in the Bible? And have you ever asked, how many different people are we talking about? You might want to pause the audio here and think about that one, just to see if you can add them all up in your head. How many Herods are there in the Bible? I am going to explain a bit of human history here. Human history loves to cover rulers and wars. This is a testimony to the power of man, the exertion of human will and human strength according to the human motive for conquest and glory.

How many Herods? Well, we start with Herod the Great. Let's review quickly the history of kingship over Israel to get us down to Herod the Great. Which nations ruled over God's people? This is the point of Nebuchadnezzar's multilayered statue in Daniel 2 and the four beasts in Daniel 7. From the exile in 600 BC to the first-century AD arrival of Jesus, Israel lacked self-autonomy. Israel was ruled by foreign powers. And Nebuchadnezzar's statue and the four beasts suggest four powers. And broadly we might identify those powers as Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. There is always and overlord. My Macedonian friends will have to forgive me for saying, Greece, instead of, Macedonia. Greece does get named in Daniel, so I'll be biblical there. It was Alexander the Great, the Macedonian, who replaced Persia followed by four generals who carved up his empire. But Alexander is the one most responsible for spreading Greek culture, so much so that we have been talking about Hellenistic culture in Acts, not Macedonian culture or Roman culture, but Hellenistic Greek culture.

These major empires ruled with over the ancient Biblical territories, but in the large expanse of territories over which they ruled, they exerted their governance with some variety. A king might be deposed, and his place given to a foreign governor. Or a native governor might be appointed. Or the king might be allowed to rule as king under the emperor: to keep the title of king. But they're paying tribute, they're ruling under, they have a covenant with that king that defines their subservience.

If you have ever read the apocryphal histories of 1 and 2 Maccabees, you know that Judea gained some autonomy under the Maccabeans while under the rule of the Seleucids, one of the Greek inheritors of Alexander's empire. The Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes IV, ruling from Syria, despoiled the Temple in Jerusalem by ordering a pig sacrificed to Zeus on the altar. And that

¹⁴ <<<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/herodian-family-tree.jpg>>> accessed 8/20/2021.

prompted a revolt. The Maccabeans led the revolt, and they defeated several Syrian armies, and they gained in the end more autonomy for Israel, but they did not gain complete freedom. They were still under the Seleucids until the Romans come in 63 BC, and then they're under Rome. Israel from the time of Nebuchadnezzar down to the time of Jesus has always been controlled by somebody else.

And after the Maccabeans, that's where Herod the Great comes along because he wrests control from the Maccabees and sets up his own dynasty - though, as a servant under Rome. He rules by the grace of Rome.

Herod's father, Antipater was a wealthy Jew who developed some pretty powerful friends, like Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. He knew some major players. And the Romans made Antipater governor in the region. I said Antipater was a Jew. That's true religiously. It's not true ethnically. He held the Jewish religion, but he was an Edomite, so a cousin of the Jews who had converted to Judaism. And he married a noble woman from Arabia, so she wasn't Jewish, either. Their son Herod then is definitely not ethnically Jewish, but he was raised religiously Jewish. After his father's death, Herod managed to make himself the unchallenged ruler over the whole region, including ancient Israel plus.

So, this is the first Herod we meet in the Gospels. I'm back to enumerating them. Herod number one: he greeted the wise men, had the babies murdered to try and kill Jesus. He succeeded in doing much evil but did not succeed in eliminating Jesus.

This Herod had many sons. His territory was split into four parts, or tetrarchies. A tetrarch is one who rules over a fourth. One son, Herod Antipas, ruled over Galilee and Perea. He is the Herod who killed John the Baptist. And the Herod who tried Jesus. He was not ruling over Judea. The son of Herod that had been ruling over Judea displeased Rome, so they took Judea away from the Herods and inserted a Roman governor. So, at the trial of Jesus, the Romans have their own man in Jerusalem, Pilate. Pilate does send Jesus to Herod Antipas because he is ruling over Galilee and Jesus is from Galilee, but Herod Antipas sent him back to say, "No, you are the governor of Judea. He is your problem."

Our third Herod, Herod Agrippa is the one here in Acts 12. He is a nephew of Herod Antipas and a grandson of Herod the Great. His father sent him to Rome as a boy where he grew up with the future emperor Caligula and became friends with future emperor Claudius. So, he is also well connected. Works out well for him. Claudius eventually rewards him as ruler over Judea and Samaria.

In Acts 25, later our fourth Herod will show up to help the governor Festus try to figure out what to charge Paul with when they send Him to Rome. He is going to be called King Agrippa in Acts, so it is easy to forget that he is also a Herod, Herod Agrippa, son of our third Herod, great-grandson of Herod the Great. His domain was to the north and east of ancient Israel in southern Syria bordering Galilee. He did not rule over Judea.

So, when you come to a Herod in the New Testament, he is going to be one of these four. They each rule over a different territory. And all of them, even if they bear the title, "king," govern by the will of Rome.

The Report

Coming back to our story, sources from the times tell us that our present Herod had taken too much liberty in fortifying Jerusalem's walls without permission from Emperor Claudius. And so, he had a good relationship but he lost good favor. And Herod is actually holding these games in Caesarea dedicated to Claudius as an attempt to win himself back into good relationship with the emperor. So, we know something about this occasion from reports outside of the Bible.

The power struggle of man between man is never ending. It's an ongoing reality. We are not given any detail here in Acts about Herod's problem with Caesar. The report here is about Tyre and Sidon's problem with Herod. Herod is trying to please Claudius, but he is angry at Tyre and Sidon. And Tyre and Sidon are trying to please Herod. These are two major Phoenician cities we are familiar with in the Bible. Through the Old Testament, they're around. And they have upset Herod somehow. We don't know how. Recognizing their dependence on the food production of Israel, they want to restore relationship. They seek to do this through back power channels, convincing the king's

chamberlain to speak on their behalf. And it looks like they're the ones instigating this praise of Herod when Herod comes out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" They're all shouting out, and Herod doesn't say anything, and he is struck dead.

"But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied." That is the inevitable outcome when the power of man is raised up against the power of God. Man dies. The Word of the Lord continues to grow. In his success in killing James, along with all his other successes as a power holder, Herod felt no fear going after Peter. The people ascribe to him the position he had taken for himself. He opposed God, elevating himself to the same plane as God. Then he died the death of a man, eaten by worms. Whether God intervenes with an angel of wrath at a certain point in life or not, Herod was going to be eaten by worms. One way or another we are all eaten by worms. We are like flowers in the field who sprout up in the morning, are dried out by the afternoon sun, and pulled up and thrown into the fire in the evening. Our existence is very ephemeral. It comes and it goes.

In a moment that we're here on Earth, the power of man is going to raise up against the Church, and it's going to have success. The Christian church does not grow through the power of man. We don't oppose power for power, or we ought not. The Christian Church is often at the mercy of the power of man. Herod killed James. Christians are persecuted. Churches are torn down. There are real losses. Real setbacks to the proclamation of Christ. This is a caution to the Christian right in so many different nations in seeing the potential for politics to help make gains on whether it's morality or the place of the Church in society. And we are to be involved in human government, that's not wrong. But to think that that's our power source? That this is where we're going to advance the Kingdom of God, through human politics is a huge mistake. Because then we start mixing up the values of the Church with the value of man, and the strategy of Church with the strategy of man, and the source of power in the Church with the source of power of man. And that's not how we operate. So, we're going to lose the more we are connected with the power of man. And in reality, the Christian Church because of who we are, and because of our principles, and because of our dependence on Christ, and our call to humility we are often at the mercy of the power of man, the power of government.

Herod killed James. Christians are persecuted. Churches are torn down. There are real losses. Real setbacks to the proclamation of Christ. Islam claimed much of the territory where the early Church had spread. Communism claimed much of the territory where the Gospel had later spread to the north. Materialistic humanism has claimed much of the territory where the Gospel later spread to the west. Human power can take a stand and can do damage to the Kingdom of God. But when man does raise his fist against God, he is misled by these transient victories. God is not impressed. The early Church, when ordered by the Sanhedrin to never again preach in the name of Jesus rightly turned to Psalm 2 in their prayer. This is God's view of man's power, Psalm 2: 1-4,

Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing?
The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying:
"Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!"
He who sits in heaven laughs, the Lord scoffs at them.

Herod killed James. Herod arrested Peter. Herod accepted acclaim as God. Herod died, eaten by worms. And the Word of God continued to spread and multiply.

In his history of Christianity, Kenneth Scott Latourette describes the ebb and flow of the gospel as a gain of territory, followed by loss, followed by new gains with the overall result of a steady growth in the Church, like the ocean's tide inevitably marching up the beach. The gospel continues to spread throughout the world, and especially in our day showing growth in the so-called third world nations. The Gospel will continue to spread until disciples are made among every people, every nation and then Jesus will return in power surrounded by a host of angels.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 12:1-19. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. When you consider the reference to angels in Acts, the Gospels and the Epistles, what stands out to you? What questions do you still have that you would like to have answers to?
3. What spiritual truths create a foundation for how you understand your relationship with God? Do angels play a role in your walk with God?
4. What benefits do you see in recognizing the role angels play? What dangers do you see in giving more focus to angels than that which is found in the Bible?
5. Read Acts 12:20-25. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. What connection do you see between the reference to Herod in this second report and the reference to Herod in the first report?
7. How would you state in your own words the overall message of this section?

Lesson 19: Acts 12:25-13:12 The Holy Spirit Initiates Gospel Mission to Gentiles

Introduction

Intentional Gospel Mission to Gentiles Begins	
12:25-14:28 The Preaching of the Good News of Salvation	15:1-16:4 The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation
12:25-13:12 Antioch to Paphos	15:1-5 Antioch to Jerusalem
13:13-52 Pisidian Antioch	15:6-21 The Jerusalem Council
14:1-20 Iconium to Derbe	15:22-35 The Letter
14:21-28 Return to Strengthen the Churches	15:36-16:4 Return to Strengthen the Churches
16:5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number daily.	

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.¹⁵

Introduction to the Acts of Paul

We enter into new territory in Acts chapter 13. Intentional Gospel mission to Gentiles begins here. We are also in chapter 13 transitioning to the acts of Paul. Remember the Acts of the Apostles is framed around the acts of two Apostles. It's not the story of all 12. The first half of Acts emphasizes the ministry of Peter. The second half of Acts focuses on the work of Paul. Through the whole, we recognize the more essential acts of Jesus Christ and acts of the Holy Spirit to bring about the spread of the Gospel through true, saving faith among Jews and Gentiles beginning in Jerusalem and radiating outward; outward geographically and outward ethnically.

Acts 13 gives us our first report of a church intentionally initiating a missionary outreach to Gentiles. Though we have already seen new birth among Gentiles by Christian Jews moved by the Holy Spirit to freely offer the gift of salvation across barriers of ethnicity and nationality. The Gospel has gone to the Samaritans, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and the Roman Centurion's household. We even have a church planted already in Antioch, the third largest city of the Roman Empire, made up of Jews and Gentiles.

We expect that other Jews have returned home after the Jerusalem awakening across the Roman Empire and Parthia, sharing the Good News certainly with other Jews and even some crossing the missions barrier to share with Gentiles. We expect that some of the Apostles may have already begun missions work, knowing that many of them will die as missionaries in non-Jewish territories. So, we are not saying that Acts 13 marks a radical, new shift in the early Church's vision of who gets to receive the Good News. On the day of the birth of the Church, described in Acts 2, with Jews gathered from North Africa to Rome through Asia Minor to Mesopotamia, the vision of the Gospel going out to all peoples was integral to God's plan for the Church from day one. The Gospel has already begun the move from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria out to the remote places of the Earth.

At the same time, what happens here in Acts 13 is unique and extremely important. God chose to use one man more than any other man to communicate to us the theology of the New Covenant. And that man would be a missionary. He would not be a pure intellectual doing all his work from a

¹⁵ David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 244.

library. He would be a theologian, and an evangelist, and a church planter. And he would not be a church planter among his own ethnic group or in his own nation. He would be a missionary church planter. His theology will be worked out intellectually and practically as evangelist, pastor, and missionary, as a preacher, an organizer, a strategist, a disciple-maker and a shepherd.

That man was a legalistic Jew of Jews, proudly tracing his lineage to the tribe of Benjamin, trained under the esteemed rabbi Gamaliel, a Pharisee committed to living out the Law, intense, dogmatic, and zealous. And ironically, this man is the man who would understand and communicate and fight for the radical new wineskin of the New Covenant that included Gentiles by grace through faith, without obedience to the Old Testament markers of the Law. He is the man who will remind the Galatians “for freedom Christ Jesus set us free”, who will explain to the Ephesians it is “by grace you have been saved”, who will declare to the Philippians “to live is Christ; to die is gain”, who will proclaim to the Colossians that “Christ is all in all” and will joyful exclaim to the Romans “I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes!”

This Pharisee of Pharisees received from God a vision of discontinuity from the Old. He was able to move to something truly new. And, at the same time, he will always insist upon continuity from Old to New. He is not going to try to recreate the Old in the New. It’s something new. And he will not allow a rejection of the Old to make way for the New. He will continue to insist that the Law is “holy and righteous and good.” He repeats that Jesus Christ is fulfillment of Law and Prophets. He grounds his teaching in quotation after quotation of the Old Testament. He saw fulfillment, and he saw new things realized. He could distinguish the shadow of ritual from the reality in Jesus.

Not only did God open his eyes to New Covenant theology. God also opened his eyes to New Covenant practice. He calls us to the “newness of the Spirit” in contrast to the “oldness of the letter.” The New Covenant is not a relaxation of righteousness as some wrongly think. It is not a new form of legalism that others have contrived. Paul follows Christ’s teaching in the sermon on the mount by exhorting us to a vision of righteousness in the New Covenant that surpasses the requirements of the Old Covenant. He calls us to be “conformed to the image of the Son”, to “walk in the good works God has prepared for us”, “to offer our bodies a living sacrifice.” He gives us God’s vision of a grace-based righteousness rooted and growing out of a new heart and the internal reality of Christ in us.

For some reason, God did not choose one of the Twelve as the primary communicator of this New Covenant vision. Matthew and John and Peter all write inspired Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit. And yet, this apostle born late, is the one God chose through whom to deliver the greater portion of the New Covenant teaching to the churches. He was a humbled man, a persecutor who was rebuked, lowered, blinded, redeemed, deeply knowledgeable in his intellectual training of the Old Testament, transformed through his encounter with Jesus Christ, and practically formed in his years of missionary evangelism and church planting.

This moment in Acts 13 is an important moment both in the expansion of the Gospel out to Gentile peoples, and also in creating the context out of which God will produce through Paul the New Covenant letters of Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. These letters will be invaluable for transforming our minds and guiding our behavior as the New Covenant people of God. And it all begins here. This is an important moment.

Luke has already given us Paul’s beginning, using that overlapping style that he loves. And before we get to the acts of Paul, we’ve got the back story of Paul already. We’ve got his conversion while we were still focused on Peter. Luke described his animosity towards Christians and his radical conversion experience. More than that, Luke has also described what we could call Paul’s first

missionary journey, which took place around Damascus in Arabia right after his conversion. Then Paul went to Jerusalem and taught there. He likely conducted a second missionary journey in and around Tarsus. Luke told us about his coming to Antioch through the effort of Barnabas and a second trip to Jerusalem with famine support and probably meeting with other Christian leaders. And this is all the back story. We are not surprised at the development of Paul's missionary vision, nor are we surprised by his theological understanding and practical ministry skill. He is not a new believer here in Antioch when he is called forth. This is a man prepared by the Potter's hands for this moment.

The last verse of chapter 12 is unfortunately cut off from chapter 13 in our Bibles. It would have been more in line with Luke's organization to end chapter 12 with the summary statement of verse 24 that completes the third part of Acts, "But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied." Acts 12:25 would have been better numbered as the first verse of then next chapter. "And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with *them* John, who was also called Mark." We can understand why this verse is often seen as the end of the third part. It is a transitional verse continuing the interlocking style we have seen with Luke use at the transition of every major part of Acts. Luke provides a summary verse reporting the growth of the Church, and he overlaps the ending content of the previous part with the beginning content of the next part.

Acts 12:25 does look back to the fact that Barnabas and Saul had gone from Antioch to Jerusalem with a gift for the church. And it looks forward to the missionary journey that is about to begin. The reference to Mark also looks back to Peter's arrival after his arrest to Mark's mother's house and forward to Mark's initial participation on the missionary journey soon to set out.

But we did not get any information in Acts 12 about Paul and Barnabas' stay in Jerusalem. That's not what this story is about. The story was about Peter. So, this reference is not a summary of chapter 12. The purpose of the reference is to redirect our attention from Peter to the report Luke is getting ready to tell us about Paul and Barnabas.

We are ready now to transition from the first half of Acts, which gave focus to the ministry of Peter and growth of the Church primarily in Israel, to the second half of Acts, which gives focus to the ministry of Paul and the missionary spread of the Gospel out among Gentiles. Luke signals to us this major transition in an interesting way with a small detail that is kind of like a blinking light. It's small, but it's clear. In Acts 13:9 when he comments "But Saul, who was also known as Paul..." I have been calling Paul, "Paul" through the first half of Acts, so this might not strike you as strongly that we haven't used that name yet. Luke has not called him, Paul, once before 13:9 and he is not going to refer to him as Saul after 13:9, except when Paul is quoting his own conversion story. He will call himself, Saul. The way Luke is using Saul's name - Paul's name - signals to us a transition from the primarily Jewish focus of the first half of Acts to a primarily Gentile focus of the second half of Acts.

In Paul's day, Jews interacting with Gentiles commonly chose a second Greek name to go by. If you have any friends from China, you are familiar with the idea, since Chinese people often choose an English name to use in English speaking contexts. So, Jews of the day did the same thing. They have their Jewish, their Hebrew name, and then they choose a Greek name that would sound better in Greek context. Paul is not a new name given him by Jesus, like with Peter. Peter's Hebrew name was Simon. Jesus did not give Simon the new name, Peter. Jesus gave Simon the new Hebrew name, Cephas. "And Simon, you will now be called, Cephas," which means, "rock". Peter, then, is the Greek name that also means, "rock." Luke wrote Acts in Greek. And so, he used the Greek name "Peter" for Peter throughout. He did not change names for Peter like he does for Paul. That's another thing that makes the shift from Saul to Paul even more apparent. He only does this with Paul. And so, it becomes obvious to us that this change from Saul to Paul in Acts is coinciding with the shift in Luke's reporting, which is now going to begin to emphasize Gentile ministry. Saul is now going to the Greek speaking Gentiles. And so he will from now on be identified as Paul. This is the name we know him of because he has become so identified as the Apostle to the Gentiles, we don't know him by his Hebrew name. We know him by his Greek name, the name he used on his missionary journeys.

Introduction to Acts Part IV

So, we have a transition from the first half of Acts to the second half of Acts. The first half contained three major parts, which all ended with a summary statement. The second half is going to contain three major parts, which are all going to end with a summary statement. So that means we are not only starting the second half of Acts here in chapter 13. We are also starting the first part of the second half of Acts, which is the fourth part of the book of Acts. And I am just about ready to get us into the text. But before we do, let's consider very briefly the structure of this fourth part of Acts which I have titled, "Intentional Gospel Mission to Gentiles Begins." So that's our title for this fourth part - "Intentional Gospel Mission to Gentiles Begins."

And this fourth part of Acts can be divided into two major movements. David Gooding titles the first, "The Preaching of the Good News of Salvation." And this movement covers what we traditionally call "the first missionary journey of Paul." That's where we're going to get the preaching of the Good News of salvation. Gooding titles the second movement, "The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation." And central to that movement is the Council of Jerusalem, where the application of Jewish law to Gentile believers will be discussed. So that's why we're calling that, "The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation." Each movement contains four sections. In the first movement, "Preaching of the Good News of Salvation," we begin with section one, "Antioch to Paphos," then move in section two to "Pisidian Antioch," then in section three we cover "Iconium to Derbe," and finish in section four with the "Return to Strengthen the Churches". Then in our second movement, "The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation," which also has four sections, we begin with section one, "Antioch to Jerusalem," then we move in section two to the "Jerusalem Council", then in section three we're going to cover the "Council's Letter," and we'll finish section four with another "Return to Strengthen the Churches". So, these two movements kind of line up with four sections each that are, in a sense, parallel to each other.

All right! Now we're ready for our text in this lesson. We begin Acts part IV with section one, "Antioch to Paphos," with a report that includes both the commissioning of Barnabas and Paul, and a spiritual power encounter. The Holy Spirit is prominent in both halves of this section. I'll address these two halves separately. We start with the commissioning in Acts 13:1-3.

The Commissioning of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:1-3)

- ¹ Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."
³ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

The Assembly of Antioch

Let's consider from these three verses how intentional Gospel mission to Gentiles began. In Antioch there is a church. We have recognized that the more literal translation for the word, "church," is, "assembly," from the Greek, "ekklesia". The most important point from the translation is to recognize that the word, "church," in Acts never refers to a building but always to a gathering of people, a gathering of believers.

I have heard preachers point out that in "ekklesia," "kaleo" means, "to call," and the prefix, "ek," means, "out," so "ekklesia" is "called out of". And that's fun, it preaches, but it's not very scholarly. You cannot accurately determine a word's meaning by breaking down the parts of a word. That works sometimes, but only sometimes. For example, if you break down the word, "butterfly," into its component parts you get, "butter," and, "fly." Imagine that image for a moment. You could never get from the word, "butter," and the word, "fly," to the true meaning of the word, "butterfly." Maybe you could if it was, "flutterby." That would make a lot more sense. We could go with "flutter" and "by." So, before we say that "ekklesia" means, "called out ones," or, "called out of," we have to show that Greek speakers thought of that meaning when they used the word. Or at least that Christians

attached this new meaning to the word. And I am not aware, I haven't seen any writings or studies where that meaning emphasized, either in secular Greek usage, or by early Christians. It is not a bad meaning to apply to the people of God. We are the called-out ones. We are called out of the Kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of light. There is just no proof that I am aware of that easily Christians thought of that meaning when they used the word, "ekklesia."

The word had a simple use in Greek. It simply meant, "an assembly of people." The town clerk of Ephesus uses the word in Acts 19:39 to refer to the mob of people that had gathered in the city's theater. There they are an unlawful *ekklesia*, or unlawful assembly. The word did have a more technical sense that could have been meaningful to early Christians who might have thought of it this way.

In the Greek democracies, the gathering of legal voters, free, landowning male citizens were the *ekklesia*, the city assembly. Antioch is not a Greek democracy, but reference to the assembly of Antioch could bring to mind, for a Greek speaker, the idea of a city assembly. That idea may lay in the background for Hellenized Gentiles when they hear the phrase, "church of Ephesus," you know, "assembly of Ephesus," or, "assembly of Corinth," the "church of Corinth". Like there is an assembly in the political sphere, there is a more important assembly in the spiritual realm, that is concerned with the spiritual growth, and benefit, and blessing of the city. The church is the assembly of believers in Jesus Christ that cares about the city. We belong to that assembly, the assembly of the Kingdom of Heaven in Antioch, or in Zagreb, or in Winston-Salem, or in Chisinau. The word brings to mind our identity as citizens of a spiritual kingdom. And so, the word also brings to mind our unity with all the other true believers in our city. Each local gathering of believers, whether a church of 5000 or a church of 15, is part of the assembly of that city. Or more accurately, we should say that the born-again believers in each local church who have truly placed their faith in Jesus are members of the assembly of Jesus Christ in that town. And unlike the Greek democratic assemblies of free, landowning, males, the Church of Jesus Christ, from the very beginning, was made up of male and female, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. There is not a white, Latino, black division in the assembly that is the Church. There is no division based on political party. If you are in Christ, you are in Christ, and you are in His assembly.

So, when you place your faith in Christ, like it or not, you enter into a universal assembly, a universal church of all who truly believe in Jesus Christ. Also, like it or not, you are automatically part of the assembly of believers in a given town or city. The church, the assembly of that place. That is a spiritual reality. You don't get to choose that. When you enter into Christ, you enter into His body, into His assembly, His Kingdom. And you are also called to become a member of a local expression of the Church. And you do have choice about that, whether you will be obedient to participate in a local assembly.

When Luke talks about the church in Antioch or the church of Corinth, he envisions both the gathering of all believers in a city, so everybody in the city who is truly a believer, and the local expressions of that church, which in his day were various house church gatherings. And all these house churches made up the church of Rome, or the church of Antioch, or the church of Ephesus.

The Leaders of the Assembly

Now, in this church early believers understood that leadership was basic to their organization. Luke has already referred to elders giving leadership to the church of Jerusalem. On his missionary journeys, Paul will appoint elders for churches that are planted in various towns and cities. The word, "elder," is not used here in these three verses, though we might imagine that that is who these men are. Instead of referring to them by a title, Luke refers to them by ministry role. And I think it's right to assume that elders are active in ministry. They are people who are doing ministry, but they are people who also are gifted for ministry by the Holy Spirit. And here, they are prophets and teachers of the assembly in Antioch.

The text could mean that some of these men are prophets and some are teachers. Both are spiritual gifts. The commentators I have read think the text leans towards indicating that all of these men as both prophets and teachers. The distinction is not really clear cut. Let's think first about prophets. Old Covenant prophets are not primarily tellers of the future. Though that does happen. And we saw it happen in Acts 11:28 with Agabus foretelling a famine. Even so, prophets are primarily those who call people to Covenant obedience, exhorting the people of God with the blessings that come from obedience and the curses that come from rebellion. So, we're calling people to the Covenant in Scripture and to obey, and to see in the future what's going to happen if people follow God's Word, or if people rebel and walk away from God's Word. This is how I think about it in my mind. I think about prophets as those who apply the Word of God to the people of God in their current circumstances. I believe that prophets are very aware of how the current social and political reality around the people of God should be addressed from a Biblical point of view. A very select group of prophets, a smaller group of prophets have been used by God to communicate the infallible Word of God to the people of God.

So, if you believe the gift of prophecy is still in operation in the Church today, it is important to make a distinction between prophets who speak the infallible word of God - we could call those "capital P" Prophets, like we did with the "capital A" Apostles. We should distinguish between those Prophets with what we might call "little p" prophets, who are led by the Spirit to apply the word of God to the contemporary circumstances of the Church in society, but who are not themselves speaking the revealed Word of God. The importance of the distinction is both to recognize that "capital P" prophecy has ended with the establishment of the canon. We are not expecting prophets today to give us Scripture. So even when the Holy Spirit is leading people to communicate truth from God today to apply in our society, we do not give that communication the same level of authority as the Bible. We see the prophets applying the Bible, and not producing new Bible. When a person claims to speak the very Word of God, they must be held to the highest possible standards. If you claim that you know your word if from God, there is a Biblical standard that applies to you, and it's in Deuteronomy 18:20-22, which states,

²⁰ 'But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' ²¹ "You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' ²² "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

If somebody is going to stand up and say, "You are speaking from the Word of God," we should expect 100% precision and we should keep them accountable. That is not a standard you want to bring on yourself. If you believe that God is speaking through you for someone else, I would recommend taking a humble approach, not saying, "God tells me to tell you," but instead saying, "I believe that God has given me a word for you. Or it seems to me the Spirit is saying..." Come at it with some humility, recognizing that you might be wrong. It might not be the Spirit you're feeling. This is a bigger discussion. And Luke does not give us here anything to help us understand the nature of prophecy among the early Church, or how it should be understood after the formation of the New Testament. I am bringing this up briefly because we've already had some prophets and we're going to hit more prophets as we go through Acts. And I am comfortable with it being a little ambiguous in the book of Acts, because we are in transition. We don't yet have the New Covenant. And we know that Paul was speaking the very Word of God at times. So, I'm okay with this being a unique reality but for us, we need to make a distinction. I would agree that a kind of spiritual gift that we can call, "prophecy," is available today, but I would not agree that the "capital P" Prophecy of revealed Word on the level of Scripture is available today. Nobody's words get put up on that level. I know that's debatable. I'm just letting you know where I stand as I teach through Acts.

To distinguish teachers from prophets, I recognize the gift of teaching as helping people understand the Word of God intellectually, emotionally, and practically. The gifts are similar, but for a prophet I'm looking at more specifically addressing current social or political reality and applying Bible to that reality. And the teacher is more broadly addressing spiritual truth without a definite focus on how it applies in our current social situation. And I personally would call myself a teacher, but not a prophet.

We do not know much about these prophets and teachers who provide leadership for the Antioch assembly. The list starts with Barnabas who we know. The second prophet-teacher mentioned is Simeon, also called Niger, apparently because of his dark complexion, since "niger" is "black" in Latin. Lucius is a common Latin name. He is from the province of Cyrene, which is modern day Libya on the northern coast of Africa to the west of Egypt. Lucius could have been one of the original founders of the church since those men were from Cyprus and Cyrene, but we don't know. Manaen is the Greek form of the Hebrew word for, "comforter." So maybe he is another Barnabas. He was from a high level of Jewish society, being raised with Herod Antipas. That's not the Herod whose death we just read about, but the son of Herod the Great who killed John the Baptist. That Herod was born in 4 BC, so Manaen is an older man in his fifties. And Saul completes this interesting band of brothers who served together in Antioch.

Luke tells us they were ministering to the Lord and fasting. Ministering to the Lord had a more specific sense in the Old Covenant when a priest performed ceremony in the Temple. He was ministering to the Lord. In the New Covenant sense, it takes a broader meaning, like the idea in Romans 12:1 of offering your body as a sacrifice, which is your spiritual service or worship. That language from Paul evoked the images of a priest in the Temple but when you look at the application in Romans 12:13-14, everything you do is your spiritual service of worship. So your service to the Lord, or ministering to the Lord could apply to any role you are fulfilling for the sake of the Lord.

Interpreting this passage, one option would be that, as these men are performing their ministries of prophesying and teaching during a time of fasting, the Holy Spirit lead one of them to prophesy directly in regard to Barnabas and Paul that they should be set apart for a special mission. Another option is to read ministering to the Lord as a worship gathering. And the congregation may have assembled together in worship, and they were fasting, and in that assembly the Holy Spirit gave the message as they ministered to God in worship. However, we interpret ministering to the Lord, we clearly see these leaders engaged with God. They are worshiping, they are doing ministry, and they are expressing devotion through fasting. We also see clearly the initiative of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who said, "Now is the time. Set them apart for what they need to do."

The Missionary Vision of the Leaders

We do not know if the assembly in Antioch had been thinking about taking the Gospel to other provinces in the Roman Empire. This church started with a missionary vision when Jews from the Jerusalem persecution crossed the Jew-Gentile barrier to give witness to Jesus Christ. Perhaps they had already begun to seek God's direction about a missionary journey. They were certainly receptive when the Holy Spirit said, "Set them apart," and then you said, "Set them apart for what?" Set apart for a missionary journey. So we don't know if that was already in their minds if the Holy Spirit said even more. Whatever the case, they were ready; they were prepared; they were mentally and emotionally on board with the idea of going into missions.

Luke makes clear to us through reference to the Holy Spirit that the plan to go to the Gentiles is not first Antioch's agenda. This is God's agenda. By embracing that missionary agenda, that agenda of God's became the agenda of Antioch: the agenda of the assembly. They embrace God's mission. So, we also notice that they send their best into the mission field. Can you imagine a large, growing, fruitful church led by two very prominent leaders in the Christian world choosing to embrace the idea of missions by sending out both of their famous leaders? I find that pretty hard to imagine that

any church with one famous leader would give them up, but a church with two well-known famous leaders would give both of them. And yet, that is what they did. They sent their best.

And before sending Barnabas and Paul, they set them apart. That is what we mean when we use the word, commissioned. To commission is set apart for a mission. It may mean that they are commissioned by the authority of the church in Antioch. Or it may mean that the church in Antioch recognizes the will of God for this to happen, without a sense of authorizing the mission. They accept it as God's will, and they agree with it. We will have to consider Paul's relationship to Antioch later when we have more to go on.

So, without bringing into question of authority, we see here the church calling on God to bless Paul and Barnabas. Fasting and praying and laying on hands is how they do that. "God, bless these two brothers as they seek to fulfill the work you have called them to do!" Something like that. The church joins in with God's agenda for the salvation of people from every nation by taking time to gather in prayer and fasting, and having a service of blessing for Barnabas and Paul. They send them out wholeheartedly, but not with the idea that they are sending them out by their own initiative. Their wholeheartedness comes from willing submission to the Holy Spirit. Luke makes that clear in verse 4, "So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia..."

A Power Encounter on Cyprus (13:4-12)

The church in Antioch would have had to wait some time for word to come back detailing the outcome of the mission. We don't have to wait at all. The second half of this passage is like reading Paul and Barnabas' first missionary prayer letter describing where they went, their initial success and a serious power encounter. This is Acts 13:4-12,

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they reached Salamis, they *began* to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. ⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, ⁷ who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who was also *known as* Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, ¹⁰ and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?" ¹¹ "Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

The Gospel Goes Out To Jews And Then To Gentiles

Intentional Gospel mission began through the initiative of the Holy Spirit. And in the first report we receive back from the mission, Luke describes a power encounter between Paul, a servant of the Holy Spirit, and Elymas, described as a son of the devil. Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an attack on the kingdom of darkness. The terms of salvation are non-negotiable. People who live in the kingdom of darkness will be threatened by the Gospel and will push back.

Seleucia is the port town of Antioch, also founded by the first king of the Seleucid Empire. From there, they sailed to Barnabas' home island Cyprus. They landed at Salamis on the northeastern side of the island and worked their way to Paphos on the southwestern side. So, kind of a diagonal down through the island. We are told for the first time that John, whose Greek name is Mark, had come along as a junior member of the missionary team.

We are also told that Barnabas and Paul proclaimed the Word of God in the synagogue of the Jews. And Paul will continue to follow that pattern. Even though he plans to preach to Gentiles wherever

he goes, he routinely begins his proclamation ministry in the synagogue. There may be multiple reasons for this strategy. Theologically, Paul may recognize an obligation to go to the Jews first, not because they have greater value in God's eyes, but because God made specific promise to the Jews and as God's ambassador, professing the arrival of the Messiah shows the faithfulness of God in keeping His promises. And also, since the Jews everywhere do profess to believe in Yahweh and to be waiting expectantly for the Messiah, they should rightly expect someone claiming to be sent by Yahweh to immediately bring them the news of the Messiah's coming. I imagine this would be apparent to Jews and Gentiles. It would sound strange to Gentiles if Paul came proclaiming the Messiah of the Jews and they asked, "So, what did our Jews say when you told them?" "Oh, I have not made it around to the synagogue, yet." "But didn't you say they have been expecting King David's Greater Son to return for about 600 years ever since Jerusalem fell to Babylon?" "I did say that, but you know, I am not really sure they want to hear about the Messiah. I'll get to them." "Ok. That's weird."

I think it would sound odd to show up in a town proclaiming the Jewish Messiah without talking to the Jews. It would sound odd to the Gentiles, and it would sound antagonistic to the Jews to be setting yourself up in opposition to them. Paul is not responsible for the response of the Jews in a given town. He is responsible to share with them the Good News of the Messiah. And he would have to, in order to maintain credibility with Jew and Gentile. No matter how much he wanted to build bridges with Gentiles, he is not going to deny or alter the basic fact of the Gospel that Jesus was born to a Jewish family as the long expected Jewish Messiah. Working out from that historical reality, Paul will declare that the Jewish Messiah is also the Savior of the World.

Paul does not expect to find reception among all Jews. He knows himself how violently he responded to the Good News when he first heard. Paul knows they will have to deal with that segment of the synagogue, the Law-abiding, Pharisaic segment that zealously opposes him. They are also going to have to deal with the syncretic segment, those Jews who have mixed Jewish belief with the paganism of Roman society. In our day, we face a similar syncretic problem with those who profess to be Christian, and yet combine Christian beliefs and terminology with a very modern mixture of New Age, or Near Eastern, or self-help spirituality. People who claim to speak for Jesus in society but have separated Jesus from the revelation in the New Testament. Paul and Barnabas encounter something like that here in the Jew Elymas.

The Gospel Stands Strong Against Religious Syncretism

Sergius Paulus, the very Roman sounding proconsul or governor of Cyprus hears of Paul and Barnabas and, apparently, forms a positive opinion of them. He summons them. That's how you get an audience with a Roman governor. You are summoned. You don't just show up. Elymas, the Jewish magician, had also made an impression on Sergius Paulus. Ironically, his Hebrew name is Bar-Jesus, son of the savior. You know, very spiritual-sounding name. Apparently, he has gained the status of spiritual advisor or counselor to the proconsul. It is not surprising that a Roman interested in Jewish teaching would initially make little distinction between the message of Bar-Jesus and the message of Paul. I see that in Zagreb in the Muslim immigrant community. It is not unusual for spiritually seeking Muslims to view the Nazarenes, the Baptists, the Roman Catholics, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Jehovah Witnesses as all basically the same: they are all Christian. My friends Shayan and Donya just discovered that one of the women in their church was recently baptized by the Mormons. She had not stopped coming to their church. She did not see a significant difference. I think these people coming from a completely Muslim culture are just as confused as we would be if we were introduced at the same time to three Muslims, one Sunni, one Shia, and one Sufi. We know about Allah and Muhammad and the pilgrimage to Mecca, but that's about where our knowledge ends, so the

distinction between Muslim groups would be beyond us. So, there is no surprise here that Sergius Paulus is willing to hear both from Elymas and Paul and Barnabas. They're Jews. They have some credibility. They're interesting. And he might be surprised to learn that Elymas and Paul have anything significant to disagree about.

Elymas, on the other hand, immediately feels threatened by Paul. He knows. He sees Sergius Paulus' attraction to the Word of God preached by Paul, and he seeks to turn him away from the faith. Paul's response is fierce. "You blind guide. You whitewashed tomb full of dead men's bones. You serpent. You viper who makes others twice as much a son of hell as yourself." Wait, no, that's not Paul, is it? Whose words were those? That's Jesus. That's Matthew 23. Paul says, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?" Paul's words are harsh, but if we compare the two, if there is any difference, Jesus' words are the harsher words.

It is a common modern mistake to downplay the wrath of Jesus. Like, somehow, Paul is fiercer than Jesus. That's not good Bible reading. But you'll notice both with Jesus and with Paul, it's not easy to bring out this level of intensity. It doesn't happen much in the Gospels for Jesus, and it doesn't happen a lot in Acts with Paul. So, what brought about that verbal assault in Matthew 23? Jesus' words are aimed at the Pharisees. And He delivered eight woes or curses, repeatedly accusing them of hypocrisy. The legalism of the Pharisees is quite different from the syncretism of Elymas. What makes them similar is that both claim to represent Yahweh, and in their positions of influence over others they both denounce the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It makes me also remember the harsh words of Jesus for a person who causes one of the little ones to stumble. Something about a millstone being tied around your neck.

Neither Jesus nor Paul respond to non-Jews this way. Neither Jesus nor Paul respond to individual sinners this way. If it were a matter of Elymas rejecting Paul himself in a one-to-one conversation, I don't think we'd get Paul confronting him in wrath like this. But by taking a position of influence at this high level of society - so the Pharisees Jesus were confronting had an influence on all of Jewish society - and this Elymas has the ear of the proconsul of the island. has taken on the role of a false prophet of Yahweh. He is pretending to be something he is not, and he is using that position to keep Sergius Paulus and through him, the people of Cyprus, bound by a false message, and he is doing it simply to maintain his own position. So, to claim to speak for Yahweh while rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ and promoting a false revelation with influence over other people, that is a way to bring the wrath of God on yourself. That is true of legalistic Christian ministers and liberal New Age Christian ministers. That is not a position you want to set yourself up in.

And the result here is the kind of power encounter you might expect in the day of Elijah. Notice once more, it is not initiated by Paul. This is a power encounter between the spirit of darkness whose influence lies behind the deception of Elymas, and the Holy Spirit. These are His words and His actions as He works through His servant Paul. Paul does not strike Elymas blind. The Holy Spirit strikes Elymas blind. He is in fact a blind guide, leading the blind. And the Holy Spirit causes his physical reality to match his spiritual state.

And what should that remind us of? Somebody being struck blind in the book of Acts?

"You will be blind and not see the sun for some time...and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand." It says that Elymas would be led by the hand but what I just quoted is from Acts 9, when the curse of God fell on Paul. Paul could say, "I once was blind but now I see." We do not know whether Elymas is going to get the message or not. So, the curse on him is an opportunity for repentance. But it's also a protection of the proconsul.

The result that we see, what we do know is that the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. The result in this case is not only the salvation of an individual. The result is the salvation of individual who has significant influence over tens of thousands of people living on this strategically located island off the coast of Asia minor. The Gospel had already begun to spread on the island. And rather than exerting influence to quell that growth, this Roman governor is going to believe and support that growth.

Intentional Gospel mission initiates power encounters. We cannot mitigate the terms of salvation. We cannot make compromise in agreement with the spirits of darkness, with the spirit of this age. There is no other name by which a person can be saved other than the name Jesus Christ. You cannot do Christian ministry without communicating that fact. That is our witness. No other name but Jesus. And we do not define who Jesus is. Jesus is not your best friend who doesn't care if you sin. That's not Jesus. We receive the truth that He has revealed about Himself. He is God. He is Savior. He is the one who became man and died to pay for the penalty of death we owe for our sins. Death could not hold him. He rose from the grave. He ascended into heaven. He sits at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. All who believe in His name are born again of the Spirit and enter into His Kingdom.

When Jesus came into the world, He initiated a power encounter against the forces of darkness. Hating the light, the ones He came to save put him to death. When the messengers of Jesus go out into the world to proclaim the Gospel, they will be opposed. The natural state of humankind is opposition to the spiritual truth of Jesus Christ. And yet, as we see here at the beginning of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, the power of darkness in this world is no match for the power of the Spirit of God who sends out His people.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 12:25-13:12. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Why might Paul describe the leaders in Antioch as prophets and teachers rather than elders?
3. By whose authority are Paul and Barnabas sent out? Whose idea is it? What role do the apostles in Jerusalem play? What role do the elders play? What role do Paul and Barnabas play? What role does the Holy Spirit play?
4. What questions do you have about the Christian assembly, leadership and missionary vision in Antioch that cannot be answered from this brief text? Which of those questions do you think might be addressed later in Acts?
5. What stands out to you when you consider Sergius Paulus and Elymas? What parallel to these two men do you see in your own culture and times?
6. Do you expect such displays of power in your own gospel witness as you see here with Paul? Why or why not? (How does the rest of the New Testament help you think about that?)
7. What are less dramatic, but very real ways that you see the power of the gospel at work? What are some ways the power of the gospel confronts the kind of religious syncretism (mixing of traditional religion and societal spiritualism) that you see in your own culture?

Lesson 20: Acts 13:13-52 Paul's Speech in the Synagogue of Promise and Fulfillment

Introduction

One way Luke communicates the theology of the Gospel is by providing for us speeches made by Stephen, Peter, and Paul.

In the first half of Acts, Luke provided for us the one long speech by Stephen and six speeches from the mouth of Peter. The longest speeches from Peter came at Pentecost and after healing the lame man. Peter also made two short speeches on trial before the Sanhedrin. And he gave a speech at Cornelius' house and then one more in Jerusalem, defending his actions at Cornelius' house.

In the second half of Acts, just as we had six speeches from Peter, we get six speeches from Paul. The first three speeches are delivered during the three missionary journeys, each to a very different audience. We have this speech in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Then we will have a speech to a gathering of philosophers in Athens. And one more farewell speech to the elders of the church in Ephesus. The later three speeches are all examples of Paul making a defense of his Gospel ministry before a Jewish crowd, before the Roman Felix and before the King Agrippa.

The speech we are addressing in this lesson is unique as the only example of what Paul said while preaching in a synagogue. And he spoke often in synagogues across the Eastern Roman Empire. This is our only example of the kind of teaching he gave.

As we go through the speech, I will draw your attention to the similarity between Paul and Peter's speeches to a Jewish audience. And I will point out connections in this speech with Paul's later letter to the Romans. Looking back at Peter's speeches and ahead to Paul's later self reveals a consistency of teaching about the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the first generation of the Church. Paul agrees with Peter. Paul also agrees with his later self. He may continue to mature in his knowledge and experience of the Gospel. You hope he does! But his maturity moves him deeper into the basic Gospel truths; not away from those truths on to something else.

The structure of our text has a short introductory arrival in Pisidian Antioch, followed by a long speech in the synagogue, concluding with a description of the response of Jews and Gentiles in the city. We start with Barnabas and Paul arriving. This is in Acts 13:13-15.

Paul and Barnabas Arrive in Pisidian Antioch (13:13–15)

¹³ Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perna in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ But going on from Perna, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

Paul and Barnabas have sailed north from Paphos on Cyprus to the coast of what is modern-day Turkey. Luke gives us a very brief travel log, "But going on from Perna, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch." That very short statement took 200 kilometers, or 125 mile journey into a mountainous region. So that was some exertion. In our next lesson, when we move on to Iconium, I will consider some of the geography of Asia Minor and the possible ministry strategy Paul and Barnabas were operating under.

John Mark did not participate on that trek inland. Scholars have guessed that maybe he didn't appreciate the shift that was taking place between the leadership of Barnabas and Paul, as Paul became more prominent as the missionary journey went on. Maybe he disagreed with Paul's invitation to Gentiles that they enter into the Kingdom without practicing customs of the Mosaic Law. Maybe he disagreed with the arduous plan to strike inland. Maybe he struggled with pride and submitting to Paul. Maybe there were personality tensions. He just didn't get along with Paul. I have

been taught that the number one reason missionaries leave the field is that they cannot get along with other missionaries. It could be as simple as that. And we get no hint here that John Mark's leaving was a negative thing. But later we will see that it left a very bad impression on Paul. It is not surprising that Luke gives us just this brief comment without saying more. This is Luke kind of alerting us to something that is going to come. It is kind of a cliffhanger, or a foreshadowing in the text. It is consistent with his style of making side references that prepare us for a story once we get to it. We'll come back to what Paul and Barnabas thought about John Mark and his leaving them.

So they continue on without him, arriving at this city, Pisidian Antioch. They may have had other interactions in the city before the Sabbath day. But Luke takes us directly to that speech in the synagogue. Now, even though Barnabas and Paul had probably never been to this part of Asia Minor, they would have found the synagogue quite familiar. It would be like growing up in a Christian denomination. You know, if you grew up in a Christian church and you visit a city that you've never been to, and showing up at a church, there's another one that is the same denomination you grew up in, or it's pretty much the same, you know exactly how to find out when services starts. You have a good idea about how you're going to be greeted when you go in. You know if you just kind of walk in and sit down, people will mostly leave you alone. You know where to go, when to stand, when to sit. They might not understand the conversation in the local language; that's something kind of new, going to a new city, but their knowledge of Hebrew, and Aramaic, and Greek means that it's going to be no problem for them to communicate. A Psalm would be sung, prayers would be made, Scripture would be read, an exposition of the Scripture would be given. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's because our New Covenant Church experience is based off of synagogue patterns. So as visitors, especially with Barnabas being a Levite and Paul being a trained Pharisee, they could expect being asked to speak.

Paul and Barnabas were a long way from Israel, but the cultural distance for them in this place, in a synagogue, it's not very distant. These may not be exactly their people, but they were very, very close.

And as they probably expected, they were indeed asked to speak. Verse 15,

After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

All right! Let's consider what Paul said. Acts 13:16-41.

Paul Preaches in the Synagogue (13:16-41)

¹⁶ Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: ¹⁷ "The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. ¹⁸ "For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹ "When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—*all of which took* about four hundred and fifty years. ²⁰ "After these things He gave *them* judges until Samuel the prophet. ²¹ "Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. ²² "After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' ²³ "From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, ²⁴ after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ "And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not *He*. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

²⁶ "Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. ²⁷ "For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled *these* by condemning *Him*. ²⁸ "And though they found no ground for *putting Him to* death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. ²⁹ "When they had carried out all that was

written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb.³⁰ “But God raised Him from the dead;³¹ and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people.³² “And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers,³³ that God has fulfilled this *promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.’³⁴ “*As for the fact* that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY *and* SURE *blessings* OF DAVID.’³⁵ “Therefore He also says in another *Psalm*, ‘YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.’³⁶ “For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay;³⁷ but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.

³⁸ “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,³⁹ and by him, indeed, everyone who believes is justified from all things—a justification which you could not have received by Moses’ law.¹⁶ ⁴⁰ “Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon *you*:⁴¹ ‘BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.’ ”

Paul’s speech has four parts. He begins with a short introductory address, then he summarizes the Old Testament promise of a Messiah who will save, then he supports his claim that this promise is fulfilled in Jesus, and finally he concludes by exhorting his listeners to believe in Jesus.

Introductory Address (16)

The introductory address is just a few words, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen:”

The men of Israel in this case are not men who live in Israel. They are the Jews of Pisidian Antioch. They are the Israelites of the Diaspora. “You who fear God” is a reference to non-Jews attracted to the worship of Yahweh who are also present in the synagogue. Paul will aim his words towards his Jewish listeners. But he is also aware of the Gentile listeners. Since they are God-fearers already connected to the synagogue, they will be able to follow Paul’s language and Old Testament references along with the Jewish listeners.

The Promise of a Messiah Who Will Save Has Been Fulfilled in Jesus (17-25)

After that brief introduction, Paul directs his listeners’ attention to the promise of Messiah, who comes not only to reign, but also to save.

Similar to Stephen’s speech, Paul begins with a summary from the Old Testament of God’s history with Israel, or just a piece of that history. However, the aspects of Old Testament history differ between Stephen’s speech and Paul’s speech, according to the point each of them wanted to make. Stephen’s intent from the beginning was to charge the current leaders of Israel with the rejection of the mediator God had appointed for the salvation of Israel. Just as Joseph was rejected by his brothers and as Moses was rejected by the people, so too, the current leaders of Israel rejected Jesus, having murdered him on a cross.

Paul will make that charge later in this speech, but his emphasis is not on the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Jesus.

Paul’s summary of Old Testament history shows us that we need a true king who can save. He begins with the perspective that God is the true King. This perspective was rejected by Israel. They wanted a different king. So, God gave them human kingship. And even though David will provide a positive foreshadowing of the coming King, his line human line still struggles under the decay of sin and death. The true King who establishes an eternal reign must defeat death.

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 261. All Scripture text is taken from the NASB except for 13:39 which is taken from F. F. Bruce.

So, Paul does not use the word, “king,” to describe God in his summary, but the strong action verbs he uses for God are the actions of a great king. God chose our fathers. God made the people great in Egypt. God led them out. God destroyed seven nations. God distributed their land. This great king has called Israel to be his vassal people. He went to war to save them with an uplifted arm. He expanded his domain by defeating nations that opposed him. And then he made a land grant to his faithful vassal Israel, distributing the conquered territory to them as an inheritance.

Israel’s behavior strikes a sour note in this litany of God’s actions on their behalf. Paul does not make this a strong emphasis, but it is there. He says that God “put up with them in the wilderness.” That’s a reminder of Israel’s constant grumbling. The first time Paul attributes an action verb to Israel is after Paul says God gave them judges. During the time of Samuel, they asked for a king. That’s what they did. And that’s rebellion against their great King. Paul doesn’t say that, but this audience, they know their Biblical history, and they know the story of Samuel: that when people ask for a king, God takes offense, recognizing in their request a rejection of him as king.

Not satisfied with judges, they want a king like one all the nations around them have. So, God gave them a king like the ones all the nations had. A king who was much more concerned with himself than with God, a king who was big and handsome and looked the part. But no heart for God. And after giving them what they wanted and waiting for that to go bad, God removed Saul and gives them a king unlike the kind of kings other nations had. Verse 22,

He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, ‘I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.’

God made a promise. And usually when I hear a promise related to the Old Testament, I think of the call of Abraham. I don’t know what you think of when you hear, “the promise.” “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3).” That’s the promise I think of. And that promise did start the promise Paul was talking about. The promise of blessing the nations comes from the line of Abraham.

However, Paul’s intention here is for us to think about the promise God made in his covenant with King David. That promise. Consider this verse, 1 Samuel 7:12,

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom.

That is the promise Paul refers to in this speech. Paul recognizes Jesus as the descendant of David for whom God will establish kingdom. He will reign and he will save. The reference to promise and savior are here in his speech, verses 23-25.

²³ “From the descendants of this man (*that is David*), according to promise (*you know, that is that covenant promise with David*), God has brought to Israel a Savior (*he’s not just Messiah; he is Savior*), Jesus, ²⁴ after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not *He*. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’

I am using the word, “Messiah,” because the Jewish audience would have understood that’s exactly what Paul was talking to them about: the Messiah. Messiah, translated into Greek is, “Christ,” and that means, “anointed one.” David was anointed by God to be king. He was anointed ceremonially with oil and spiritually by the Holy Spirit. God’s promise to David that he would raise up a descendant after him and establish his kingdom is a promise to establish a son of David as king. In one sense all of Israel’s kings are anointed ones. That’s the ceremony that happens when they become king. In another sense, the people of Israel recognized God’s promise of a unique king, one uniquely anointed. He is The Anointed One as David’s son to reign forever. He is the Messiah. He is the Christ.

When a human king comes to save, we think of salvation from an oppressor or an enemy, like God’s salvation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. And that’s the kind of king of salvation many Jews were

looking for in the Messiah. In the days of Jesus what they wanted was salvation from the oppression of Rome. They wanted an earthly salvation, and an establishment of earthly kingdom. But God had communicated through the prophets of Israel that there was a need for a greater deliverance: that this Messiah would deliver from the oppression of sin and death.

The ministry of John the Baptist foreshadowed that. It was a ministry of repentance. It appears to have been a known event. Paul's reference to John suggests these Jews in Pisidian Antioch were aware of John the Baptist's movement. He points out how John understood himself as preparing the way by calling people to turn from sin and turn to God. That's what repentance is. And while confirming that John was not the Messiah, Paul says John said, "I am not," he also recommends John's attitude to these Jews. John was not the Messiah. Don't get that mixed up! This was John's attitude. John refused to define himself based on his own merits and his own ministry, his own calling. His value comes from his relationship to the One that comes after. As the one who baptized Jesus, John should be recognized in a place of honor in the society. Jesus, in a sense, was his student, being baptized by him. And in the honor-shame culture of Israel, Jesus might be expected to tie the sandals of John. You could see a student doing that to a Rabbi or a teacher. John would never tie the sandals of Jesus. The one who baptized is greater. But John reverses that. He indicates the greatness of Jesus by completely humbling himself before Jesus, declaring not only, "Shall Jesus not tie my sandals. I am not even worthy to tie his." So, John is indicating that there is something great, something new about Jesus. And it's not just that he is the son of David. There's something greater.

And the sons of David could never save. They were too burdened by their own sin. Each one would suffer under the curse of death and corruption. Even David who maintained a heart for God proved that he, too, was in the end a sinful man, unable to overcome the temptation in his own flesh. But this Jesus, this son of David, John praises him as being greater than any who came before.

So, this is Paul's first point. God is king. And God has promised a son of David who will come and establish a kingdom. Jesus, the one recognized by John the Baptist is that king God foretold.

Defense of the Claim that Jesus is the Messiah Who Came to Save (26-37)

Paul's shift to a second point is shown when he, again, directly addresses his audience. Again, he says, "Brethren." Having summarized the promise of Messiah and claiming Jesus is the Messiah, Paul now makes a case for his claim. This is Acts 13:26-37. Notice how Paul's recitation of the facts about Jesus parallel Peter's Pentecost speech. These are facts that Peter proclaimed.

²⁶ Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God [that is Abraham's family; that's the Jews and those of you who fear God; again, that's the Gentile worshippers of Yahweh], to us the message of this salvation has been sent. ²⁷ For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled *these* by condemning Him. ²⁸ And though they found no ground for *putting Him to death*, they asked Pilate that He be executed. ²⁹ When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised Him from the dead; ³¹ and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. ³² And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, ³³ that God has fulfilled this *promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.' ³⁴ As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY and SURE *blessings* OF DAVID.' ³⁵ Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.' ³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; ³⁷ but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.

You hear that, the point? We are talking about someone greater, someone who doesn't die. Paul acknowledges right away that the majority of Jews in Jerusalem and their leaders rejected Jesus. It's

not the thing you want to have to say when you're coming out from Jerusalem, and you're in the synagogue in the Diaspora. You would like to be able to say, "The leaders have affirmed his as Messiah!" But Paul can't say that because that's not historically true. He does make the point that in rejecting Jesus they rejected the Old Testament prophets' teaching about Jesus and at the same time, ironically, affirmed the prophets who had declared the Messiah would be rejected.

Paul is not anti-Semitic. He has not turned against his own people. He is stating the facts accurately without embellishment. Our Gospel is based on historic facts and the Jewish leaders of Israel have turned against Jesus. Paul does not change those facts. He doesn't devalue those facts as he moves further away from Jerusalem. He states the same facts Peter stated.

Jesus was rejected by Jewish leadership. Jesus was tried and condemned though innocent. Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Jesus died and was laid in a tomb. Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus appeared to his disciples who have become first-hand witnesses to the resurrection. Paul says all of that here. Peter said all of that in his sermons.

As with Peter's sermons, you hear how the Apostles' Creed was later developed with these Acts sermons in mind. "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried...The third day he rose again from the dead."

Like with Peter, Paul refers to the disciples who spoke with Jesus and became first-hand witnesses to the resurrection, though differently than Peter, Paul does not claim to be one of those people. Also, differently from Peter, Paul does not accuse these listeners of being guilty of the death of Jesus. Now, that's interesting because, you remember, that was a regular pattern of Peter's. Every time he stood up, he is accusing, "You killed Jesus!" That was a regular accusation made by Peter. And we have to remember that was a historically contextualized accusation. Those listeners actually shouted out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" They were the ones who were there at Passover. Those listeners actually petitioned Pilate to kill Jesus. So, Peter spoke to that crowd. Paul does not accuse this crowd, because this crowd was not present or involved. That's not an accusation against all Jews everywhere. That's an accusation against those who were historically present and involved. So there's no accusation here. Historical context matters.

Peter and Paul both refer to God's promise, but with different promises in mind. Both promises are part of the Good News of the New Covenant. At Pentecost, Peter's focus is what's going on with the Holy Spirit coming down, so Peter quotes Joel and refers to the promise of the Holy Spirit, declaring to the crowd in Acts 2:39, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." Even then Peter, he recognizes that this is a promise to Gentiles - "to our children, we Jews, and to all who are far off." Peter was going to have to struggle a little bit with Cornelius to figure out the implications of that. But he knew it was part of the message. Paul here refers to the promise not of the Holy Spirit, but of the Messiah who is a Savior.

³² And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, ³³ that God has fulfilled this *promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus

Just as Peter supported his claims about Jesus from the Old Testament, Paul here refers to three Old Testament references to support his claims about Jesus.

First, Paul quotes Psalm 2, a recognized Messianic Psalm by Jews and a Psalm referred to already in the prayer of the church in Acts 4. He says, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.' As always, we wanna go back and consider the context of the Psalm. In that Psalm, we might at first think that God speaks to David or to one of David's human descendants as his son. In that sense the king, who is already God's son as a faithful Jew, you know, we can call all Jews God's sons and daughters, but he becomes established in a special sense as God's son, begotten as his Son, through his enthronement. And that would be the "today" of the Psalm in that context. "You are my son; today I have begotten you." The day is his coronation as king.

But reading on, like so many of the Messianic Psalms, you see, “Okay, there’s an application to the human king, but this is too expansive to be talking about a mere human king, a mere descendant of David.” There is something else going on here. And God says of this Son of David in 8-12,

⁸ ‘Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,	And the very ends of the earth as Your possession.
⁹ ‘You shall break them with a rod of iron,	You shall shatter them like earthenware.’ ”
¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, show discernment;	Take warning, O judges of the earth.
¹¹ Worship the LORD with reverence	And rejoice with trembling.
¹² Do homage to the Son (<i>that literally says, “kiss the Son”</i>), that He not become angry, and you perish in the way,	For His wrath may soon be kindled.

How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

You can see that as being hyperbole about a human king, or you can see that as being about someone who is greater than a human king. And Paul here has just claimed that God raised Jesus from the dead. That day of resurrection is the “today” of the Psalm in this context. ‘YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU’. And just like there are two senses where the human king is already the son of God in the sense that he is an Israelite, and he is enthroned and begotten in a special way in the royal Psalm, so also Jesus is already Son of God, but the idea of “today I have begotten you” is a recognition through the power of his resurrection that he is the fully divine and fully human Son of God from the line of David. In this sense, “begotten,” is more like the sense of, “I have shown you to be through the power of the Holy Spirit, by raising you from the dead.” And so recognized, you are enthroned on high as my Son, as the Eternal King. That is the implication of this royal language in the Psalm.

The next quote is a reference to Psalm 55:3. The phrase, “holy and sure blessings of David,” is translated in various ways in the Old Testament in English Bibles. It might be, “faithful mercies shown to David,” or, “steadfast, sure love for David.” So as, again, we go back to context, and when we do, you will recognize this portion of Isaiah as soon as I read it. You’ll be like, “Oh, I know that! I love that!” The context in Isaiah refers back to the covenant of David in 1 Samuel 7 and looks ahead to its fulfillment of the Messiah. I’ll read several verses to give a sense of the passage, Isaiah 55:1-5.

¹ Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; Come, buy wine and milk	And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Without money and without cost.
² Why do you spend money for what is not bread, Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,	And your wages for what does not satisfy? And delight yourself in abundance.
³ Incline your ear and come to Me. And I will make an everlasting covenant with you,	Listen, that you may live; <i>According to the faithful mercies shown to David.</i>
⁴ Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples,	A leader and commander for the peoples.
⁵ Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel	And a nation which knows you not will run to you, For He has glorified you.”

Paul connects the idea of an everlasting covenant with “the holy and sure blessings of David”. It’s a promise fulfilled by Jesus who overcame death as a holy and sure promise to David. Paul’s third quote from Psalm 16:10 supports this idea more directly. He says it right out, ‘YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.’

Peter referred to that same passage to make the same claim in his Pentecost speech. David died. His body has decayed. We have his tomb. The Psalm must be speaking of another whose body will not be allowed to decay. Jesus, the son of David, is that One. The curse of death cannot remain on him. He was raised from the dead. This is how the promise will be accomplished to establish David’s reign eternally. To have the eternal reign established, we need someone who will never die; who can defeat death. And it’s through Jesus, who forever was and forever will be that an eternal kingdom is established.

This connection to the Old Testament may not create a big “aha!” moment for us. We have always understood the resurrection as essential to who Jesus is, because we have grown up in New Covenant age. But the nature of prophecy is that before the fulfillment happens, there is some mystery about the details. It’s not that clear. And so, this is a potential “aha!” moment for those gathered in this synagogue. “Oh, that’s what God meant! He literally meant that David’s greater son would never die. That’s what it means that he won’t allow his body to decay! And that’s how the kingdom lasts forever. Wow! It makes so much sense! It sounds right!” Some people are going to get that by the Holy Spirit. It’s going to be their moment of, “Whoa! This is awesome! This is fulfillment!”

Concluding Exhortation (38-41)

Having given witness to Jesus, Paul concludes by exhorting his - I am laughing to myself because I can actually imagine a Jew from Pisidian Antioch in a synagogue going, “Whoa!” But you know, there’s some “wow” factor there, right? When they’ve just heard this, and it connects in their mind and heart. All right, concluding exhortation! Having given witness to Jesus, Paul concludes by exhorting his listeners to respond. Verses 38-41,

³⁸ “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, [he concludes, again, be exhorting his listeners to respond; this is the third time he addresses them directly] - Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him, indeed, everyone who believes is justified from all things—a justification which you could not have received by Moses’ law.^{17 40} Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you: ⁴¹ ‘BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.’ ”

Not only is Jesus the Messiah who reigns forever, he is also the Messiah who provides a way for sinful human beings to be forgiven and enter into his Kingdom. We cannot talk about the Good News of an eternal Kingdom without also talking about the Good News of individual forgiveness. The two go together. And like with Peter and his sermons, forgiveness of sins is an essential component of Paul’s message. This is basic Gospel. Individual human beings are sinful and separated from God, and they need to be forgiven. It is not Good News for humanity if Jesus reigns in an eternal Kingdom, but not one human being is able to enter into that Kingdom. That’s not good news, at least from our perspective. Forgiveness is a prerequisite for human participation.

I said in my introduction that Paul’s sermon shows continuity with Peter’s proclamation of the Gospel described to us through the initial chapters of Acts. We’ve seen that. We’ve talked about that. I’ve been pointing out, “remember this from Peter?” I also said that this sermon shows continuity with Paul’s later teaching, exemplified especially in the letter to the Romans. So now I’ll point out a couple of connections with that later teaching of Paul.

I am using the NASB translation through this series. And I love the NASB but I’m disappointed here with Acts 13:39. The NASB, along with other modern translations like the ESV and NRSV, all good translations, translate “δικαιώω” as, “to free from,” or, “set free.” so just listen for the English words in 39,

and through Him everyone who believes is *freed* from all things, from which you could not be *freed* through the Law of Moses.

My problem with that translation is that “δικαιώω” is the word translated elsewhere in Paul’s writings as, “to justify.” And you can hardly get a more Pauline word than, “justify.” So, if it’s there in the Greek, we need to hear it. Whether it has a different translation or not, we need to know that this is the word that Luke had in Paul’s sermon. So, when I read the Acts text for this lesson, I used F. Bruce’s translation do that you would hear that word. I’ll read again. This is the verse I’ve read,

¹⁷ Bruce 261.

and by him, indeed, everyone who believes is *justified* from all things—a *justification* which you could not have received by Moses' law.

I think the newer English translations are trying to help us avoid an interpretation problem by using, "set free," which is a possible sense of the word, "δικαίωω." But even then, it is "set free" in the sense of set free in a judicial way. And that is probably missing if we do not know that this word for "freedom" comes from this root word, "to justify."

The possible problem the newer translations are helping us to avoid is the misconception that the law justifies in part and the Gospel justifies in full. It is said that is the emphasis of "everyone who believes is justified from all things." Some scholars see a conflict between Paul's teaching here and his later teaching in Galatians and Romans. But that is unnecessary. We don't have to read this as we're justified partly through Mosaic Law, but we're justified in full through the Gospel. It is also valid to interpret Paul's meaning here that we could not be justified by the Law at all, and so are justified from all things - all things held against us, all of our sin, all of the penalty for our sin: we're justified from all of that - through the Gospel, not through Mosaic Law. And that translation aligns fully with Paul. The phraseology here is a little different than in Romans. But there is no reason to create a conflict with different ways of saying the same thing. It is much easier to recognize that you can interpret both ideas as meaning the same thing, so why not do that? In fact, the language of forgiveness here in this sermon requires that we interpret this reference of justification in line with Paul's later teaching. The Law of Moses does not justify. Romans 3,19-20 - Paul is very clear on that. No flesh is justified. And Paul is very clear that we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Christ provides complete justification. That seems to be the point.¹⁸

Now imagine that you were present in this synagogue in the middle of Asia Minor. Your town sits on a major road. There's a road that runs through this town, from Syria to Ephesus. And you have heard some of this story. You have heard a bit about John the Baptist. You've heard about Jesus of Nazareth. It's been a decade since it's happened. People have come through. And you have not known what to think. Everyone seems to have their own opinion. In your own fellowship, everybody's got their own opinion. Now here are two fellow Jews, both who grew up outside of Israel, so these are kind of like you. One from the nearby province of Cilicia. He is the Pharisee. And the other one is from Cyprus, and he is a Levite. They are Jews with some clout, but they are also your kind of Jews, who grew up in the Diaspora. But they have been to Jerusalem. They have met the followers of Jesus who gave a first-hand witness to the resurrection. And this Paul speaks powerfully, full of conviction, grounding his message in the Law. He keeps referring to, "As it is written in the Prophets, in the Psalms." He speaks of promise and of fulfillment. And he speaks of forgiveness in the name of this Jesus. And you're wondering. Could the Messiah be crucified? Could it happen that way? Could he be raised from the dead? What does this mean? Is this real?

Paul's proclamation would not be delivered merely in the strength of his oratory skills or religious insight. Paul's proclamation would have been empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised at the beginning of Acts, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be my witnesses." So when you think about yourself in that synagogue, it's not just the logic of Paul's argument but the Holy Spirit is at work in your heart.

And there are going to be those in this synagogue who, they hear it, they hear this Gospel and they smell death. In the darkness they will not understand, and they are going to oppose it. This is bringing about change. This is not what we want. This is not what we believe. But there are others whose eyes are, even at this moment, opening to the light of day. And they would hear and see that Jesus indeed is the fulfillment of the promise and the source of salvation. Still, others who are in the synagogue, they would not know which way to turn. They are going to be like Nicodemus. Maybe they are ready to come out of the dark and investigate these things in the light of Jesus, but could

¹⁸ Bruce 263.

they possibly be true? We don't know. And they cannot yet see or understand the message that Paul proclaims so they don't respond right away.

Knowing that the destiny of his listeners sits on a knife edge, Paul concludes his appeal with a challenge from the prophet Habakkuk that is much more relevant than we might recognize at first. Paul is saying a lot with this quote.

'BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.'

In his day, Habakkuk called on God to do something about the wicked hypocrisy of Judah. "God, you've got to do something!" God declared that he would do something wonderful, unheard of, that if you were to hear it, nobody would believe you. "I'm going to send the Babylonians to punish the unfaithful majority of Judah." Habakkuk heard. He asked for it, and he heard it. And he recoils at that news. "That is not what I asked for, God!" How can that be the plan of to save by using a nation that is even more wicked than us to punish the wickedness among us?

Paul knows that all Jews await the coming of the Messiah. They continuously pray for his coming. But like Habakkuk, nobody could have described this Gospel. They never would have thought of God coming as man, dying on a cross and initiating a new covenant open to Gentiles, and so they recoil. That cannot be the plan. And the majority are going to reject it. That can't be Good News. And they're going to hold on to their vision of who they want the Messiah to be rather than accepting the reality of who the Messiah is.

In his prophecy, (you can go back and read Habakkuk) Habakkuk's eyes were opened. It's chapter 3. His mind is changed. He becomes silent before God and he believes, and he sees with new eyes. And he ends with a testimony of faith. Even in light of the coming destruction of Judah. Even though it's still rolling up inside of him, this negative sense that something terrible is getting ready to happen, but he believes. And he writes in 3:18-19,

¹⁸ Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ The Lord GOD is my strength, And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,
And makes me walk on my high places.

You know, he has set me up in the rocks, on his places above the destruction. He has saved me and I will trust in him. That's what Habakkuk was saying. Paul has preached the Good News to Jews for a decade already. (*) He knows the majority are already set to resist him, like Habakkuk initially resisted God's declaration of his plan. The New Covenant overturns the religious order that Jews hold on to so tightly. John the Baptist told his disciples, "He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30)," so too, the Church of Jesus Christ among Gentiles must increase, but this means that Jerusalem, the Temple, the priesthood, that precious identity, that special uniqueness of the Jews must decrease. That's not something easy to accept.

The prophecy of Habakkuk served for Paul as a foreshadowing, or as an example of the resistance he experienced among the Jews that reject the newly revealed plan of God. Paul quotes Habakkuk here. He's going to quote Habakkuk in Romans, too. It's in the thesis,

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

That last bit, "but the righteous man shall live by faith," is Habakkuk 2:4. And it is not simply just a proof text that Paul pulls in for justification by faith. Paul's quote of Habakkuk is more like a hyperlink in a text. You know, you click on, "but the righteous man shall live by faith," click on that, and it imports the whole prophecy into the background context of Romans. Just like the whole thing is imported here in the speech in the synagogue. It brings to mind all of Habakkuk. And that's what Paul does in the letter to the Romans. He proceeds to set up a Jewish opponent, a type of Habakkuk. And as Paul goes through teaching in chapters 1-11, there's these questions that keep being raised up,

objections that cannot be true. It's a refusal to believe that the Gospel that Paul presents could be true of a righteous God.

Paul expects resistance to God's plan. But there is also a background narrative of hope in Habakkuk. There is the narrative of resistance to the plan, but Habakkuk believes. He was one of a remnant in the day of captivity. Paul believes there is a remnant in his day. And despite rejection from the majority of Jews, some will believe and be saved.

We will see that reality play out in the final verses of this section.

Paul and Barnabas, Opposed by the Jews, Turn to the Gentiles (13:42-52)

This last paragraph reports what happened the week after Paul's speech in the synagogue. Acts 13:42-52,

⁴² As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. ⁴³ Now when *the meeting of* the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God (*so there were some who truly believed*). ⁴⁴ The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and *began* contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. ⁴⁶ Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ "For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.' " ⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they *began* rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. ⁵¹ But they shook off the dust of their feet *in protest* against them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

The problem for Paul's Jewish listeners seems to be less the specific truth claims about Jesus and more the fact that the New Covenant Gospel message has created such a positive response among Gentile believers.

Let me just interject. I think this happens every generation in the Church. Old people love the way things were and we want to hold on to it. And if we don't change, we are not going to reach our generation. And there is a right reason to be nervous, because for some, change means changing the basic facts of the Gospel. That change is of no good. We reject that change. But while we're rejecting that change, we have to be careful that we don't also reject changes in music, changes in expression, changes in the way we worship and interact. There is real change that needs to happen in order to help young people feel like this Gospel is for their generation. And these Jews get jealous because there is this positive response. And you might look around you, and you might be in an older church. You might see this church down the road is having a great response. And be careful because if your first response is, "Well, they must be just telling them what they want to hear," that's what the Pharisees said about Jesus. Why does he have sinners gathered around him? He must be a sinner, like them. So, it may be true that a church has gone off and left the Gospel. But don't let your first response be jealousy. Rejoice in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And rejoice that God will raise up in every generation different churches and movements that will reach the heart of that generation.

So nearly the whole city assembled to hear the Lord. This is where Jews who shared the heart of God would rejoice also. They would be excited, "Look! The Gentiles are coming out!" But instead, Luke writes a different response, "When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and

began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.” This response was so typical by Jews Paul encountered in his ministry that he refers to the phenomena in Romans 11. In this section of Romans Paul is describing how the majority reject God’s plan of salvation through Jesus, though a remnant accept. And listen for the word, “jealousy.” He writes in 11:11-14,

¹¹ I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation *has come* to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. ¹² Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! ¹³ But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴ if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

He expected a response of jealousy and the majority rejection. But even with that jealousy, he was hoping that a remnant would be saved. Paul says here he felt an obligation to go to the Jews first. We recognized that on Cyprus. Paul says it directly here. And he hopes a remnant will believe. But he is also quite prepared by the words of Isaiah, one of his favorite prophets, he is prepared to turn next to Gentiles.

“For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.’ ”

They stayed for some time in Pisidian Antioch. Long enough for the Gospel to begin to spread from the city into the region surrounding the city. Long enough for disciples to be established in the faith. And then they were forced from the city after Jewish pressure raised significant opposition against them.

Luke has given us here an example of a pattern that will repeat. You know, going to the synagogue, being welcomed, seeing a Gentile response, being rejected, seeing more fruit and finally being forced out. Luke has also given us a valuable, precious example of the teaching Paul delivered when he preached in the synagogue. He preached Jesus. Just like Peter did. He preached a promised fulfilled. He preached justification by faith. He preached hope for a remnant, knowing the majority would resist. He preached a light to the Gentiles. And he continued preaching this message of salvation in Jesus Christ through the course of his entire ministry.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 13:13-52. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What was the service in the synagogue like? How does it compare to your Sunday church service? Though there is not a lot of detail here, there are some interesting points to observe and consider.
3. How are these Jews different from Elymas in the previous story on Cyprus? Who in your culture seems similar to Elymas and who seems similar to these who are gathered in the synagogue?
4. This speech from Paul is different from Peter’s Pentecost speech and Stephen’s trial speech. It is also very different from the speech Paul will make to a Gentile audience in Athens (17:22-31).
 - a. Scanning through Peter and Stephen’s speeches (2:14-36 and 7:2-53), what are some similarities you notice? What are some differences?
 - c. What are some ways Paul speaks to this Jewish audience that you would not expect him to speak to a Gentile audience? What are some assumptions or references he can freely make with Jews and God-fearing Greeks in a synagogue?
5. What main points does Paul make in this speech about the Messiah?
6. What word does your Bible use in 13:39? Does it use “set free” or “freed” or something else? Does it help you see continuity with Paul if you recognize that this word used here two times is the same word normally translated in Paul’s letters as justification? Compare the conclusion of this speech (Acts 38-41) with Paul’s statement in Romans 3:19-30. Does that seem to you to be the same idea?

Lesson 21: Acts 14:1-28 Paul's Strategy – Iconium to Derbe and Back Again

Introduction

Acts 13 and 14 give us our first intriguing glimpse at Paul's missionary message and strategy. Paul's encounters with a Jewish magician, with Jewish synagogue members, and then with pagan worshipers, all described in these chapters, give us an opportunity to consider Paul's core message in context with a variety of worldviews. Luke reports both the words of Paul and the actions of Paul. Considering his actions, we can make some theories about his strategy. The proof of those theories comes later as we get more data from his second and third missionary journeys and as we consider comments on strategy in his letters. In this lesson, I am going to concentrate on what we can see here and what we can deduce, both from Acts 14, our main text, and also considering our recent coverage of Acts 13.

I'll suggest seven strategic actions we see Paul taking. And we will consider the preaching of his message as one of those actions.

1. Paul targets significant urban centers.
2. Paul preaches the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles.
3. Paul relies on the Holy Spirit for guidance and power.
4. Paul organizes ekklesia.
5. Paul appoints elders.
6. Paul strengthens the disciples.
7. Paul goes to new territory.

I will spend most of my time in this lesson on the first two actions, targeting significant urban centers and preaching the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles.

1. Paul targets significant urban centers.

Acts 13 ends with Paul and Barnabas shaking the dust off their feet in Pisidian Antioch and traveling to Iconium. We noted in the last lesson that upon arriving in Asia Minor from the island of Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas made an inland trek of 200 kilometers or 125 miles north into mountainous country to the city Pisidian Antioch. We are not told of any evangelistic ministry they may have first conducted in the coastal towns of Perga or Attalia. The impression Luke gives is of an immediate, intentional press inland.

Pisidian Antioch was located a little southeast from the central point of Asia Minor at a crossroads of two major Roman highways. One road ran north-south from Attalia in the south, the port city near Perga where Barnabas and Paul landed, moving northward through Pisidian Antioch to Nicaea and on to Byzantium. An east-west road ran from Ephesus on the western coast through Pisidian Antioch into Cilicia before turning south to Paul's hometown of Tarsus and on to Antioch of Syria from which Paul and Barnabas had originally set out. Pisidian Antioch sat in the cross-hairs of those two intersecting highways, close to the center of Asia Minor.

Pisidian Antioch also sat close to the border of two major Roman provinces being located in Galatia but quite close to the province of Asia, the province where Ephesus is situated. As the name suggests, the city is one of a number of Antiochs established by the Seleucid dynasty. Antioch in Syria, where Paul and Barnabas came from, was by far the more significant Antioch, being the third largest city in the Roman Empire. This Antioch is located in the region of Phrygia, overlooking the region of Pisidia. So, it gets called, Pisidian Antioch. And it is an important Roman military and administrative center for this region.

Looking at a New Testament Bible Map of Asia Minor, all the different names can become quite confusing. That's the nature of missions. Go to any locality in the world and the place names become much more complicated. We use large abstract terms like, the United States or, Europe or, China or, India, which mask the multitudes of people groups overlapping in those large geographic spaces. We

might zoom in a bit with terms like, the Balkans or, South Africa or, the Caucasus. Once you do that, you start to encounter these people groups with their overlapping claims for territory and their messed-up history, and how some larger empire has come in and imposed another set of names on the region.

Asia Minor in Paul's day is one of those regions made up of a multitude of ethnic groups and languages over which Rome has enforced a new organization that does not really maintain the way the people of that region would define themselves.

On Bible maps, the larger regions dividing up Asia Minor are Roman Provinces. The Romans combined a couple of older territories and subsumed several others underneath larger areas to produce an administration of six provinces during the time of Paul. Paul and Barnabas had landed in the south in the province of Pamphylia-Lycia. Paul's home province of Cilicia is along the coast to the east, or to the right if that is more helpful for you. Running west to east, or left to right, in the center are Asia, Galatia and Cappadocia. And then there is Bithynia-Pontus to the north. So, from the Roman point of view, those are our provinces. And they ensured a good network of roads connecting the major cities of those provinces.

Luke does not stick to the names of the larger Roman provinces. He tends to refer more to the specific regional names that refer to the peoples and kingdoms the Romans had conquered. These names often appear on Bible maps along with the Roman province names. So, even though Pisidian Antioch is a significant Roman base of administration in southern Galatia, none of the people there are Galatians. The Galatians are Gauls, a Celtic people, who descended into Asia Minor from the Balkan peninsula about 300 years earlier and made their home to the north of where Barnabas and Paul are traveling on this first journey. That was the kingdom of Galatia up there. But the Romans, consolidating, have made the province of Galatia much larger than that northern region where the Galatians lived.

So, we are traveling through the Roman province of Galatia, but encountering a variety of non-Galatian people as we go. Pisidian Antioch is situated among the people of Phrygia. According to Homer, the Phrygians participated in the Trojan war. Their most famous king of legend was Midas whose touch caused objects and people to turn to gold. So, you may have heard of at least one Phrygian. They have their own history. They have their own language.

The mountainous and hard-to-tame people of Pisidia live to the west. Paul and Barnabas do not go that way. They head east to Iconium on the far side of Phrygia, and then from there to Lystra and Derbe in Lycaonia, another language and another people. How do you reach such a large area of land. From the Bible it doesn't look that big but once you get in there, this is a lot of land with diverse peoples and cultures and languages. So how do you reach it all?

Strategically, Paul chose to start in an urban center that contained a lot of people. You need a lot of people to start a new movement because the majority of people are not going to believe and participate. Some of them will be downright antagonistic. Some will be apathetic. Some will be positive, but they are not believing and joining in the mission. So, an urban center allows you to cast a large net. And even if only a small percentage responds, that small percentage is still enough to establish a new community. That does not mean that Paul is not thinking about the countryside. He is thinking about the countryside, but he is going to reach the countryside by reaching local urban centers. We read this in Acts 13:48-49, concerning the response at Pisidian Antioch,

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they *began* rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region.

People come in and out of the city from the countryside. They come to buy and sell. They come to see family and exchange news. They come to conduct business with the Roman government. Paul's plan is for the growing church in each urban center to spread the Gospel out to the surrounding region.

Paul is thinking on a larger scale when he seeks to reach a city with the Good News. That is why he targets significant cities that serve as local centers for a region. Paul is thinking even bigger. I expect that Paul is thinking about how to reach the world for Christ. To reach the world, he is first going to reach the Roman Empire; you know, one of the most significant points of communication out to the rest of the world. To reach the Roman Empire, he divides it into east and west. Later he will go on to Spain in the west by way of Rome. But he starts with the east. The word of God is already established in Palestine and Syria, so Paul has set his sights on Asia Minor with a divide-and-conquer strategy.

He starts at a central point, Pisidian Antioch. And then he turns east. After he sees churches planted to the east, he will turn to the west. That is what we are told when he sets out to new territory on the second missionary journey. He planned to go to the province of Asia just to the west of Galatia. God will change that plan, but that was the plan. It makes me wonder if Paul was thinking of Joshua's conquest of Canaan, when he captured Jericho, established a central base, then first defeated the kings of the south before turning to defeat the kings of the north.

Who knows? What we do know, is that when Paul and Barnabas left Pisidian Antioch, they set off eastward along the via Sebaste, still in the Roman province of Galatia, moving on to their text target, the urban center of Iconium on the eastern border of Phrygia. Paul's first strategic action is to target significant urban centers. Now we are ready to consider Paul's second strategic action. What does he do in those urban centers?

2. Paul preaches the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles.

The Pattern Repeated In Iconium

The short report on Barnabas and Paul in Iconium repeats the first two aspects of missionary strategy we are considering. They travel another 145 kilometers or 90 miles along the Roman road to target the significant urban center of Iconium. Once there, they preach the Gospel, first to Jews, then to Gentiles. Here is the report in Acts 14:1-7.

¹ In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. ² But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. ³ Therefore they spent a long time *there* speaking boldly *with reliance* upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. ⁴ But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. ⁵ And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, ⁶ they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; ⁷ and there they continued to preach the gospel.

This is what they're doing: they're preaching the Gospel. And the passage affirms for us the pattern we will continue to see. Paul and Barnabas preach the Gospel wherever they go. That is the central aspect of their strategy. They are sent ones, sent to proclaim salvation in the name of Jesus. Notice in verse 4 the reference to apostles is plural. "But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles." Paul is an Apostle in the capital "A" sense of the word that only includes the Twelve, with Matthias replacing Judas, and Paul is the thirteenth one, as one untimely born. But here Barnabas and Paul are both referred to as Apostles in the missionary sense of that word; the normal sense of the word. They are messengers sent out to proclaim a message. And in that sense they're both Apostles.

They proclaim the Gospel first to the Israelite people as fulfillment of God's promise to send a Messiah who will save. They feel obligated to do that. They show up and proclaim that Good News for the Jews. Then they proclaim the Gospel to everyone else. They will experience some receptance everywhere they go, and some rejection everywhere they go. The degree of each will differ in each place. In Iconium, as in Pisidian Antioch, an element of the Jewish population, very much like the Saul of old, responds towards the Gospel with bitterness and jealousy. They speak out to the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas. The opposition becomes so intense that Paul and Barnabas leave Iconium.

Following the via Sebaste further eastward, they enter into the territory of Lycaonia. This is still the Roman province of Galatia, but a new people group. And this report is a little longer than the report about Iconium. Since, Luke is going to give us a little bit of Paul's verbal response to the misconceptions the people of the city have about Paul and Barnabas, this report gives us an opportunity to consider Paul's Gospel message in context. This is Acts 14:8-20.

The Message of Salvation Proclaimed to Pagans

⁸ At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. ⁹ This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped up and *began* to walk. ¹¹ When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." ¹² And they *began* calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose *temple* was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out ¹⁵ and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. ¹⁶ "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; ¹⁷ and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." ¹⁸ *Even* saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them. ¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. ²⁰ But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.

The healing of the lame man, especially with the description of Paul gazing at him and then the man leaping up, points us back to Peter's healing of a lame man in chapter 3. It's a very similar miracle. And we're going to see this as we go through Acts. God chooses to work through Paul in many ways parallel, almost identical, to how he worked through Peter to affirm for us the ministry of Paul. Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Another interesting detail here is the reference to the people speaking in the language of the Lycaonians. Paul and Barnabas have passed through Cyprus, and Pamphylia, and Phrygia with no reference to the local languages or to translators. The extensive use of Greek throughout the Roman Empire allows Paul and Barnabas to share the Gospel message with people, even though Paul and Barnabas do not know the local languages, much the same way that English serves so many missionaries in so many regions today. Lots of people speak English as a second language and are able to hear the Gospel message. Reading through Acts in one language we might forget the variety of languages being encountered. It might be like watching in English a movie about an American airman shot down in the Netherlands and making his way through Nazi lines to meet up with the French underground. And there is no Dutch in the film, there is no German, you don't hear any French because the movie is all translated into English. Maybe they have accents to let us know that they're foreign, but you don't hear the languages. I can imagine something similar as I read through Acts. Luke wrote it all down in Greek, and I get it all in English, you know, one language. But Barnabas and Paul were weaving through a multitude of languages and cultures, connected by Hellenism, which has similarities in culture, similarities of worldview, a common language, much in the same way Europe is a multitude of various cultures connected in a way by Western culture, which indicates some similar worldview assumptions and a major language, like English, to help connect peoples. So, in general, in Acts the Greek language serves Paul and Barnabas wherever they go. But a lot of languages are being spoken.

Even while these Lycaonians are speaking in their own language trying to come to grips with the miracle they just witnessed, their solution is not particularly Lycaonian. It is Hellenistic. They view the supernatural through the lens of the very influential Greek culture that dominates the region. So they determine this one is Zeus, that's the Greek storm god. And this other one is the messenger, the speaker: the Greek god Hermes.

When something spiritual significant happens, the immediate response is to evaluate the phenomena based on one's own worldview assumptions. The lame man Peter healed immediately began praising Yahweh, then rejoicing in the Temple. And that was in accord with his worldview. God is the one who heals. Being in the Temple, speaking to people already predisposed to interpret the healing in light of their belief in Yahweh, the step Peter had to make from Yahweh to Jesus was a short one. The worldview of the Jews already established a solid foundation to build upon.

Here in Lystra, these people, seeing the lame man healed, reach back into their own collection of stories that talk about Zeus becoming man and Hermes being his spokesman and they apply those ideas to this situation. Barnabas and Paul have a much larger step, several steps, in fact, to move these people from a healing miracle to the Good News about Jesus.

As an experienced evangelist, Paul is already aware of the various worldview options he is going to address as he travels through Asia Minor. But I bet this particular response is a new one. Healings done by Christians may have been attributed to Greek gods. That happened. People search their own worldview for explanations of the supernatural. But being identified as a god and with such enthusiasm that the city's priest to Zeus wants to sacrifice oxen in your name, I doubt that had ever happened to either Paul or Barnabas.

And this is a tricky moment for the evangelists. Paul and Barnabas are receiving very positive affirmation. The people praise them. The chief priest joins their side. He is bringing out oxen. That's a big sacrifice. This is going to feed a lot of people. Imagine the influence they could have working together with this chief priest. If they could just build some bridges here, he could really set them up. Paul and Barnabas could work with this misunderstanding to establish a significant following in Lystra.

But they don't work with the understanding. We see clearly here that the Gospel message is a critical component of their missionary strategy. And they respond with just as strong emotion as the people were responding. They rip their clothes. They show that no, this is not the right way. They did not come to build a following. It is not enough to just have faith in whatever you want to have faith in. It is not enough that we all just be kind to one another. Spiritual experience, hope, kindness, morality, none of that is enough. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus, and not just any Jesus, but in the true name of Jesus, in Jesus as he has revealed himself to be in the Word that Paul and Barnabas are proclaiming and that is going to be written down in the Gospels and in the New Testament letters for us. THAT Jesus. That's where salvation comes from. The basic truth claims of the Gospel are essential for salvation. Paul and Barnabas cannot build bridges that deny witness to God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. They will work with the worldview as much as they can, but not as essential points of religious identity that people are unwilling to let go of, even though it conflicts so strongly with the truth about who God is. That they have to oppose.

Listen again to their response in verses 13-17.

¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose *temple* was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out ¹⁵ and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? (Now listen to the true claims Paul makes.) We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. ¹⁶ "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; ¹⁷ and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

They reject the worldview of the crowd. This is their strategic agenda, “We preach the Gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God.” They have come to change minds about reality. Paul makes four specific truth claims here. He claims that he and Barnabas are of the same nature as their audience. We are just men like you. We are not Buddhas of a higher order. We are not transcended gurus. We are not divine. We are men like you. Second, he declares God to be the Creator of all things, heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them. Third, he asserts that God has allowed the people to go their own way. And fourth, he argues that God left himself a witness in the provision of nature.

In his truth claims, we see that the worldview of this crowd forces him to back up from truth claims about Jesus and lay down some more basic principles. This is quite different from his speech in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, where he could assume knowledge of the Old Testament and agreement in worldview. He could start right in with the Biblical history. He was able there to go straight to the promise of a Messiah who saves and the claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise, and then to make the claim that grace provides the justification not attainable by Law. He proclaimed the who of the Gospel, Jesus Christ, and the how of the Gospel, justification by faith through grace.

Here, Paul backs up to make a declaration about the nature of human beings and the nature of God as Creator. We need to recognize who we are and who God is as a starting point. This is Genesis 1 and 2. Paul’s claim that God allowed the peoples of the world to go their own way is a short statement anticipating the question, “Why is your worldview more credible than our worldview? We might say that all people have their own worldview, and all worldviews are basically the same. They overlap at all the key points.” And Paul would say, “No. God is one. All things are understood by understanding him and his Word. But people turned away from God and began to worship the creation and idols of their own hands. They made their own gods. And God allowed them to turn away. The explanation for all the various worldviews you encounter is that humankind has turned away from God as the definer of all things, making human beings the definer of truth. But humankind has come up with as many definitions as there are peoples. There is no agreement among the philosophers.”

Paul’s truth claim here is very brief. He doesn’t say all that. He says, “God permitted the nations to go their own ways.” But don’t think that is all that Paul has to say on the subject. This is an extreme summary of his ideas on that topic. I imagine he said more than Luke has reported here in this short paragraph. Even so, this is not the moment for a full apologetic on the topic. This is a very emotional moment. There’s a crowd and people are giving Barnabas and Paul great acclaim, and Paul and Barnabas are rejecting that emotional initiative. As you can imagine, the emotion can easily shift without losing intensity. It is intense and positive initially. It could shift to intense and negative. So, Paul and Barnabas don’t have a lot of time here for intellectual argument.

But don’t think that Paul does not have more to say on this point just because it is not said here. I encourage you to check out Romans 1:18-32. And that’s not all Paul has to say on this subject, either. But it is a good bit more than this short statement. When you look at the Romans passage, especially take note of the phrase, “given over.” Paul repeats that three times in that text. The reason so many worldviews compete in the marketplace of human religion is that God himself was rejected, human beings turned away and God let them go. He gave them over to their own way and, “they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened (Romans 1:21).” This is Paul’s point. That’s why you people see things this way, but we are here to tell you that you are mistaken.

Paul’s fourth truth claim to the crowd is also brief and is also further developed in that same Romans passage, 1:18-32. God has left himself a witness in the creation. You don’t have the Word, but you have the world, the universe, “in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” In Romans, Paul declares that all people are accountable to God because of the witness in creation. Romans 1:20,

²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

The brief statement to this crowd is positive about God's goodness. And of course, his opponents could argue that the rains come from the storm god Zeus. Why does the provision of nature prove your God? Paul invites that response. He would not be surprised by it. He would not be ruffled by it. He could move from there to a more developed argument, like the one we see in Romans. And as we keep questioning him, he could move on to an even more developed argument. We will address some of those arguments when we get to chapter 17 and Paul's speech to another pagan crowd in Athens. We are just recognizing the truth claim here that people are responsible for knowledge of the one true God, even if only through the reality of the creation.

In these four truth claims, Paul has taken a big step back from the Good News of Jesus Christ and justification by faith to address basic worldview disagreements between himself and this crowd in Lystra. He has to tell them that they are wrong. There is good, positive truth in every human society, and there's brokenness, and sin, and wrong belief in every human society. Love demands that we engage in that which is wrong, and binding, and corruptive. I am reminded of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus loved her. Jesus wanted her to know forgiveness. He wanted her to become a true daughter of Eve, a woman created by God in his image and able to grow into his likeness. To do that, he had to tell her she was wrong. John 4:20-23,

²⁰ "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers."

Paul's love for the people of Lystra forces him to oppose the critically wrong elements of their worldview. He must tell them they are wrong. And he must offer to them the truth of who God is. Paul does not simply yell out, "Jesus and justification! Jesus and justification!", as though they'll be able to understand what he's talking about. You know, "You must be saved!" All that is going to have to come but first recognizes that he must back up and meet them at a point of fundamental disagreement. He has more work to do here in communicating the Gospel than he did in the synagogue. And Barnabas and Paul were initially successful. Verse 18, "*Even* saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them." Their correction and disagreement with the Hellenistic worldview did not move the crowd to hostility. We can imagine bitterness among some, particularly the priest of Zeus. He was shut down in his enthusiasm and his desire to co-opt the miracle for this own cause. But Barnabas and Paul were able to continue with their ministry in Lystra, developing some of the arguments Paul introduced in his short speech, and seeing some come to faith in Jesus. When they leave, there is going to be a group of disciples.

The next verses imply that some time passed. We do not know how much time, enough time for Jews to travel from Antioch and Iconium and enough time for some to have believed and become disciples. Verses 19 and 20,

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. ²⁰ But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.

In great irony, the Jews of Antioch and Iconium are much more fervent in opposing the message of Good News to Gentiles than they had ever been in proclaiming their own belief to Gentiles. They had not been moved by compassion to such a fervent outreach to their pagan neighbors, you know, traveling from city to city. But they are now moved by anger and jealousy to recruit violent opposition to the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

In this, God allows Paul to suffer for his name at the hands of evil men. Opposition to critical points of the reigning worldviews in our societies may stir up a vicious response. To be a witness for Christ in culture requires courage. God does not always shield his servants from abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse, ostracization in the workplace or at school. God allows Paul to suffer the pain of stoning. In his suffering, Paul's courage and perseverance become a testimony to the new believers of Lystra. They are seeing here at the beginning of their faith the opposition that might follow. Everything is not going to stay warm and fuzzy. We are in a battle for souls against demonic powers and evil men and women. These new believers are seeing the power of faith in Christ working through Paul as he stands back up and re-enters the city. This example of Christian courage remains as Paul and Barnabas move on to the next town along the Roman road.

We see as essential to the missionary endeavor the commitment Paul gives to Gospel proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ. And this is regardless of the worldview he encounters. In Cyprus, he opposed the religious syncretism of the Jewish spiritualist. In Pisidian Antioch, he opposed the religious legalism of the Jewish traditionalists. In Lystra, he opposed the pagan spiritualists of Hellenized Gentiles.

Remaining true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ requires similar commitment of us. We proclaim Jesus Christ according to his own self-revelation recorded for us in his Word. And we proclaim justification by faith through grace, also recorded for us in the Word. We proclaim the same message, whether to Christian syncretists who promote a liberal form of Christianity mixed with the spirit of our day, or to Christian legalists who hold on to a tradition that opposes grace, or to modern pagans who reject the moral law of God in exchange for a worldview of their own making. The Gospel stays the same, even though we have to adjust our response to the nature of the opposition.

I have given considerable attention to two strategic actions of Paul's missionary ministry suggested here in Acts 13 and 14. First, Paul targets significant urban centers. Second, Paul preaches the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles. I recognize five more strategic actions of Paul's ministry in these two chapters. I am going to move through these rather quickly.

3. Paul Relies on the Holy Spirit for guidance and power.

Remember, this missionary journey began when the Holy Spirit directed the elders in Antioch to "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them...so being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus (Acts 13:2, 4)." Paul is not only sent out by the Holy Spirit, he also conducts his ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. In confrontation with the Jewish magician, "Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him (Acts 13:9)." Then in Antioch we are told, "[The Gentiles] began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." I am not going to get into the theology of election right now, except to point out the assumption that the Holy Spirit is the one at work in Antioch. As Jesus said, "no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father (John 6:65)" and "when [the Spirit] comes he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:10)." Paul did not open the eyes of Gentiles. And it wasn't purely by their own intellect, or morality, or will. The Holy Spirit opened their eyes. So, when Paul leaves Antioch, Luke can write, "the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52)."

Paul does make plans according to reasoned principles. At the same time, he is following the guidance of the Holy Spirit and conducting his ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. Paul organizes ekklesia.

Paul also organized believers into new covenant communities. He organizes "ekklesia." You know, that word we're using for the church, that emphasizes the people, not the building. This point, along with our final three points, is suggested in the last paragraph of chapter 14. I will read that now, Acts 14:21-28.

²¹ After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” ²³ When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. ²⁴ They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. ²⁵ When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶ From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. ²⁷ When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they *began* to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they spent a long time with the disciples.

Paul and Barnabas stop moving east at Derbe and begin backtracking their steps, going from Derbe, back to Lystra, back to Iconium, back to Antioch, back to Perga, back to Attalia. We have had reference to believers and disciples in each city where Barnabas and Paul proclaimed the Gospel. Acts 14:23 affirms we should consider these new communities to be churches, “When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” This is a very simple church. It’s a gathering of true believers in Jesus Christ with elders.

5. Paul appoints elders.

And that’s our fifth strategic action, which is also suggested in this verse. Paul appoints elders. Churches need leaders. Paul is not going to leave these communities leaderless.

A look at 2 Timothy 3 would give us a picture of the kind of men Paul looked for in appointing elders. You can check that out yourself. I will summarize the criteria there as believing men of integrity who can teach well and relate positively to others. The elder has moral maturity, social maturity, knowledge of Biblical truth, and the ability to communicate that truth.

One question I have, “If these are the necessary qualifications, where did Paul find men qualified to be elders?” If this whole missionary journey lasted about two years from Antioch back to Antioch, Paul was not in any one place longer than a matter of months. Where does he find believers qualified to teach Biblical truth who are grounded in Biblical morality? It is one thing to come to faith in Jesus Christ through grace. It is another thing to set aside the immoral habits of society, these patterns that are ingrained in us, and to develop moral integrity and good doctrine. That kind of growth takes time. Paul’s own teaching in 2 Timothy 2:6 is not to appoint a new convert as an elder, “lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.”

Where does Paul find elders, when to be an elder implies time? Elders are the grey-haired who have developed wisdom in the faith.

I suspect he found a significant number of them in the synagogue. Jews and God-fearers of the synagogue who believed would already be committed to Biblical doctrine and morality. I think this was one of the benefits of going to the synagogue first. These men are new to faith in Jesus, but they have a firm foundation already established. Paul may have also found in society men of integrity prepared ahead of time by God who were not connected to the synagogue. I can imagine Paul bringing together a group of elders from a variety of backgrounds in each place whose strengths complement one another.

While Paul is with them, he does not commit all the work of growth to the elders. His goal is not only to see people come to faith but to see men and women grow into maturity as disciples, and that suggests a sixth strategic action.

6. Paul strengthens the disciples as long as he is with them.

As Paul goes through each city appointing elders, he also “strengthens the disciples.” This will be an ongoing practice of Paul. He will return to these churches on his second missionary journey with the

express purpose of building up these believers. Paul knows there are challenges ahead. There is the need for perseverance through faith, through commitment to essential doctrine, and through relationships forged with one another. Recognizing this need for further teaching and exhortation will lead Paul, when he can't visit, to write letters that are going to help make up our New Testament. We still benefit from this pastoral vision of Paul for equipping the saints.

7. Paul goes to new territory.

The final strategic action I see here is Paul's commitment to move on to new territory. Some are called to stay and build the church in a specific place. Paul is called to proclaim the Gospel where the name of Jesus Christ has not been heard.

I wonder if that strategic idea explains why Paul and Barnabas did not continue on from Derbe to Tarsus, Paul's hometown, and then on to Antioch in Syria. If they had just continued along the Roman road eastward, that land route would have taken them home. The strategic desire to strengthen the churches may be enough to explain Barnabas and Paul turn around at Derbe. But I wonder if Paul also considered Cilicia reached through his own preaching and the preaching of others. Jesus had already been named in that province. Churches were already formed. Paul had now established a witness in southern Galatia that linked those believers eastward to the provinces of Cilicia, on to Syria, on to Judea. If Paul wanted to proclaim the Gospel in new territory, it was now time to move westward. This fits with the later explanation of this strategic goal that Paul writes to the Romans. He wrote in Romans 15:19-21,

¹⁹ ... from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; ²¹ but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND."

Paul has not gotten round to Illyricum, yet. But that is where he is headed, targeting significant urban centers, preaching the Gospel, relying on the Holy Spirit, organizing churches, appointing elders, strengthen disciples and moving on to that place where Jesus Christ has not yet been named.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 14:1-28. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Without looking at the suggested missionary strategies in this lesson, what stands out to you in the text as a possible strategy that guides Paul's missionary thinking?
3. Consider the seven missionary strategies suggested in this lesson.
 - a. Which of these suggested strategies seem to be well supported in the text of Acts (either in this passage or future passages) and which do not?
 - b. Which of these suggested missionary activities would you agree to as part of Paul's strategy?
 - c. Which of these suggested missionary activities would you not list as part of Paul's strategy? (Maybe you disagree with the wording or maybe you think the action by Paul in one place does not indicate that this is part of his ongoing strategy in other places.)
 - d. What actions would you add? Do you see other actions by Paul that suggest a repeated pattern in missionary strategy?
4. What strengths or weaknesses do these strategies suggest to you when you consider your own church or movement? Does this list suggest changes that you or your church or your movement could make?
5. Does this list help you in considering missionary endeavors you would like to support or partner with?

Lesson 22: Acts 15:1-21 The Jerusalem Council – 1st Question

Introduction

Intentional Gospel Mission to Gentiles Begins	
12:25-14:28 The Preaching of the Good News of Salvation	15:1-16:4 The Discussions of the Terms of Salvation
12:25-13:12 Antioch to Paphos	15:1-5 Antioch to Jerusalem
13:13-52 Pisidian Antioch	15:6-21 The Jerusalem Council
14:1-20 Iconium to Derbe	15:22-35 The Letter
14:21-28 Return to Strengthen the Churches	15:36-16:4 Return to Strengthen the Churches
16:5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number daily.	

Part IV of Acts has two movements. Chapters 13 and 14 show us the preaching of the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. This is the primary action of Paul and Barnabas everywhere they go. Three times the text says they preached the Gospel and one time that they preached the Good News. They are also described as proclaiming, testifying and speaking the Word of God three times, the Word of the Lord three times, the Word of grace once and just simply, the Word, once.

What is their message? It is the “who” of salvation, Jesus Christ, and the “how” of salvation, justification by grace through faith. Whatever the context, whether correcting a Jewish spiritualist before a Roman governor, religious legalists in a Jewish synagogue or Hellenistic pagans at the city gate, Paul’s aim was to proclaim the Gospel message of salvation in the power of the Holy Spirit in significant urban centers to establish Christian fellowships led by local elders who would spread the Good News of salvation further into the regions around those urban centers.

Luke covers Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey in the first movement of part IV with four reports of proclamation from Antioch to Paphos, then to Pisidian Antioch, then from Iconium to Derbe, and finally back again to strengthen the churches. The main theme of this movement is the preaching of the Good News of salvation. The second movement in part IV of Acts, 15:1-16:4, gives us a discussion of the terms of salvation.

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ goes from Jews, used to following Old Testament requirements, out to Gentiles, for whom those requirements are quite foreign, those Gentiles quite naturally ask the question, “What is expected of me as a follower of Jesus Christ?”

As long as the Gospel stayed among Jews, much of the “How then shall we live?” was assumed, having already been worked out for generations from the Old Covenant. There was a known and recognized set of behaviors, covering all areas of life. With the Gospel now going out into a variety of cultures, the basic assumptions are challenged. “Really, are we to do that? Do we have to stop doing that?” You know, “God wants that?” Seekers and new believers will ask these questions, sometimes from willing hearts and sometimes from resistant hearts. The missionary must rethink their own behavior, asking what in my practice is fundamentally in line with the Gospel and what is from my culture. It is just the way we do it. So, the kid who grows up a Baptist, or grows up a Moravian, or grows up in some kind of Christian denomination, whether it’s in Croatia, or China, or Korea, or North Carolina, you have this pattern of what it looks like to you to live a Christian life. And when you take

that into a different culture, just like these Jewish believers are now having; they have assumed patterns of what the moral life, the good life, the God-fearing life looks like as they go into new cultures, they need to question what of this is really Biblical, and what is really in line with the New Covenant Gospel, and what is my culture: either how we do the Biblical in my culture, or simply not Biblical at all but just how we do culture.

Paul and Barnabas were answering those questions. And a segment of the believing Church in Jerusalem was not happy with how they answered those questions. So, imagine that? Christians not in agreement with how other Christians answer the question, “How then shall we live?” Shocking. The missionary expansion of the Gospel, the movement out from Jewish culture, created a set of questions that leaders of the New Covenant Christian community were now being forced to address. The whole text from 15:1-16:5 addresses this question, “What does the New Covenant Gospel message require of Gentile believers?” This movement contains four reports, just like our previous movement. We start with Antioch to Jerusalem, then the Jerusalem Council, then the Council’s letter, and finally, the return to strengthen the churches. I am going to address the first two of those reports in this lesson and the second two in the next lesson.

The first report from Antioch to Jerusalem serves as our introduction. This is Acts 15:1-5.

Antioch to Jerusalem (15:1-5)

¹ Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, *the brethren* determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. ³ Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. ⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

This paragraph is framed at the beginning and end with a challenge to the Gospel message that Paul and Barnabas preached. So, in verse 1, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved,” and then in verse 5, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” It is not only about circumcision. Circumcision is maybe the biggest, most obvious hurdle that a Gentile is going to have to cross. And for hundreds of years, that’s what a male proselyte to Judaism had to do. But not just circumcision. That was an introduction into all of the Law of Moses. So, the whole Law is in mind here and the sect of the Pharisees are simply applying the process that they’ve always had for somebody coming into the people of God now to Christians: to enter into the New Covenant community you also have to be circumcised as a sign you’re going to obey the whole Law of Moses.

The text says, “some men came down from Judea.” On a map you might wonder where they went down to. The way we look at it, they actually went up or north to Antioch in Syria, Paul and Barnabas’ home church. Jewish convention always has us going up to Jerusalem from all directions and so also, down from Jerusalem in all directions. And Luke is following that convention.

Paul and Barnabas did not appreciate the teaching of these men who had come down from Jerusalem. They had great dissension and debate with them. When the brethren in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, I do not think they were sending them to find out what’s right. I am assuming that the church in Antioch is standing with Paul and Barnabas in the Gospel that has been preached. And they had great concern over the direction of the teaching coming out of Jerusalem. They wanted to know whether the Apostles and elders support this view that believers must be circumcised. If the Apostles and elders do support this view, we might be facing the first major split

in the Christians movement. I do not see Paul and Barnabas and the church in Antioch submitting to a Gospel that requires circumcision and Law obedience for salvation.

So, there was great joy in Antioch, and in Phoenicia, and in Samaria, along the whole road south to Jerusalem in response to the report from Paul and Barnabas about Gentiles in Asia Minor entering into the community of faith. And this is not unusual that everybody would be joyful and excited about the report of conversion. We are all glad to hear of people coming to faith in Jesus. It's the details that start getting us concerned. Years later there's this story about a Roman legion being baptized, and yet holding their sword arms above the water, so they can continue to fight. You know, they don't want to baptize that sword arm. You just hear that a Roman legion comes to faith and you're filled with joy. "That's amazing! That preaches! We'll tell other people about that!" But then you hear they held their sword arms above the water, and you wonder, "Wait a minute. What Gospel did they receive? And what kind of discipleship are they getting? I mean, who is teaching them? Are they truly saved at all? And if they are, who is telling them how they should live now that they are saved?" So, a certain group of believing Jews had considerable doubt about this liberal message of Paul and Barnabas that did not conserve Old Covenant obedience for Gentiles. They are wondering, "Are these Gentiles really saved? We don't think so, not if they are not willing to submit themselves to Mosaic Law."

Now, once in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas are received by the apostles and elders. That is a good sign. But some of the sect of the Pharisees stand up and say, "They must observe all the law of Moses." And we should not be surprised at this. Rightly understanding the relationship between Old and New Covenant is an ongoing issue for each generation. And to be honest, this is why I did a series on the Pentateuch, because I think it's a major problem in the modern Evangelical world to rightly understand the relationship between our Old Testament and our New Testament. At the time of Acts 15, thousands of Jews had come to Christ in Jerusalem. And, having received the Gospel message, they had continued to circumcise their children, eat kosher food, worship on the Sabbath. Nothing wrong with that. But how have they processed their own behavior? How do they understand this keeping of the Old Covenant during the time of New Covenant? Processing and clarifying their own understanding is now being forced on them. This is like a Southern American Christian who doesn't want their lips to touch alcohol ever going to Europe and taking the Lord's Supper and drinking wine for the first time. How does their mind process the fact that they just drank wine and now how do they rethink their commitment to never touching alcohol, as they're forced back in the Bible to reconsider the behavior they thought was clearly Christian? And as long as they were in their Southern community, there was no reason to even think about it. But now, they're having to think about it, because these look like really sincere Christian people who have wine in the church. So, as long as the Jews stay in the Jewish community, and they all follow the Law together - they believe in Jesus and they follow the Law - they are not having to fully process their understanding of their own behavior. So, now what they are learning is that this question of Old Covenant obedience has not been adequately addressed. They didn't have to.

There had been some talk about Gentiles coming to faith, a few years before when Peter went into the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius. The leadership had met in Jerusalem and discussed that experience and had affirmed the salvation experience of those Gentiles. Still, this was just one household, and they are already living in Judea, and they are already making concession to live in piety among Jews. So they're Gentiles but they sort of, kind of fit. That event forced the question of whether or not Gentiles might be born again, but it did not force the leadership to work out a theology of New Covenant obedience for Gentiles.

Later, a largely Gentile church was planted in Antioch. And the leaders of Jerusalem again affirmed the work going on there. But we still have a minority. They are still a distance from Jerusalem. The Jews in Jerusalem do not have to really fellowship with those Gentiles of Antioch. A couple do who go visit, but it's just them. It is a lot easier to love and accept someone if you never have to live with them, or work with them, or interact with them. They're more abstract. We love our brethren over

there who do those weird things. So, Gentile inclusion has been affirmed abstractly, nor really in the day-to-day. The question of behavior has still not been fully addressed. And people are developing their own opinions. Different Jews in Jerusalem are coming up with different ways to think about this. But no event has forced those opinions to clash. They might sit around and talk about, in Bible study, whether or not Gentiles need to be circumcised but nobody cares that much, because they are not trying to force Gentiles to be circumcised. Not until conservative Christians Jews go up into new Gentile communities and begin to teach in a way that is contrary to the way the Gospel message has been presented by people like Paul and Barnabas. Sharp disagreement now results, forcing the elders and apostles in Jerusalem to address further their theology of Gentile inclusion.

Peter's Possible Involvement

Even though they've already made some affirmation of Gentile inclusion, the outcome of the Council in Jerusalem is not guaranteed to be positive. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul records a lowlight in Peter's life when Peter temporarily went back on his acceptance of Gentiles. In the report, Paul used Peter's Hebrew name, Cephas, even though he was writing in Greek, he inserted the Aramaic for "Cephas", probably to emphasize the fact that Peter in this instance was putting his ethnic Hebrew identity above his identity in Christ, which lead to a hurtful rejection of Gentile brothers and sisters. Paul describes what transpired in Galatians 2:11-14.

- ¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. ¹³ The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Notice the similarities with our Acts passage. Certain Christian Jews came to Antioch. Paul says they are from James. That does not necessarily mean that James affirms their stance on Gentile obedience to the Law. It would at least mean they are in fellowship with James in the Christian community in Jerusalem. In Galatians, Paul calls them, "the party of circumcision." And circumcision is the issue described in Acts 15:1. Peter's presence is added in the Galatians passage. So, either these are two different moments of disagreement in Antioch, or Luke simply does not mention that Peter's presence in Antioch when he reports it in Acts.

In the Galatians report, Peter was swayed by these Jewish Christians from Jerusalem to separate himself from fellowship with Gentile believers.

This incident highlights an issue in early Jew and Gentile relationships that may not be immediately apparent to us. Earlier in Acts 10, the major problem the Jewish brethren had with Peter's witness to Cornelius was that Peter went into Cornelius' house, accepting Cornelius' hospitality, and so was made ceremonially unclean. Jewish adherence to Old Covenant Law required separation from Gentiles, particularly around mealtime. You know, with all the food laws. That segregation was bad enough, that Jewish Christians would segregate themselves from Gentile Christians, but what made it even worse in the house church movement of early Christianity - you know, it's bad enough that we're in the same house but we're sitting at different tables - but it is around mealtime that they celebrated the Lord's supper together. So, not only are they eating separately: they are taking the body of Christ and the blood of Christ in the symbolic remembrance separately, one for the holy Jewish Christians, and another for the, umm... partially clean? How do we say, Gentile Christians? You might be able to identify with this at your church. There is the clearly holy table. They're the people who are in. And then there's the other table for the people we're not sure about. You probably sit at one of those tables.

So, Paul has charged Peter with inconsistency, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?", meaning, if you as a New

Covenant believer do not seek to keep the whole law of Moses, why do you choose certain markers of the Law to impose on Gentiles as a requirement for table fellowship?” This issue of table fellowship is an issue of purity or cleanliness. Are the Gentiles made clean through faith in Jesus Christ? Or do Gentiles need to conform to certain Old Testament rituals in order to be truly clean?

Table fellowship then becomes a test case for what a Christian Jew truly believes about a Gentile who has received the Gospel. It is one thing to say that we accept those people in that country over there, on that side of town, but to sit down together at a meal and to enjoy one another’s company with full acceptance as brothers and sisters in Christ, that will test what you really believe about your brother or sister.

Peter was tested and he failed. He did not accept his Gentile brothers and sisters on the basis of faith in Jesus, even though he accepted that Gospel truth for himself.

The missionary enterprise among Gentiles is forcing the Jewish majority church to reconsider their answers to previous questions. “Do we really believe that Gentiles are considered acceptable based on faith in Jesus Christ? Because if we do, that means treating Gentile brothers and sisters with full inclusion as brothers and sisters, as fellow workers in the Gospel, even as elders in our churches. There is no distinction in Christ. Do we really believe that? Do you believe that? Is there no distinction in Christ? Or do we believe in two tables, a table for those who have merely professed faith; and a table for those who are fully cleansed through their obedience to certain practices?

Considering the timing of this temporary defection of Peter at Antioch, it is not easy to nail down with certainty when did this happen. Is this something Peter did after the Church Council presented in Acts 15 or before the Church Council of Acts 15?

Earlier in the letter to the Galatians, Paul describes going up to Jerusalem twice before this confrontation with Peter. He went up three years after his conversion in Damascus, and then he went up fourteen years later. Now, if the fourteen years later is fourteen years after his conversion, not fourteen years after going to Jerusalem the first time, then it was eleven years between Jerusalem trips. And this might have been a full eleven years, but since Jews used inclusive counting, it could have been part of a year, then nine full years, then another part of a year. And that, for them, would count as eleven years. But for us, it would be just over nine years.

The reason it is important to recognize inclusive dating is that the possibility of a shorter time period that’s just over nine years means the second trip Paul mentions in Galatians could have been the trip he and Barnabas made when they brought famine relief from Antioch to Jerusalem. That trip is reported in Acts 11:30. We are not told by Luke in the book of Acts that Paul at that time consulted with the apostles and elders. And in Galatians 2, we are not told that on that trip Paul and Barnabas took famine relief. So, according to what happened on that trip, they don’t look like the same trip. But both reports are brief. There is no point to mentioning the famine relief in the Galatians context. And Luke is later going to show confirmation of Paul’s ministry in Acts 15, so he does not need to mention an earlier confirmation by just a few of the leaders during the famine relief trip.

So, that Paul had such a discussion while in Jerusalem for famine relief is quite believable. Luke doesn’t say it, but it’s quite believable. Paul’s vision for Gentile missions did not come to him in Acts 13 when he and Barnabas were set aside by the Holy Spirit. That’s not the first time he thought about reaching Gentiles. Paul’s testimony about his experience on the Damascus Road confirms that Jesus told him right from the beginning that he was being to Gentiles. And he seems to have already witnessed to Gentiles in Arabia and in Cilicia. At least, that is my assumption. We do know he has already been active in the mixed Jew-Gentile church of Antioch, and he is soon going to go on his first missionary journey. So, that Paul might have wanted to discuss his call to Gentiles with the leaders in Jerusalem, while he and Barnabas were in town, makes a lot of sense. The trip described in Galatians 2 could be the famine relief trip indicated in Acts 11:30.

If these two trips are the same trip, then the confrontation with Peter likely happened before the Jerusalem Council. Peter lost his way, being persuaded by Jewish believers, but came back to a right application of the Gospel after being confronted by Paul.

Many Biblical scholars take another perspective, pointing out the similarity between the trip recorded in Galatians 2, and not the famine trip but this debate being recorded here in Acts 15. This view allows for the eleven-year time gap to be a full eleven years without using inclusive dating. And there do seem to be some similarities between the two trips.

I do not believe it is the correct view. The discussion described in Galatians 2 is with just a few leaders only. It is not described as a public council for the whole church, like the one Luke describes in Acts 15. I also think Peter would be less likely to lose his way at the pressure of men claiming to be from James if this Council had already taken place, considering that Peter and James both making public statements, and even draft a letter that contradicts the circumcision party. If we have already had this, does Peter, then, defect?

F. F. Bruce, who stands in contrast to the majority view, so you could say I am following F.F. Bruce's view, also points out that Paul's choice not to mention the Council's decision in this letter to Gentiles is quite odd if the Council has already happened. If members of the circumcision party had already been decisively refuted by a public council in Jerusalem, why did Paul not mention that in his letter to the Galatians when circumcision and obedience to Law are the exact issue causing problems in Galatia? Why not write and tell them, "Hey, we just had a big conference in Jerusalem about this whole problem, and the Apostles and the elders they all agree with us that you don't have to be circumcised to be saved"? A very good reason explaining why Paul does not mention the Jerusalem Council to the Galatians is that it has not happened, yet.

This is the possible scenario that I think fits best with the record. Paul and Barnabas brought famine relief to Jerusalem, so that's around 46 AD. This was also the trip reported at the beginning of Galatians 2, where Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles was affirmed by leaders in Jerusalem. Returning to their base in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas set out from there on a missionary journey that lasted 18 months. On that journey they established churches in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, from Pisidian Antioch all the way over to Derbe. These Galatians are not the ethnic Galatian who are to be found in northern Galatia. These southern Galatians were Phrygian and Lycaonian along with a normal mix of ethnicities you would find in any Roman city.

During the following year, Peter visited Antioch, and so did a group of conservative Jewish believers in Jesus, and they argued that Mosaic Law still applies to Jews and Gentiles. Peter was convinced for a time, until Paul rebuked him. By this rebuke Peter was restored to his senses. Also, around this time Paul received word that believers among the churches in southern Galatia had been affected by a similar argument. And with the Jewish opposition that was present there in Galatia, along with the number of Jews and God-fearers who had believed in Jesus, and along with the spiritual youth of the elders in the churches, none of whom had been long in the faith of Jesus Christ, it is not surprising that they have this same problem, this pull towards Old Testament Law and a confusion about how it applies to the Gospel. It's not surprising. Hearing this news, Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians, our first New Testament epistle, to them. He can't go himself, so he writes a letter and with exasperation he confesses to them, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting God who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel." (Galatians 1,6) Paul doesn't go to them. He writes to them, because rather than go to Galatia and try to set things right among the churches there, Paul recognizes the need for a unifying statement with the church in Jerusalem. So, in 49 AD, three years since the famine relief trip, Paul and Barnabas return to Jerusalem to draw forth a clear position regarding Gentile inclusion from the elders and the Apostles. We want to hear what you, guys, have to say. After that decision was obtained, Paul set off for a second missionary journey, and you know what he did at the beginning of that journey. Then he visits the struggling Galatians church, as he starts with a pastoral visit before he moves into new territory.

The Two Questions of Covenant

Paul's strong language in the letter to the Galatians shows that he considers the issue raised by the circumcision party in Antioch and the similar problem in Galatia to be an attack on the fundamentals of the Gospel. The disagreement is about what enables a person to enter into and remain in a covenant relationship with God. I call this a first question issue. We covered the two questions of Covenant in our lesson on Peter at Cornelius' house. The two questions will also help us separate two interrelated issues under discussion at this Council in Jerusalem. We are discussing two things and we need to recognize that, and the two questions will help us do that.

The first question of Covenant is, "What makes a person acceptable to enter into relationship with holy God?" And how do you answer that question, what makes you acceptable. And instead of "acceptable," we could say "righteous" or "pure." "What makes a person righteous enough or pure enough to be in relationship with God?" The Gospel answers this question emphatically, "By grace through faith you are justified!" You are declared right, acceptable. You are declared righteous based on not what Jesus has done, not on anything you do. The commands of Law have no place in procuring a standing before God. You receive it passively as a gift of grace.

The second question of Covenant assumes the first, asking, "Now that I am in relationship with holy God by grace through faith, how then shall I live?" When this question is asked from the heart of a true believer, it is basically asking, "How do I love my heavenly Father? How do I serve my righteous King? How do I worship my holy God? What are the right commandments for me to follow?" This is the response of faith. It is a response of wonder at the gloriousness of God and a response of gratitude to his loving sacrifice.

Jesus declared to his disciples, "If you love me, you will obey my commandments." The right response to good, valid, loving authority is obedience. That is how you love the one in authority over you. The question is not whether it is right to obey, but what should that obedience look like? What Covenant stipulations has God given to guide me in my desire to live for him? If I was a Jew living under the Old Covenant, I would rightly answer this question by embracing the commands of Moses, not as a way to justify myself, but as the right response to God in Covenant obedience. But we are not living under the Old Covenant. We are living under the New Covenant. Then circumcision, and the food laws, and keeping the Sabbath, and everything else is the right way for me to pursue life with God. But I'm not living under the Old Covenant. We are under the New Covenant. And because of this transition, the way the people of God answer the question, "How then shall we live?" now looks different.

Okay, so having defined the two questions of Covenant, we can consider their application both to Peter's situation in Antioch described in Galatians, and in the Acts 15 debate in Jerusalem. When Peter separated himself from Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, was his separation an issue related to the first question of Covenant, or an issue related to the second question of Covenant? Was it about justification, or was it about the life of a believer? Peter himself might have said that it was a second question issue. He might not have been saying that the Gentile Christians were unsaved. He might have been saying that the right way to live for God was to follow certain markers of Old Covenant Law.

Peter might have said it was a second question issue. Paul does not. Paul saw in Peter's actions an undermining of the Gospel, especially since Peter's leadership influenced others: Barnabas and other Jews. So, people were looking at Peter and making interpretations on his behavior. If Gentiles are not clean and acceptable based on faith in Jesus, then something must be added. They are lacking something. But that is contrary to the Gospel Paul had been preaching. We can add nothing else than what Jesus has done for us. Paul says to Peter during the confrontation,

"a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified."

So, Paul is taking this as a first question issue. This is about salvation. And this is Paul's concern also for the Galatians, when he writes to them and he says, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting God who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel." Adding a requirement of circumcision to the Gospel, or a requirement of baptism, or a requirement of any kind of discipline or ritual makes the Gospel - not the Gospel for Paul.

Now, it is possible to have a similar debate about circumcision, or food laws, or Sabbath keeping that is not a first question debate. We might all be agreeing and assume that salvation is based on grace through faith, and still be asking, what's the right place of these Old Testament commandments in the Christian life? And that's what happens in 1 Corinthians 10 and in Romans 14. Very similar issues are being addressed but as a second question issue. That's why Paul is much more relaxed in discussion about food laws and Sabbath keeping in those letters, because it's not an attack on the Gospel, but rather a wrestling with the right way to live in the Gospel. Peter's separation from Gentiles as unclean shows that the party of the circumcision were arguing something more serious that was affecting the answer to the first question: by grace through faith.

Applying the two questions of Covenant to the context of this Council, we see that the first question is definitely under debate. Verse 1, "Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" This is a salvation issue. This is a first question issue. It's about justification before God. You cannot be declared right with God without circumcision. Once we clarify our answer to the first question - that obedience to Law is not necessary for forgiveness - we are still going to have to address the follow-up question about how Old Covenant commandments apply to living the Christian life.

And this Council is going to address both of those questions in turn. We will consider the first question answer during the rest of this lesson, so a little more straightforward, but we're going to hold on to the answer to the second question of Covenant for our next lesson.

So, let's read Luke's summary of the Council proceedings in Acts 15:6-21.

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)

⁶ The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

¹² All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴ "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. ¹⁵ "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶ 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, ¹⁷ SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' ¹⁸ SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. ¹⁹ "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹ "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

If it is correct to say that Peter stumbled in his treatment of Gentiles before this Council, he really regained his footing. He comes out strong. He is established firmer than ever. Now according to Peter,

not only is it not necessary for Gentiles to keep Mosaic law, but it is also not necessary for Jews. There are not two ways of salvation, one for the circumcised and one for the uncircumcised. Peter declares, "We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." It's the same way for Jew and Gentile.

I can hear Paul's rebuke, when Peter declares, "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" Those words match harmoniously with Paul's declaration to the Galatians in 5:1-3,

¹ It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. ² Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³ And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.

Peter is not just parroting Paul. He was helped by Paul to get through his theological confusion. We all need help sometimes when we get mixed up in our understanding and application of the Bible. Paul helped Peter, but Peter has had his own experience, his own walk with God, his own processing of the Scriptures regarding Gentiles. He reminds the brethren that they had already affirmed his preaching to Cornelius. And if there was any doubt whether the members of that Gentile household had really believed in their hearts, "God, who knows the heart," made very clear that these had truly been born again by filling them with the Holy Spirit and causing them to speak in tongues just as the Apostles had at Pentecost. Peter reminds them about this. That same outward manifestation of the Spirit by Gentiles affirmed they had the same internal new birth experience as the Jews. Peter reminds everyone, just as he had to remind himself, God makes "no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith." And those words address the first question salvation issue, while also pointing to the second question issue of fellowship with one another. Fellowship is no longer affected by ceremonial cleansing but stands on the basis of spiritual cleansing already received in Christ.

Luke does not need to report to us Barnabas and Paul said at the Council, describing how God was working among Gentiles. We have already read that in chapters 13-14. We know the Spirit of God was leading Gentiles to believe in Jesus. Luke moves on to the contribution of James. This is not John's brother, the Apostle James who was killed by Herod Agrippa. This is James, the brother of Jesus, who is a leading elder in Jerusalem and who appears to be acting as the facilitator of this gathering.

James affirms the testimony of Peter with these words, "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." These are important words. In this context, James uses Peter's original Aramaic name, Simeon. More interesting is the phrasing James used when he said that God has taken "from among the Gentiles a people for His name." The word used for, Gentiles, is the word, *ethne*, also translated, nations. So it's, "from among the nations a people for his name." That word, people, used here has always been equivalent to Israel. When we talk about the nations, that all the different ethnic groups. When we talk about the people of God, that's the ethnic group, Israel. And this is a deep value of identity for the Jews. In the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 14:2 we have the distinction. "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the nations who are on the face of the earth." Did you hear that? The Jews are "the people" (in Greek, *laos*). They are the people who have been separated from the nations (which in Greek is, *ethne*). Two different words. The Jews were taken as a people out from the Gentiles. The Jews were accepted by excluding Gentiles. They are other. A Gentile was included by becoming a Jew. But not now. James' words - this is a really radical change for the Jews. God does not take a people out of the Gentiles, out of the nations. He takes a people consisting of the Gentiles, of the nations, of various *ethne*. It is a totally new conception of the people of God. Under the Old Covenant, the people of God were defined ethnically and geopolitically. You had to become one of them to be a member of the people of God. Those distinctions are removed in the New Covenant. The people of God are now defined as those who have believed in Jesus Christ, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or geography.

James goes on to quote Scripture in support of this conclusion. His main text is Amos 9:11-12, though the beginning of the text, “After these things I will return,” is from Jeremiah 12:15 and the end, “who makes these things known of old,” is from Isaiah 45:21. So the hearers may have picked up on that. This is a text that is representative of things that you can also see in Jeremiah, and you can also see in Isaiah. The original Hebrew text of Amos is about the restoration of David’s house after the exile. That is something more concrete: David’ house will re-establish Israel as a kingdom, and they will rule over other peoples. The Greek Septuagint translation that James uses spiritualizes the meaning. This is what he said,

AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN,
AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

¹⁷ SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’

James’ uses the text to recognize that this promise to restore the house of David is fulfilled spiritually in Jesus. He may even be talking about Jesus’, “Tear down this temple and I will rebuild it in three days.” You know, the tabernacle of David has fallen into ruins, and it’s restored. It may be true that we should even see a link to the resurrection here. David’s house is restored in Jesus who reigns from Heaven. And through Jesus, humankind can seek the Lord and Gentiles will be called by his name, not Jews alone. James is agreeing with Peter. He is giving Scriptural support. Gentiles are included as full members of the people of God by grace through faith in Jesus. This is the prophetic view of what was to be in the New Covenant.

Having affirmed the full inclusion of Gentiles, the Council has made a clear decision regarding the first question of Covenant. Maintaining certain Old Covenant markers is not necessary for salvation. The answer to that question is clear. Or it seems clear until James adds verses 19-21.

¹⁹ “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹ “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

Now, wait a minute! That sounds like you are troubling the Gentiles. If salvation is by grace through faith, why does James feel the need to add stipulations? And why does he choose these particular stipulations, some which sound moral, others which merely sound ceremonial? Has James just diminished the clear move away from legalism that Peter, and Paul, and Barnabas were urging?

We will address those questions and these specific stipulations from James in our next lesson.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 15:1-21. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What are some significant differences in practice that you are aware of, either between Christian denominations in your own culture or between Christians in different cultures? (Come up with a short list that includes examples of practices some Christians would claim as necessary for salvation and some that are differences in how Christians ought to live but not issues of salvation.)
3. What behavior or practices are being required in 15:1-5 by the Christians from Jerusalem?
4. Would you describe those practices as relating to the first question of covenant or the second question of covenant?
5. Does Peter address the issue as a first question issue or a second question issue?
6. Does James’ response address the issue as a first question issue or a second question issue?
7. What stands out to you in James’ response? What further questions does James’ response create? (James’ response will be discussed in the next lesson.)

Lesson 23: Acts 15:22-16:5 The Jerusalem Council – 2nd Question

Introduction

The Jerusalem Council of 59 AD convened in response to a serious threat to the first question of Covenant. The challenge was an internal one. It had to do with the application of Old Covenant Law to New Covenant believers. And since many Jewish believers continued to keep the major Old Covenant requirements as a matter of cultural heritage, the focus of the challenge was on Gentiles and those who witnessed to Gentiles. Conservative Jewish Christians visiting the church in Antioch, a base of Christian outreach, made this claim, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

That’s a first question claim. It has to do with our justification before God. “What makes me acceptable or righteous enough to be in a covenant relationship with holy God?” Paul and Barnabas became indignant at this addition to the Gospel of grace. Luke’s report of the Council has Peter giving refutation to this claim.

¹⁰ “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

Peter and Paul are in agreement that to be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus means that no other requirements can be tacked on to grace. James the elder goes on to back them up with a quotation from Amos that includes short references to Jeremiah and Isaiah. Essentially, he is saying, “The prophets agree. Gentiles are accepted as Gentiles. They don’t have to become Jews.” One of the really knew things about the New Covenant is that the people of God are no longer taken out from among the nations and included into the one specific ethnic group: Israel. Now, the people of God are made up of believers from all the various ethnic groups, whether Lycaonian, Persian or Roman, Libyan or Egyptian, Han, Zulu, Polish, Irish, Korean, Bengali, all are accepted into the New Covenant family through faith in Jesus Christ. Old Covenant Law produced an ethnic people of God with a shared culture. The New Covenant produces a spiritual renewed people of God full of ethnic diversity. Ethnic identity is retained in John’s vision of Heaven, Revelation 7:9-10,

“...a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches *were* in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

The Apostles and elders in Jerusalem agree that Jew and Gentile are saved through grace by faith. And then James goes on to make this suggestion.

¹⁹ “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹ For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

When we first read this, we might wonder whether James is slyly agreeing with the conservative party who claimed, not only was circumcision necessary, but missionaries to Gentiles must also “direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” Did James just agree with Peter and then also agree with the opposition? What’s up with these commandments?

Well, if he did, Peter and Paul and Barnabas do not seem to have noticed. We are told the Apostles, and elders, and the whole gathered church agree to send men out to Gentile churches, reassuring them that salvation is by grace and instructing them to do the things James recommended.

There is both an affirmation of grace and a call to a particular kind of obedience. We need to unravel this a bit to make sure we understand what is going on. The remaining two reports of Acts Part IV are

going to cause us to think about the role of obedience in our salvation. We will start by considering the letter that was sent out by the Council, and then we will look at a couple of surprising things that happen as Paul sets out to strengthen the Galatian churches. First, the letter, Acts 15:22-35.

The Letter (15:22-35)

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, ²³ and they sent this letter by them, “The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. ²⁴ “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls, ²⁵ it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ “Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word *of mouth*. ²⁸ “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

³⁰ So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. ³³ After they had spent time *there*, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. ³⁴ But it seemed good to Silas to remain there. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.”

We might consider this letter the shortest of the New Testament letters. Even though it is encased in another New Testament book, it is a letter, containing senders, and receivers, and a message. However, the suggestion that we should take the content as inspired truth is easily debatable. When someone speaks in the Bible, the Bible remains without error if it communicates accurately the speech. It is another question whether or not the Bible is indicating to us that the speech is true. Another example of a letter inside of Acts, is the letter of the Roman tribune in Acts 23, who had written to Felix. We believe that Luke reported the letter correctly. The Bible is without error in telling us what was said, but we know that Lysias was not telling the exact truth in the letter. There is falsehood in the letter. He intentionally misled Felix.

The letter does claim the leading of the Holy Spirit. At least the elders and Apostles are saying, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and it seemed good to us to write this to you.” So maybe we are to take it as inspired. I take the content as a wise, Spirit-filled response to a particular situation, but not as normative command for all Gentiles in all places. We will get to that content in a minute and why I think that. First, the senders and the receivers.

The senders of the letter are the Apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem, who also claim to have the agreement of the whole Church. And we do not know to what level the whole Church agrees. There may be some of the circumcision party who are agreeing to disagree. They are not going to oppose the decision publicly. But there’s always people still processing after you have such a big gathering. Importantly, there is no division among the leadership, concerning the decision of the Council. A decision has been made by all the Apostles and elders to which the Church assents.

The receivers identified in the letter are not all Gentiles everywhere, but the brethren in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The Apostles and elders specifically address those churches affected by teachers who had gone out from Jerusalem. They write,

“Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The leaders in Jerusalem are taking responsibility to correct the false teaching that has been attached to the church they lead. They do not address the letter to churches further into Asia Minor that Paul and Barnabas planted. Though later, we will read that Paul communicates these decrees to the churches in Galatia with the encouragement that they observe them. Paul is on board with the intent of this letter, showing his agreement by applying the letter in his particular sphere of influence.

Interestingly, the theological decision of the council regarding salvation is not expressed in the letter. And that seems like a significant omission. They don't say, “We have decided that you can be saved without circumcision.” They don't say that. The Apostles and elders are comfortable trusting Paul and Barnabas to communicate what has been agreed about the Gospel. It's the Gospel they've been preaching anyway. And I imagine that the lack of Gospel clarification would communicate to the church in Antioch trust. Jerusalem trusts Paul and Barnabas, and the teachers and prophets in Antioch to continue preaching the Gospel as they have been preaching it. Jerusalem does not feel the need to correct them or exert oversight. Paul and Barnabas and the elders in Antioch can fill that role. Judas and Silas are sent along to confirm the Apostles' and elders' agreement with Paul and Barnabas. They are tried, attested men. They are valued leaders in the Jerusalem church. But they do not seem to carry the weight of oversight. They come to affirm, not exert authority. We are not going to hear anything more about this Judas after this reference. Silas is going to become a team member with Paul on his next missionary journey, where Paul is clearly going to be the leader of the team.

Four Commands Recommended by James

So, what are these decrees that Paul has agreed to tell Gentiles to obey?

²⁸ “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

What stands out to me first is what James did not suggest. What is missing to this list? What is he not encouraging? Circumcision, food laws, ceremonial cleansing, Sabbath observance, none of the major markers of Old Covenant Law are included in the list. And that's curious. And that affirms the most critical question about this list. Is this a backhanded way of agreeing with the circumcision party that Gentiles must observe the Law of Moses in order to be saved? No. Or at least no good Jew would think that. No good Jew would read this list and think that this is a summary statement of the Law. What they would see immediately is what is not there, especially that circumcision is left off.

Recognizing what is left off helps us answer the most critical question about James' list. The most critical question is whether James' instructions are intended as an answer to the first question of Covenant, “How am I declared righteous before God? Or acceptable to God?” or as an answer to the second question of Covenant, “How then shall I live?” What are we talking about, first question or second question? The Council affirmed the Gospel answer to the first question: by grace through faith you are declared righteous, made acceptable. This is not a first question issue. This is a second question issue. James is considering the question, “Knowing we are made acceptable by grace, how then shall we live?” What instructions do the Apostles and elders have for new Gentile believers to help them answer that question? How should we live? And they tell them, “abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well.”

Now notice, this is not at all intended as a full answer to the question, “How shall we then live?” There is a lot more instruction to give. We are supposed to go and make disciples, teaching them

everything that Jesus has taught us. If we want instruction, commandment, stipulations, we have got the whole sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-8. You can go to Romans 12-15, you know, it's command after command after command. Ephesians 4-6. There's a whole lot more than these four commandments from James. Read the letter of James. He has got a lot more to say himself about the practical issue of how then ought Christians live.

James is not trying at all to cover the whole second question here. He is not saying, "If you only do these things, you will have the Christian life covered." He is saying, "In regard to this issue of Jew-Gentile relationships that we are addressing right now, if you do just these four things, you will do well."

So, we ask, "Why these things?" There are four things here: (1) abstain from things sacrificed to idols, (2) abstain from eating blood, (3) abstain from eating things strangled, and (4) abstain from fornication, or sexual immorality. That's an interesting list. The first commandment has to do with idolatry. The next two have to do with ceremonial food laws. And the fourth has to do with sexual morality. Why these things?

Four Principles Behind New Covenant Commands

I can think of four reasons that Jesus and the Apostles give us New Covenant commands. I will call those reasons, ritual, moral, love, and wisdom. These are not absolute categories. There will be overlap. Still, these categories identify four principles for us to consider. First is ritual. If God tells us to perform a ritual, then we ought to do it because God told us to do it. Ritual does not save us. Ritual reminds us of truth in an experiential way. Two New Covenant rituals commanded by God are baptism and the Lord's Supper. This category is seriously reduced in the New Covenant when we compare it to the Old.

Our second option for why a commandment might be given is moral. The Old Covenant call of Leviticus 19 to be holy as God is holy continues on into the New Covenant. God's will for us is to live in goodness. Abundant life is experienced by living a life of love, and integrity, and uprightness. We reflect God when we live as His image in the world. We were created to do this, to be His image, to be holy as He is holy. I do not obey the moral commands of the Old Testament as an obligation to the Old Covenant, because I am not under Old Covenant. I obey the moral commands revealed in the Old and New Testament as one under New Covenant, who has an obligation to the Spirit indwelling in me to live according to who I have been created to be in Christ Jesus. God's moral character does not change. And that is why the moral commands of the New Covenant line up perfectly with the moral commands of the Old.

Our third option is love. This motivation for command overlaps a lot with the moral commands, since the moral commands are all ultimately an expression of love for God or love for our neighbor. The emphasis I am putting here is more on me choosing to limit my freedom in Christ for the benefit of another person. It may not be immoral to drink wine under certain circumstances, but if my drinking a glass of wine causes my brother to stumble then I might choose, out of love for my brother, to refrain. This is Paul's discussion about accepting one another in Romans 14. And as he says before that in Romans 13:8, "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law." So, reigning in my freedom for the sake of showing loving concern for someone else is a motive for New Covenant command.

Our fourth option is wisdom. Again, there is overlap with what is moral and what is loving, and yet, this is another helpful perspective. We might say, "I am free to do this in the Gospel. And I am not hurting anybody, so it is not unloving, but is it the wise thing to do?" You know, it's not immoral. It's not unloving. But is it wise? In this, we are considering the consequences of our actions on ourselves in how is this going to affect me, and on other people. For example, it would be unwise, if nobody is around, it would be unwise for me to drink even to drink one glass of wine at dinner if I am a recovering alcoholic. So, even though I might be free, there's nothing particularly sinful against one

glass of wine, so it's maybe not clearly immoral, it's maybe not unloving because I'm by myself, but it's not wise.

These four principles help us think about different motivations behind New Covenant instruction. With these in mind, we can now turn to James' list of commands and ask with each one, "Is this command based on a principle of ritual, morality, love, or wisdom?" If you want to pause here, think about yourself. You can do that. You can go through the four commands and think, is this ritual? Is this a ritual command? Is this a moral command? Is this a command out of love? Or is this a command out of wisdom? Beginning with our first option, none of these commands are ritual commands. There is no confirmation anywhere else in the New Testament that God has established ceremonial food laws for the New Covenant. The command that you cannot eat blood sausage is not anywhere affirmed as a ritual or ceremonial decree. In fact, God showed the end of the food laws to Peter in his vision of the sheet coming down from heaven when he was told to kill and eat. We removed the food laws so the Jews could interact freely with Gentiles.

Okay. So, these are not ritual. Is James motivated to give moral instruction? Is that the motive here? The last command addresses a clear moral issue. Sexual intimacy is reserved by God for marriage. This has to do with something intrinsic in our nature as human beings and as male and female. The other commands could have something to do with moral behavior but seem not to. But maybe. Maybe it's about idolatry. Worshiping false gods is immoral. Eating food sacrificed to idols was a means of interacting with a god. The ceremonial restrictions on consuming blood and strangled animals are connected to pagan worship practices. If a Christian performs any of these actions with the intent of worshiping or manipulating gods or other spiritual beings, then that Christian is committing the sin of idolatry, and that is a moral issue.

However, that does not seem to be the motive behind James' instruction. As Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 10, it is possible for a believer to acknowledge that meat has been sacrificed to an idol, and with a good conscience honestly eat the meat with no attempt to worship that false god at all. They reject the occult. They reject pagan gods. They recognize the demonic behind false religion. They are fully aware. When they eat meat from the market, they know it might come from a temple, but they eat without any temptation to interact with or worship or manipulate some god through their eating. They simply want meat for dinner.

Likewise, though pagan rituals involve eating blood as a way to commune with the gods, Christians who are free from that kind of superstition can, with a clear conscience, eat blood sausage or a strangled animal that has not had its blood drained away. This is what 1 Corinthians 10 is teaching. It is not the eating that is immoral. It is the potential meaning of the eating that might be sin in the heart of a person. So, these commands could have to do with the immorality of idolatry. Or not. It depends on the heart of the one eating.

We are on to something when we recognize that all four of these commands are related as pagan religious practices designed for communicating with the gods. I think that is even why abstaining from fornication makes this particular list. James is not implying that Paul and Barnabas forgot to talk to the Gentiles about sexual purity. They don't know that they ought not to have sex out of marriage. I am sure that Paul would have been teaching sexual abstinence outside of marriage. That is consistent in his letters. James does not need to recommend that for moral reasons. So, why include sexual abstinence in this list? In this time period, sex with a temple prostitute was a way to commune with certain gods. That's one way sex ties into false worship. Sex with non-believers is also a major temptation that leads to false worship. That's a consistent principle all the way through the Bible. If you want to lose, or weaken, or derail your faith, you know, if you just don't care that much about your faith or your relationship with Jesus Christ, it's just not that important to you, then date or marry a non-believer. That's basic wisdom played out over and over and over. A marriage between a believer and a non-believer is so much more likely to end in the believer moving away from God than the non-believer moving towards God. I have seen that principle consistently in student ministry. If

an involved student suddenly stops coming to prayer, or Bible study, or a fellowship gathering, the first question that enters my mind is, “Who are they dating?” Who we worship affects our behavior, and how we behave affects our worship. This is preeminently true in the area of sex. Your behavior will change who you worship, or your view of who you worship. There may be no other area of life that we are more likely to come up with a new theological perspective on God, or the gods, to justify our behavior than the sexual area of life. We have one view of God when we are not dating. But when we start dating, we start shifting, and questioning, and trying to go as far as possible and justify our actions. That’s why idolatry and sexuality are addressed together in the holiness code of Leviticus 18-20 and in Paul’s indictment of the pagan worldview in Romans 1:18-32, because sexuality has a special connection to false belief.

Recognizing the connection all four of these commands to worship practices in the Gentile world, points us in the right direction to understand what these commands are all about. I have said that the commands are not motivated by New Covenant ritual and not by moral instruction, so, what is the motive for the commands? We have two more options. They are either motivated to show love for others, or to exercise wisdom for oneself or ones’ community? I believe both are in mind here, love and wisdom.

When James first suggested his list in 15:20, he made two comments that gave context. He said, “It is my judgment that we do not trouble the Gentiles.” He did not say, “We need to make sure the Gentiles get correct teaching about the moral life.” He didn’t say, “It is my judgment that we create this whole list of things that will guide the Gentiles in how they should behave.” He said, “Let’s not trouble them.” James believes he is suggesting something that will not be a big burden. He does not want to make a big, long list of rules for the Gentiles to follow. So, what is he thinking? He goes on to add in verse 21,

“For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

Why does that matter? It matters because of relationships. It matters because of witness. The witness of believing Gentiles; believing Gentiles who want to give witness to non-believing Jews, or to God-fearers who haven’t believed in Jesus, or to other Gentiles who have some knowledge of Moses because Moses is preached. These commands will help with that witness. And it’s also important for relationship of believing Gentiles with believing Jews. I think James is saying, “You will do well to avoid these things because these things, with their association to pagan ritual, are especially abhorrent to Jews everywhere. Just don’t do these things. If you will limit your own freedom by avoiding them, you will help your brothers and sisters who are Jews, and you will enhance your witness to other Jews and to people who are aware of Jewish teaching. And by this, you are loving them. Similarly, Paul explains his heart desire for limiting his freedom this way in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33,

“³¹ Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; ³³ just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the *profit* of the many, so that they may be saved.”

Limiting freedom for the well-being of others, for the potential salvation of others, is an act of love. Why? So that some may be saved. Morally, you may be free to eat meat sacrificed to an idol or eat an animal killed by strangling. If you are in know way tempted to worship a false god through those acts, it is not immoral for you to do so. But it may not be loving. The mature Christian limits his or her freedom on occasion out of love.

I believe there is also a principle of wisdom at work here in James’ advice. The New Covenant does not demand of ethnic groups that they do away with their cultural habits and practices in order to enter the kingdom of God. The New Covenant does call all people, everywhere to yield to a new spiritual identity in Christ. A predominantly animistic, or Hindu, or Muslim, or Jewish culture may celebrate certain practices that are quite neutral. It is not a bad thing to pray five times a day. You

don't have to be Muslim to pray five times a day. And if you're a Muslim who believes in Jesus Christ, you can keep going praying five times a day. The content of your prayer is going to shift, but the cultural practice can stay the same. It is not a bad thing to not work on the Sabbath. It's actually a pretty good practice to not work on the Sabbath, even if you want to shift Sabbath to Sunday. It is not a bad thing to remember ancestors who have died. You have this respect for those who have gone before us. And yet, there is a fuzzy border between neutral customs and practices that maintain our former spiritual and religious identity. This gets a bit tricky.

As a worshiper of Jesus can I enter a mosque while Muslims are praying? That is an interesting question. And you may say, "yes," or you may say, "no." Can I pray that Muhammad is God's prophet? Absolutely not! That may have been my former identity and it's a quite natural prayer for me. But even if I feel drawn to it, I have to set that aside. That is not of Christ. That is no longer who I am even if it's very important in my home culture. That's similar to a Roman Catholic who will not stop praying to Mary. You may explain to me that you are not worshiping, you are just asking for intercession like you would ask your own mother. My question would then be, "Can you stop praying to Mary? Is this an issue of religious identity to you? Can you give your focus in prayer 100% to God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ? Or is your Christian identity more about Mary than about Jesus?" And I can't answer that for a Catholic friend. You're going to have to answer it yourself because it's a question of the heart and the spirit.

Separating cultural identity from religious or spiritual identity is quite tricky, especially in a culture that has really strong traditional religion. And new believers need guidance towards fully embracing their identity as a worshiper of Jesus Christ. Before we can live in the freedom of the Gospel, we have to become aware of what binds us, what hinders us from being free in Jesus. And this is going to require learning to be honest with our own heart and conscience about why we are holding on to certain practices. It is wise to make a clear cut and just to step away from traditional religious practices that are not Biblical in order that we might learn to live in our new identity in Christ. And James' commands are urging Gentiles to do that. Step away from the sacrificed meat on feast day. Yes, it's a great opportunity to get some free meat or some cheap meat, but let's step away until you've become comfortable in your conscience that you don't believe you are worshiping or showing honor to a god by eating that meat. Step away from blood. Blood is magical in most pagan religions. It has strong spiritual overtones. If you have any symbolism of blood, you want to have it when you take the wine and the bread at the Lord's supper. Let's limit ourselves to that, to symbolic blood. It's really wine, it's not blood. And maybe you'll be free later to go and eat things strangled or to eat whatever. But step away. That's wisdom.

James' instructions are going to cause a bit of sacrifice for some Gentiles at family gatherings. They are not going to be able join with everybody else in going to the sacrifice at the temple. They are going to have to pass up certain foods. They are going to offend mom or offend an uncle or two. They are reminded clearly that temple prostitution is out, so, no late-night trips back to the temple with the cousins.

This is wisdom. This is recognition that it takes some time to free our hearts from the rituals and practices of our religious culture. We need to make a clear cut. We need to become grounded in our identity in Christ. Our hearts need to be truly free, in order to practice the freedom that is possible in the Gospel. If new Gentile believers will do these things instructed by James, they will do well. They will do well in their love for others, and they will do well in guarding their own hearts from the temptation to fall back into the spiritual identity of their culture.

The effect of the letter is telling. Paul and Barnabas arrive back in Antioch and Luke writes,

"having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement."

We might think, "Oh wow, this is a big burden put on the Gentiles." They didn't think so. Two big questions were on the minds of the believers in Antioch. Are the leaders in Jerusalem adding some

requirement, like circumcision, to the Gospel? The answer, “No. The first question of the Covenant is clear. You are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen. Rejoice!” Next question. Are the leaders in Jerusalem advocating that Gentile believers keep the Mosaic law as part of living the Christian life? The answer, “No. The second question of Covenant does not demand a return to the old way of the written code of Moses. You don’t have to be circumcised. You can keep eating shrimp.” Hallelujah! This is good news! We rejoice!

The commands James did recommend come out of love for brothers and sister in Christ and out of wisdom to separate from the old spiritual identity. We see in the report by Luke that the Gentiles in Antioch were glad to do these things. They rejoiced that the Gospel was not compromised and that they were given practical wisdom to help build unity in the body.

Return to Strengthen the Churches (15:36-16:4)

Luke wraps up Part IV of Acts with a report of Paul taking this letter with him and returning to strengthen the churches of Galatia. This report contains two very surprising events. We will go over it quickly. I will address the two surprises one after the other. The first surprise is in Acts 15:36-41. So, as Paul and Barnabas set out with this message of love and wisdom for the churches, and they are unable to even get started because of a sharp disagreement that arises between them.

Separation of Paul and Barnabas

Acts 15:36-41,

“³⁶ After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, *and see how they are.*” ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. ³⁸ But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

What do we say about this? I could launch into a whole sermon here about conflict among missionaries. I certainly have a lot of stories I could tell both from personal experience and second-hand. And a number of those stories are my fault. You know, I started the conflict. As important as that discussion is, I will stay in the context of this chapter and keep my comments brief.

The text does not tell us a lot. Paul is ready to return and strengthen the brothers and sisters in all the churches he and Barnabas had planted together. It was very important to Barnabas that they take John Mark along. It was very important to Paul that they do not take John Mark along. Luke reports Mark’s turning back during the first missionary journey as desertion. That’s a strongly negative word. As we said in a previous lesson, we do not know why he turned back exactly. We do not know if it was a theological difference, or a personality difference, or a character weakness. We can only assume from the word, “desertion,” that Mark was obligated to go on, and without the blessing of Paul or Barnabas, he left. At that point, the work load that Mark would have carried fell on Paul and Barnabas. They also lost the opportunity of mentoring a young man, an opportunity which could have easily gone to someone else if Mark hadn’t accepted the invitation in the first place.

Barnabas is convinced that Mark is ready for a second chance. And if tradition is correct in identifying this Mark with the writer of the Gospel of Mark, then Barnabas seems to have made a good choice. On the other hand, the success of Paul’s future missionary journeys and the ongoing participation of Silas suggest that Paul is choosing correctly. And the text tells us the brethren commend him to the grace of the Lord. By personality, I am more likely to do what Barnabas did and offer a second chance. By experience, I have come to appreciate the wisdom of Paul. Paul is not saying here that Mark is not forgiven or that Mark should not have a role in the church. Paul is saying that he is not

yet ready as a leader to risk the outcome of this missionary journey on Mark. He doesn't yet trust the character of Mark.

Regarding the question, "Who is right?", I am not sure there is a correct answer. It is possible that Paul, in his single-mindedness, makes a mistake here. It is possible that Barnabas, in his compassion, makes an unwise decision. The text does not indicate either of those things. It is also possible that two leaders with different gifts come to a disagreement that results, by the Spirit's leading, in the two leaders moving on in two different directions.

There may not be one who is right and one who is wrong in the eventual decision to separate. That might be the right decision. The rightness and wrongness may apply more to how they handle their conflict, how they treat each other. The text doesn't tell us. I have seen, more than once, two strong leaders in disagreement label each other in such a way that they cannot back down and they can't support the fact that the other leader is making a different decision. You know, they've said things like, "You are not Biblical!"; "Well, you are not following the Spirit!"; "You are being unloving!"; "You have no compassion!"; "This needs tough love!"; "You don't have wisdom!"; "This is a terrible thing to do!" Those kinds of claims, built up and repeated during in several meetings out of frustration and anger, you start to question the spiritual capability of the leader and the character of the leader, and you voice it. That kind of conflict does not simply end in disagreement. It ends in a disparagement of the other side, of the other person. And people are going to have to take sides. With that kind of language going on, people are going to have to go with Paul or go with Barnabas.

I do not think this conflict forces us to take sides. Whatever is said that may have been heated, it's not being reported. So, we do not see here the kind of language that disrespects and tears down the other leader. Certainly, they may have been hurt, and angry, and frustrated. But Paul does not denounce Barnabas. And Barnabas does not disinherit Paul. They disagree. They disagree strongly. And they go different ways. And from what we know, God blessed both paths. The separation may have caused a change in Paul's plans. He had suggested to Barnabas that they go back to all the churches they had planted. That would have entailed Paul and Barnabas sailing for Cyprus. Instead, Barnabas goes to Cyprus without Paul to strengthen those churches. And Paul heads up north by the land route curving around through Cilicia to reach the Galatian churches. Interestingly, the routes chosen coincide with the home provinces of each. Barnabas from Cyprus goes to Cyprus. And Paul from Cilicia travels through Cilicia.

The Circumcision of Timothy

In addition to this surprisingly sharp conflict between Barnabas and Paul, we find a second surprise in our last five verses. Paul sets off with Silas. They pick up Timothy in Lystra, and Paul has him circumcised. What in the world! Didn't we just confirm that circumcision is not necessary? Didn't James even leave that out of the list of practical commands? Nobody is being instructed to be circumcised. What's up with this Paul? Let's read the text. Acts 16:1-5,

¹ Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, ² and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. ⁵ So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily."

Luke continues his pattern of overlapping the major parts of Acts. Instead of ending Part IV with his standard summary statement before Paul suggests starting the second missionary journey, Luke goes ahead and writes about the start of the second missionary journey and then ends Part IV. I totally would have ended at 15:35, right after we got the resolution of the council and the positive response in Antioch. They Gentiles rejoiced. "The churches were being strengthened in the faith and were

increasing in number daily.” The end. That’s where that summary belongs. Then we start Part V at the beginning of the second missionary journey. This just makes no sense for Luke get us barely started into the second missionary journey and then end with the summary statement.

Well, actually, when taking a closer look it does make sense. The return to strengthening the churches reported here parallels the return to strengthen the churches in chapter 14. Remember, we have two movements in Part IV of Acts, the first highlighting the preaching of salvation and the second highlighting the terms of salvation. The first movement began with a trip from Antioch to Paphos. The second movement began with a trip from Antioch to Jerusalem. The first movement ended with a trip strengthening the churches. Now we see the second movement ending with a trip to strengthen the churches. So, Luke’s decision in how to report these events produces this well-balanced structure.

Even more importantly, Luke is using the story of Timothy to develop our thinking about the terms of salvation. The content of this story fits better in Part IV, even if it is the first part of the second missionary journey. This idea of Timothy being circumcised really has to do with this idea to live out the Gospel with love and wisdom. This second movement began with a claim that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved. That claim threatened the Gospel. Now that we have firmly rejected that claim, Timothy is free to choose circumcision. This is the importance of clear and emphatic teaching about grace. Nothing else can contribute to your justification! Circumcision is not necessary. Baptism is not necessary. Taking the Lord’s supper is not necessary. Keeping the Sabbath is not necessary. Bible study and prayer are not necessary. There is one thing that is necessary, faith in Jesus Christ. That is the first question of Covenant. And when we truly believe in Jesus Christ, it’s going to lead us, as true believers, into the second question, “How then shall I live?” And now all of those things matter. Now we think about all of these things, and they become important. They become necessary in our growth and in our life with God, that were not necessary for salvation.

So, when we’ve established that it’s only by faith in Jesus Christ, we can then enter into the challenge, the struggle, the messiness of the second question of Covenant. “How we are made acceptable?” is easy to answer in the Bible: by grace through faith. That’s it. “How then should we live?” is a lot harder. That’s the question they were working on with the letter from the Council. That’s the disagreement that separated the dynamic duo of Paul and Barnabas. They disagreed on how we ought to live, how we ought to go about our ministry strategy. And that’s the question leading to Timothy’s circumcision. “How then shall we live?” is not an easy question. But that is okay. The Gospel has freed us up to engage the answer without fear. We are free to make mistakes because we stand secure in the knowledge that we are accepted by grace. We don’t stay safe by getting everything right. We are safe in His love, and we can strive to live for Him, learning as we go. To be circumcised or to not be circumcised is now about love and wisdom. And in some situations you would say - most situations you would say, “No, it’s no point.” But there may be a case where it’s the loving thing to do, where it’s the wise thing to do.

And Paul has reasoned this way. People knew that Timothy’s mother is Jewish. And they knew that his father was Greek. That’s available knowledge around Southern Galatia. Somebody is going to find out that Paul has a Jewish traveling companion who was not circumcised because of his Gentile father. Ethnicity is proven through the mother. The father’s identity may not be 100% sure. But who gave you birth, that’s clear. His mother is Jewish, so he is Jewish. That’s available knowledge around southern Galatia. Somebody is going to find out that Paul has a Jewish traveling companion who was not circumcised because of his Gentile father. To avoid one more reason for opposition from Jews, Paul has Timothy circumcised. This is not at all an issue of salvation. This is an issue of love and wisdom in the life of someone who aspires to a ministry calling. Full-time Christian service is a higher calling, there is a higher standard. Not that people in full-time Christian service are more spiritual. But people are watching. And you’re representing Christ in a particular way. Mark did not get this. He turned back and deserted on his first missionary journey. It was going to a tough lesson for Mark. He got it later. Timothy seems to have got it here. He accepts Paul’s wisdom. He wants to join the team.

So, he is circumcised out of a desire to minister effectively, to make a difference. I will be circumcised if it will help me make a difference. Timothy is willing to give up his freedom to not be circumcised in order to help draw other people closer to the cross.

So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 15:22-35. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Do you see a unifying principle to the four commands James suggests be sent to Gentile believers in 15:29? Do any of the commands stand out as not fitting with the others?
3. Are these commands related to the first question of covenant or the second question of covenant?
4. What are the motives for these commands? Which of the motives suggested in this lesson seem to apply: ritual, moral, love or wisdom?
 - a. Are the commands for the Gentiles or for helping the Gentiles not be a stumbling block to Jews?
 - b. Are the commands for Gentile believers to challenge them to step away from religious aspects of their culture that might prevent them from walking with God?
 - c. Do you see some other reason for these commands?
5. Read Acts 15:36-16:5. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. Perhaps neither Paul nor Barnabas was in the wrong over the dispute about John Mark. Nevertheless, which one feels to you to be “more” in the wrong? Why do you lean that way in your assessment? What considerations might lead to the assessment that neither was in the wrong?
7. How do you understand Paul’s move to have Timothy circumcised in light of his participation at the Jerusalem council? What motivates Paul? Is he being hypocritical?

Lesson 24: Acts 16:6-40 The Holy Spirit and the Powers of Darkness

Introduction

The Gospel Mission Confronts the Pagan Worldview			
16:6-40 The Holy Spirit and the Powers of Darkness	17:1-34 God's Messiah and Gentile Philosophy, Politics and Religion	18:1-28 God's Messiah and the New People of God	19:1-19 The Holy Spirit and the Name of the Lord Jesus
16:6-15 From Phrygia to Philippi (Introduction)	17:1-15 Thessalonica and Berea (Introduction)	18:1-11 Paul's Stay in Corinth (Introduction)	19:1-10 Paul's Stay in Ephesus (Introduction)
16:16-40 In Philippi (Problem Resolution Follow-up)	17:16-34 In Athens (Problem Resolution Follow-up)	18:12-28 In Corinth (Problem Resolution Follow-up)	19:11-19 In Ephesus (Problem Resolution Follow-up)
19:20 So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.			

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.

The Part IV summary statement of Acts 16:5 concludes, “the churches were strengthened in their faith and were increasing in number daily.” As one of Luke’s part-ending summary statements, we are supposed to think of the whole Church of Christ being strengthened and increasing, all the local churches established up to this point. And we are also to think more specifically of the churches established on Paul’s missionary journey into Asia Minor. Those are the churches he and Barnabas planted at the beginning of Part IV, and the churches that Paul and Silas returned to at the end of Part IV. They are strengthened by the continual ministry of Paul who has come to be with them, and also by the resolution of the Jerusalem Council that affirmed the Gospel message they had already received.

Now, beginning Part V of Acts, we make an almost complete shift away from the Jewish context of the letter. Parts I-III focused on the ministry of Peter and the growth of the Church in and around Israel. Then even in Part IV where we began intentional missions to Gentiles, clarification of New Covenant theology was still being worked out against the backdrop of Jewish concerns. The question of the Council was whether or not Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved and whether or not good Christian Gentiles should follow any of the Old Covenant ceremony as a way of honoring God. And these important questions were forced on the body of Christ as Jewish Christians sought to understand what it meant for the Gospel of the Messiah to include Gentiles. The conflict of theological understanding regarding Old Testament truth led to important clarifications and, ultimately, a strengthening of the churches. So, in part IV we saw an expansion of the Church among Gentiles with a working out of the Gospel in light of Jewish theological concerns.

As the Gospel continues to move out into Gentile territory, other questions will be forced on the growing Christian community. In Part V, these questions do not come from the Jewish background of the Gospel, but from the backdrop of Pagan thought. The one major speech from Paul given to us Part IV occurred in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Jewish context. The emphasis was on Jewish thought. The one major speech that’s going to come to us in Part V occurs in the Areopagus of Athens. The emphasis is on Gentile thought.

¹⁹ David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 300-303.

Observing this interaction with Gentile thought, David Gooding describes three major issues that Luke develops as the Gospel messengers interact with the polytheism, philosophy, and politics of the Gentile world. These three issues relate separately to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in that order. The issues are these.

1. “Christianity’s proclamation of the existence and nature of one true God and of man’s relation to him” challenges pagan religion and philosophy.
2. “The meaning and significance of the Christian Gospel’s assertion that Jesus is the Messiah, king, and judge of this world” challenges pagan politics and morality.
3. “The importance of the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit” challenges pagan spiritism and occult practices.²⁰

Now, there are four movements in Acts Part V, each addressing one or more of these three issues. Each movement follows a consistent pattern. The pattern begins with a two-part introduction, and then reports a problem encountered by Paul in his Gospel witness, God’s resolution of the problem, and some follow-up after the problem is resolved. In chapter 16, there is a problem in Philippi. In chapter 17, there is a problem in Athens. In chapter 18, there is a problem in Corinth. And in chapter 19, there is a problem in Ephesus. The outer two problems in Philippi and Ephesus address the issues of the Holy Spirit versus pagan spiritism. The inner two problems in Athens and Corinth address the issues of God and his Messiah encountering pagan religion, philosophy and politics.

We begin in this lesson with the problem encountered in Philippi, which provides a contrast between the Holy Spirit and the powers of darkness. We will address the introduction first and then we’ll consider the problem. So, this is the introduction to the first movement in the fifth part of Acts, the Holy Spirit and the powers of darkness, Acts 16:6-15.

From Phrygia to Philippi (16:6-15)

⁶ They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; ⁷ and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; ⁸ and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹ A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

¹¹ So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a *Roman* colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. ¹⁴ A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵ And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.

Phrygia to Troas and the Macedonian Man (6-10)

The first part of this introduction explains why Paul decides to go to Macedonia. The second part tells us how Lydia came to believe in Jesus. God led Paul back to the churches of the Galatian province to

²⁰ Gooding, 293.

see how they were doing and to encourage them to stay true to Jesus. After strengthening those churches through further teaching, Paul re-engaged his strategy to spread the Gospel by establishing communities of believers in urban centers in various regions. The southeast of Asia Minor, the provinces of Galatia and Cilicia have churches. Using the strategic mind God gave him, Paul stayed on the east-west road in Galatia, planning to move on into the province of Asia.

That did not work out, so instead Paul took the Roman road network north, planning to by-pass Mysia for the moment, going first to Bythynia, the region in the northwest corner of Asia Minor, diagonally opposite his home province of Cilicia. Maybe he intended to go as far as the Bythynian city, Byzantium, which would later become one of the most famous cities in the world for centuries. Byzantium would be designated as the eastern capital of the Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine would rename it, Constantinople. Becoming one of the largest cities in the Western world, it would grow to span both sides of the Bosphorus Strait, connecting Asia and Europe in one city. Byzantium would serve as the capital to Orthodox Christianity after the division of the Roman Catholic Church. It would eventually be captured by Muslim Turks in the 15th century and in the 20th century it would be renamed, Istanbul. That's what you'll see if you look on a map today. Six of the seven ecumenical councils of the Roman Church would take place in Bithynia, in Constantinople, and in couple other towns that might sound familiar: Nicaea and Chalcedon. Those are Bithynian towns.

But all of that is part of a later Christian story. Here the story gets stopped before it starts. Unable to enter Bithynia, Paul and his band traveled west through Mysia to Troas, which is on the western coast of Asia Minor. In Troas, the narrative shifts from "they" to "we", indicating that Luke has now joined Paul's band. And so, now we're getting the story first-hand. Now, when Luke says, "Paul said," or, "Paul did," he actually saw Paul do and he heard Paul say. Sadly, we have absolutely no record of Luke's conversion. We do not know how he and Paul met. But the story of Acts is not about Luke. And so, he does not insert his testimony into the narrative. We do not even know how long Paul's team stayed in Troas. Paul may have stayed longer than the text indicates. Sometimes in the text he just seems to move on, but still, he could be weeks in Troas. We don't know. In chapter 20 on his way back to Jerusalem, Paul will stop to preach through the night to believers in Troas. That's where the boy falls asleep and tumbles out the window, if you remember that story. So, by that time, by Acts 20, there is a church in the town. Maybe the church was planted now at this point and Luke, being in the city, came to believe and joined Paul. But that's not a story told here. It's one we'll have to wait in Heaven. We'll ask Luke when we get there.

Paul does not stay in Troas but determines to cross over the Aegean Sea to the province of Macedonia, a move that will take him from Asia, not just the province but the continent, to Europe.

That's the route Paul took from Pisidian Antioch up and around to Macedonia. That's where he went. Now let's consider why he went where he went. And this is interesting. The combination between Paul's use of the strategic mind God has given him and the leading of the Holy Spirit gives us a glimpse into how the Spirit of God guides us. And later in this lesson, we will consider the contrast between the Spirit's guidance of Paul and the work of an evil spirit in a slave girl of Philippi.

Paul has a strategy that guides his missionary work. We considered that strategy in a previous lesson. Paul targets significant urban centers; he preaches the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles; he relies on the Holy Spirit for guidance and power; he organizes fellowships of believers; he appoints elders; he strengthens the disciples; he goes on to new territory. That strategy was developed through Paul's understanding of his calling, through the working of his own mind as he is led by God's wisdom in the Word, in the Spirit, in prayer. Paul has a strategy that he is following as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

It would seem that Paul did not wait for the specific direction of the Spirit each time he moved from place to place. He may have a sense. Now it's time to go and the Spirit might be leading, but it's not clear that the Spirit is saying, "Now you need to go to Ephesus." He appears to have followed the strategy that he had already worked out through prayer, and thought, and practice. I am sure he prayed as he considered each move from place to place. And I am sure he prayed along the way. But it does not seem that the Spirit said, "Go from Pisidian Antioch to Asia." Based on his strategy and his trust in God, Paul left Pisidian Antioch, he is right at the edge of the province of Asia, and he continued along that Roman road, again, probably towards Ephesus, but something happened on the way. Luke simply says that Paul and his band were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." I'd really love to see what does that mean. How is he forbidden by the Spirit? That sounds like a direct experience with the Holy Spirit. I think it may or may not have included some outward circumstance. It is possible for God to use a storm, or Romans, or bandits, or sickness, or any number of barriers or problems to redirect Paul. Through whatever circumstances may have been involved, Paul had a sense of the Holy Spirit's guidance. And it may simply have been that. Paul could have received a direct prophecy from the Holy Spirit forbidding him from going further in Asia. Interestingly, though, Luke does not report speech from the Holy Spirit, which he does in other places when the Spirit speaks to Paul. Also interestingly, the Holy Spirit does not give Paul a complete directive. Paul knows where he is not to go, but he does not seem to know where he is to go. This is one of the ways God guides us. It requires trust on our part to turn our steps away from something when God closes the door. We may know we're not supposed to go that way, but we don't know where we're supposed to go, but since we can't just stop in the road of life and sit down where we are, we have to make some choices. So, we agonize, and we pray, and we try to figure out, and we trust by going. And that place we go, whether it is another job, or another school, or another home, or another country, may not be the place God wants us to end up. As much prayer we put in and we have a sense of peace, so this is where I'm going, maybe God just wanted us to set out, not knowing if the next place is the place we are supposed to end up in or if that place is simply a stepping stone to get us where God intends to take us eventually. And that's what's happening to Paul here.

Forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel in Asia, Paul again makes a strategic decision to enter the province of Bythinia-Mysia. Maybe that's the province I should go to next in Asia Minor? We confidently assume that Paul prayed before he turned north, and he prayed along the way. This is not a lack of prayer. But even with the prayer, the Spirit did not intervene until Paul got to Bythinia. And they could not enter that region because the Spirit of Jesus would not permit them. Again, we do not know whether that was purely the guidance of the Holy Spirit or whether some outer circumstance was also involved, such as opposition from a Roman official or something else. And we do not need to assume any outward circumstance. Maybe God simply communicated His will but maybe there was some kind of barrier. We don't know but the Spirit of Jesus doesn't let them go to Bythinia.

Luke does not tell us that the Spirit said, "Go to Troas." Again, I assume Paul is acting on the strategic calling he has understood from God, and I assume he is doing so filled with the Spirit, trusting Jesus, praying as he goes, but he still doesn't know if he is headed in the right direction. Or we might say it is the right direction at the moment because he is headed there in faith, acting on the best information he has at the moment. So that makes it the right direction. But just because it is the right direction at the moment does not mean the direction may not still change as God leads.

Paul arrives at Troas. He does pick up Luke here. That is a hugely significant event. As quietly as Luke inserts himself into the narrative, just the shift from the "they" to the "we," who knows whether all the moving around was not designed by God to make sure that Paul and his band arrived at just the right time and under just the right circumstances to make sure that Luke came to faith and joined the

team? God wanted Paul and his band in Troas at this moment, and being a port city, it could fit Paul's strategy of preaching the Gospel in urban centers where a new Christian fellowship could influence the surrounding region. Paul's mind might be to plant a church in Troas.

But Troas is not the landing spot God had in mind. It's another stepping-stone. It is the place where God decides to give Paul a direct message of speech conveyed in a vision through the mouth of a Macedonian man. The man appeals to Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul is mature in his discernment of God's communication. He recognizes the source of this vision. This is not just a dream. This is God. The nature of the vision fits with very well with Paul's calling and strategy. It sounds, it feels like God. Though it does require him to give up the way he thought best to execute the strategy. This is not Paul's idea. Why skip over to Europe, leaving the western and northern parts of Asia Minor unreached? It's a bit untidy? Why do that? Well, because God intervened. And God is in charge. Paul may be executing the strategy, but it is not Paul's strategy, and it is not Paul's mission. Paul is a servant in the mission of Jesus Christ, engaged in a strategy that he believes is from God. And God can certainly redirect his servant anytime God so chooses as long as God's servant keeps remembering that he is God's servant, and this is not all about him. Walking in faith, Paul is able to do that. He is able to be redirected because his mind and heart are focused on God's agenda, not his agenda.

There is an intriguing interaction here between Paul's mind and the will of God. One of the things I notice is that the will of God is expressed in terms of the whole Trinity. That's the language of the three interactions described here. The Holy Spirit forbids. The Spirit of Jesus does not permit. And then a vision causes Paul to conclude that God called his band to preach to the Macedonians. I am understanding the reference to God as God the Father. So, who is guiding Paul? Spirit, Son, and Father.

We also notice that Paul does not simply stay put when the ultimate direction is not specified clearly by God. He keeps acting on the wisdom he has. He may have stayed still for some time along the way. Luke does not give us a moment-by-moment: this is not a minute-by-minute report. We know Paul would have prayed and waited on the Lord. He could have been many days in Asia before turning north. Still, he does eventually make three decisions that lead him to places he is not supposed to stay in: that's Asia, Bithynia, and Troas. He seems to be using his mind in the Spirit to follow the strategy God had given him.

What I see here is relational guidance from God that requires relational trust from Paul. The will of God is not a magic 8-ball that we shake up in order to get direction. God is not a tool we use to get direction. Paul is not a tool God uses to accomplish His will. This is relationship. So, when I say relational guidance from God, I mean that God does not simply use Paul as an instrument. God communicates to Paul, treating him as an autonomous moral being. God provides an offer. Paul must choose whether or not to receive that offer in obedience. The relational trust on Paul's side includes both a sensitivity to spiritual experience and a wise use of his mind. Paul does not follow the stars, or the flight of a crow, or the entrails of a sacrificed goat. That's pagan divination. It's fortune cookie guidance, a horoscope. Paul is in relationship with God through the person of the Spirit. He must pay attention to his feelings, his experience of the Spirit, but he must also not be driven this way and that by feelings. He must also use the wisdom God has given him through the Word and in his calling. Paul's response is consistently along the lines of the ministry strategy that God gave him to fulfill his calling. Paul is able to leave that ministry strategy if God calls, if God makes it clear. We will see that later in his life when the ministry strategy says, "Go to Spain via Rome," but God says, "First, go the opposite direction, back to Jerusalem." So, Paul is able to put the strategy aside for a moment if he has clear direction from God. Paul is also able to adjust the strategy as he is executing the strategy. More than once, God's guidance redirects Paul without a lot of information, requiring Paul to trust

God as he is going. Mind and Spirit are both in play for Paul as he walks in this trusting relationship with his Lord Jesus; the One who is in authority, the One whose mission it is.

From Troas to Philippi and the Salvation of Lydia (11-15)

Moving into the second part of the introduction, we cannot begin to consider the millions of factors that God interacts with as he sovereignly guides. Sometimes it is helpful enough just to consider one factor. Why lead Paul to Troas to arrive there at that specific moment in time? It may be enough to recognize that, at that place and time Luke, the eventual writer of Luke and of Acts, joined their team. That is a pretty good reason to get Paul and his band to Troas at that moment. Why lead Paul over to Macedonia at that particular moment in time that he was lead there? Well, the salvation of Lydia and her household may be enough of an answer. That's why Paul arrived there at that time.

From Troas, the team boarded ship to the Macedonian town of Samothrace, then on to Neapolis and from there to the influential city of Philippi. In the text that Luke calls it an "influential city", that's fitting with Paul's strategy of going to urban centers, where a planted church can help reach the region. Now, Paul's strategy in a new city consistently involves visiting the local synagogue on the first Sabbath that he is in town. Apparently, there is no synagogue in Philippi. The text describes a place of prayer on the Sabbath, that would be a gathering of Jews and God-fearers meeting to worship Yahweh. And this text says it's out of town. So, there is no place in town where there is a Jewish gathering. According to the convention of the language, if there had been just men, or if men and women were present, the text could have said that Paul spoke to the Jews, or Paul spoke to the men gathered. But since the text says he spoke to the women it is unlikely that any men are present at all. And this could explain why there is no synagogue, since an official synagogue required ten men.

Lydia represents the people of Thyatira well. We are told that that's where she is from. Before the region was conquered by the Romans, Thyatira was a leading city of the kingdom of Lydia. Same name. And maybe her name was not originally "Lydia." Lydia could possibly be a nickname she received in Philippi as traders with her in business recognized her as a woman from the Lydian people group. So, she's, "the Lydian," or just, "Lydia." Also, the skill of dying purple cloth was a trademark of the region, you know, further explaining why she woman might appreciate being called, Lydia. That's a good, positive brand for her business. Who are we going to get our purple cloth from? Well, the Lydian. Get it from Lydia. With reference in the text to her home and the people of her household, but no reference to her husband, Lydia was successful in business in her on right. And she was interested in Yahweh spiritually on her own. We don't know if she was married or not. But the emphasis is on Lydia's own abilities, Lydia's own interests.

Paul does not convert Lydia. Paul faithfully preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ and as Luke tells us, "the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." Evangelists preach. God converts. God then works through Lydia her conversion, and Paul in his message, to bring the members of her household to salvation. The fruit of hospitality urged on Paul by Lydia suggests the sincerity of her new faith. This is like the Samaritans urging Jesus to stay with them longer.

The story of Lydia's conversion adds to our understanding of the working of the Holy Spirit here in this introduction. The Spirit that is guiding Paul is the Spirit who came to glorify Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel. Paul, in his preaching, does not urge on an experience of the Holy Spirit. His Gospel message is not about feeling the Holy Spirit. That is not evangelism for Paul. It's not recorded in Acts and not in his letters. Paul's message is a proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How do we come into relationship with God through Jesus Christ? And we can look back to the sermon in Pisidian Antioch or we could look ahead to his letters. Paul preaches forgiveness of sin that comes when we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ. He will eventually write to the Philippians, "[I

count my works] but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Philippians 3:8-9).” That is the consistent essence of Paul’s message, but not only Paul’s message. That is the message of the Holy Spirit who lead Paul to Philippi. The message of the Holy Spirit is not about the Holy Spirit. The message of the Holy Spirit is about Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit works to open hearts, like with Lydia, to see Jesus.

This is our introduction. That is how the Holy Spirit led Paul to Philippi and empowered his Gospel message, so that the heart of Lydia was opened and her household, as well. The rest of the text is going to speak of a problem, resolution, and follow-up. The particular problem is going to show us a pagan contrast to the Holy Spirit in a slave-girl possessed by an evil spirit. This is Acts 16:16-40.

In Philippi (16:16-40)

¹⁶ It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, “These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.” ¹⁸ She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And it came out at that very moment. ¹⁹ But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, ²⁰ and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, ²¹ and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” ²² The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order *them* to be beaten with rods. ²³ When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; ²⁴ and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; ²⁶ and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!” ²⁹ And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰ and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹ They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his *household*. ³⁴ And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household. ³⁵ Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, “Release those men.” ³⁶ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, *saying*, “The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace.” ³⁷ But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out.” ³⁸ The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, ³⁹ and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging

them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ They went out of the prison and entered *the house of* Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

1. Problem: A False Accusation

The problem in Philippi Luke writes about is a false accusation made by some very angry businessmen. They accused Paul and Silas before the town magistrates of “throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” Is there anything true about that accusation? Well, Paul and Silas are Jews. Anti-Jewish sentiment might be at the core of the accusation. Also, these people are Romans. Philippi was a Roman colony. So, the ex-military had established the city. So, this is not just, like, Thyatira would be a city of Lydians taken over by Rome. You would say it’s Roman in the sense that it’s owned or controlled by Rome. But Philippi is Roman in the sense that the founders of the city are actual Romans. They’re proud. And I mentioned this before, in my own experience sometimes the Diaspora peoples or people who live outside of the homeland can be even more proud about the customs of the homeland. Croats living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Albanians living in Macedonia may fiercely or strongly hold on to religion, idea, the customs that they believe truly to be Croatian or Albanian or, in this case, Roman. You know, we are Romans. It may be suggestive that the Jews and God-fearing women were meeting outside of town at a place of prayer. Perhaps the reason they drew away from town is that their commitment to the Jewish God Yahweh was considered suspect in Philippi. Jewish credibility rose and fell in different times and different places throughout the Roman Empire. Without enough men to establish a synagogue in the town, Philippi lacked Jews in the business community who could have developed relationships with influential men and women in the city. Jewish religion sometimes created a sense of hostile wariness in Romans because of the Jewish insistence on only one true God, and their separating cultural practices, and their moral convictions. These men play on suspicion and ignorance in their charge that Paul and Silas are “proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.”

The motive for the accusation appears to be angry bitterness at their loss of income. When Paul casts the spirit out of the slave-girl, her owners lose the money she brought in as a fortuneteller. These men were not like the charlatans in a cowboy movie or a Mark Twain story, conning townspeople out of a few dollars, you know, while they’re hurriedly passing through. No. Considering their influence with the magistrates, these men seem to have been established and respected. There is more concern in this city about those people who are meeting outside of town in a prayer meeting than there is about these men charging citizens money to receive an ecstatic utterance from a slave-girl controlled by some spiritual power. And that’s the way of spiritual darkness. Sometimes that which is truly good gets vilified and that which is obviously destructive gets embraced.

Luke uses a suggestive word to describes the distinctive quality of this slave-girl. My English version says, “[she] had a spirit of divination.” Another version says, “[she] had a spirit by which she predicted the future.” Those are both valid interpretations of the literal Greek which says, “[she] had the python spirit.” That’s interesting, isn’t it? That word, python, does refer to a snake, but not kind of snake. It refers to the great snake demigod that spoke through the famous oracle at Delphi. That is, until Apollo killed the snake and took over the Delphi for himself. But even after Apollo took over, the high priestess at Delphi was still called, Pythia, from the term, python.

The importance of diviners was well established in the ancient Mediterranean world. Before going into battle, commanders sought to discern the will of the gods from any number of means. A diviner could read signs to determine the will of the gods and predict where attacks should be made or if you shouldn’t attack. The practice goes way back. Balaam’s failed attempt to curse Israel in Numbers 22 is an example. He was a diviner.

The Delphic Oracle existed as a respected Greek religious institution for centuries. In 480 BC, before the 300 Spartans faced Persia in the famous stand at Thermopylae, the Spartans supposedly received from the Delphic Oracle this message, *"The strength of bulls or lions cannot stop the foe. No, he will not leave off, I say, until he tears the city or the king limb from limb."*

Over 500 years later, the Roman Emperor Nero, who had previously executed his mother, supposedly received from the Oracle the message, *"Your presence here outrages the god you seek. Go back, matricide! The number 73 marks the hour of your downfall!"*

A slave-girl considered to have the python spirit would utter similarly cryptic messages, supposedly giving insight into paying customer's future. This slave-girl was not simply a talented impostor. There was something spiritual going on in her. Her ecstatic utterances were otherworldly. When she was overcome by a strange voice, the Philippians interpreted the experience as a message from Apollos. Paul interpreted the event as demon possession.

The Holy Spirit gave Paul guidance as one person leads another. It is not a friend-to-friend or partner-to-partner relationship. It is a relationship of authority between king and subject. Paul submits to the Holy Spirit as one who holds authority over him. Still, it is a willing submission. God does not overwhelm us by the Holy Spirit so that we're forced to act, forced to speak. We saw in the previous text how Paul continued to use his own mind. When he did not have specific guidance from the Holy Spirit, he acted on the strategy he already understood as being from God. When he did receive guidance, he had to interpret that guidance. And the result of Paul's submission to the Holy Spirit is the fruit of new life in Lydia and her household.

The slave-girl receives no personal guidance from the spirit that possesses her. She is a tool or a receptacle, used by the spirit to communicate. Her will is overwhelmed. Her mind is restricted. There is a sense of disorder and unruliness about her. She has no control over the filling of this dark spirit. When it takes over, it takes over. We see this as, day after day, she follows the Christians going out to prayer and she cries out, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation."

And Paul is not impressed. Though the words are true, Paul, like Jesus before him, did not put any stock in the value of words uttered by a demon. The girl's words may have developed credibility for Paul's message in the minds of the pagan Philippians, but that is not a kind of credibility Paul wants to have anything to do with. Luke tells us he was annoyed. And so, he commanded the demon, "In the name of Jesus Christ, come out!" And the fruit of anything that comes about through the work of the demonic is suspect. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul frees the girl from enslavement to the powers of darkness.

As Christians, let's think about this, we may be overwhelmed emotionally at times in our worship, overwhelmed by a sense of awe at the glory of God, a sense of joy at the love of God, a sense of gratitude at the grace of God, but even then, if it is of the Holy Spirit, we retain the use of our mind and will. That was an important point for Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, who had become unruly in their worship. He wrote to them in 14:15, "I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also." And because we retain the use of our will and mind when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul assumes that those gifted with tongues or prophecies can choose, and this is an important point, we can choose to not speak or to speak. If you have the gift of tongues, you don't have to speak. You can hold it back or you can let it out. Paul says if there is no interpretation, don't speak it out loud because that's not helpful for everybody. He also says if one person is speaking, then wait your turn. And if somebody else has a prophecy and you're speaking, then you be quiet and let them speak. You're in relationship with the

Holy Spirit, you're not taken over by Him. Possessed by the demon, the slave-girl could not help but cry out. Filled with the Spirit, we can choose the timing of our speech.

Spirit-filled worship is very important also to Paul. At the same time, while communicating to the Corinthians he gives them this rebuke, "But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner." There is no orderly manner when we lose the possession of mind and will. That's the difference between being possessed by an evil spirit who would control us, and the Holy Spirit who will enable us to focus on God and to be alert and aware of God.

In his later letter, Paul will remind the Philippians of the kind of fruit God desires as our minds work in harmony with the filling of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual fruit comes from knowledge and discernment in accord with the Spirit. Paul writes in the beginning of his letter in 1:9-11,

⁹ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹ having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

And then Paul re-emphasizes the importance of our mental engagement at the end of the letter in 4:8,

⁸ Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

The slave-girl is set from bondage to the powers of darkness so that she might become willfully obedient from the heart to Jesus Christ, that she might be enabled to set her mind on things that are excellent and worthy of praise, that she might be in relationship with a loving master who desires her full personality, her heart, her mind, and her spirit to be engaged in relationship with Him through His Spirit.

God's display of spiritual power through Paul provokes a backlash. The extreme response of the slave-girl's owners matched by the crowd raising up against them and the magistrates tearing their robes, depicts an unreasonably intense response suggestive of demonic influence. There is more behind this than just the humans. The powers of darkness resist this incursion on their territory and they fight back. Paul and Silas, seemingly powerless before the Philippian authorities, are beaten and thrown into prison. Paul and Silas may have saved this one slave-girl but it looks like the powers of darkness have won the battle. That would certainly be the majority opinion coming from a worldview that interprets failure as the displeasure of the gods. Apollo has flexed his muscles to beat down Yahweh.

2. Resolution: God's Vindication of Paul and Silas

The problem in this text was a false accusation leading to imprisonment. The resolution comes next through God's vindication of his servants.

²⁵ But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; ²⁶ and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

God vindicates his messengers through a major act of power - earthquake - and also through His internal working to provide in them the strength of character they need to glorify Him throughout the incident. The vindication of Paul and Silas begins with their initial response of prayer and song. There is something very different about these men.

Paul will later write to the Philippian church urging them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel, telling them to "stand firm together because this will affirm to you your own faith and it will be a sign to your opponents. Do not be alarmed by them." He goes on to write in 1:29-30,

²⁹ For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, ³⁰ experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear *to be* in me.

Living according to the Gospel is a sign to their opponents of the truth of their message. Throughout the letter Paul calls for joy in spite of suffering. He says, "You saw that in me." When did they see it? The jailer saw it and heard it as Paul and Silas, beaten and imprisoned, pray and sing. Their joy was a vindication of their message, revealing the truth of new life that was in their souls.

They are further vindicated by their release from prison, by how they acted when they were released and by the fruit of salvation born out in the jailer and his household.

²⁷ When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ (*But what did Paul and Silas do? Easy to escape.*) But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" ²⁹ And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰ and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his *household*. ³⁴ And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

It's that same response of hospitality that Lydia expressed, this gratitude. I will show gratitude to God, I will show gratitude to His messengers. The character of Paul and Silas counteracts the false accusation that they were throwing the city into confusion. On the contrary, they did not even flee from jail when they had the chance. They didn't create confusion. They created order. By their example all the prisoners were kept in one place, and they turn themselves back over to the jailer. They are vindicated in their allegiance to Jesus Christ through the strength of character shown in them by their singing and by their submission to the jailer. They are also vindicated in their allegiance to God through as He reveals power to save, both through the earthquake, and also power to save the jailer and his household. I love how in verse 33 the jailer washes their wounds and then the jailer and his household are baptized, receiving a washing by the Holy Spirit of their spiritual wounds.

3. Follow-up: The Magistrates Rebuked

There is a follow-up to this story.

³⁵ Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, "Release those men." ³⁶ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, *saying*, "The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace."

The magistrates have changed their minds about keeping Paul and Silas in prison. I imagine the earthquake has frightened them. They would rather just send Paul and Silas on their way. The jailer is more friendly, of course, and he wishes them peace as they go.

³⁷ But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out." ³⁸ The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, ³⁹ and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ They went out of the prison and entered *the house of* Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

The demand for the magistrates to appear is a demand for the magistrates to publicly admit their error, thus restoring the honor of Paul and Silas. And the magistrates do it because it is illegal to beat

Romans. They thought they were just beating Jews, but Paul and Silas are also Romans. And now the magistrates have done something illegal by beating them with no trial. Restoration of honor, I think, is not so important to Paul personally. This is not a moment of personal pride for Paul. It is important to him in combating false accusations that would detract from his witness to the Gospel. I believe he is also working for the credibility of the new Christian fellowship that he is leaving behind. Their position is enhanced by the magistrates' public admission of wrongdoing. They'll think again before coming strongly down on the Christian fellowship. The demand also allows Paul time to encourage members of the young church before he leaves. He doesn't have to rush out of town. He is going to go. They are still afraid of him, and they want him to go. He is going to go. But first he goes to Lydia's house, he encourages the believers, and then he departs.

And it is an interesting group of believers Paul leaves behind; a wealthy, foreign business woman and her household, a slave-girl formerly possessed, and a Roman jailer with his household. We do not know what words Paul used to encourage this diverse group but considering the importance of being Roman, of Roman citizenship in Philippi and of Roman customs, Paul's later words in Philippians 4:20-21, provide a good example of something he might have said as he exhorted them to stay true to Jesus. He might have taught them not to put great stock in their earthly citizenship, but to know that they now hold a far more valuable passport that confers a far more precious identity and calls them to life-giving customs. He writes,

²⁰Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

The powers of darkness seek to enslave our mind and will to a false worldview and to a corrupt lifestyle that leads to death. God makes us citizens of His Kingdom. He guides us and empowers us in loving relationship through the Holy Spirit, so that even though we do suffer at times in our struggle against darkness, we continue to sing with joy as God works out his salvation in us (Philippians 2:12) as we press forward to lay hold of that salvation for which Christ Jesus has already laid hold of us (Philippians 4:12).

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 16:6-15. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Have you ever been led by God through a vision that might be similar to the call of the Macedonian man to Paul? (This seems to be a fairly unique form of guidance in the Bible and in the lives of Christians.) How do you confirm the vision is from God?
3. Can you relate to the way God led Paul by preventing him from entering Asia then leading him to Mysia before finally guiding Paul to Troas? (This seems to be a more typical form of guidance that includes prayer and reasoning and the guidance of the Spirit.) When have you been led one way only to discover that way was a stepping-stone to where God wanted you to go?
4. Read Acts 16:16-40. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
5. What spiritual assumptions or practices seem to be involved in the Philippi as emphasized by the slave girl, her owners and the Philippians how paid for her services?
6. What are the assumptions and practices of the believers in Philippi?
7. There are two power encounters in this story between God and forces of darkness. How does God show his power in each case? What is similar and what is different? What are the results of each encounter – both negative and positive?

Lesson 25: Acts 17:1-34 Gentile Philosophy, Politics and Religion

Introduction

I was in the economics college in Split, speaking with the vice-dean about bringing American businessmen and women into English classes for a leadership seminar. He instructed me to send an official request to his office and then we would set up an appointment. I sent the letter and showed up for the appointment. I had my answers prepared for questions about the spiritual dimension of our Christian group. “Yes, we are a Christian organization. “No, our seminars in the classroom will not be spiritual or religious.” “Yes, we promote values in-line with orthodox Christian faith.” “No, we will not enter into spiritual discussion with students during class time.” I was prepared for the questions I expected the vice-dean to ask. I was not prepared for the question he did ask. “What political party are you associated with?” A bit surprised, I had no trouble honestly saying, “We are not connected to any political party. We are a spiritual organization.” Then he gave me this smile; a knowing smile and he responded, “Religion is always political.” He was either talking down to me, assuming I was just really naïve, or, more likely, he assumed I was hiding something from him. He denied the request for our group to go into the economics college.

That religion is always political is not an easy opinion to disagree with in this part of the world. Nationalities tend to align with one major religion. Croatians are Catholic. Serbs are Eastern Orthodox. Bosniaks are Muslim. And those religions are mixed up with the cultural identity and political process. The word, Protestant, brings up images of Northern Ireland. Politics and religion exist hand in hand. Back when I had that conversation, I might have argued a difference in the United States, at least that had been my experience, though lately a lot of Christians seem bound up with one political party or the other.

My interaction with the vice-dean raised two important questions. First, is all religion political? And second, how do you engage a non-believer who has a very different worldview than the one you are promoting; so different, that they assume you are either very naïve or you hiding what you really believe?

As Paul, Silas and Timothy continue their mission of proclamation through Macedonia and on into Greece, they encounter a mix of Gentile philosophy, politics and religion. In the first movement of the fifth part of Acts, Paul’s encounter with the Gentile worldview at Philippi brought into focus the difference between the Christian’s relationship with the Holy Spirit and Gentile spiritism. In this second movement as we interact Gentile politics, religion and philosophy, Luke will highlight differences relating to the Christian understanding of God the Son and God the Father. In the introduction a contrast is established between the synagogues of Thessalonica and Berea. That contrast will help set us up for the problem, resolution and follow-up that happens in Athens.

We begin with the introduction in Thessalonica and Berea. This is Acts 17:1-15.

Thessalonica and Berea

¹ Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and *saying*, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason,

they were seeking to bring them out to the people. ⁶ When they did not find them, they *began* dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸ They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. ⁹ And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

¹⁰ The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹ Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so. ¹² Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. ¹³ But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.

Thessalonica and the Jealous Accusation (1-10)

Leaving Philippi, Paul followed the famous Via Egnatia, a Roman road that connected Philippi to the Adriatic coast in the province of Illyricum and then across by ship across the sea to Italy and on to Rome. Along this major trade route Paul journeyed through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica. At the time, Thessalonica boasted a long heritage being founded in 315 BC by Cassander, one of the successor generals who fought for a piece of Alexander the Great’s empire. In Paul’s day, the city could claim to be the most influential city of Macedonia, sitting on the via Egnatia, blessed with an impressive harbor, the Roman administrative center of the province and home to the proconsul. Thessalonica fit Paul’s strategic preference for establishing Christian fellowships in significant urban centers that could then spread the Gospel throughout the region.

Unlike Philippi, there is a synagogue in Thessalonica. According to his custom, Paul goes there the first Sabbath he is in town, recognizing his obligation to the local Jewish population to announce the coming of the Messiah. And, though he usually encountered significant opposition in the synagogue, his teaching also usually bore fruit there among some Jews and among God-fearers.

Luke summarizes Paul’s message in a way that gives us some insight not only into the content but also into the method. The content is summarized in two points. First point, the Messiah was supposed to suffer and die and rise from the dead. Second point, Jesus is the Messiah. That’s the content.

What can we discern about Paul’s method of presentation? How does he communicate these truths? Paul will later write in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:5).” This may mean that Paul’s preaching was accompanied by miraculous signs - it came in power. Though it is quite interesting that he does not mention any particular miracles in his letter nor does the book of Acts mention miracles here in Thessalonica. The “power” in this case might simply mean that spiritual power accompanied the Word, working internally in the hearts of some who hear so that they might believe. Just as in Philippi, where we are told the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to believe. Paul’s method always depends on the power of the Holy Spirit to work through his words.

Luke’s specific emphasis here is on the mind. He speaks of those who were persuaded to believe. And he describes Paul as reasoning with them, explaining and giving evidence. The reasoning of Paul was from the Scriptures. And his explaining must have included the historical facts concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus along with the Gospel word of Jesus.

Paul’s reasoning from Old Testament Scriptures followed the pattern Jesus set with his own disciples: the pattern that Luke recorded for us in his Gospel, Luke 24:44-47.

⁴⁴ Now Jesus said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Paul presented that same message, and he was depending on Jesus Christ again to open up their minds to understand the Scriptures. So, for three weeks he’s handling the Scriptures as he reasons in the synagogue. And as he does this, two things happen. Some of the Jews believe. Not all, not a majority, just some. We could imagine that, if the majority believed, the whole synagogue might become a redeemed fellowship of Jesus-followers. But only some Jews believed. The other thing that happens is that “a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women” believed. That is where the jealousy comes in, the motivating factor that Luke cites for what follows.

You can imagine how the Jews of this synagogue for decades, possibly centuries, had held to a Biblical worldview of one God and moral living. They distanced themselves from Thessalonian beliefs and practice. And they have some success in bringing Gentiles into their synagogue as God-fearers. And they worked among those Gentiles to convince them to become full proselytes of Judaism.

Now this fellow Paul shows up announcing something new. And in the newness, he declares all the work to maintain Jewish cultural identity unnecessary. He proclaims Christ to the God-fearing Gentiles and, of course, they prefer his way. He lets them eat whatever they want. He doesn’t require circumcision. They can follow Jesus without becoming Jewish. It is easy-believism. So easy! All they have to do is place their faith in Jesus as the Christ and then all of a sudden, they are forgiven, they’re included. So, these Jews are angry at what they are losing and jealous that their former Gentile contacts are deserting them for this liberal message about Jesus, and grace, and forgiveness.

John the Baptist provides a very different contrast in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. His disciples are also upset. They are upset that Jesus’ disciples are baptizing people. “You know, that’s our thing. We baptize people. You came up with that, John. And not only are they doing your thing, but more and more people are going over to them. Their movement is getting bigger and it’s taking away our people.” How does John the Baptist respond? “He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30).”

John recognized that he was not the center of the show. He was the friend of the bridegroom, not the bridegroom. Loving Jesus, he could hand over followers with joy, you know, as a bride going to her husband. These Jews were meant to be stewards. They are not the main show. But they did not love Jesus. They loved their own cultural, religious identity, the position they had kind of carved out for themselves. They have worked hard. Their fathers had worked hard. Their grandfathers had worked hard to establish this synagogue. They saw themselves as the suffering servant who had persevered so long in following Yahweh in the midst of this Roman-Greek culture. They had no joy as the multitudes went over to the New Covenant, placing their faith in Jesus.

I wonder sometime about my own heart. How much do I love my own movement, my own church, more than I really love Jesus? And it can show up in how I feel about other churches, about other movements who are experiencing this reality Luke has just reported, “a large number believed”? Influential people believed. I’ve got my church and my group going on and we’re just, kind of, working hard and maintaining our numbers, maybe losing some numbers, and there’s this church on the other side of the town, and there’s this other student movement, and they are just booming. Or even with CRU, it can be a student movement at another university or in another country, and they are really growing and we’re not. And I can be tempted to even question, you know, what are they really teaching over there? What are they really doing? And bitterness and jealousy can enter in

instead of the joy that multitudes are following Jesus, that he is gathering His bride in? It is a good heart check.

In this case, the jealousy that comes from those who should have viewed themselves as forerunners and stewards, leads to violence. Frustrated by an inability to persuade through reason and respectful dialogue, the opponents of Paul, stir up passions and they incite anger through falsehood. The crowd is directed to Jason's house. That's a good Greek name. It reminds me of the myth about Jason and the Argonauts. But this Jason has believed in Jesus and opened his house to Paul and his band, certainly for hospitality, maybe it had become the gathering place of the church after the synagogue was barred to them. Paul and Silas aren't there when the crowd shows up, so they drag Jason before the magistrates. And the magistrates take the charges seriously enough to listen, they are also stirred up, but not seriously enough to punish Jason or anybody there at that moment. Instead, he has to give pledge, which means he had to pay a bond, promising there would be no trouble, we're not trying to start a riot or incite against the government. As a result, the brethren determine together with Paul that he ought to leave the city.

Let's consider the nature of the charge that was leveled at Paul. "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." The charge is essentially political. Paul encourages rebellion against Caesar. All region is political. If Jesus is a king, he must be a king like Caesar is a king and, therefore, he must be in opposition to Caesar.

Paul had indeed proclaimed that Jesus is the King, and the Christ is the anointed son of David who will reign eternally. That part of the charge is true. But does allegiance to Jesus as King mean a rejection of Caesar as King?

It depends on what kind of Kingdom Jesus has come to establish. Are religion and politics one and the same, or is religious devotion to Jesus something that supersedes all other commitments without necessarily abolishing lesser commitments?

Jesus is indeed King, but He has not chosen to establish His reign on earth, not yet. His rule is currently a spiritual rule from Heaven. We submit to His lordship unequivocally. And in line with that lordship, Jesus Himself has commanded us to pray for and submit to the authorities in the nation where we live.

Jesus indicated this kind of spiritual reign in His conversation with Pilate just before His crucifixion. John 18:35-37,

³⁵ Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?"

³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."

³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?"

Jesus answered, "You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

There is no truly Christian political party or Christian political system. That is to bring Christ down. All parties and systems are flawed. We ought to remember the whole point of Old Covenant kingship that even the very best of human kings, David and Josiah, are seriously flawed. It's the point of the first third of Isaiah with the comparison between one of the worst, Ahaz and one of the best, Hezekiah. Neither son of David became the type of King necessary to establish God's Kingdom on earth.

We need a true leader who can overcome the depravity of the human heart and who can deliver us, not only from our enemies, but from the greater enemy that dwells inside of us: from our own

depravity. We need a child to be born to us, a son to be given on whose shoulders the government will rest, who is of the root of David, and yet transcends David, whose name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace, of whose government there will be no end. He will reign on the throne of David and over His kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then and forevermore! (Isaiah 9:6-7). That's the King we need. No prime minister, no president, no party, no platform, no political system can achieve Godly political leadership. That was one of the lessons God intended for us to learn from the theocracy of Israel, from the Old Covenant. So, we are not tasked, as a New Covenant people, with the purpose of establishing a physical kingdom on earth. That was Old Covenant.

The New Covenant presents something quite different. We are a spiritual body. Our primary purpose is not to establish a nation state, but to go and make disciples of all nations, to establish a remnant of believers among every ethnic group. Now, Christians ought to engage in politics with the intent of blessing society through just laws and just leadership. But our fundamental purpose is aligned with Heaven, not earth. We seek to bring every man, woman and child into spiritual relationship with God the Father, so that we all might be conformed to the image of the Son.

The Jews of Thessalonica reject Paul's claim that Jesus is King in the sense that God is King. They intentionally misconstrue his words, bringing Christ down and making him a political, human king on the level of Caesar. They know this is not the claim Paul had made. They know that they themselves recognize God as King and yet, submit to the laws of Caesar. Sometimes Christianity is entangled with politics by the Christians themselves. Sometimes we do that. Sometimes it is a misunderstanding from those listening who have no conception of religion separate from politics, like the vice-dean I was talking to. In this case, the Gospel was intentionally entangled with Gentile politics, at least by some of the Jewish opponents who wanted to create problems for the Gospel messengers.

The charge of political sedition with allegiance to Jesus characterized as opposition to Caesar paints a very different picture to the teaching revealed by Paul in his two letters to the Thessalonians. We can ask, what was Paul teaching? He is teaching that Jesus is the Christ. What are the implications of that? Does liberation theology follow? Are we setting up a Jewish kingdom? What follows? And we recognize that both letters, 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians, were written on this same missionary journey when Paul is going to be in Corinth for a year and a half, and he makes comments in the first letter about sending Timothy back when he was still in Athens. He wanted to come back to Thessalonica but probably because of this pledge Jason had to commit and the problem with the magistrates he was not able to, but he mentions sending Timothy back and that he wants to come. So, this letter is following closely after these events. It's just some months later.

There is considerable agreement between both letters, giving us insight into the content that Paul had taught them when he actually was with them. He taught them about the second coming of Christ, about living worthy of the Gospel, about the election of the saints and sanctification and perseverance in affliction, about unruly brothers, bearing up the weak, about sexual purity, about working hard, giving to those in need, leading an orderly life. He does not speak against Rome. He does not promote the Jewish state. It is not political teaching. It is teaching that makes good citizens, who will be a blessing to the city as they submit their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

My friend Josh Irby, the leader for Cru ministry in Bosnia, was interviewing young Muslims while doing research for a book he was writing about the Protestant missionary to Bosnia, Paulina Irby. The young Muslim commented about Protestants, "You are the spiritual Christians." That is not true everywhere when people hear the word, Protestant, not up in Ireland, but in his experience Roman Catholicism was inextricably tied up with Croatian politics and Eastern Orthodoxy with Serbian politics, but Protestants were the ones who weren't aligned to any nation. They were just the ones who sought to love God and love their neighbor. That's awesome! Whatever our label people use for us, Evangelicals kind of taking on some negative political overtones to that one; that one may be on the way out, but Protestant, Evangelical, just Christian, Christ-follower, but whatever label in

whatever country, how sad it is when our faith becomes so mixed up with our politics that our audience cannot distinguish between the two. But how awesome when they hear what movement or what church you belong to and they're thinking, "Wow, you're the guys who want to love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself! You're the spiritual Christians!"

Berea and the Noble Search (11-15)

The second part of the introductory section occurs on Paul's next stop in Berea. The Berean Jews establish for us a contrast to the Thessalonian Jews, and also a contrast to the Athenian philosophers. Luke described them this way, "Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."

Rather than hold on to their pre-conceived notions of what ought to be true about the Messiah and the New Covenant, the Bereans wanted to know what God taught about the Messiah and the New Covenant. They sought a perspective of the world that was defined by revelation from God, not by human religion and tradition. The Thessalonians provide a picture of entrenched religion that refuses to reassess its presuppositions according to the revelation of God's Word. Their traditions supersede the Word of God. The people of Athens will contrast the Bereans in a different way. The Athenians are not holding on to their own traditional interpretation of revealed truth. They have developed a worldview based on human myth and reason. They reject Scriptural revelation altogether, providing their own answers to the big questions about God, reality, truth, life, human nature.

Many Bereans believed in Jesus. But Jews from Thessalonica stirred up crowds there as well, forcing Paul out again. Silas and Timothy were able to remain. Heading out of Berea, Paul left the Via Egnatia, choosing instead to enter the province of Achaia and the famed city of Athens. There Paul encountered a new problem. The worldview of the Athenians was so different from the Jewish worldview that his message was almost incomprehensible at first. In this text we will consider this problem of misunderstanding, how Paul addresses the misunderstanding, and the follow-up response to his explanation. Rather than read the whole section at once, I will start with just the misunderstanding. After that we will read the explanation and follow-up. So, here's the misunderstanding in Acts 17:16-21.

In Athens (17:16-34)

Problem: A misunderstanding (16-21)

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. ¹⁷ So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing *Gentiles*, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. ¹⁸ And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?" ²⁰ "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." ²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

Paul again is in the synagogue, reasoning with the Jews and God-fearers. At the same time, he is in the marketplace, reasoning with whoever he encounters there. The report in Thessalonica affirms Paul's core message to the Jews regarding Jesus as Messiah, while also revealing how the Christian view of Jesus as King sounds like a challenge to Gentile political systems.

Here in Athens, the focus is all on Gentile religious and philosophical systems. The initial misunderstanding is about the nature of Jesus. The explanation will establish the Biblical view of God the Father as Creator, and God the Son as Judge. But before that explanation, we need to first understand better this misunderstanding.

Athens shares center stage with Sparta as the two most famous Greek city-states. Here is a brief introduction of Athens in Paul's day from F. F. Bruce.

"Although Athens had long since lost the political eminence which was hers in an earlier day, she continued to represent the highest level of culture attained in classical antiquity. The sculpture, literature, and oratory of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. have, indeed, never been surpassed. In philosophy, too, she occupied the leading place, being the native city of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. In all these fields Athens retained unchallenged prestige, and her political glory as the cradle of democracy was not completely dimmed. In consideration of her splendid past, the Romans gave Athens the right to maintain her own institutions as a free and allied city within the Roman Empire."²¹

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who engaged Paul in dialogue labeled him, "a babbler." "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Literally, the word means, "seed-speaker." It is the image of a bird flittering from one seed to the other, or it's like a sparrow outside McDonald's, feasting on the fries and bits of hamburger bun tossed their way. A seed-speaker picks up scraps of thought here and there, just flittering around, and then tries to pass off the jumbled-up mess as a coherent system. It's a rather common approach in our day as people who consider themselves spiritual pick up a little of this and a little of that, treating religion like a buffet, with no commitment to coherence or consistency. You know, it's anathema to the philosophers. It's like he's not even trying. And though Paul's worldview was in actuality very robust, it was so different from the philosophers of Athens, they struggled to make sense of it. They thought he was just babbling.

They were probably also misled by his use of common Greek to communicate his ideas. My undergraduate degree was Philosophy of Science. I remember once having a lecturer from Duke University come and speak to us on the philosophy of language. And he spoke with a southern drawl. It was really interesting, this a very intelligent person. And he told us he would emphasize his accent when he engaged in philosophical debates because it always disarmed his opponents. They assumed he was not on their level. I'm from North Carolina, I can do it, too. But just hearing that, it's a little slower, it doesn't sound so cultured. Paul is using common Greek.

Philosophers prize precision of language and logic. Precision requires a very specific use of language that is devoid of ambiguity. Classical Greek or Attic Greek was the preferred philosopher's dialect. Early in the days of the Enlightenment, during the revival of all things Greek, religious scholars believed the Bible was written in some special, spiritual version of Greek, because it was quite different from Attic Greek that was being studied. But as more and more average texts were surfaced through archaeology and research it became clear that the Greek of the Bible was Koine Greek. It was the Greek of everyday speakers. And that was scandalous to the religious scholars, who wanted the Bible to be on this elite high level. We know Paul wrote with Koine Greek, and I assume Paul he spoke as he wrote, just using the common Greek language, not seeking to impress with his rhetorical ability, but rather aiming to make his message accessible to every listener, whether they're philosophically educated or not. Paul wrote to Corinthians,

"¹When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-2)."

Paul doesn't assume that an uneducated person is unable to handle difficult concepts. Paul communicates some hard things to understand, but he doesn't use an elite, university level language that would be inaccessible. It wasn't just his language, though. At the heart of the confusion was the Greek conception of the spiritual world. And that's both true on the level of just Greek myth and kind of the average man's Greek religion, and also the Greek philosophers, who sought more sophistication in their understanding of the gods than a literal acceptance of Greek myth. Stoics may

²¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 329.

have spoken of Zeus as God, but they did not conceive him as outside of nature. He was the soul of nature, the divine element present in the material universe. Their philosophy was essentially pantheistic. They believed in a rational, controlled approach to life with a high sense of morality and honor. Epicureans did not deny the gods but believed they did not involve themselves in the affairs of people. You know, they exist in their realm, we exist in our realm. And they are known for promoting pleasure as the chief end of life but that might not sound what you think it means. They did not promote hedonistic debauchery. Not just sex and getting drunk and just partying all the time. Epicureans argued that the pleasure most worth seeking was “a freedom from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears.”²²

The Epicureans and Stoics looked down on Paul’s common Greek language and on his new concepts as uneducated, naïve, foolish, incoherent. So, they call him a “babbler.”

Luke also tells us that some others were also confused by Paul’s reference to the resurrection. They assumed he was “‘a proclaimer of strange deities,’—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.” The plural, “strange deities,” apparently indicates they thought Paul was using the word for “resurrection,” Anastasis, as a god. You know, Jesus was one deity and Anastasis was another deity. When people hear a foreign message, they seek to understand that message according to the lens of their own worldview. The Greeks connected the gods both with phenomena and with abstract qualities. So, Zeus was not only the god of the storm, he was the storm. Aphrodite was not only the goddess of love, she was love. So, when Paul speaks of resurrection, a sensible Greek confusion would be to interpret Anastasis as a god, the god of resurrection who is resurrection.

And it’s a common problem witnessing to people with a very different worldview. They’re just taking what you say and re-translating it. It is like proclaiming to a Hindu that Jesus is God and ought to be worshiped. You might get the response, “Yes, exactly. Jesus is god and ought to be worshiped.” And that sounds like agreement. You know, we are getting somewhere. In fact, things just got more confused, because the Hindu is able to incorporate many gods into his or her system and is able to worship gods and worship people. So, you’re not really sure if we’ve just agreed that Jesus is a god, or if He just has a divine spirit, and He is certainly not the only god, and we’re not anywhere near grace yet. So, the Hindu has interpreted through his own lens, incorporating what he has heard without understanding the vast difference that the Christian meant to be communicating between the two different worldviews.

This is Paul’s problem. Either the philosophers are looking down on the Gospel message as foolish and common and just a jumbled-up mess, or they interpret the Gospel through the lens of their own system, and they are going to change it to fit into their worldview. How does Paul address this failure to understand his message? Let’s consider his speech to this elite gathering of thinkers and leaders, which is the Areopagus of Athens.

Resolution: The explanation (22-33)

²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and

²² Bruce, 330–331.

exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' ²⁹ "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

In the Jewish synagogue, Paul moved quickly into the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. With the polytheistic Gentiles of Athens, he took a step back to first proclaim the true nature of God the Father. The altar to an unknown God provided a cultural bridge he could invite his listeners to consider a different perspective. It's connected to a belief they already have but it's something new. The true nature of the gods was a long-discussed topic of Greek philosophy. Paul claimed to have knowledge that was unknown to the Athenians. He defined God as Creator and as Lord of Heaven and earth. And that is a departure from typical mythology whether Canaan, or Babylonian, or Greek, which identifies a vague, far off god like Chronos as creator, and then identified a rebellious storm-god son like Zeus as Lord. Paul claims that the one true God is both Creator and current Lord.

Paul also rejects the pagan idea that God is somehow material, dwelling in a physical temple or that He needs to be fed wine and food by his worshipers. God is independent of His creation. God does not have any needs that human beings can fulfill. Human beings, on the other hand, are dependent. God gives them the breath of life and provides the physical universe as a dwelling place.

Also, contrary to pagan polytheism, the nations do not owe their existence to their own set of gods. Spiritual reality is not relative to the religious system adopted by each nation. God made one man and from that one man God brought into existence every nation of the world. Moreover, God sovereignly determines the times and boundaries of each people's existence.

Paul seems to be alluding back to the tower of Babel, when he declares God's intention in separating the nations from one another was so that they might grow grope for Him in the darkness, that they might seek Him out. And that does not mean that each people group must find the place where God lives. As Stephen declared in his speech before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, God does not live in the Temple in Jerusalem. We should not think that God exists in one place rather than another. Paul says,

"He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man."

In this speech, Paul has rejected the polytheistic view of classic Greek mythology and the broader polytheistic practice which allows for each people group to set up its own pantheon of gods. There is one God, he is God of all, having made all peoples from one man. Now, we might notice that this is also a rejection of some modern views on human evolution and on relative truth.

On a very surface level, the comment that "God is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist," might sound like a place of agreement for the pantheistic Stoic view that God is the soul of the physical universe. But a Stoic find Paul's claim that God created all things as completely incompatible with his view. For the Stoic, God is the soul of the universe, not a spiritual being who exists independent, or outside, of the material world. The Epicurean idea that the gods remain distant and disconnected from human affairs is also rejected by Paul's claim that God is sovereign over all and that God desires to be sought after and found, and later that God is inviting us to repentance, to engage with Him.

At the end of the speech, Paul has created a second cultural bridge, just like the reference to the unknown god, he quotes a Greek poet when he declares, "We are also his children." Now, we need to think about this. Paul is not trying to define Biblical truth through Greek philosophy. He is not

searching for concepts in philosophy that will help him to define Scripture. A correct understanding of what it means to be a child of God start with Genesis chapter 1. We are created by God in His image. That's fundamental and it cannot be provided outside of Biblical revelation. Paul is using the poet here as a culturally relevant invitation for his listeners to consider the message he is proclaiming. He is reaching for something they might accept and agree to, but then he is calling them over the bridge. You know, come, move from your worldview to what I am proclaiming to you.

Paul's declaration that God has overlooked times of ignorance is not an assertion that God does not hold pagan peoples accountable for sin committed prior to their awareness of the Gospel. That's not what he is saying. When we go somewhere else where Paul has developed this more, like Romans 1:18-32, we see his argument that everybody is accountable for knowledge of God. The creation makes us accountable. It is our duty to seek Him. What Paul is saying here is that God will not hold the Athenians' ignorance against them at the present time. Paul has not come to bring wrath on the Athenians for their rejection of the one true God. They already stand under judgment. Paul has come to call them to repent based on God's willingness to forgive. God is not locking them out. They are welcome to come to Him. It is at this point that Paul communicates the critical need of every human being and at least begins to suggest that that need is met in Jesus Christ.

"God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

Paul did step back from Jesus to take time to define the nature of God the Father as the one true God, Creator of all things, independent from the created world. Even in doing so, Paul does not shy away from bringing his message all the way forward to a declaration of Good News through faith in Jesus Christ. As Peter did on Pentecost, Paul declares the need of everyone present to repent. He identifies Jesus as the judge of all. He is the one they need to turn to. And he declares the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ as proof that he has been appointed judge of all humanity by God.

There is a tension, there is always a tension in evangelism between not wanting to move to the Gospel so quickly that our listeners cannot understand or receive what we are saying, and the opposite problem of discussing foundation spiritual ideas without ever communicating the specific claims to the Gospel regarding Jesus, sin, judgment, forgiveness, and resurrection. Paul engaged that tension in this speech. He took a step back to clarify the nature of God the Father, using a couple of cultural bridges to help his listeners understand the worldview he was communicating. He even held off. He was so provoked by their idolatry, but he didn't start in with a judgment and wrath on them for being idolaters. Having taken a step back, he still brought his message all the way forward to the claim that Jesus Christ is the judge of all, that his historical resurrection from the dead proves this, and then inviting the Athenians to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus.

Paul rejects the Athenian ability to develop a true worldview based on their cultural traditions and logical reasoning. He calls them ignorant, these philosophers. He is not saying they are stupid or that they're uneducated. Paul recognizes that human beings have three very significant, insurmountable problems. One, even if we had perfect reasoning, we lack information, particularly information about the nature of the spiritual realm. There is so much that we just don't know and can't seem to get at. Second, we have flawed reasoning. We are morally depraved. Our minds and hearts are darkened. So even if we did have all the right information, we would not be able to interpret it correctly. Third, we are part of the experiment. We are not objective, scientific observers. We exist inside the system. We cannot look from outside in. So, by definition, we are ignorant, and we can't overcome that.

If we are going to have accurate knowledge about God, about the spiritual realm, about moral behavior, about our own nature, about life eternal, then God must communicate those truths to us. And we must be willing to hear. The Jews of Thessalonica had the revealed Word of God, but they refused to listen to the newly revealed Word about Jesus Christ and evaluate that Word according to

the Scriptures they possessed. The men of Athens pride themselves in their own mythological culture and in their ability to reason out truth philosophical.

It was the believers of Berea who provided for us the noble way. They accepted their own limitations, recognizing that if it is at all possible to know about God, and salvation, the purpose of humankind, then it must be God himself who reveals that truth to us. So, they eagerly searched the Scripture to understand the Gospel message Paul proclaimed to them.

Follow-up: Differing response (32-34)

When we consider the last three verses of chapter 17, the follow-up to Paul's message, we might think at first that Paul made a mistake moving so quickly to the repentance and the resurrection with this particular audience. "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *began* to sneer." Some of Paul's ideas were immediately discounted as foolishness by members of the Areopagus. But if we were to judge the nature of our Gospel presentation only by the part of the crowd that sneers, we would find ourselves constantly insecure and apologetic about our claims. There are always going to be people who sneer, and mock, and reject, and get bored, and turn away. Paul's honest declaration of Gospel truth did bring about mockery from some. But it also had this effect.

"Others said, 'We shall hear you again concerning this.' So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them."

We have a message for the marketplace of human society; for the philosophers, the politicians, the businesswomen, the store clerks, the jailers, the slaves, the priests, the educated, the uneducated, the Jews, the Greeks, the barbarians. We have a responsibility to proclaim that message the best way we can so that it might be correctly understood, and then bringing that message forward to the problem of sin, the solution of the cross, and an invitation for everyone to repent and believe that Jesus is the Christ.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 17:1-15. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. How does Luke describe the activity of Paul in Thessalonica?
3. How do the Thessalonians try to twist the message of Paul to make it a political message?
4. What pitfalls do you see in your own culture of people on the left and right making the gospel of Jesus more political?
5. Read Acts 17:16-34. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. What misunderstanding is Paul correcting in his speech before the philosophers of Athens?
7. How does this speech by Paul compare to his speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch in chapter 13?
8. What principles do you see suggested here for sharing the gospel with people who have a very different worldview than the worldview of the Bible?
9. The Bereans are presented as a positive model in contrast both to the conservative Jews of Thessalonica and the philosophically open of Athens. How would you phrase in your own words the nobility or wisdom of the Bereans? And how do you see that wisdom applying to you in your culture?

Lesson 26: Acts 18:1-28 Jesus Christ and the New People of God

Introduction

Leaving Athens, Paul journey's on to Corinth. Corinth had a great trade location on the land bridge that connected the two peninsulas of southern Greece, the Roman province of Achaia. Corinth controlled two smaller port towns on either side of the land bridge, one leading to the Ionian Sea and out into the Western Mediterranean, and the other leading to the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Though they had been military, cultural and trade rivals the Corinth of Paul's day was more of a Roman city than was the free Greek city of Athens. That's because the Romans destroyed troublesome Corinth in 146 BC. The Corinth Paul experienced had been rebuilt as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar and established as the provincial seat of Roman administration in Achaia.

Paul will spend 18 months in this important Roman center and establish a thriving church that Paul later described as "enriched in all speech and knowledge ... not lacking in any gift (1 Corinthians 1:6-7)." And yet, the amount of text Luke dedicates to Paul's time in Corinth is shorter than the record of his time in Philippi and not much longer than his time in Athens, even though Paul only spent a few weeks in these cities. The brevity of this account, which covers a year and a half in Corinth, reminds us again that Luke is not trying to give us a full report of the missionary work of the early church. Luke is intentionally selective of his material. So, we have to ask, why these reports? If this is all Luke chooses to tell us about what went on Corinth, why this?

One thing we notice about Luke's reporting is that he seems to include every instance that Paul is on trial. He is creating a written defense of the Apostle Paul by showing how charges against him are regularly resolved. Disturbances do follow Paul, but Luke explains those disturbances. Paul was exonerated by the magistrates in Philippi; the charge before the city authorities in Thessalonica was shown to be a twisting of Paul's proclamation that Jesus is king; and Paul held his own among the philosophers gathered at the Athenian Areopagus. In this chapter, the charge brought to the proconsul of Achaia will be quickly dismissed. Making a written defense of Paul is one of the motivating factors behind Luke's selection of material. In this, his aim is not only to defend Paul for Paul's sake. In defending Paul, Luke is also providing a defense of the Gospel and of the Christian movement.

We have also noted that in each of the four movements of Acts Part V Luke shows us the Gospel in contact with Gentile politics, philosophy and religion. In doing so, he emphasized the Holy Spirit in Philippi, Jesus the Messiah in Thessalonica, and God, Creator of all, in Athens. Jesus is again declared Christ in the Corinthian synagogue, but what is the impact on the Gentile world in this section? What theological point about the Gospel is Luke making? That's not so clear.

In chapter 16, the unique message had to do with the leading of the Holy Spirit in contrast to possession of the slave-girl by an evil spirit. In chapter 17, the unique message had to do with reliance on the Word of God as the primary source of revelation about God. We believe and accept God's revelation in order that we might understand the world. The Bereans provided a contrast both to the less noble Jews of Thessalonica, who turned away from the prophetic revelation of their own Scriptures, and to the philosophers of Athens, who loved to develop old philosophies and discuss new teachings based on human reason but did so without any word from God himself.

Here in chapter 18, we see Paul once again entering a synagogue and proclaiming Jesus as the Christ. Then we see Paul on trial before the proconsul. But what is the unique message being developed in these accounts? What do the four episodes of chapter 18 have to do with one another? What specific theological point is Luke making?

One exceptional thing does happen in this chapter. Jesus communicates directly to Paul in a vision, and we get His words. I believe the unique message that Luke has for us in the account of Corinth is indicated by Jesus' words in the vision that Paul has of Him,

“Do not be afraid *any longer*, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.”

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes into contact with Gentile politics, philosophy and religion, the resulting fruit is a New Covenant community that rightly bears the title, God’s people. Jesus Christ and the New People of God, that is the unique theme of chapter 18. The first half of the chapter emphasizes a new vision for who the Covenant people of God are. The second half of the chapter shows God’s protection and provision for this new community. Over the whole chapter we recognize the sovereign hand of God as the primary factor that brings the Church into existence and strengthens the Church to maturity.

We start with the two reports in Acts 18:1-11 and the Gospel’s definition of who are the people of God.

Paul’s Stay in Corinth – Introduction (Acts 18:1-11)

¹ After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, ³ and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. ⁴ And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁵ But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul *began* devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. ⁶ But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood *be* on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” ⁷ Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid *any longer*, but go on speaking and do not be silent; ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” ¹¹ And he settled *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Aquila and Priscilla (1-4)

There are human reasons to explain how Aquila and Priscilla came to be in the city of Corinth at the same time Paul arrived there. The Roman Emperor Claudius issued a decree that banned Jews from Rome. “Claudius’s edict is usually connected with a statement by Suetonius, that he banished the Jews from Rome because they were ‘indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus.’”²³ It is quite possible that Suetonius’ information was not precise and instead of riots being instigated by Chrestus, the trouble had to do with argument among the Jews of Rome about Jesus Christ.

One consequence of Claudius’ decree was the relocation of Aquila and Priscilla to Corinth. That’s the human reason they are present to meet Paul. Though I would say the real reason, or primary reason, they are in Corinth is the will of God. Just as God sovereignly prepared ahead of time Lydia and the jailer of Philippi, Jason of Thessalonica, and Dionysius and Damaris of Athens, so too, as part of His preparation for the formation of a church in Corinth, God led Aquila and Priscilla to the city at just the right time to meet up with Paul.

I love that they are tentmakers. God provided Paul with fellow tentmakers who wanted to grow in their faith in Jesus, and God provided Aquila and Priscilla with Paul. We do not know for sure if Aquila and Priscilla were believers prior to coming from Rome or if they came to know Christ through Paul. Aquila, at least, is Jewish. We cannot be sure about Priscilla, since her name is not Hebrew, and she

²³ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 347.

would have left Rome with her husband whether she was Jewish or not. The title, tentmaker, could be just that specific job or more likely indicated work with all kinds of leather.

Paul emphasizes his choice to work in both of his letters to the Thessalonians and in his second letter to the Corinthians. One reason he worked was to set an example to new believers; another reason was not to burden the people he was ministering to with the need to support him.

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we *kept* working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; ⁹ not because we do not have the right *to this*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. (2 Thessalonians 3:7–9)

Paul's work is not all consuming. In his off hours, he pursues his ministry of the Word. Luke tells us during this time he spent his Saturdays "reasoning in the synagogue... trying to persuade Jews and Greeks."

Driven from the Synagogue to the House of Titius Justus (5-11)

Even though Paul did recognize benefits of having a job and working for pay while on the mission field, he does not establish an absolute rule here. When Silas and Timothy come from Macedonia, Paul stopped working at his trade and "devoted himself completely" to the ministry of the Word.

Perhaps Silas and Timothy were able to support themselves and Paul through their work. Or perhaps they brought with them a gift from Macedonian believers of the kind mentioned in the letter to the Philippians. Their presence does allow him to solve one of his problems. He does not want to ask for money from members of the synagogue or from the seekers to whom he is witnessing. He does not want that conflict of interest. He is willing to receive money from the established communities in Macedonia, but not here in this new church plant. But once he is able to devote himself fully to the ministry of the Word without being a burden, he does so. He pours himself full-time into his work of evangelism and discipleship.

Verse 5 very briefly describes the content of his message. Paul solemnly testified to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. This is the same message he reasoned and proved in Thessalonica. It's been the same message all along. Luke gave us an example at the beginning of the first missionary journey, way back in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, of what that may have sounded like. And Paul probably changes his approach in the cities he goes to, but his core message does not change. The Christ had to come to die and rise again. Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. And he was showing them in the Old Testament Scriptures the prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, explaining to them and proving to them from the Word of God.

⁶ But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood *be* on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

In some other places, Paul was forced out of the synagogue. Here Paul chooses to leave. After weeks or months of reasoning, Paul sees no way forward. The Jews of the synagogue have taken a stand against Jesus and are making claims about Jesus that Luke considers blasphemous. It took some time to build up to this response. Paul is certainly used to Jews saying bad things about a crucified Messiah from the backwater town of Nazareth. But at some point, after weeks of reasoning, Paul felt himself hitting a wall, and he left them to their rejection of Jesus. When he says, "Your blood be on your own heads," he is not cursing them. He is pronouncing a curse or a judgment that is already on them. By their free will, they have rejected the source of salvation. Paul has pleaded with them from the Word of God. They have resisted. Paul says, "So be it. I will go. Know this. The decision you are making now is to take your life into your own hands. The wages of sin is death. You can either pay your own death penalty for your sin, or you can accept the gift of Jesus to pay your death penalty for you. Since you have rejected the substitutionary atonement of Jesus, your blood is not on Him. Your blood is on your own head. I am clean. I have done what I can do."

Even as Paul turns away, we can be assured that he does not do so satisfied and happy to angrily condemn the Jews of the synagogue. He will later write to the Romans in 10:1-3,

¹ Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation. ² For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. ³ For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

The direct approach in the synagogue has won some to faith in Christ, but no more. Paul's continued preaching in the synagogue will only solidify the bitterness of resistance. He must now turn to the Gentiles, but even in so doing, he hopes that more Jews will come to faith. Romans 11:13-14,

Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

This is what Paul does. He now commits himself fully as an Apostle of Gentiles to the Gentiles, but still with hope for his fellow countrymen. Verse 7,

⁷ Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue.

Did you catch that? Can you imagine that? You get what's going on? Paul says, "Your blood *be* on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." How far does he go? Next door. This is not even the church across the street. This is the building right beside the synagogue. And how do we think Titius Justus, a wealthy Roman with a home that can accommodate the "First Church" of Corinth, how do we think he came to be a worshiper of God? Through the Jews of the synagogue that meet next door. They are the ones who likely long before introduced him to Yahweh. And not just him. Luke told us that Paul was going every Sabbath to the synagogue to persuade Jews and Greeks. The term, Greek, here may mean Greek Greeks, though in all likelihood it means Romans whose culture is Greek, it's Hellenistic. Paul was reaching Greeks at the synagogue along with the Jews. They were coming every Sabbath to hear the Word of God because Jews had been inviting them for years to come and worship. When Paul leaves, taking Jews and Greeks with him, he goes to the house sitting right beside the synagogue.

Paul has drawn a very clear line in the sand. He has great sorrow for his fellow Jews who have not believed in Jesus Christ. But he is not going to pretend that their choice is okay. There are not two options, you know: if you want to, go to the synagogue, or you can come to our home church, both are fine. It is not okay that Gentiles continue to attend worship in a synagogue that has rejected the saving atonement of Jesus Christ. Paul is not just going to go to some obscure, you know, we'll take the east half of Corinth, you take the west half of Corinth.

Out of concern for every Jew and Gentile attending synagogue, Paul sets up a reminder of the critical need for every man, woman and child to come to faith in Jesus. Now, every Sabbath when Jews and God-fearing Gentiles go to synagogue, the physical presence of the Christians who meet in the house next door becomes a reminder that a decision must be made to follow Jesus or to reject Jesus. No one is neutral. You are either following Jesus or you are not.

You either believe that the Gospel is the way of salvation, or you reject that the Gospel is the way of salvation. And Jesus, not Paul, established this dichotomy.

³⁴ "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ "For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; ³⁶ and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD. ³⁷ "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁸ "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁹ "He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it."

That's Jesus in Matthew 10:34-39. Jesus doesn't want children to truly hate their parents, but He is saying, "You children have a choice to make. Will you come away from synagogue into the new community of God's people? If you do, your parents will feel like you hate them. Your behavior will hurt them. But you are still responsible to make a choice for me regardless of how strongly your father or mother may be against your choice."

When it comes to the very heart of the Gospel, a decision must be made and that decision is of eternal importance. "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him... this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. (John 5:23; 17:3)."

When Paul's ministry in the synagogue hit a wall of stubborn rejection, the best hope for the salvation of a remnant out of the synagogue for both Jewish and Greek worshipers was a separate formation of a new community that recognized the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And a remnant did make that decision. Luke gives us at least one prominent example.

⁸ Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

It is after this decision to gather believers in the house next to the synagogue that Paul received words from Jesus in a vision.

"Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

The word for, people, here is theologically tinged. I mentioned this when we considered the Council of Jerusalem in chapter 15. James said, "Simon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for his name." Under the Old Covenant, the people of God are always the Jews. The term for, people, in Greek, *laos*, is not used for non-Jews. Non-Jews are, *ethnos* - the nations, Gentiles. The Old Covenant conception of the people of God is represented in the synagogue of Corinth. The Jews are God's people. Gentiles are welcome if they will become Jewish.

God chose to introduce a new vision in the New Covenant. A remnant of believers from every nation is now invited in as "*laos*," as the people of God. They are not defined by a single ethnicity or culture. They do not join by losing or giving up their culture. They are a multi-ethnic *laos*. The many people that God has in Corinth are made up of various nations or ethnic groups. The move from the synagogue to the house of the Gentile Titius Justus is quite radical. How can the people of God meet in a simple home? It's just a home. Not only that, but it's an unclean Gentile home. How can Paul do that? How can that be the "people of God"? It's a radical move. What does Jesus think about it? What does Jesus think about leaving the synagogue and setting up the Church of His people in a Gentile house? Well, let's think through the vision because Jesus is speaking here. So, what does Jesus have to say? Let's unpack this.

When Jesus spoke to Paul, he began, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent." "Do not be afraid any longer" suggests that Paul was afraid. That's not the picture I have of Paul. I do not think of Paul as afraid. And I don't ever think that somebody needs to tell Paul not to be silent. I see him as boldly proclaiming the Gospel without fear. He can get stoned and thrown out of a city, and he gets up and goes back in.

Paul himself affirmed that, at times, he faced some kind of an internal struggle to witness, when, writing the Ephesians from prison, he asked them to pray,

...that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in *proclaiming* it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak (Ephesians 6:19-20).

What was Paul afraid of? What did he need prayer for? There are options.

The most obvious fear would be bodily harm. Paul has been beaten and stoned. He has been imprisoned. James was executed by Herod. So, that's a possibility. Jesus suggests this is a fear Paul struggles with when he says, "for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you." Why does Jesus say that to Paul if that's not something Paul would be afraid of?

I am not sure if Paul struggled with the fear of rejection or the fear of embarrassment. Those fears are more mine. I am way too concerned with how others perceived me. I feel like Timothy identified more with those fears. And Paul wrote to him,

⁶ For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. ⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with *me* in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God... (2 Timothy 1:6-8).

The internal fear of rejection or shame may have been true of Paul to some degree, though I see it more in Timothy. I think physical attack, imprisonment or death more likely the fears Jesus is referring to here.

There is one more fear I wonder whether Paul struggled with. As a leader, his decisions significantly impact individuals and the Christian movement as a whole. What he says and does affects how believers and non-believers perceive the body of Christ. Now let's think about this choice Paul has just made. Imagine the God-fearing Greeks who are attached to the synagogue and Paul has moved out of the synagogue into a home right beside the synagogue. And so, these God-fearing Greeks have a decision they now have to make because of Paul. Do they continue to attend the synagogue where they had built relationships with Jews that they considered to be godly men? Do they separate themselves from those relationships by attending the new house church Paul has established?

And what do other Gentiles believe? Those who reside nearby and business owners in the same quarter of the city where the synagogue exists? Or the family members and friends of the God-fearing Gentiles? They all know about the synagogue. They know there is one common voice, one voice, proclaiming belief in the Jewish God Yahweh. Or there was one voice. Now there are two voices: two voices that cannot agree on the interpretation of their own Scriptures. They are divided. Paul has initiated this division. And they might say, "The synagogue we get. It is a Jewish thing. It has always been a Jewish thing." They tell the God-fearers, "We thought it was strange you wanted to go there. We thought it was odd when you stopped eating pork and shrimp. We put up with your outdated views on sex and drinking. But at least we understood what you were doing, getting interested in this Jewish God. But now, you have given up even the credibility of this long-established synagogue. You are meeting in some guy's house, for goodness sake! You have got some new teacher who thinks he knows the Jewish Scriptures better than our Corinthian Jews know the Jewish Scriptures. But he meets in a Gentile house. And to top it all off, you are now proclaiming belief in a Jewish rabbi who was nailed to a cross, gods forbid! I could explain to my friends your weird attachment to the synagogue, but this makes no sense. And what happens when some new teacher comes from Israel? Are you just going to jump on the bandwagon with him, you know, hopping from one fad to another? What is going on?"

There is now a divided voice for Yahweh in the city. The same street. Two options. Paul made this decision. Paul chose to leave the synagogue. Paul could have respectfully distanced himself, but he did not. He chose to establish the new community right next door. This is all on Paul, this radical decision to separate and establish a new assembly in a way that very visible rejects the synagogue. The hurt relationships; the confusion among the worshipers of God; the increased complexity of the message to the world - not one voice but multiple voices; Paul's decision as a leader has serious consequences on individuals and on the Christian movement as a whole. And I wonder if Paul is asking himself with some fear, "Did I do the right thing?"

Thinking about Paul's fear, one commentator I read quoted 1 Corinthians 2:3 to show that Paul really was afraid of the physical harm he might experience in his ministry. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I

was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.” It is a great observation. That’s a great verse to bring into this discussion because it’s Paul speaking about his time in Corinth. And he says, “I was in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,” but I think this commentator gives it the wrong interpretation when he thinks that fear and trembling is about physical harm. The phrase, “fear and trembling” for Paul communicates something else. It’s about his relationship to God and the seriousness of his mission. Here is a little more of the context. This is 1 Corinthians 2:1-5,

¹ And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. ³ I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, ⁴ and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

That’s Paul’s fear: that the church would be built on the wrong, and it would be his fault, that their faith would rest on his rhetorical ability, on his reasoning, not on the power of God. This fear and trembling is not a fear and trembling of physical harm. This is something in Paul’s soul. It is a right awareness of the seriousness of his calling. He felt responsibility before God to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He did not want a cult of Paul. He wanted real transformation through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He wanted true worship of God the Father. He wanted something with the strength to last, whether he was there or not. And he rightly understood the weight of responsibility on one who would stand up to proclaim the way of God, to teach others, and to call them away from synagogue. This is the fear and trembling that should accompany every preacher, every missionary who stands up to proclaim the Word of God and to call people to make life decisions based on that teaching.

Paul’s teaching and leadership has just initiated a separation from the synagogue to follow a new vision for who truly are the people of God. Jesus appeared to Paul after that decision was made, telling Paul, “I have many people in this city.” They are not just in the synagogue. I have people throughout this city. Jesus’ words are not only an affirmation to continue to proclaim the Gospel. It’s not only an encouragement that you’re not going to come to physical harm. It is an exhortation to continue to gather together the believing community from every walk of life in Corinth. Continue that what you are doing in the house of Titius Justus. Continue to gather there. Keep on going, Paul!

The part of the encouragement about physical harm is going to meet a very concrete need soon. A scary situation is developing in Corinth. A major problem is brewing. In Acts 18:12-28 we continue to follow the pattern of problem, resolution, and follow-up that we have seen in each movement in Acts part V. The problem this time is a charge brought before the provincial governor. This is the highest court Paul has faced so far. The problem and resolution are recorded in Acts 18:12-17.

Paul’s Stay in Corinth – Problem, Resolution and Follow-up (Acts 18:12-28)

Problem and Resolution (12-17)

¹² But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, ¹³ saying, “This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.” ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; ¹⁵ but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters.” ¹⁶ And he drove them away from the judgment seat. ¹⁷ And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and *began* beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.

A trial before Gallio is a really serious. This is not the city mob. This is not the local authorities with power to banish Paul from Corinth. This is the Roman governor of the whole province, whose verdict could have long-ranging effect on the Christian movement throughout the Empire. Gallio is a known

figure in Roman history outside of the Bible. His father, Seneca, was an influential politician. His brother, the younger Seneca, was a well-known Stoic philosopher. Gallio had already served a term as praetor of Rome, one of the highest elected positions under the Emperor. He took up his position in Corinth during the summer of 51 A.D. and seems to have left because of ill health before the year was out, so Gallio is very helpful in this that he helps us to date the timeline of Paul's ministry. This is 51 A.D. when these things are happening.

This trial would certainly cause stress, fear, and worry among the Christians of Corinth. The Emperor had recently decreed the exile of Jews from Rome. What is going to happen here? This trial is intended by Sosthenes to put a Roman target on the Christian movement.

But Jesus' words that Paul need not be afraid are immediately confirmed when, upon hearing the accusation, Gallio throws the case out of court. Sosthenes' charge that Paul "persuades men to worship God contrary to the law," sounds to Gallio like an internal issue of Jewish religion. The Emperor did not kick the Jews out of Rome because he cared about their theology. The internal decision among Jews regarding Christ had led to civil disturbance. That was the problem, not theology. Gallio does not see that here in Corinth.

"If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you;¹⁵ but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters."

Gallio's rejection of the synagogue leader Sosthenes was abrupt enough to unleash a violent response from anti-Semitic Corinthians who began to beat him. The irony here is that Sosthenes, claiming to represent the true people of God, had hoped to use his influence to move the Romans to a violent response against Paul and against the New Covenant people of God. Instead, that violence falls back on him. Paul had said to Sosthenes in the synagogue, "Your blood is on your own head." And Jesus had said to Paul, "No harm will come to you." That is what we see happening.

God first gathered together a New Covenant people. Now He is protecting them and providing for them. This problem of the trial and the quick resolution brought about through Gallio shows God's protection. The follow-up report shows God's provision. This is 18:18-28.

Follow-up (18-28)

¹⁸ Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. ¹⁹ They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, ²¹ but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again if God wills," he set sail from Ephesus. ²² When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch. ²³ And having spent some time *there*, he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. ²⁴ Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. ²⁵ This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; ²⁶ and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, ²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

That's the whole account that Luke gives us of Paul's eighteen months in Corinth. In this follow-up section, Paul returns to Antioch. And God sends another powerful witness for Christ to strengthen the ministry of the church in Corinth. God provides.

Timothy and Silas are not mentioned in this account. They may have stayed in Corinth, or they may have returned with Paul. Silas is mentioned by Paul at the beginning of the letters to the Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, but he is not mentioned later. So perhaps he completed this mission and no longer traveled with Paul. Timothy is going to reappear in our next chapter. Emphasis here is given here to Priscilla and Aquila who decided to travel with Paul to Ephesus, but they are not joining Paul's traveling team. They are going to be active in ministry in Ephesus without Paul, and we do not see any evidence that they left their work as tentmakers. Perhaps they were led by God to combine both their trade with the establishment of a believing community in a place Paul had not yet been, giving us a very interesting example of businesspeople in one local church who choose to participate in the missionary work of the Gospel by moving their business to another city, so that they may be part of a church plant. That's really cool. That's a challenge to everybody who is called into a vocation that's not full-time Christian work. How, as we're in our vocation, what is our part and how do we serve our local church, or how do we even serve the missionary work of the Gospel? Maybe we can participate in a new church plant?

Luke tells us that Paul cut his hair in the port city of Cenchrea as part of keeping a vow. This is not a Nazirite vow, because that would require sacrifice in the Temple. But it is similar in the cutting of the hair. Hair was cut at the beginning and the end of the vow as a visible reminder, or marker, for the duration of the vow. If this is the end of the vow, Paul may have begun the vow after Jesus appeared to him. In that sense, the vow would be a reminder to Paul of the promise that Jesus made that he would be kept safe and should continue speaking the Gospel. If this cutting of the hair is the beginning of a vow, it might have to do with a Paul's commitment as he makes his journey to Jerusalem, maybe even about his desire to go to Jerusalem and then to Antioch in return.

Paul had begun this missionary journey after the Jerusalem Council. He took the letter from the Council to Antioch and then he shared the result of the Council with the churches of Cilicia and Galatia and then, eventually, he got around to Macedonia, and Athens, and Corinth. So, Paul decides to go full circle. He is not going to go directly back to Antioch first but it says he goes up to the church after arriving in Caesarea, and that's got to be Jerusalem. You don't go "up" anywhere else, so he is going up to Jerusalem, then he goes down to Antioch, his sending church, and Luke even gives us here the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey. Very briefly: Paul starts off again, but I think that's to explain to us that Paul is not here. Paul is not in Ephesus. He is not in Corinth. He is off somewhere else doing the work of God.

Paul had stayed on in Corinth in response to the word of Jesus. But it was not Jesus' will for Paul to establish his home among the believers there. After 18 months, Paul makes the strategic decision to leave Corinth. Paul is a pioneer missionary. He only stopped briefly in Ephesus before he goes home. So there's some reason Paul wants to go back to Jerusalem, back to Antioch and do something there. He is going to start another journey. But for now, he has left the church at Corinth, and he even taken along with him the stabilizing factor of Priscilla and Aquila, and probably also Timothy and Silas. I wonder, after all of this, I wonder if Paul could look ahead to the absolute mess that the church of Corinth is going to get itself into before he gets back, the mess we read about in 1 Corinthians? If Paul could look ahead and see that, would he had ever left?

Well, yes. I'm pretty sure he would have. Paul has been in Christian ministry long enough to be fully aware of the mess that follows the planting of a church. It is a bit like having children. The majority of what we are getting here in Acts is the baby stage. The birth of every new church is just simply wonderful. Lydia came to Christ, and then the slave-girl, and then the jailer. And so, we have the birth of the church in Philippi. It's awesome! It's wonderful! How do you think those three got along later? Let's be realistic - a Roman jailer, a slave, and a Lydian businesswoman? I hope they got along great but, certainly, they had to have some growing pains to learn to love each other and to live together with each other in community. Of course, they got along in the beginning. They are all excited about their new faith in Christ, and they have this positive, grateful relationship with Paul and

Timothy and Silas, and everybody is happy. They've got other people instructing them and they don't have to take responsibility. But their growth pains are going to come.

Here in Corinth, we have the former head of the synagogue, Crispus, along with some Jews, and some God-fearing Gentiles, and probably some Greek philosophers, and a whole lot of pagans completely new to belief in Yahweh. Luke has just given us the birth story. And it is cool, it is great. There are people coming to faith and God protects them at the trial before Gallio. And it's wonderful, just like birth stories often are. What we do not get how these young believers are going to grow up. We are going to read about that in 1 Corinthians.

From infancy to childhood, maybe they're doing fine because when you are still children you have other leaders, you know, they're looking to other people to tell them what to do. But as they become kind of like teenagers, they are going to start to question their leadership, and they are going to start to act out. They are going to start to express their freedom in all kinds of ways, mature and immature. They are going to remove Paul from his pedestal. He is not going to be perfect anymore. Like when a son finally starts to see the weakness of his father but is not yet wise enough yet to see the strengths of his father. They will glory in their knowledge and their spiritual giftedness. We are so strong! Oh, to be eighteen! But they are also going to rip the church apart in their pride. And what's going to happen then? Is somebody with a strong legalistic hand going to shut down all the enthusiasm? Will they establish some kind of rut, get into some safe rut that leads them into old age? Or are they going to come out of their teen years with a new sense of responsibility and energy, much knowledge? And yet it's come to a new awareness that they still lack experience and wisdom. And might they mature further into older age as they enter into wisdom and knowledge but have the maturity not to lose the joyfulness of the Gospel, to maintain an appreciation of youthful energy without becoming indulgent on the one hand or cynical on the other. You know, will they mature? Will they grow up in Jesus?

As with individuals, the New Covenant Church will only truly grow to maturity under the freedom and responsibility of the Gospel of grace. Liberalism in theology and behavior cannot get you to true spiritual maturity. Legalism cannot get you to true spiritual maturity. The freedom of grace is the only path for growing up in Jesus Christ to be mature, adult children of the King. But it is not a guaranteed path. That's why so often it's not chosen. It's too scary. The freedom of grace is dangerous.

One thing that strikes me as very interesting is that Paul does not try to solve the danger by creating a hierarchy of organization or authority. That is one solution. Provide strong leadership for the church, they are too young to know what they're doing, we need a single head in each city who defines for them theology and practice and who reports to provincial and then global leadership, who we can remove when things go wrong. Paul doesn't do that. He does not go there. He does not clean up the potential mess of grace. He leaves the mess to each local body. If you are going to grow and mature, you are going to grow and mature as you take responsibility yourself. You have a group of local elders who are growing along with you. You have deacons in the church, men and women like Priscilla and Aquila who give significantly to the ministry of the local body. You are leaders and servants and the whole community, and you are responsible for the growth of the local body of Christ. The responsibility is not outside Corinth or above Corinth. It does not come from Jerusalem, or Alexandria, or Rome.

That is a scary kind of freedom. Will the churches of each city respond? No. Some will do well. Some will not. And you can't always tell who is doing well. Sometimes you have to do bad before you do well. Corinth will grow, fantastically gifted. Then they will become divisive, separating according to different parties - some follow Paul, and some Apollos, and some Peter. Paul will not give up on them. But he will also not have the authority to fire anybody. His influence will come through the preaching of the Word and the Spirit. If they respond, according to the working of Jesus in their hearts, then they respond. If they do not, they do not. Paul does not try to set up some way to force them. He appeals to them. And according to 1 Corinthians, he is really not sure which way it is going

to go. They may respond, they may not. And this may cause fear in Paul. But all he can do is plead his case to the believers in Corinth and leave the results in the hands of the true Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. In the case of the Corinthians of Paul's generation, we see maturity. 2 Corinthians reports that they did receive Paul's rebuke concerning their ungodly behavior and errant theology. They owned their problems, they confessed their sins, and they re-established relationship with Timothy and Paul, and they grew out of those rebellious teenage years and became fruitful again.

A strong hierarchy may have prevented the problems that rose up in that church. But we don't see a strong hierarchy in Acts. Freedom to make those mistakes and the responsibility to work through those mistakes is what provided the space necessary for Corinth to mature as a local expression of the body of Christ.

And in reality, Paul did not leave Corinth alone. The church was not the first church of Paul in Corinth. This was not St. Paul's. It was the church of Jesus Christ in Corinth. God led Paul out of the synagogue to found something new. But that was God. God brought them together. And God would look after them. He protected them when charges were brought to the court of Gallio, charges that could have shut them down. And He provided for them when Paul left with Aquila and Priscilla.

That's the end part of chapter 18. The follow-up to the story is that God did not leave Corinth without gifted leadership when Paul returned to Jerusalem and started his third missionary journey. God took Priscilla and Aquila to Ephesus while, at the same time, He was leading another young man in a different part of the Roman Empire, different set of unrecorded circumstances, and he led that young man from Alexandria of Egypt, the second largest city in the Roman Empire. That young Jewish man with a great Greek name, Apollos. He was eloquent, learned in the Scriptures, fervent in the Spirit, and teaching accurately about Jesus without ever having met Paul.

And yet, he still had some growing to do. So, God had him land in Ephesus soon after Priscilla and Aquila did. He was speaking boldly in the synagogue that Jesus is the Christ, which of course makes us think of a younger Paul. But he has some gaps. He had the baptism of John. We do not know much more than that.

So, Priscilla and Aquila confronted him after a synagogue service demanding that he stop speaking in the name of Jesus until he gets baptized appropriately and receives correct instruction from Paul, the true Apostle to the Gentiles. No. Not at all. They could have done so. And many leaders would have done so. You know, you have gaps! Shut up! Sit down! They did not. Priscilla and Aquila saw through Apollos' weaknesses to his real potential for the body of Christ. And they took him aside, not to rebuke him or to belittle him, you know, what are you doing, you young people? You always make mistakes! You screw up! I can't believe you said that in the synagogue! No. They took him aside to build on his strengths. Of course, he has gaps. That is the definition of being young. When you are young you have gaps. The text is careful to say that Apollos was already teaching accurately about Jesus. What he was saying was not wrong. He just did not grasp the full picture. So, Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and "explained to him the way of God more accurately." It's interesting language. He was teaching accurately. They explained to him more accurately. You can have gaps and be accurate. And in that you can then benefit much from older mentors to help you fill in the gaps and be more accurate.

I love that Aquila and Priscilla did not try to force their own agenda on Apollos, or what they thought Paul would want them to make Apollos do. They recognized that he was following the call of God to proclaim the Gospel. And they supported him in that agenda. And they instructed him graciously and respectfully. And when he wanted to go across to Corinth, they encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.

This was God's plan for the church in Corinth. Everything was not dependent on Paul. Everything was dependent on God. And God has many people, many people. There is no one movement. There is no one denomination. There is no one great speaker or teacher. One of those people, Apollos, God brought to Corinth from Alexandria by way of Ephesus,

“and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”

God has a new vision for his people that requires stepping away from the old wineskin of the synagogue into a new wineskin that welcomes individuals of all ethnic groups who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. God’s vision is for each local assembly to take responsibility to represent Him to the best of their ability as they continue to grow up in faith. Grace is messy. It is messy for individuals. It is messy for local assemblies. It is not controlled by law pressed down from a higher authority. Grace calls forth individuals to walk as adult children of the Father, taking personal responsibility for their own walk with God and for their local church, and trusting in the sovereign hand of God to continually protect and provide. The Church does not depend, cannot depend, on any one single individual. As Paul later wrote the Corinthians, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).”

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 18:1-28. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Considering Paul’s experience with other synagogues, what circumstances do you imagine might have been present that moved Paul to leave with the strong words of “Your blood be on your own head.” What are some different feelings you can imagine Paul experiencing?
3. What kind of situation was going on for Paul when God spoke into it with the words of encouragement recorded in 18:9b-10? Were those words for the present circumstances or for the circumstances to come or for both?
4. What danger existed for the early Christian movement with Paul being on trial before the Proconsul Gallio? What worse case scenario could you imagine?
5. What kind of benefit came to the early Christian movement through the decision of Gallio?
6. What do you make of Apollos? What did he know? What gaps might he have had in his knowledge?
7. What stands out to you in the way Priscilla and Aquila interacted with Apollos?
8. Who has served the role of Priscilla and Aquila in your life?

Lesson 27: Acts 19:1-20 The Holy Spirit and the Name of Jesus

Introduction

Ephesus is the seat of administration for the Roman province of Asia. On a map, that's the lower left-hand chunk of Asia-Minor. It is the most populous city of all Asia Minor. Ephesus did great trades, situated on a main trade route to Rome and it was granted the status of a free Greek city-state. So, Ephesus fits well into Paul's strategy to establish Christian fellowships in influential urban centers from which the Gospel can then spread into the surrounding area. Paul will stay almost three years in Ephesus. And he will see the success of his strategy. Luke reports in 19:10, "And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in [the province of] Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." To get an idea of what that means, we can consider the churches listed in Revelation 2 and 3, all located in this province: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Paul had thought to go to Ephesus on his second missionary journey. And we see that his reasoning to create a base in Ephesus that would reach out into the surrounding area was very sound strategy. It is just that the timing was not right. God led him instead to the European provinces of Macedonia and Achaia. Now, Paul has reset his strategy and on this third missionary journey he tries the same route, starting off strengthening the churches through Galatia and Phrygia and then continuing on to Ephesus, this time arriving successfully. The text tells us he "passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus," I assume this is the more direct east-west route following the Roman road directly west from Pisidian Antioch. The other option would have been to turn southward and follow the coast along to Ephesus.

This is not Paul's first visit to Ephesus. We read in our previous lesson, when he departed Corinth, he stopped over on his way back to Jerusalem. He made a brief appearance at that time in the synagogue and promised to return if God wills. And we know God wills.

The conversation about Jesus at the Ephesian synagogue did not end when Paul left. Priscilla and Aquila stayed. Apollos arrived, lending his voice to the case for Christ. But now Apollos has left and Paul has returned.

The pattern of Paul's stay in Ephesus follows the same pattern we encountered in the other three movements of Acts Part V. Luke starts with a two-part introduction and then he gives us a problem, resolution, and follow-up.

The introduction tells the story of Paul's interaction with 12 disciples and then gives an overview of his first two years in Ephesus. These two accounts are recorded in Acts 19:1-10.

Paul's Stay in Ephesus – Introduction (Acts 19:1-10)

¹ It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. ² He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they *said* to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." ³ And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵ When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they *began* speaking with tongues and prophesying. ⁷ There were in all about twelve men.

⁸ And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading *them* about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from

them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.¹⁰ This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

12 Disciples (1-7)

Paul meets twelve disciples. “Disciples” is Luke’s preferable term for, “Christ-follower.” If Luke wanted us to understand that these were disciples of John the Baptist, rather than disciples of Jesus, it seems most likely he would have told us they were disciples of John. The word, disciple, appears 28 times in Acts and always in reference to people who have believed in Jesus. It has the same basic meaning as, Christian, or believer; terms Luke also uses but only a handful of times each.

These disciples were fairly deficient in their knowledge of Jesus. Unlike Priscilla and Aquila’s assessment of Apollos, Paul finds their understanding quite inadequate. I am asking myself how is it that these men did not meet Apollos or get to know Priscilla and Aquila? Why is not until now when Paul comes that we find out that their faith in Jesus is deficient? They are members of the Jewish community, but apparently, they have little or no connection to the other Christ-followers in that community.

The text says that Paul found them, so it seems to me they were not known to Priscilla and Aquila. Where were they hiding? Well, Ephesus had a population of over 200,000 at the time. And the Jewish community may have exceeded 10,000.²⁴ That’s a large church; large enough that there might be numerous sub-groups that do not regularly come into contact with one another. You can imagine showing up at synagogue and if there are this many people, we’ve got services all day long, and it’s quite possible that you never get to know this other sub-group of people who are talking about Jesus.

For whatever reason, these twelve did not receive sufficient instruction until Paul himself, coming to Ephesus, met someone who knew someone who introduced him to someone who connected him to this group of men. Or maybe he just ran into them on the street, you know, just a Holy Spirit appointment. We don’t know how they came to meet each other.

We do not know the full extent of their conversation. They profess belief in Jesus Christ. Paul does not dispute the reality of their faith. But he does ask them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” He accepts they may have believed, but something in their experience of Jesus or something in their understanding of Jesus suggests to Paul that they have not been born again by the Spirit.

There is not a modern experience that exactly parallels the experience of these men, because they were living through the transition between Old Covenant and New Covenant. They may have seen Jesus, or the people who discipled them may have seen Jesus. Though we can’t think of exact parallels, we can think of Christian experiences that bear some similarities. I believe there are multitudes of believers in Jesus Christ in churches today who have an insufficient understanding of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Some, for example, are in churches where forgiveness in the name of Jesus is preached, but the Holy Spirit is rarely mentioned. They have never been taught what it means to be filled with the Spirit. Others are in churches where the emotion of being in the Spirit is emphasized in such a way that it distorts what it truly means to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is lost in the emotionalism, or in the emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit. That was an error in 1 Corinthians. Both errors, ignoring the Holy Spirit or speaking about relationship with the Holy Spirit as fundamentally an emotional experience, can lead to a pursuit of the Christian life through the effort of human flesh rather than through the power that comes from dependence on the Holy Spirit. To abide in Christ, to walk in the Spirit, to be filled with the Holy Spirit -these ideas all point to a day-by-day dependence on Jesus Christ to produce spiritual fruit in us and through us. And

²⁴Mikael Tellbe. *Christ-Believers in Ephesus: A Textual Analysis of Early Christian Identity Formation in a Local Perspective*. (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 75.

ever since Pentecost, the message of the Apostles and the message of Paul links together faith in Jesus Christ with the spiritual reality of the indwelling Spirit.

These twelve men lacked instruction about the Holy Spirit. They had believed in Jesus to some point, but then their knowledge of Jesus seems to end. They have not come to understand certain truths about Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. They do not understand how it was that Jesus leaving physically was then able to send the Spirit to indwell and empower those who believe in Him. Let's think a little bit how this might come to be, how might they have this kind of faith in Jesus that's inadequate as it is.

The primary stream of Christian teaching coming out of Jerusalem flows from the preaching of the Apostles initiated on the day of Pentecost and rapidly expanding during the early days of the Jerusalem Awakening. We might expect to meet Jews with a strong understanding of Jesus who had received instruction from the Apostles or others in this movement. Churches, like the church in Rome, were started by Jewish believers returning home after Pentecost.

Another major stream of Christian faith comes from the missionary work of Paul. His teaching is in agreement with the Apostles. We would not be surprised if Paul met some Jews in Ephesus that he had never met before, who had a strong understanding of faith in Jesus through their interaction with Priscilla and Aquila who, in turn, had been mentored by Paul.

Those are the two streams of Christian proclamation we have been following through Acts: the stream that's coming from the Apostles out of Jerusalem, and the stream that's coming from Paul and his missionary labors.

A third stream of belief about Jesus began in Israel through the ministry of John the Baptist. That stream seems to have forked into two different streams. One stream coming from John the Baptist flowed into and became equivalent to the stream of belief associated with the Apostles. Disciples of John shifted over to the movement that surrounded Jesus. They moved over sometime during the course of Jesus' public ministry.

Another fork of that stream from John the Baptist never met up with the further teaching that came from Jesus and the Apostles. Apollos, who we met in chapter 18, seems to have received his teaching from this stream that came from John the Baptist but that did not link back in with the Apostles. John called for a baptism of repentance as preparation for the coming of Messiah. And then, when Jesus began His public ministry, John proclaimed Him as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Reading from the third chapter of the Gospel of John, we can see that John's ministry did not end when Jesus began His ministry. Some of his disciples went over to join the movement around Jesus. Others stayed even when John began to point people to Jesus.

Those disciples who stayed with John the Baptist would not have personally heard all the later teaching that Jesus gave to His disciples. I'm thinking of the night of instruction that Jesus gave the Twelve before His arrest: all that material that we have recorded in the Gospel of John, chapters 13-17. Twice in those chapters Jesus teaches, "I am going to send you a Helper, it's the Holy Spirit. And He is going to indwell in you to help you to love God and obey His commandments. And He is going to be the one who witnesses to the world." And in the center of that - that was in John 14 and John 16 and John 15 - we have Jesus urging His disciples to abide in Him as branches in the vine, so that they might produce spiritual fruit. Jesus later met with His disciples after His resurrection, and He continued His teaching. You know, He is talking about Himself, and He is showing how the Law, and the Psalms, and the Prophets, how they speak of Him. But then He is also telling them, "Stay in Jerusalem and wait until the Holy Spirit comes on you with power."

None of this teaching would be available to a stream of believers who accepted John's proclamation that Jesus is the Lamb of God, but who, for some reason, were not able to connect into the later movement of Christian teaching. We can imagine that they left Jerusalem while Jesus was still alive. You know, or maybe even right after Jesus' death to go to do what Paul is doing, and to go back into

Jewish synagogues and other places, and tell them about what's going on, about the Messiah. We can imagine someone going into Alexandria in Egypt and into that community and there's this communication that the Lamb of God has come. But Pentecost hasn't happened, or they weren't there when Pentecost happened. So, they don't know about that. And maybe it's from this witness that Apollos came to believe in Jesus, but without the instruction that must have come from Pentecost. Somehow, his instruction is more adequate than these twelve. We imagine similarly how Jews influenced by the teaching of John came to Ephesus and they began to meet in a small group, and their understanding maybe that wasn't that far along but they believed what John said, that Jesus was the Messiah, and they gathered together this small group of people who came to believe in Jesus, but without the later stream that came from the life of Jesus and the later instructions of Apostles that came after His death and resurrection. They haven't heard any of that.

So, in this transitional period between the Old and New Covenant, we can imagine this third stream of Christian faith identified with the earlier ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus but being cut off from the later ministry of Jesus and so producing disciples who proclaim faith in Jesus as Messiah but lack knowledge about very significant aspects of Christian truth.

Paul recognizes this lack and he connects it to a deficiency of spiritual knowledge and experience.

² He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they *said* to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." ³ And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵ When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they *began* speaking with tongues and prophesying. ⁷ There were in all about twelve men.

Practically, I do not think we need to know whether these men had saving faith in Jesus before meeting Paul or after meeting Paul. And this is the way of evangelism. It is not unusual to meet people who identify as Christians but seem to have rather fuzzy thinking about the Gospel, or who cannot point to any specific moment when they yielded their life to Christ. In a sense, it's not that important. Not in that evangelistic moment. What is important is how they respond to the Gospel message being shared with them. If they have truly believed in Jesus, then they will accept clarification of grace as the truth. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice." If they are already His sheep, they are going to respond to the voice of Jesus.

And so, it is not really relevant whether these men had truly believed before they met Paul or whether this is their moment of saving faith. What is relevant is that they have now affirmed their faith and having been born again through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they can now begin to experience the abundant life that Jesus offers to His followers as they walk in Him.

They are hearing the Holy Spirit speak through Paul. They hear and they respond. And they receive immediate confirmation of what they believed to be true, that Paul's Gospel is the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is telling them the truth. That immediate confirmation to them is manifested through tongues and prophesying.

Now, the nature that does raise questions for us. We know that belief in Jesus Christ is followed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Paul recognizes through his conversation with these men that they lacked the indwelling of the Spirit. They were caught in the transition between Old Covenant and New, where it was possible to have believed in Jesus through John before Pentecost, and to have not received the Holy Spirit. But then, their faith is affirmed through the very visible signs of speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Okay. So, we also believe that true faith is followed by the indwelling of the Spirit. Should we expect the new birth to be confirmed in a very visible way as it is here, through speaking in tongues? We have to ask that question of Biblical narrative that we have been asking through Acts, "What here is

norm to the Christian experience (what about these twelve men is normal at all times through the Church age), and what here is special to the specific circumstances?”

I already addressed this question in regard to speaking in tongues back in lesson 16, which covered the first half of chapter 11. At that point we had already discussed the receiving of the Holy Spirit by the Apostles at Pentecost, the Samaritans when Peter and John laid hands on them, and Cornelius’ household after hearing the Gospel from Peter. So, we have those three accounts. So, I addressed it then. I also referred to this account back in lesson 16 so that we could cover all four accounts in Acts where we are told that people received the Holy Spirit.

I addressed the context of each passage, and the context of the whole book, and then the broader context of the Apostles’ teaching in the New Testament epistles, so if you want to refresh yourself on the comparison between those four passages, you can look back at lesson 16.

My conclusion back in lesson 16 was that in these four accounts, the coming of the Holy Spirit on people after they had placed their faith in Christ like some, with a time lapse, and the speaking in tongues when receiving the Holy Spirit, that neither one of those things is a norm for the Church. That’s not the normal way that these things happen. The normal experience, what we get taught in the later epistles, is that people place their faith in Jesus Christ and are immediately born again through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And that speaking in tongues may happen when someone comes to faith in Christ. It’s a special gift, not attached to the new birth experience in the epistles, and it’s not even encouraged as a sign of new birth. So, what we are seeing in Acts with this delay of the Holy Spirit and the speaking in tongues are special occurrences under special circumstances at the beginning of the New Covenant community.

When we examine the epistles, we do not see a call to a second experience of the Spirit. We see the teaching that believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit at the moment of new birth. We see a call to be filled with the Spirit. We also see Jesus teaching about our need to abide in Him, that spiritual fruit comes through this moment-by-moment abiding. And then we get Paul’s exhortation to walk in the Spirit in Galatians 5. The “baptism in the Spirit”, whenever we encounter it in the Gospel and in the epistles, it is equivalent to the new birth that comes through faith in Jesus. So then, the phrases “abide in Christ”, “be filled with the Spirit”, and “walk in the Spirit” they are all speaking of the act of living our Christian faith in dependence on the Spirit of Christ who has indwelt us at the moment of our true belief.

Interestingly, it is in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians that he gives the command to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). And though he does take time in that letter to present the Gospel message and to call the Ephesians to walk in a manner worthy of the Gospel, he never calls them to a second experience in the Holy Spirit. And he does not even mention tongues in the gift list of Ephesians 4:11. He does pray for the Ephesians, and it’s interesting what he prays. He prays in chapter 3:16-19,

¹⁶ that [God] would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Paul affirms this need for the Spirit of Christ to be working in the believer. To truly know Christ, you need His Spirit to be revealing to you the extent of His love for you. The norm that is communicated in our present story, what should be true of all believers in Jesus Christ through the Church age, is an experience of the power of the Holy Spirit in us and through us. It doesn’t have to be evidenced by speaking in tongues but there is something lacking in our Christian experience if we don’t have an experience of being filled with the Spirit, or of the Spirit working in us and through us, empowering us, guiding us, developing fruit in our lives.

I do have another question about the pattern. I can understand the special role that speaking in tongues played for the first three instances of receiving the Holy Spirit. Those events matched Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8 that his disciples would,

⁸ ... receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon (them); and (that they would) be... witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, remotest parts of the Earth. So, Jews spoke in tongues in Jerusalem, that was our first story. Then Samaritans in Samaria, that was our second story. Then Gentiles in Cornelius' house, that was our third story. So as the Gospel moves out culturally, the miracle of speaking in tongues affirms to the Jewish leadership of the New Covenant community that all peoples are received into the promise through faith in Jesus and that they are fully accepted. The miracle of speaking in tongues shows that, just like the Jews, the Samaritans and the Gentiles have received promise of the Holy Spirit. So, we know that. They are not less spiritual than the Jews and so God gives this outward confirmation so that the Jewish leadership will see, "We don't have to make them Jewish in order to attain a deeper spiritual status. They have been fully granted the promise through faith in Jesus Christ." So, that explains the first three accounts; why we have these three special moments of the Holy Spirit coming after belief and people speaking in tongues at that moment.

But why this fourth instance of speaking in tongues after receiving the Holy Spirit? So, there is the immediate reason: the experience would have served to affirm Paul's message to these men themselves. So that's good for them but we don't see that as a norm through... I did not speak in tongues when I believed in Christ and the Holy Spirit indwelt me. So, this is not a norm for the Church age. But is there another big picture reason that God would have these men speak in tongues and prophesy after Paul lays hands on them?

I think there is. This experience here with these Ephesian believers has the effect of affirming the ministry of Paul through comparison to the ministry of Peter. Luke has been concerned throughout Acts to establish the credibility of Paul.

And in this particular movement here in chapter 19, Luke recognizes and communicates several details that parallel God's work through Paul with Peter. Just as Peter laid hands on the Samaritans who then spoke in tongues, so too, Paul lays his hands on these men who are then empowered to speak in tongues.

And note also the short sentence in verse 7. "There were about twelve men in all." That sounds like there were not twelve men. You don't say, "There were about twelve men" when there are not twelve men. If there were exactly twelve men, he would have said, "And there were twelve men," not, "about twelve men." "About twelve" men would be ten men, or eleven, or thirteen men. So, why not say, "about ten men?" That's a normal, round number. So, if you've got eleven men, why say, "about twelve men" instead of just saying, "Eh, there were about ten"? Luke could have said, "about ten," but he doesn't. He says, "about twelve." And here we are in a story about a group of Jewish men who are baptized in the name of Jesus and then begin speaking in tongues and prophesying, and Luke makes a point to tell us there about twelve of them. So, what is he trying to get us to think of? He is pointing back to Pentecost. This is a parallel he has recognized, and he is showing us so that we'll see that Paul really is equally an Apostle of the Gospel along with Peter. Later I'll point out their other parallels in this text. Maybe you'll see them before we get there but I will point them out at the end. Okay, the summary.

Summary (8-10)

The story of the twelve emphasizes the indwelling of the Holy Spirit through faith in the name of Jesus. So, the Holy Spirit and the name of Jesus. In that story we're going to come back to that. The second account in this introductory section provides an overview of Paul's first two years in Ephesus with an emphasis on the fruitfulness of that ministry. We have already read this. I'll read it again,

⁸ And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading *them* about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.

This sounds very similar to Corinth. Paul is continuing his strategy of entering the synagogue to proclaim the Gospel. There is something that's different. Usually, Luke describes Paul as proclaiming Jesus Christ. Here he says Paul seeks to persuade in regard to the Kingdom of God. This is not a shift in message. This is a different phrase for summing up the same message. To be Christ is to be King. Arguing that Jesus is the Christ is an argument about the Kingdom of God. Paul has been talking about Christ, he has been talking about Kingdom of God all along. And just as the language of Christ is not a political message in direct opposition to the Roman emperor (we recognized that in Thessalonica), so also the language of Kingdom is not in direct opposition to the Roman Empire. You can live fully committed to this Kingdom, the Kingdom of Christ, and then still be a good citizen of the Roman Empire. You know, until that Empire pushes you to reject God. Jesus had told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this realm (John 19:36)." Christians are not setting up a political Christian kingdom like there was a political theocracy, Israel. During the Church age, the Kingdom of God is primarily a spiritual reality that works in and through us who have faith in Jesus. And being primarily spiritual doesn't mean that it doesn't have a real effect and impact in this world. It better have! If we are truly living for Jesus, then we make a difference in society.

Luke only refers to the Kingdom of God seven times in the book of Acts, which is an interesting number. At the beginning of the book the Apostles had asked, "Is now the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" And Jesus says, "It is not for you to know." And then gave them a different set of marching orders that reveals the agenda of the Kingdom for the Church. We establish Kingdom through witness. That is the agenda Jesus gave the Twelve. When the Spirit comes on you, you will be my witnesses starting in Jerusalem and moving out to the ends of the earth. When people yield in faith to the Jesus as King over their lives, the Kingdom of God is expanded. And this Kingdom of God is opposed to the demonic kingdom of darkness, which is why I think Luke is using this language here because it's setting us up for the story to come, that the establishment of the Kingdom of God is going to have a major impact in Ephesus.

As in Corinth, the opposition against Jesus became irreconcilable after three months of reasoning in the synagogue. So Paul leaves the synagogue and he goes again to a Gentile location from which he can continue to teach disciples and proclaim the Gospel. In Corinth he went to the home of Titius Justus located just beside the synagogue. Here Paul moves to the school of Tyrannus. The word, "school," means, "lecture hall." Maybe it says that in your translation. Tyrannus may be the teacher who taught at this lecture hall, maybe he was a lecturer; or he may have been the owner of the lecture hall. We don't know. There is an insertion in some later manuscripts that says Paul taught from 11 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon. And we do not know if that is accurate. It certainly seems to come later and not original to the text, but it does have the ring of truth.

In Mediterranean cultures of Paul's time, the workday started quite early, so we are talking about 4 in the morning, to avoid the heat of the day. So, it is quite possible that the main lectures, if Tyrannus was a lecturer, that he was done by 11. Paul likely got up early to work as a tentmaker. And then he may have gone to the lecture hall to teach from 11-4, skipping the normal rest that takes place during the heat of the day, and instead choosing to teach through the heat because the lecture hall at that time was empty. It was available for his use.

So, it may not have been ideal, but God certainly produced fruit through it. So that Luke can end this introduction with the conclusion, "This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

Now Luke turns our attention to the problem, resolution, and follow-up he has chosen to record from Paul's stay in Ephesus for this movement. There is actually going to be another big problem in

Ephesus, but we are keeping the pattern of Acts part V. The text is not long, so I will read the whole and then we will break it down. Acts 19:11-20.

Paul's Stay in Ephesus – Problem, Resolution and Follow-up (Acts 19:11-20)

¹¹ God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out. ¹³ But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches." ¹⁴ Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. ¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" ¹⁶ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

¹⁷ This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. ¹⁸ Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. ¹⁹ And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and *began* burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.

Problem and Resolution

Something truly special is going on here. The Kingdom of God shines through God's servant Paul in an extraordinary way. God's reigns over the laws of the physical universe. People are healed by Paul's touch, even by handkerchiefs carried from Paul to the sick. God also reigns in His Kingdom power over the spiritual forces of darkness. So, people are delivered from demonic possession.

Luke has mostly kept us focused on the message of Paul rather than the miracles of Paul. Here, he reminds us that the proclamation of Paul was accompanied by unmistakable power. And it was attractive to others who would use that power to their own end. The Jewish exorcists here remind me of Simon the magician in Samaria who offered money to Peter. He saw Peter laying hands on people, and they began to speak in tongues, and he wanted to be able to have that power by laying on of his hands.

These exorcists made a similar mistake of understanding spiritual reality - the power that they were seeing - from a worldly point of view. They believed that spiritual power was something a person could tap into through the right formula. The Holy Spirit can be manipulated through the name of Jesus. That's what they saw happening. When Paul proclaims the name of Jesus, people are freed from the demonic. So, they are like, "We want to get some of that! How do we learn this magic spell? How do we learn to manipulate the name of Jesus so that we also can do this?" That's the problem that Luke records here for us. If these Jews succeed in using the name of Jesus as a source of spiritual power, then they will succeed in compromising the Gospel message. The message of Paul will be syncretized together with a bit of Judaism and a bit of pagan spiritism and a bit of magic. Jesus will not stand out as distinctly different from pagan practice of the gods in magic. He will be just another source of power, just another god to add in.

The account of the twelve men at the beginning of the chapter gave us a picture of what the Christians relationship with the Holy Spirit really ought to look like. First, we believe in Jesus. Then, through our relationship with Him, we are empowered and led by His Spirit. For them, to be baptized into the name of Jesus, that wasn't a simple baptism formula. Baptized into the name of Jesus meant that they were receiving the revelation of who Jesus was; Jesus' own self-revelation communicated through Paul. This is Jesus who Jesus says He is. Do you truly believe in His name? Do you believe that is who He is? And when they submit to who Jesus truly is, then they are empowered with the Holy Spirit.

What these Jewish exorcists attempt is something very different, though maybe not so different from the way that many Christians attempt to relate to the Holy Spirit. I think we all to some, maybe to a lesser degree, have the temptation of falling into this idea, “If I just pray with the right words or the right amount of faith, or if I’m good enough through the day, if I get the right formula, then I can get God to do what I want God to do.” The name of Jesus Christ does not represent to them the Lord to whom they should personally submit. It’s not relational. The name of Jesus Christ is not bringing about does faith. To them, then name of Jesus is a magical formula they can use in prayer to exert power over the spiritual world. Okay, we know that’s wrong, and yet we have to be careful because sometimes we pray, and we end our prayer “in the name of Jesus.” What are we doing when we do that? Am I tagging that on because that’s the right way you pray to get what you want? Or is that a statement of my, “I am giving this prayer up to Jesus. I am trying to pray in line with who I know Jesus to be. I am praying out of my relationship with Jesus in the name of Jesus.” You know, what are we saying?

These exorcists are breaking the third commandment, “You shall not take the name of your Lord God in vain.” That commandment is specifically directed against a spiritual or a magical use of the name of God to obtain your own ends. Prayer that attempts to use God as a way to gain power or control over life is magic. It is the attempt to manipulate God.

True believers pray like Jesus. “Take this cup from me if it is your will, o, God. My trust is in you.” We pray to God as our Father in Heaven who loves us, and desires our good, and who is completely sovereign, and who is free to answer our prayers according to His own will and wisdom. Prayer, for the believer, is a relational conversation. When we ask for things, we always ask as a request to the One who has right authority over our lives. It’s asking anything of your dad or asking somebody who has authority over you. You have the right to ask. And you hope they will answer, but He is Father, He is King, He is God. Our right relationship is to love, to serve, to obey. And He welcomes our requests. But we also recognize He has the right to deny any request. We are not trying to manipulate Him through the intensity of our emotion, or through a magical pattern, or repetition of words, or through life obedience. That is pagan thinking. We cannot force God to act. We can pour out our emotion. We can let Him know how important this is to us but in the end, if He doesn’t act, that’s “amen.” He is God. He is the One with all wisdom, and all power, and all knowledge. He knows whether or not to answer this prayer that I have submitted to Him. And am I disappointed? Yes. But, God, help me to have faith not to be disappointed. Help me to believe that Your not answering my prayer is out of Your goodness and out of Your wisdom. Help me to truly submit myself to who You are: to the name of Jesus, that You are King, and You are good, and You are sovereign, and I want to trust You with my prayer.

So, we can ask anything out of love for Him. And He will answer out of love for us. That is what it means to pray in the name of Jesus. We are praying out of this growing recognition of who Jesus really is and who our Father really is. And we pray to relate to Him, to see Him. We also pray to see ourselves and our circumstances through His eyes.

I am always a little surprised when people say, “Why should we pray if God is just going to do what he wants to do anyway.” And it makes me wonder, “Is that why you pray? You pray to get God to do what you want God to do. Is that what you think prayer is? A way to get stuff from God? Is God a source of power and you just have to learn the right formula for manipulating Him, so that you can get what you have asked for? And if He can’t be manipulated, then why even talk to Him? Why would I talk to somebody I can’t manipulate?” Well, you talk to Him because you love Him. Because you trust Him. You believe that He is good. He is your Father. You’re entering into relationship with Him and when He doesn’t answer your prayers, that’s an opportunity for you to see things the way that God sees them.

That’s not what these exorcists believed. They believed that God can be manipulated, that the name of Jesus is a formula for unleashing spiritual power. And they tried to use the name of Jesus without

any relationship with Jesus. That's what the evil spirit is going to tell them, "I have no idea who you guys are."

The resolution to this misuse of the name of Jesus comes through the response of the evil spirit.

¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" ¹⁶ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

The approach of these Jewish exorcists is shown to be false in a really dramatic way. They did not submit in faith to Jesus as the twelve Jewish men did at the beginning of our chapter. They sought to use the name of Jesus for their own ends. God did not protect them from the fire they played with. God did not allow them to continue on with the false belief that Jesus is just another god that you can include into your religious system to make your life better. By declining to protect these men, God sends the message, "Do not play with the name of Jesus. Do not take His name in vain."

Follow-up

The follow-up to this story is revival in Ephesus. The shocking, brutal effect of the misuse of Jesus' name opened people's eyes to the power of the Kingdom of God, and it led to a widespread rejection of occult practice throughout the city. The name of the Lord Jesus was magnified and people turned to Him.

The revival extended to prominent practitioners of the magical arts, who renounce magical texts worth fifty thousand pieces of silver. That's a huge amount when you consider that one drachma was equivalent to a day's wage. I don't particularly fancy the burning of books. In this case, however, the books in questions were not simply repositories of information. The books were how-to manuals. The reason you have these books is to use them. And you use them to get control over the spiritual world. The use of the manual was an invitation to the spirits to be active in the practitioner's life. The use of these manuals is an invitation to the spirits to be active in your life. That's creating an open door for the demonic. The destruction of the books showed a commitment - it was a sacrifice, it's a lot of money - it's a commitment to turn away from the occult, to not play with the fire of the demonic, but to instead come under the kingship of Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we have entered into spiritual union with Jesus Christ. The magical use of the name "Jesus" is no protection to us. But relationship and dependence on the person of Jesus, on that name, that is our protection. When we pray for God's protection in the name of Jesus, we are not using a magical formula. We are acknowledging our faith in the person of Jesus, in who He declares Himself to be. He is God, and his Spirit indwells us. We do not have to be afraid of the demonic when we fix our eyes on Jesus and trust in the power of his Lordship.

Parallel to Peter

I said that at the end I would come back to the parallelism Luke recognizes here between the ministry of Peter and Paul. The two are both called by God. They preach the same message of salvation through Jesus Christ and empowerment for life in the Holy Spirit.

The parallelism began in the introduction, taking us back to the beginning of Acts. We have twelve Jewish men affirming their belief in the name of Jesus who are filled with the Spirit and then speak in tongues and prophesy as a result. That reminds us of Pentecost. Paul also lays his hands on the men, just as Peter laid hands on the Samaritans before they spoke in tongues.

Then we have the report extraordinary miracles where even a handkerchief of Paul heals the sick. And that reminds me of Acts 5:12, where the Apostles are performing many signs and wonders to the degree that people laid out their sick on the street in the hope that Peter's shadow might fall on them. We just have these two reports of this kind of extraordinary, over-the-top miracles, and one is of Peter and one is of Paul. Those miracles back in Acts 5 were preceded by the story of hypocrisy that went very bad for Ananias and Sapphira in a way similar of the Jewish exorcists here wrongly using the name of Jesus, and then it goes very bad for

them. In both stories, here in chapter 19 and back in chapter 5, the people of the city begin to fear Yahweh and place their faith in Jesus. The expansion of the Church that began in Israel through God's chosen apostle Peter is continuing among Gentiles through God's chosen Apostle Paul.

All right! This movement ends Acts Part V. In each of our four movements, from Philippi, to Athens, to Corinth, to Ephesus Luke has developed the theology of the Gospel against a backdrop of Gentile politics, philosophy, and religion. This story in Ephesus reminds us that, though the advance of the Gospel certainly requires reason and persuasion from the Word like Paul has been doing in the synagogue and in the school of Tyrannus, the spread of the Gospel is not purely a battle for the mind. The proclamation of the Gospel is a spiritual battle for the souls of men and women that can only be won through faith in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul would later remind these Ephesians in his letter, Ephesians 6:11-12,

¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.

Luke wraps up Acts Part V with this final summary statement. Acts 19:20, "So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing."

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 19:1-20. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Who do you understand the disciples in Acts 19:1-7 to be? What details are suggested in the text? Do you see any connection with Apollos in 18:23-28?
3. How do you understand the connection with baptism and speaking in tongues and prophesying? How does this incident relate to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost in chapter 2, the coming of the Spirit on Samaritans in chapter 8 and the coming of the Spirit on Gentiles in chapter 10? Is this a fairly unique occurrence connected to the spread of the gospel through Paul's ministry or is the indicative of a normal spiritual experience that baptized Christians should expect? Or would you offer another explanation?
4. What details in 19:8-10 summarize Paul's ministry in Ephesus? How does this summary parallel the experience Paul has had in other cities like Pisidian Antioch, Thessalonica and Corinth?
5. How do the story of the 12 men in 19:1-7 and the story of the seven men in 19:11-19 relate to one another? Are there similarities in the stories? What are some differences?
6. Comparing both stories, what do you learn about the name of Jesus and the Holy Spirit?
7. Think back over the problem and resolution of each section in Acts Part IV (in Philippi, in Athens, in Corinth, and in Ephesus). What do you think about the summary statement of 19:20? If you added to that summary statement, what would you add?

Lesson 28: Acts 19:21-21:16 The Defense of Paul and the Riot in Ephesus

Introduction

Defense of the Gospel and the Gospel Messenger Paul				
19:21-21:16 Nature Worship and the Defense of the Church of God Ephesus to Jerusalem	21:17-23:11 The Gospel Judged by its Respect for Conscience Jerusalem	23:12-24:27 The Gospel Judged by its Attitude to Morality & the Law Caesarea	25:1-26:32 The Gospel Judged by its Message for Caesar & the World Caesarea	27:1-28:29 Nature's Storms and the Reign of God Caesarea to Rome
19:21-35a A Riot in Ephesus (Rescue)	21:17-36 A Riot in Jerusalem (Rescue)	23:12-24 Proposed Ambush (Rescue)	25:1-12 Proposed Ambush (Rescue)	27:1-44 Shipwreck (Rescue)
19:35b-41 Mob's False Ideas (Misrepresentation)	21:37-39 Commander's View (Misrepresentation)	23:25-35 Criminal Charges (Misrepresentation)	25:13-22 Priest's Charges (Misrepresentation)	28:1-6 Maltese View (Misrepresentation)
20:1-21:16 Miracles & Words to Ephesian Elders (Defense)	21:40-23:11 Commander's Investigation (Defense)	24:1-27 Trial Before Felix (Defense)	25:23-26:32 Enquiry Before Agrippa (Defense)	28:7-29 Miracle & Words to Jewish Leaders (Defense)
28:30-31 And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.				

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.²⁵

The Structure of Acts Part IV

Acts Part VI steps up the action in terms of danger to the Apostle Paul. In these five movements, Paul escapes a riot in Ephesus, a riot in Jerusalem, a proposed ambush from Jerusalem to Caesarea, another proposed ambush from Caesarea back to Jerusalem, and a shipwreck.

This final part takes up a full third of the book of Acts. I am going to move a little faster than I have been. I plan to cover all five movements in six or seven sessions because Luke's narrative is so good it will carry us along at places with only a little commentary from me.

The quality and the length of the narrative is partly due to the fact that Luke has rejoined the team. So, his reporting shifts from "they" to "we", indicating that he is present. After the riot that occurs in Jerusalem, Paul will be imprisoned for two years. It is quite possible that those two years gave Luke the opportunity to do research for this book and for his Gospel. Much of the birth story we celebrate at Christmas is only found in Luke. How did this Gentile companion of Paul get that information? You have to wonder, did Luke visit Mary and the Apostles? And when did he do that? Could it be at this time when Paul was imprisoned? Did he trace the steps of Jesus while putting together his notes? Did he research Pentecost and the Jerusalem Awakening for the book of Acts? Maybe. This could be the moment that Luke is putting together everything we have been studying.

The dangers Luke reports on in these five movements of Acts Part VI, riots, ambushes, the shipwreck, all lead into the correction of some misconception about Paul which is then followed by an occasion where Paul defends himself and his message. That's the pattern we will follow in each of the five movements: danger averted, misconception corrected, defense provided. After quelling the riot in Ephesus, the town clerk corrects the misconception of the mob, then later the ministry of Paul is defended by a miracle and in his speech to the Ephesian elders. In the second movement, the Roman commander quells the riot, has his misconception about Paul corrected and a defense of Paul is made through his speech to the mob and the investigation of the commander. In the third movement, the ambush attempt is thwarted, misconception about Paul is corrected by the commander's letter to Felix, then Paul makes his defense at the trial before Felix. In the fourth

²⁵ David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 406-413.

movement, another ambush is avoided, misconception about Paul is cleared up by Festus, then Paul gives another defense before King Agrippa. In the final movement, Paul is saved from shipwreck, the misconception of the Maltese is corrected, and Paul is defended by a miracle and by his speech to the Roman Jews.

The Emphasis of Acts Part IV

The text of the five speeches of Paul that we will see in these five movements adds up to the length of 1 Thessalonians. So, in terms of Biblical narrative it is really quite a lot of speech. But what we will notice is that very little of the content of these speeches provides further development of the theology of the Gospel. Luke has developed the Gospel through the ministries of Peter and Paul as we follow the story in Acts. And now he is moving on. These speeches are going to focus on the defense of Paul; the defense of his behavior and of his calling.

In defending himself, Paul is defending the Gospel. He recognizes that his person is tied together with his message. David Gooding makes this argument. I will read a paragraph from him.

To defend the Gospel adequately, Paul would have to defend himself, his character, and behavior. At the various public gatherings, judicial inquiries and trials, the bench and the public would of course be interested to hear his exposition of the Gospel and to discover that it was not subversive political propaganda, nor the unhealthy notions of some bizarre sect. But they would also be weighing up his character and personality and sifting the reports of his past and recent behavior with the result that the impression they formed of the Gospel itself would be inseparably bound up with, and influenced by, their assessment of Paul himself. In that sense Paul was the Gospel.²⁶

We can formulate at least three different reasons for making a vigorous defense of Paul. First, a written defense in the book of Acts could provide material for Paul's legal defense at the court of Caesar. This first goal would be to bring about Paul's release. Second, a defense of Paul supports the evangelistic goal of bringing more people to faith. If the questions non-Christians have about Paul are answered, they will be more open to hearing the message preached by Paul. Third, a defense of Paul supports the goal of strengthening the Christian Church. Christians who do not know Paul, but have heard about Paul, may have heard some strange things. What was he teaching the Gentiles? What really is his opinion about Moses? What really happened that caused the riot in the Temple?

Paul is the Apostle through whom God chose to provide for us the most extensive development of the Gospel message that we have. That's not only true of the believers living in Paul's day. That's true for believers living at all times. It would have been one thing to have a negative opinion about some famous Christian in our own day, Billy Graham, for example. If some Christians had developed a bad impression of Billy Graham, maybe your church or your city would miss out on the fruitfulness of his evangelistic movement and ministry. But okay. That is not the end of your church. God raises up other evangelists and teachers. But to have a negative opinion of the character and behavior of the Apostle Paul might turn you away from 25% of the New Testament. That's how much of Paul's writing God has included into the Bible.

In providing a defense of Paul, the Book of Acts continues to point us to the Gospel as it is developed by Paul, both here in the book of Acts and also in his epistles. Sometimes you hear in certain circles a devaluing of Paul's letters, the ideas that come out of his epistles. So-called "Red-Letter Christians" give greater emphasis to the word of Jesus than to the later writings of the New Testament. They recognize a canon within the canon. They might be rightly reacting in part to a devaluation of the Gospels. If we focus only on Paul, then we're missing the rest of the New Testament. But if they are, they lose a lot by erroneously swinging the pendulum away from the epistles. The Word of God includes the Gospels and the Letters, both of which God has connected for us with the book of Acts. The defense of Paul is also a defense of Scripture.

²⁶ Gooding, 399.

Justification by faith is not Paul's idea. Not at all! It's God's idea. But it's not the easiest idea to preach and to communicate. God inspired Paul to maintain a tension that exists in the Gospel: a tension between calling believers to live in the freedom of Christ while also calling believers to pursue a high moral vision. Paul, who argues fiercely against laying the yoke of Old Covenant law onto Gentiles, is the same Apostle who requires Timothy to be circumcised and who willingly participates in a vow in the Temple. It takes a bit of effort to unpack what is going on here. Paul can be criticized on one hand as being too legalistic, but then on the other hand as being too free. But that is not Paul. That is the Gospel. A Gospel message that cannot be misunderstood as promoting sin through grace is not the Gospel. If you guard it so much that people can't misunderstand grace, you are not communicating the Gospel. When grace is taught correctly, people will misunderstand it. Likewise, the Gospel continues to call believers to righteousness in a way that can be misunderstood as legalism. There is a challenge to understanding grace. And Paul does not simplify the challenge. He maintains the tension of the Gospel, and in doing so, he opens himself to criticism. The answer is not to devalue Paul's teaching. You know, "He is too difficult. He says some hard things. Let's pull away from him." That's certainly not the answer. You want some hard things? Read what Jesus says in the Gospel. Jesus says plenty of hard things in the Gospel. The answer is to dive into the gospels and the epistles with a commitment to continual growth in our understanding of a grace that results in righteousness; a commitment to maintain the tensions in the hard questions, not to simplify them or do away with them but to seek to understand them and let them exist, however uncomfortable, until we do understand them. Luke's defense of Paul here in Acts is God's indication to us that Paul is indeed a very special messenger that God has chosen to provide for us deeper insight into the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Amidst the defense, all the defense that is going on in this section, Paul especially emphasizes one theological point – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. At one point, mention of the resurrection may seem like a shrewd move to pit Sadducees against Pharisees. And that may be the case. It was shrewd. But it is more than that. The resurrection remains a central theme throughout the book of Acts. The Jewish leadership has argued that this Jesus of Nazareth is no Messiah. "We know He is not because He lost. He did not set up a kingdom. He did not succeed. He was executed by the Romans on a cross, proving that He was a fraud. No Messiah."

Peter and Paul have countered by showing in the Old Testament Scriptures that the Messiah comes not only to reign, but first to suffer and die. He was not proved to be a false Messiah by His crucifixion. On the contrary, He was proved to be the true Messiah by His resurrection. He had to die. But He is not dead. The defense of the Gospel is first and foremost a defense of Jesus Christ. The reality of His resurrection is a key point of the Gospel that continues to be a key point even as we're turning to the defense of Paul and his message. This Jesus, whom you crucified, is alive!

That's my set-up for this Acts Part VI. Now let's turn to our text for this lesson. I am going to break this first movement into two parts. We will cover the first two components of the movement in this lesson, the danger avoided and the misconception corrected. Then I'll say the third component, the defense provided, for our next lesson.

The first danger avoided is the riot in Ephesus. Before we get to the riot, we do have a short two-verse introduction from Luke that I'd like to address first. This is Acts 19:21–22

Luke's Introduction to Acts Part VI: Back to Jerusalem and Then on to Rome (Acts 19:21-22)

²¹ Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." ²² And having sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while."

"Now after these things were finished" may be better translated as, "After all this had happened," or, "When all this had been done." And we are talking about the events of the spread of the Gospel in Ephesus. Luke's select reports from Paul's time in Ephesus give us an overview of very fruitful

ministry among Jews and Gentiles. We think of the twelve Jewish men who professed faith in Jesus and were filled with the Spirit spoke in tongues and prophesied. You can imagine some of them becoming significant witnesses to others, particularly among the 10,000 plus Jews in Ephesus. We heard of a major awakening among magical practitioners in the city who denounced their practices and turned to Jesus. Those were two fantastic events Luke told us about. He also told us Paul organized regular lectures through more than two years. He is in the hall of Tyrannus, conducting a teaching ministry, and that teaching ministry propels the Gospel out from Ephesus into the whole province of Asia.

And that's what Luke means when he says, "After all this had happened," all this in Ephesus. Now, the Spirit of God stirred in Paul, indicating to him it was time to go. Paul had a pastor's heart, but he was not a pastor. He was a pioneer missionary. After the riot in Ephesus that we will read about in a moment, Paul will do as he says. He will go over to Macedonia and Achaia, to strengthen those churches just as he regularly has done in his visits to the Galatian churches. While in Corinth, he will write a letter to the Roman church to let them know about his plan to visit them. That letter will become Paul's most famous presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We also get more information about Paul's ministry plans and his specific sense of call in that letter. He will write to the Romans, "from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ (Romans 15:19)." That is what Luke has shown us. From his base in Syria, Paul has preached the Gospel up through Cilicia, across Galatia and Asia, over to Macedonia, and into Achaia. The province of Macedonia borders the region of Illyricum that Paul mentions in his letter, a region that extends through modern day Albania leading up through Montenegro and into Croatia. Paul has been a witness to the Gospel up to that border by establishing Gospel communities in influential urban centers in each of these provinces mentioned; Gospel communities enabled with Paul's vision to spread the message of Jesus Christ through the surrounding area.

Paul explains further,

²⁰ And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; ²¹ but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND" (Romans 15:16).

You see, Paul's ultimate goal is not Rome. He certainly sees the value of strengthening the church in Rome. As we see from his greetings in Romans 16, his friends Priscilla and Aquila have gone back. A church is meeting in their home. Paul wants to aid them and other fellow workers in the Gospel to establish the church of Rome firmly in the truth of grace. You see Paul's pastoral heart for the believers in Rome clearly expressed through his letter. He wants to build them up. But as he concludes his ministry in Asia, Macedonia and Achaia, his eyes are not fixed on Rome. He is not drawn to set up shop in Rome. He is looking further afield to where Jesus has not been named. He writes in Romans 15:23-33,

²³ but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you ²⁴ whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while— ²⁵ but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ Yes, they were pleased *to do so*, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. ²⁸ Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. ³⁰ Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, ³¹ that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and *that* my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; ³²

so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find *refreshing* rest in your company.³³
Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Paul wants to go West. First, he must go East. That is the way it is sometimes in service of God. We submit to His leadership, whether His call matches our gifting and our particular desire or passion, or His call matches a need that must be met. It depends on God. Paul is God's servant. Paul is going to do what God leads him to do, not what he wants to do. So, this is the full plan. Paul plans to leave Ephesus. First, he will go strengthen the churches in Macedonia and Achaia, you know: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, those places. He does not want to rush to something new without one more trip to strengthen what he has planted. Then he will go to Jerusalem to take a gift of money to Jewish believers, a gift he collected from Gentile believers. His goal is Christian unity. He says he wants to set his seal on it because he wants them to see the health and the orthodoxy of the churches that he has planted outside of Israel. Then after Jerusalem, he will go to Rome because it is very important that the believers in that very influential city, that they are established firmly in their understanding and practice of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, will he follow his heart's desire to take the Gospel to Spain.

We see that emphasis on Spain in Paul's letter to the Romans. Luke knows about that plan, but he does not mention Spain here in Acts 19. That is not part of this story. This story is going to end in Rome. Luke simplifies Paul's plan; Macedonia and Achaia, then Jerusalem, then Rome. That's the plan. It is interesting to me that Paul asked the Romans to pray for protection for him on his trip to Jerusalem. Someone might say, "Wow! That prayer really was not answered!" He gets thrown into prison for two years, and then he is shipwrecked, and then he is imprisoned when he arrives in Rome. But when we look at all the dangers that God takes Paul through, you think God was not answering prayers for Paul? And we consider all the ministry fruitfulness that God produces along the way, and this may even be the time when the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are written, and when we do recognize that Paul actually ends up in Rome, which is what he wanted, to come to Rome, we have to conclude that God abundantly answered Paul's prayer, just not in a way that anyone praying would have imagined or asked for.

Paul's travel will begin soon. He sends Timothy and Erastus over to Macedonia to prepare the way. But before he himself sets off, opposition in Ephesus leads to a very dangerous moment for Paul and for the Christian movement in that city. If he is going to continue his ministry for God, that danger must first be avoided. This is Acts 19:23-41.

Danger Avoided (Acts 19:23-35a)

²³ About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way. ²⁴ For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; ²⁵ these he gathered together with the workmen of similar *trades*, and said, "Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. ²⁶ "You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods *at all*. ²⁷ "Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence." ²⁸ When they heard *this* and were filled with rage, they *began* crying out, saying, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" ²⁹ The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia. ³⁰ And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him. ³¹ Also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater. ³² So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together. ³³ Some of the crowd concluded *it was* Alexander, since the Jews had put him forward; and having

motioned with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense to the assembly.³⁴ But when they recognized that he was a Jew, a *single* outcry arose from them all as they shouted for about two hours, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”³⁵ After quieting the crowd, the town clerk said, “Men of Ephesus, what man is there after all who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of the *image* which fell down from heaven?”³⁶ “So, since these are undeniable facts, you ought to keep calm and to do nothing rash.”³⁷ “For you have brought these men *here* who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess.”³⁸ “So then, if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him have a complaint against any man, the courts are in session and proconsuls are *available*; let them bring charges against one another.”³⁹ “But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly.”⁴⁰ “For indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today’s events, since there is no *real* cause *for it*, and in this connection we will be unable to account for this disorderly gathering.”⁴¹ After saying this he dismissed the assembly.

Luke uses one of the titles for the Christian movement first used in Judea, “no small disturbance concerning the Way”. Jesus himself is the Way, the Truth, the Life. He is our way to God, and He is our way of life. It is a new, counter-cultural approach to living that is creating problems for the craftsmen who make money off the worship of Artemis.

Worship of a mother goddess at Ephesus predated the Greek conquest of the city. The name “Artemis” is not Greek. There was a chaste, huntress version of an Artemis-like god on the Greek mainland. But the Ephesian Artemis combined the virgin warrior and the nurturing mother together. She was the whole woman. She was everything. You can get an idea of what Artemis’ temple looked like by searching for an image of the Parthenon. Just google it. When you find that image, multiply it in your mind four times and you’ll have the temple of Artemis in Ephesus, one of the seven great wonders of the ancient world, something they were really, really proud of. You can imagine that, if you visit Ephesus at this time, then you’re going to have a picture of Artemis or her temple on your T-shirt. This is the identity of the city.

The silversmith Demetrius represented numerous craftsmen who worried about the loss of income that might occur if people stopped venerating Artemis. Then they start buying Christian T-shirts, and that’s going to be a problem. And that’s the number one concern he raises. But knowing how to stir up support for his argument against these Christians, Demetrius does not just leave it at the financial argument. He taps into three different streams of emotion. First, he creates fear over a loss of income. Our livelihood might be affected. “Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business.” And that will get people’s attention if you’re saying that their financial state is going to be affected. After that, he stirs up religious feeling.

²⁶ “You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods *at all*.

Can you believe that? The charge of atheism was an early charge in writings against Christians. That makes no sense to us today that Christians are atheists. But back then to argue that there is only one God, to reject the vast number of gods recognized throughout the ancient world, that was tantamount to belief in no gods at all. To be against belief in the gods is to be a-theist: against god. That’s not just an Ephesian problem. That is a problem all across Asia and the wider Greek-speaking world. This is bigger Hellenistic religious feeling. Demetrius brings in a third issue by describing the Christian message as an attack on the Ephesians sense of local identity.

²⁷ “Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence.”

There is a real difference between these two streams of emotion. Where I am in Zagreb, Croatia, I could disagree with specific points of Roman Catholic doctrine, and that could get some people upset at me. But if I start arguing something more specific and local, if I say something bad specifically about the golden statue of Mary that’s on the column in the square, out in front of the cathedral, or if I disrespect the prayers given through the day at the stone gate leading to upper town, then I am tapping into a more fundamental sense of Zagreb identity, of how people understand themselves.

For me, if someone makes fun of the hymn, “Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice,” or if they don’t like our sugar-cake or our lovefeast buns, if they make fun of the love-feast, or a brass band playing before the worship service, I am actually going to get upset. And I know it is silly, but my sense of Moravian identity is something fundamental about who I am and how I grew up. It is not a rational thing. It is an emotional thing.

Paul’s rejection of the gods results in a specific rejection of Artemis. And a degradation of Artemis is a degradation of Ephesus. And a degradation of Ephesus digs into the sense of a person’s own uniqueness and value.

²⁸ When they heard *this* and were filled with rage, they *began* crying out, saying, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

Luke suggests to us that Demetrius’ primary motivation was financial. And that is not hard to believe. Whether the motive is financial or political, this is a known formula that gets used through the centuries. You won’t find it difficult to think of an example in your own recent cultural experience. Today, especially if you think about religious nationalism. You know, how do we stir up support for our side and anger at the other side? You suggest an economic reality for which the other side is to blame. You know, because of their behavior, we are losing money. But don’t just make it about economics. That doesn’t sound quite credible enough. We may be upset about money, but let’s make it about something more pure. Let’s make it about religion. But don’t make it a rational argument about religion. Let’s not discuss theology. There might actually be something to that. We might have real differences to discuss, but we are not trying to have a productive, rational discussion. We are trying to move the masses. We are trying to get a huge number of people on our side. We don’t care what they think as long as they are angry at the other side. So, let’s make it an attack on religion and then make it personal. Your city, your denomination, your history, your sense of identity. That is what is being attacked here.

Those who instigate the emotion of a mob may have their own self-interest at heart, whether financial or political, but when they can strike the right cord, the mob takes on an electricity of its own. These people were not primarily motivated by an economic downturn. They were not worried about religious argumentation in the abstract. They are angry that anyone would attack their sense of identity and importance. This is who we are. We are Ephesians. And we are known for the temple of Artemis. “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

²⁹ The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia. ³⁰ And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him. ³¹ Also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater.

That's good advice. Paul had some high-up friends who gave him wise council. "Stay out of this storm of emotion!"

³² So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.

That's classic mob. Most of them have no idea why they are even there. Somebody talked bad about Ephesus. Somebody said something? "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" And you can see in here a glimpse of the antisemitism Jews have had to deal with for centuries. The Old Covenant code made them stand out as other, as not truly Ephesian, not truly European, not truly American, not truly African. They are something else. They are a convenient scapegoat.

³³ Some of the crowd concluded [they were there because of] Alexander, since the Jews had put him forward; and having motioned with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense to the assembly. ³⁴ But when they recognized that he was a Jew, a *single* outcry arose from them all as they shouted for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

For about two hours they're shouting, jumping up and down, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" It sounds like a soccer match in any major city. You know, like, "Ole, ole, ole, ole. Ole. Ole!" And then you launch into your team's chant. The songs begin to take on a sense of local identity. Here is one of the songs from Split.

Dalmatinac sam
Tu sam rođen ja
Plavo more zna,
Da ga volim ja
Splitskog Hajduka

That sounds a lot better when you have a crowd of guys singing it. And I don't really have any right to sing it. It says,

I'm a Dalmatian
I was born here
The blue sea knows
That I love
Hajduk of Split (Hajduk is the soccer team.)

It's fun. It's easy to get caught up in the emotion of it all. You feel like you are part of something. You belong to something. But things can turn nasty. They have another song about burning Zagreb fans alive. So, you tell them there is going to be no tourism at all this year. We are shutting down tourism. And say something bad about Mary. And then add on that Hajduk sucks. And even if they agree with you, it is okay for them to say those things. It is not okay for you to say that. Economic fear, religious identity, local identity, that's the way to start a riot. Add in an appropriate scapegoat, somebody we can all hate, and it can become quite dangerous.

So, they are going at this for two hours, most of them do not even know why they are there, and then the town clerk stands up and quiets the crowd, and the danger is averted. It was a real danger. We have got leaders in the city who are like, "Paul, don't go in there! This is explosive!" Jewish communities through history have suffered repeatedly, have not been rescued by God from the hands of angry mobs looking for a scapegoat to blame for economic problems, or the spread of disease, or natural disaster. We are really on the knife edge here. The outflow of emotion by the mob could easily turn physical and deadly, destructive against Jews' and Christians' homes and the synagogue. God kept the emotion of this incident contained to the theater, and He gave wisdom and success to the town clerk in quelling the crowd.

God also used the town clerk to correct the misconception of the people in the crowd. This is the second component of the pattern that we will see in each movement of Acts Part VI. That pattern starts with a danger avoided, then moves on to a misconception corrected. And in each case the misconception is corrected by someone other than Paul. In a rather clever method of presentation, Luke is calling real, credible witnesses in the course of his narrative.

Misconception corrected (Acts 19:35b-41)

We can imagine later, Paul on trial and this town clerk being called before the bench as a witness to events.

“Mr. Town Clerk. State for the court your responsibilities.”

“As the court knows, Ephesus is recognized by his majesty the Emperor of Rome as a free Greek city. I am the executive officer of the city assembly. I draft and publicize legislation. And I serve as a liaison between the government of Ephesus and the Roman provincial authorities whose offices are in Ephesus.”

“And those authorities would hold you accountable for a civil disturbance?”

“That is correct. I had a vested interest in calming down the crowd that had gathered because I could have been held responsible.”

“How did you calm the crowd?”

“It is my job to preside over the city assembly. I am recognized as a man of Ephesus and as a man of authority. When I made my presence known, the crowd quieted down to listen to what I would say. I began by affirming their local pride in Ephesus and Artemis, telling them,

‘Men of Ephesus, what man is there after all who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of the *image* which fell down from heaven?

³⁶ So, since these are undeniable facts, you ought to keep calm and to do nothing rash.’”

“And what of these men charged by the mob with wrongdoing? These Macedonians Gaius and Aristarchus? And their leader, the Jew Paul who is on trial here today?”

“Right. I said to the whole crowd in the theater, ‘you have brought these men *here* who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess.’”

“Let us be clear on this for the court. You did not have any evidence that these men had robbed or defiled the temple of Artemis, or that they had spoken in a blasphemous manner about the goddess?”

“That is correct. And I told them, ‘if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him have a complaint against any man, the courts are in session and proconsuls are *available*; let them bring charges against one another. But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly.’

“Is that all you said?”

“Not quite. After affirming the greatness of Ephesus and then pointing out that no one had evidence of wrongdoing against the accused, I then warned the crowd that, on the contrary, they might have charges brought against them. I told them,

‘Indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today’s events, since there is no *real* cause *for it*, and in this connection we will be unable to account for this disorderly gathering.’”

“So, it’s in your opinion that there was no legal cause for this riot?”

“That is correct.”

“And what happened then?”

“And then I dismissed the assembly.”

Rather ingeniously, Luke has recorded this testimony of a respected Greek leader in the context of this riot which might later be used as an attack on Paul’s character and on his behavior. If a Roman prosecutor were to bring up this disturbance in Ephesus, or if a Christian leader in Judea or somewhere else hears about it in a way that throws negative light onto Paul, this testimony recorded by Luke will help clarify misconceptions that someone might have about the event.

With the danger averted and the misconception corrected, Paul calls together the disciples, exhorts them, and leaves Ephesus. He was not leaving because of the riot. He had already made plans to leave and send Timothy on ahead. But the riot made good timing for leaving. Paul will spend three months in Macedonia and Achaia. He will get to make his long-desired visit to the Corinthians. The drama presented in those two letters to the Corinthians happened during Paul’s time in Ephesus. Now Paul can visit them. While with them, he will write to the Romans and send that letter with Phoebe, a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea, one of the two port-towns of Corinth.

And then, completing his ministry to the Greek and Macedonian churches, Paul will turn his sights east to Jerusalem, but not without taking one more opportunity to meet with the leaders of the church in Ephesus. Three months after the riot, as he is sailing to Jerusalem, he will stop for a day near Ephesus for a conference with the leaders of the church. He will exhort them to faithfully fulfill their ministry to the body of Christ, and he will also take opportunity to defend his own ministry. That is the third component in each of the five movement of Acts Part VI; danger avoided, misconception corrected, and defense provided. We will consider the defense component of this first movement in our next lesson.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 19:21-41. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Why does Paul plan to return to Jerusalem when he is already half-way to Rome? What does the text reveal here in 19:21-22? What does Paul add to this in Romans 15:22-33 (which may have been written soon after the riot when Paul was again in Corinth)?
3. What seems to be the primary motive of Demetrius? What is moving him to speak against Christians?
4. What motives does Demetrius tap into in his speech to the craftsmen?
5. What motivates other citizens to join in with the shouting of the mob? Use your imagination to come up with possible reasons this person or that person might find themselves in the theater shouting. What got them there?
6. What is the possible motive of the town clerk who speaks up in 35b-41?
7. What misconception does he address in regard to the Christians? How does he correct that misconception?
8. What does it mean for a Christian to be a good citizen? Were the Christians of Ephesus good citizens of the city?

Lesson 29: Acts 20:1-21:16 Defense by Miracle, Message and Prophecy

Introduction

Our primary theme in this section is the defense of Paul and his ministry. As a secondary theme, Luke's background narrative provides a number of interesting details about the practice of the earliest Christian churches. We will consider both themes in this lesson.

In our previous lesson, we recognized a way to structure Acts Part VI. The division of Acts into six parts marked off by the summary statements of church growth and expansion are not unique. The scholars have long recognized that division in Acts. The way I have sub-divided those six parts comes from David Gooding's book, *True to the Faith*. I have said that before. I just want to make sure I am giving Gooding the credit. He sees five movements in this final part of Acts, all beginning with a danger avoided, followed by a misconception corrected, concluding with a defense provided. That structure seems very helpful to me and true to the text.

We considered already the riot in Ephesus and the statement of the town clerk. That was our "danger avoided" and "misconception corrected" for this first movement. In this lesson we turn to the defense provided. The defense here is longer than we will find in some of the other movements. It consists of more than a speech. There are three sections to the defense. In Troas, Paul will raise a young man from the dead. That miracle is powerful testimony that God is with Paul. Following that miracle, Paul will give a speech to the Ephesian elders that defends his ministry among them. In the final section, the sovereignty of God is emphasized as he leads Paul to suffering in Jerusalem. When bad things happen to messengers of God, one response is to assume they are not really a messenger of God at all. Or if they were, they made a mistake this time. But through the words, the prophecy delivered by the Holy Spirit we are reassured that the trials Paul is about to suffer in Jerusalem are not news to God. It is the plan. Paul is His servant, and He is leading His servant into some hard times.

During this whole section Paul is on the move. There is quite a bit of travel recorded here. And there is a lot of meeting with Christians along the way. So, as we consider the three-part defense, I will also be able to point out some of the detail about the early Church, and we'll just do that as we go as our secondary theme. Let's start with the travels that take Paul from Ephesus to Troas, where the young man is raised from the dead. This is Acts 20:1-12.

Paul's ministry defended through an incredible miracle (Acts 20:1-12)

¹ After the uproar had ceased [*that's referring to the riot in Ephesus*], Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. ² When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece. ³ And *there* he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. ⁴ And he was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, *the son* of Pyrrhus, and by Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. ⁵ But these had gone on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas.

Let's pause here. We covered Paul's plan in our last lesson. His plan is to strengthen the churches in Macedonia and Achaia, to take a financial gift from these Gentile churches back to Jerusalem to encourage Christian unity, then to travel to Rome to further establish that church in the Gospel, and after all of that to re-engage his passion for pioneer missions in a journey to the western Roman province of Spain.

Luke tells us Paul spent three months in Macedonia and Achaia. But he does not tell us anything about Paul's time there other than the very broad statement that Paul exhorted the disciples and changed his travel itinerary when he discovered a plot against him by Jewish adversaries.

Paul's letter to 2 Corinthians reminds us that there is always more going on that is not being reported. 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus to Corinth. And if you know that letter, you know

it is full of drama. The church had divided into factions. The theology of some about the resurrection of Jesus had gone off track. The behavior of some lacked a standard appropriate to the Gospel, being disorganized and unloving in their weekly gatherings and, in some cases, practicing outright immoral behavior.

We see in his letters that Paul wants to go to Corinth, but he is hesitant. He does not want to go unwelcomed unless he is absolutely forced to do so. He spoke plainly in 1 Corinthians, addressing numerous theological and behavioral issues, communicating his disappointment and his dismay. He does not know how they are going to receive that correction.

Instead of sailing from Ephesus directly across to Corinth, Paul follows the coastline of Asia Minor north to go up and around. He will sail over to Macedonia from Troas, following the same path as his second missionary journey, visiting the churches he had planted, starting with Philippi. It's going to take him some time to get down to Corinth.

We might think Paul would be eager to get to there and would have sailed straight over from Ephesus. But we find out in 2 Corinthians that he is giving them some space to process his letter. Paul had sent Titus to Corinth and had hoped to meet up with him in Troas to find out how the Corinthians responded to that other letter. In 2 Corinthians 2:12–13, he wrote,

¹² Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.

Paul decided not to wait for Titus. He continued his trip to strengthen the churches but with significant angst over the situation in Corinth. Paul is writing that he has left Troas. That means he didn't write 2 Corinthians until he already got over to Macedonia. That letter is a positive one. It's communicating joy over reconciliation between the Apostle and the church. We find out how it's able to be positive later in chapter 7 of 2 Corinthians. This is verse 5-7.

⁵ For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; ⁷ and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.

The discord with Corinth had torn Paul up. He admits to “fears within” and being “depressed.” So, when Titus finally met up with him and spoke of the sorrow of the Corinthians and their longing to see Paul, he was greatly comforted, and he was rejoicing. It is a very human piece of writing that shows us his pastor's heart. It is also another reminder that Luke's story here in Acts is not about the growing pains of the churches Paul has planted. Those struggles are happening. And we get record of those struggles in the epistles. There are two truths. The planting of these churches was followed by a lot of grief, struggle, sin, sorrow, people walking away. And the planting of these churches resulted in eternal life and lasting fruit, and people stepping up and growing strong. The focus of Acts is on the latter reality: the positive truth of God's work by the Holy Spirit through human witnesses to bring all peoples into the body of Christ. That's Luke's focus. Luke gave us a little glimpse of that positive fruitfulness in verse 4.

You know, when he listed all those names, and did you notice how Luke identified where they are from according to their city or their province? One is from Berea in Macedonia, two are Thessalonians, two are from Galatia - because we know that Timothy is from Galatia - and two are from Asia. Paul is not going to Jerusalem alone. He has seen fruit in his travels. And these Gentiles are coming with him from churches he had planted. And in their coming they will personally deliver their gift to the poor in Judea, and they will give witness to what God had done through Paul in their cities.

During his three months in this area, Paul makes a loop sailing from Troas he left Asia Minor, he crossed over to Europe, he traveled through Macedonia down to Achaia, and then he returned back up through Macedonia to sail again over to Troas. We pick back up in Philippi in verse 6.

⁶ We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days. ⁷ On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. ⁹ And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for his life is in him." ¹¹ When he had gone *back* up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left. ¹² They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.

God used Paul to raise the young man Eutychus from the dead. That miracle puts Paul into a very small, select group people. Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, Peter, and now Paul. That's it. This miracle provides another parallel between Peter and Paul. Both men are affirmed as God's chosen Apostles, and both are connected to the Lord Jesus through the miracles of resurrection. This miracle as an affirmation of Paul is the main point of this story. I think that's why Luke included this here in the record.

But then there is a lot more for us to notice in the detail that Luke has provided. We have seen Paul regularly visiting the synagogue on the Sabbath in city after city. Here, Luke tells us they gathered together to break bread on the first day of the week. The Sabbath is the last day of the week. The first day of the week is the day of Jesus' resurrection. This is an example of Christians coming together on Sunday. Gathering to break bread can mean gathering to eat a meal together. But in the Christian context, we understand that Luke is talking about sharing the Lord's supper, which in early Church quite likely included eating a meal together. The breaking of bread does not happen immediately. First, Paul speaks. And it's interesting how much Luke emphasizes he spoke for a long time. Because he spoke for a long time till midnight, before Eutychus fell and died. This doesn't mean he has spoken all day. We should assume the gathering began at night. Roman civilization did not recognize a 7-day week and did not have a weekend. The concept being used here, referring to the first day of the week, is a Jewish concept. This is the Jewish ordering of the calendar. Believers were not getting the day off. They had to work during daylight hours. And that assumption is affirmed by Luke's reference to many lamps in the room.

Who hasn't fallen to sleep at some point in a 20-minute sermon? And in this case, it's dark. It's after midnight, and Paul has been talking on and on and on. And we don't take this as the norm for every Sunday meeting. But when you have the Apostle Paul with you and he is leaving town the next day, you want him to teach. So, he taught long enough for Eutychus to become drowsy and to really fall asleep. And he had this coveted seat by a window to benefit from the cool air, but window is open, without glass or screen, and then he is sitting so close to the edge, and maybe that is not the wisest choice. It's late at night. But he falls asleep, and he loses his balance, and he tumbles out of the window. It is a horrible scene! If you can imagine that at a church. We know the end. So, it becomes joyful, but before you get there you just think you're having church and a young man falls out of the window. So along with the others, Paul rushes down and falls on the boy, embracing him.

Why motivated Paul to do that? You know, that's curious. It's actually kind of weird when you think about it. What idea is in his head? Peter did not do that. Peter raised Tabitha by speaking to her. "Tabitha, arise." Peter's method followed all three accounts of Jesus raising someone from the dead. The widow's son, Jairus' daughter, Lazarus, Jesus spoke, and they woke up and they came back to life.

Why didn't Paul do as Jesus and Peter did? Why didn't he just speak to the boy, "Eutychus! Arise!" It is interesting to note that Paul was not present when Jesus' raised the dead. Peter was. Peter saw Jesus do it. Peter did it like Jesus. Paul wasn't present when Peter raised Tabitha. He didn't see that, either. It is also interesting to note that Paul was not the first person in the Bible to lie down on a person in order to raise them from the dead. So, who did that? Elijah laid down on a widow's son, and Elisha laid down on the Shunammite's son. Both of them did it that way. They laid down and they embraced them. And Paul would, of course, have known those stories, as a Pharisee of pharisees he has got it all memorized.

The comparison suggests flexibility to our method as the Holy Spirit works through us. This is not about getting the right formula. If Paul had spoken, I believe Eutychus would have risen from the dead. But he doesn't. He lays down, because that's what he has seen in the Word. We are not manipulating the Spirit of God with precise words or actions. That's not Christian spirituality. There's not this formula we have got to get just right. Three things are crucial for us: are we living in dependence on Jesus Christ? Are we are filled with the Spirit? And does God will the thing to be done? The method, our specific words and actions, those will likely follow from whatever examples we have seen. Peter was discipled by Jesus, so Peter acted as he had seen Jesus do. Paul had never seen anybody do something like this, but he is moved by God to do it, to try it, and the example he has seen is in the written Word. In that sense he is discipled by Elijah and Elisha. He modeled himself after them. The spiritual disciplines and practices, there's some sense where we want to do them in our closet. You don't want everybody to know that you're fasting or praying or that you're being spiritual. But Jesus did do ministry in front of His disciples. And He is praying with them, and they are seeing Him at work. And that is very important in the church, because we have younger believers interacting with older believers, because discipleship is more like an apprenticeship. The younger ones are looking, they are trying to learn how do I do this. How do I study the Bible? How do I pray? How do I walk in the power of the Holy Spirit? How do I trust God to work through me spiritually? And it's not that they need to learn a formula from older believers who have gone before, but they need models to imitate as they, also, are walking with Jesus.

Paul's ministry defended in his speech to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:13-38)

Travel to Miletus (13-17)

Paul will speak to this kind of modeling in his speech to the Ephesian elders. He was a model for them. That speech is the second element of defense in this section. It's in Acts 20:13-38. There is a lot here. Rather than read the whole passage, I will go paragraph by paragraph. First, we have to get closer to Ephesus. Here is our travel section. This is verses 13-16.

¹³ But we, going ahead to the ship, set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for so he had arranged it, intending himself to go by land. ¹⁴ And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. ¹⁵ Sailing from there, we arrived the following day opposite Chios; and the next day we crossed over to Samos; and the day following we came to Miletus. ¹⁶ For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. ¹⁷ From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

If we look up on a Bible map, what's going on is Paul is traveling on coastal ships that are going from port town to port town in about a day. The sea worked as a major highway so that ships are taking people and goods just on day trips down the coast, however far you need to go. Luke told us that Paul set sail from Philippi after the Passover and week of Unleavened bread. Here he tells us that Paul wants to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. That's a celebration that has lost importance in the modern church. We don't have this big cultural celebration of Pentecost, at least not anywhere I have lived. But I imagine there was still a lot of excitement surrounding the celebration of Pentecost and the birth of the Church in Jerusalem during that first generation. And this is a feast you would want to be at. If at all possible, you would want to be at it in Jerusalem. Paul has 50 days from

Passover to Pentecost. That's why it's called, Pentecost. It's fifty days after Passover. That means, fifty days, he's got to get from Philippi to Jerusalem. And he needs to find a ship that is going to make a more direct voyage to Syria, not hopping from town to town all the way around the coast. He is not in a huge rush. But to stay in Ephesus itself would have required showing hospitality to a number of people. Paul doesn't just go somewhere he has lived for two years and not spend time. And you also never know what kind of emergency might come up, causing delay. So, he decides instead to pass Ephesus and stop a couple of days in Miletus and have the Ephesian leaders travel to meet him there.

Luke gives us a summary of the speech Paul made to the elders. This is the only speech to a Christian audience Luke gives us in the book of Acts. Luke's pattern is to give us just one speech in a particular context. He gave us an example of Paul speaking to Jews in a synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. And that example can at least help us to imagine the types of things Paul said when he went into various synagogues. He gave us an example of Paul speaking to non-Jews at the Areopagus in Athens. And that was a specific speech for that group of people but in another sense, it's an example of what Paul might say when he is speaking outside to a pagan evangelistic kind of audience. This speech may be similar to exhortations Paul gave to believers in places like Corinth and Philippi. There is some similarity. But also the speech is also quite contextualized around a specific moment of farewell. And the audience is not the church. The audience is the leadership of the church. Paul's farewell address to all the people in a congregation would have been different. This speech breaks up into three parts. The first part is in verses 18-27.

1 (18-27)

¹⁸ And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ²¹ solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. ²⁴ "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. ²⁶ "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

To make sure that you are correctly tracking with an author's train of thought, it is sometimes helpful to jump ahead to the "therefore." A "therefore" in the text introduces a logical conclusion derived from what has just been said. This is Paul's "therefore."

²⁶ "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

So, Paul is stating a defense about his ministry. It is also helpful to take note of repeated language. "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." That is at the beginning of the paragraph, too, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly from house to house." That's the main point of this paragraph. Paul did not shrink back from declaring the truth. And he is defending his ministry to them. He is saying, "I carried out what God called me to do." What else does he say about that ministry?

(1) I served with humility and with tears through trials.

- (2) I testified to repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (those are the two sides of the same coin that Peter also used in the conclusion of his sermons: repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ - repent and believe).
- (3) I preached the kingdom, declaring the whole purpose of God.

Why is Paul defending his ministry at the moment? Because the Holy Spirit is testifying to him “that bonds and afflictions await me.” He understands they will not see each other again. Then how does Paul process that idea?

²⁴ “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul is given over to the will of God. “If I don’t make it out of Jerusalem alive, then I don’t make it out of Jerusalem alive. But I’m going to be faithful to Jesus Christ.” The revelation that Paul will not see these elders again is key to understanding the tone of this speech. These leaders have close relationship with Paul. They served in ministry with him for two years, passing through exciting and scary times together. They love Paul. It is one thing to lift yourself up as a model, you know, to say, “I was humble among you and I wept for you,” to a crowd of people you do not know very well. That’s usually a mistake. You don’t want to be lifting yourself up to people you don’t know. It is very a different thing to ask a small band of men with whom you have close relationship to remember what you have taught them and what they saw in you. You can ask them to consider your tears and trials because they were there with you in those tears and trials. They know it’s not fake. They know this is not just rhetoric. They remember. And when you ask them, “What was my message? What has always been my message?” They know immediately without you needing to say it, “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified and raised from the dead.”

If Luke had not remembered these words and written them down, the speech would have just been for the elders. This is not for the whole congregation. It’s not for the broader church. Paul is not making a broad, public appeal. He is just speaking to the elders. And he has a word of warning specifically for them. The next paragraph is verses 28-31.

2 (28-31)

²⁸ “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ “Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Again, the “therefore” gives us the logical conclusion of the paragraph. “Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” Paul impresses on these elders the seriousness of their responsibility to shepherd the church of God using his own behavior among them as an example. True Biblical theology regarding the Gospel of grace is a matter of life and death. It is worth tears. To escape eternal death, people must come to true faith in Jesus Christ. To experience the abundant life Jesus offers, people must learn to walk with Jesus in faith. And when people turn away from that, they are turning towards destruction. This was not just a job for Paul, clock in, clock out. It was not a task just to grow a bigger religious movement around him. It wasn’t all about his ego. It was a labor of love and concern for real people, and that brought him often to tears for them.

To love people, elders of a church must recognize that the spiritual battle of the mind is real and it’s critical. Leaders in Ephesus must refute for their congregation the priests of Artemis and the practitioners of magic who offer sensuality and power outside of God. They must also contend with the Jewish view of Scripture that denies Jesus Christ and calls believers to a legalistic approach of salvation. But those are not the wolves Paul speaks about here. Even more problematic than the

external challenges will be a packaging of such ideas as these together with Christian truths, that will then be promoted from within by professing believers. They will promote a distorted Gospel and they will lead disciples away from Biblical truth.

This will always be a challenge for every church. It was a primary theme way back in the book of Exodus. It really looked like the Egyptians were the problem. If we can just get out from under their yoke, we can live free. But then at Mount Sinai, we saw that a more sinister problem had entered the camp. The Israelites brought their own sin nature with them. Set free, they were still slaves. They tried to express their freedom by forming God into an image appropriate to their vision of what a powerful God should look like. But we cannot be free if we insist on defining truth ourselves. We can only be free by accepting God according to God's own definition of Himself, by accepting who we are based on how He defines us and accepting His way of salvation as the true way, His vision of life as the true vision.

The Church is a community of sinful people led by sinful people who are continually including sinful people into their community, whether by birth or through invitation. The vision is to grow together to be more and more like Jesus. But that is a lifelong process at which we will never fully arrive. So, we can never escape the need for communicating true Biblical faith. In Paul's mind, it is the job of the elders to seriously and faithfully take up the responsibility of shepherding the flock in right belief and right practice.

And this anticipation of Paul that wolves are going to enter the flock is a reality that he is writing about in his first letter to Timothy. This is going to come later, after Paul goes to Rome. Timothy is serving in Ephesus. And in that letter, he refers to contentious arguments about doctrine. He even names Hymenaeus and Alexander as men who have shipwrecked their faith. This is real. It's going to happen. Paul knows that.

Paul also writes in that letter to Timothy the qualifications necessary for elders. Those requirements fit with the need that Paul has spoken about here in this speech. The elder must be a person of moral integrity, must be able to get along with others, and must be able to teach the truths of the Christian faith. The importance of practical integrity comes out in Paul's last paragraph, this is verses 32-35.

3 (32-35)

³² "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. ³⁴ "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me. ³⁵ "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

Again, Paul is able to refer to his own practice as a model because these men were in close relationship with him. And they know whether he is speaking the truth or not. Also, these men have to take on the responsibility of leadership. So, when Paul presents himself as a model to them, he is also communicating to them that they must now be models for others. Orthodox faith must be shown to be real, not just through your teaching, but through your practice. And Paul's specific example has to do with his intentional effort not to be a financial burden on the believers in Ephesus and on the goal of saving money to help those who are less fortunate.

That connection of Gospel truth to financial reality has already been a theme in the Gospel of Acts. Luke brought that up in his record of the Jerusalem Awakening in the early chapters. Remember, he told us twice about believers selling goods to share with those in need, he told us about the hypocrisy of Ananias and Saphira, and he told us about the problem of distributing funds to Greek-speaking widows. So, there is quite a bit on this.

Paul returns to that theme in this speech. Here the exhortation is not to sell all you have. That one-time solution was appropriate to the revival context in Jerusalem after Pentecost. And select

believers will be led by God to sell goods or to sell land and give to the poor. Paul here exhorts a more sustainable solution for everyone to attempt. You know, all believers should try this. Work hard with the goal of making enough to provide for yourself and your family, so that hopefully you will have even more to share with those in need, and then share it. Paul will repeat that point later in Ephesians 4:28, "Labor...so that you will have something to share." Everyone is not going to be able to succeed. Life can be rough and unfair. But that is, sort of, the point. Those who do succeed will be able to share with those who still have need.

And this concern for the physical needs of believers does not originate with Paul or with Luke. Paul quotes Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than receive." That is a fine motto for the elder, both in physical things, and also in spiritual things.

Paul concludes with prayer. Verses 36-38.

Farewell (36-38)

³⁶ When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And they *began* to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, ³⁸ grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

The elders do not act like chastised men after Paul's challenge and warning. Paul said, "men will arise from your own selves, speaking perverse things." You can think, "Wow! This is a contentious conversation!" I don't think these men took it as though he was talking about them. And I am not sure when Paul says, "From among you," whether he is talking about just this small group of leaders or whether he is talking about the congregation of all Ephesian. In any case, these men on the whole are committed to Paul personally. The warning does not throw them off. But the thought that they will not see Paul again, that does. And they weep and they embrace.

Paul's main intention in speaking to the elders was to strengthen them for the difficult service of shepherding the church by exhorting them to hold true to Christian faith and practice as he had modeled for them. That is Paul's intention. Luke's intention for including this speech here is to provide a defense of Paul using his own words. Paul designed these words for a small, well-known audience. Luke saw the importance of sharing these words more broadly, as a way to affirm for us Paul's behavior among the Ephesians. And it's not just the words Paul uses, but the response. If you get up and you say these words, "You know how I have modeled myself to you," and people don't respond well, it's not a very good defense. But the emotional response by the elders shows that they agree with what Paul is saying. He has made a relational impact on their lives. And his Gospel was very real to him. It was also very real to them, who had benefited from knowing him. He had led them into relationship with Jesus Christ.

Okay. So, having considered how this speech defends Paul and his Gospel, I have a few words about my secondary theme, the nature of the early Church. Verse 17 introduces the speech, "[Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church." I want to make a comment about the church and a comment about elders.

We have noted in more than one lesson that the simple meaning of "ekklesia" is assembly. Greek cities like Ephesus had assemblies. They were made up of free, landowning, male citizens who voted on important legislation for the city or on important decisions, like whether or not to go to war. That's the job of the ekklesia.

The focus of the word is not on a building, it's on a gathering of people. It is a free association of people who have come together for the good of the city. The town clerk in our previous lesson was the president of the Ephesian ekklesia. And he used that word when he warned the mob about making an unlawful ekklesia. The mob in the theater was that type of assembly.

Paul's strategy has been to establish a new kind of assembly in every city he goes to. And this assembly cares about the well-being of the city, but not in direct competition with the political

assembly. This assembly is a spiritual assembly, caring for the spiritual and physical well-being of all the citizens. Luke sometimes makes a distinction by calling this assembly, the assembly of God. So that's a great name for a denomination, Assemblies of God. God's assembly is open to all, male and female, slave and free, rich and poor, citizen and foreigner. The only requirement for joining is faith in Jesus Christ, and the true president or chief elder of the assembly is Jesus.

This is how Paul saw the Church, as an assembly of people who have believed in Jesus Christ and represent the spiritual kingdom of God on earth. That *ekklesia* can refer to various levels of organization. On the most local level, we have an *ekklesia* that meets in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:5), on a little bigger level, we have the *ekklesia* of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1), so all the house assemblies in the city are the *ekklesia*. We can also refer to the assembly in a region, the *ekklesia* of Asia (1 Corinthians 16:19) or the *ekklesia* in Judea (Galatians 1:22). And we can refer to the *ekklesia* of all believers as Paul does in Ephesians 5:23, when he writes, "Christ is the head of the Church - the *ekklesia*." It's the word, "assembly." It can be very local or all the way up to being universal: all believers.

In Acts, we see Paul appointing elders at the city level. We do not know how formal the role of elder had become by this point, but there is some formality to it. It is a role in the church. These are not simply the respected old people in our midst, the elders. In Acts 14:23, we saw how Paul made it a part of his ministry strategy to appoint elders in each church that he planted. It is a recognized role of leadership in the early church. What is added in this passage is the reference to elders as overseers with the responsibility of shepherding.

The word "overseer" in Luke's Greek was, "*episkopos*," which is where the word "bishop" comes from. Paul recognizes no separate office of bishop. The elders here are all bishops or overseers. And that word had a broad meaning in the Greek. It's not a religious word. A person could oversee a ship, or a business, or a market, or a household. Paul adopts the word to emphasize the function of the elder to oversee the assembly of believers. He compares them to a shepherd overseeing a flock of sheep.

And though a shepherd may be seen as doing all the work for the sheep, you can get from the metaphor, Paul does not want you to get that. Elders aren't supposed to do all the work. When he writes the Ephesians, he directs those with leadership gifts to equip the saints, so that everyone can use their particular gifting for the building up of the church (Ephesians 4:11-12). Also, interestingly, we do not see one person given the role of pastor in the assemblies of Acts. The elders share this particular responsibility to guard and communicate the doctrinal and practical truths of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

Over the past two years Paul has equipped these men in Ephesus so that they might also equip others. Paul now exhorts them to remain true to Jesus Christ and he takes his leave.

We have seen the defense of Paul's ministry through the resurrection of the boy Eutychus and through his message to the Ephesian elders. In this last section, Paul's actions are defended as we see him following the sovereign voice of God.

I will keep this section brief. It divides into three parts: travel to Tyre, travel to Caesarea, and travel to Jerusalem. First, to Tyre, Acts 21:1-6.

Paul's ministry defended by God's sovereign leading (Acts 21:1-16)

Tyre (1-6)

¹ When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara; ² and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³ When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. ⁵ When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey,

while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until *we were* out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. ⁶ Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again.

Patara is a city I am not familiar with. At the time, it was the Roman provincial headquarters for Lycia. So, it's not surprising Paul is able to find a ship there that left the coast and made the longer, direct voyage to Phoenicia. The Roman province Paul is sailing to is Syria. The older, regional name for the section of the coast that contains Tyre and Sidon is, Phoenicia. Luke made reference to Phoenicia back in chapter 11 when he told how the church in Antioch came to be. Jewish believers propelled out of Judea by the persecution that followed Stephen's martyrdom proclaimed the gospel up through Phoenicia, over to Cyprus, and into Antioch.

So, this church was planted before Paul came to faith in Christ. But Paul does not share fellowship only with the churches he planted. He is not creating his own denomination. He seeks out these believers in Tyre, they have that bond of faith in Jesus Christ. He spends a week with them. Paul hears the common voice of the Spirit through them. And they tell Paul, "Don't set foot in Jerusalem."

That brings up an interesting question. Paul hears the Spirit saying, "Go to Jerusalem." These believers, hearing the Spirit saying, "Do not go in Jerusalem." What's up with that? The easiest way to explain the apparent contradiction is to assume the believers in Tyre did not hear from the Spirit that Paul should not go to Jerusalem, but that if he goes, he will suffer. And then they added their own kind of application to that, "Do not go."

Believers can hear from the Spirit of God and derive very different conclusions on how to apply it. A cause of serious conflicts in churches can be the different directions believers want to take based on the urging of the Spirit, and especially when they have different gifts, so they have different priorities for what we ought to do. That's one reason we need elders, to make those difficult decisions for the community when there is not a clear, right response. The Spirit is working in all of us so what direction are we going to take? It does get hard when it is the elders are the ones that are disagreeing.

Here, there is disagreement about how to respond to the warning of the Spirit. But it is not the responsibility of the disciples in Tyre to make that call. Paul must decide. And he decides to continue on. Verses 7-14,

Caesarea (7-14)

⁷ When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day. ⁸ On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. ⁹ Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. ¹⁰ As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' " ¹² When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents *began* begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!"

We get an example here of what probably happened in Tyre. Agabus receives a word through the Holy Spirit that Paul will be bound by Jews and handed over to Gentiles. That prophecy in itself is not very clear. We might even note that Paul does not get bound by Jews. The prophesy comes true in a general sense, but maybe not in a specific sense.

With that lack of clarity, we can sympathize some with the believers in Caesarea who come up with the same application point as the believers in Tyre. “Paul, do not go to Jerusalem.” It’s not what the Holy Spirit said through Agabus. But it does seem like a pretty wise application point.

There is one quick point to make here about the early Church. I do not want to just skip over this. We have just read that Philip had four daughters who were gifted as prophetesses. And you may have noticed that I have referred to the Ephesian elders as “men.” That’s because God led Paul only to appoint men as elders. Paul taught Timothy the same principle in his letter referring to the qualifications of elders. Gender roles in leadership requires further study. I am not going to get into that here. We did notice at the beginning of the letter that Jesus only appointed men as apostles and that was a requirement for the replacement of Judas. That does not mean that Jesus did not value and respect the thinking abilities of women. He stood out as a Rabbi who taught and discussed theology with women like Mary and Martha.

Similarly, Paul limits the role of elders to men. But he does recognize the role of women prophesying and praying in the gathered assembly in 1 Corinthians 11. Here we have an affirmation that women were gifted by the Holy Spirit to communicate God’s Word through prophecy. A study on gender roles in the Church is going to require a study of all the key passages, starting back in Genesis 1 and 2, as Paul does. And also a study of the whole of Scripture to recognize important passages that might be easily overlooked, like this one here affirming female prophetesses. So, in the case of this issue, as Paul argued to the Ephesian elders, it is the job of the leadership of each church to study carefully the Word of God, so that Biblical truth might be rightly applied to our contemporary churches.

Okay, back to the prophecy that came from Agabus. Or I should say, back to the Caesareans’ interpretation of the prophecy, “Do not go to Jerusalem.” Paul counters that, pointing out a flaw in their interpretation and application. “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” This is not the exact same thing, but it does remind me of Peter telling Jesus not to go to the cross and Jesus looking at him and saying, “Get behind me, Satan! You are distracting me from the way I am going!” And that’s a little harsher and stronger because it was the Lord Jesus speaking and Peter should have trusted that. There is less clarity here. So, Paul is not rebuking them so strongly, but he is standing very firm on his understanding of the Holy Spirit’s message that suffering doesn’t mean I’m not supposed to go. Holding on to life is not the fundamental goal guiding my actions. Faithfulness to my ministry whether in blessing or in suffering, faithfulness to Jesus Christ, that is my fundamental goal of life. Jesus does not always choose to save believers from pain, or sickness, or failure, or death. That’s a poor theology of suffering. If we see pain ahead, we don’t always turn aside.

Now, should we seek out suffering for suffering’s sake? No. Should we avoid suffering at all costs? No. And it is hard to advise someone you love to continue on a path of guaranteed suffering. The believers in Caesarea do not do that. They urge Paul not to go. But the individual who is called by God is ultimately responsible to make that decision. Paul has the wisdom of an experienced servant of God. He does not proceed naively. When others had urged him not to enter the theater during the Ephesian riot, Paul had listened. His goal is not to throw his life away. This time, though, Paul does not accept the advice given him. He listens and he makes a different choice. He continues on. We end with verses 15-16.

Jerusalem (15-16)

¹⁵ After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge.

We have completed the first movement of Acts Part VI. Paul is in Jerusalem. The danger of the riot was avoided, the misconception promoted by Demetrius was corrected, and a defense has been

given. The defense comes by way of a miracle of resurrection, a speech to the Ephesian elders, and the sovereign voice of God.

This defense will not be enough to silence all critics. Some detractors will surely use Paul's long imprisonment and later transportation to Rome as a critique against his claim to serve God. Why then would God let all this happen? Why has God put you on the sideline and handed you over to pagans?

We will consider those events and continue to build our defense of Paul's character and actions. Ultimately, however, it comes down to this: sometimes suffering is God's plan. Consider Jesus, who was bound by the hands of sinful men and handed over for crucifixion. Keep your eyes fixed on Him. His vindication came from God. Paul's vindication comes from God. Our vindication comes from God. The rule of this life is to put your faith in Jesus Christ; to walk with Him the best you can; depending on the Spirit; using the gifts He has given you; working hard; sharing with those in need; living as a witness for His glory; confessing when you screw up; getting back up; accepting God's love and forgiveness; and continuing to walk with Jesus, wherever He leads.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 20:1-12. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. In what ways does the miracle of resurrection at Troas defend Paul as God's messenger?
3. Read Acts 20:13-38. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
4. The three-part division for Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders is left untitled in this lesson. What title would you give to each part of the speech?
5. Why is it important to recognize that this speech is specifically designed for the elders of the Ephesian house churches? How might this same speech come across differently if it was given to the whole congregation of a church?
6. Read Acts 21:1-16. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
7. In 19:21 we were told that "Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem." In 21:4 the disciples at Tyre, "Kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem." How do you resolve this apparent conflict?
8. How does 21:10-14 help you think about the apparent conflict of the Spirit giving one message to Paul and a contrary message to the disciples in Tyre? Do you have real life example of a similar seeming contradiction in your own life or between leaders you know?

Lesson 30: Acts 21:17-23:11 The Gospel's Respect for Conscience

Introduction

Paul has arrived in Jerusalem. He is not beloved by all Christians. He is hated by many Jews. His desire is Christian unity. And he knows that real Christian unity must be grounded in a common core of shared belief. This second movement of Acts part VI provides more support for the defense of Paul and his Gospel. We see in Paul flexibility in things that are not essential and immovability in things that are essential. He will engage in religious ceremony that he does not believe necessary for salvation to show that he is not advocating the elimination of Jewish tradition. At the same time, he will not back down from a mob when the question of faith in Jesus Christ is at stake.

We are following the same structure as the first movement with a danger avoided, a misconception corrected, and a defense given. As in the last movement, the defense given is lengthy, covering three distinct reports.

The danger avoided in this movement parallels the danger avoided in the previous movement. There Paul escaped a mob of pagans angered by the charge Paul was preaching against Artemis and dishonored her famed temple in Ephesus. In this movement Paul will be rescued from a mob of Jews angered by the charge Paul was preaching against Moses and defiled God's holy Temple in Jerusalem. This is Acts 21:17-30.

Danger Avoided: The Mob in Jerusalem (21:17-36)

¹⁷ After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. ¹⁸ And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After he had greeted them, he *began* to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it they *began* glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; ²¹ and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.

There is more than one misconception about Paul in this section. This is one of them. The misconception that a lot of these Christian believers have about Paul. We notice the reception Paul received from the leaders in Jerusalem, from James and the elders. Luke tells us all the elders were present as Paul told what God had been doing among the Gentiles. And they glorified God. They rejoiced. They are praising. They are excited by the stories of salvation that Paul is sharing. There is no misunderstanding with the leaders.

But they know their own people, and they know false rumors have been going on. And this has to do with Christian brothers and sisters. We are not talking right now about unbelieving Jews. The majority of Jewish Christians are still zealous for the Law. They have not fully, theologically unpacked the implication that Jesus is the end of the Law. At the Council of Jerusalem in chapter 15, Jewish leaders rejected circumcision, food laws, and any ceremonial requirement as necessary for answering the first question of Covenant, "What justifies a person before God?" So that decision has been made at the top. And their decision affirmed the Gospel claim that you are forgiven fully by what Jesus did. You cannot add to that. You are justified 100% by grace through faith.

There is, however, a second question of Covenant, "How then shall we live, having been fully accepted by grace into relationship with God?" That question is messier. We are not called to live up to a standard of acceptance. We are all called to live according to God's vision of what true life is. We are called to show our love through obedience to His will. The Mosaic Covenant was God's will for those who lived before Jesus. That Covenant has ended for Jew and Gentile. Now God's will for obedient behavior from His followers is expressed in the New Covenant.

The commitment of Jewish believers to the Old Testament Scriptures is commendable. They are committed to Scripture, and their commitment to the Law is a valuable witness to nonbelieving Jews. But in their Jewish culture, they have not been challenged to work out the implication of freedom that comes along with the New Covenant. And it has so much to do with how we were brought up in our religious environment, in our cultural environment, to understand what it means to walk with God. If everybody drinks grape juice for the Lord's Supper in your church, and in your city, and in your region, and it's just a thing people do, great, no problem. But as soon as you introduce a European into the conversation, somebody is going to have to ask, "Why don't we drink wine? What is this value that we have?"

Living as a believer in a society that recognizes Old Testament ceremony as the right way to honor God, where everybody kind of has this general belief to be spiritual, everybody knows you keep Sabbath, you keep food laws, you keep sacrifices, everybody does that, Christian or non-Christian, everybody, whether they do it or not, everybody knows that's what you're supposed to do, and having no alternatives; you know, these are all Jews, pretty much in Judea, so we don't have a strong community of believing Gentiles who are rocking the boat. We are saying, "You know what? We need to go back and to think what it really means that Jesus is the end of the Law." They don't have that. And so, they don't understand the context that Paul operates in. They haven't been challenged to work out some of the implications of their own faith. Their cultural isolationism makes them susceptible to rumors about Paul. And knowing this, the elders tell Paul,

"They have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."

And we know the accusations are not true. We even have this interesting example of Paul requiring Timothy to be circumcised Paul to join in with his missionary band. It's not required for salvation. It's not even required for the second question of Covenant. Timothy doesn't have to be circumcised, but Paul knows it will become an issue. And so, he does encourage Timothy to be circumcised. So, we know Paul is not going around, telling Jewish parents not to circumcise their children. He has taught Jews they are saved by grace apart from the Law. But he is not telling to abandon their customs. In fact, Paul just wrote a long letter to the Romans at the end of his last missionary journey before he headed to Jerusalem, so it's just a matter of weeks since he wrote it, in which he addressed this issue. In Romans 14 and 15, Paul addresses the Jewish position that believers must follow certain food laws and must observe certain days. As an issue of the second question of Covenant, some are saying, "We need to be doing these things. Not to be saved, not the first question, but as the second question, to honor God we need to be doing these things." And Paul, in Romans 14, he calls that position, "the weak position." He also refers to the view of other believers that the Gospel set us free from the requirement of Old Covenant ritual practices. Paul expresses that as his own view. And he calls that, "the strong position." But instead of telling the weak to just stop it, stop what you're doing, don't do these things, Paul provides three principles to help both sides live in acceptance with one another. First, you are all ultimately accountable to God. So, stop judging each other. These are not moral issues. These are issues of ritual and ceremony, and what you feel is right in your walk with God. Second, if you do recognize your freedom in the Gospel from these Covenantal practices, do not become a stumbling block to those who do not. Do not drive them away by your disagreement with their position and do not tempt them to do something they understand as sin. Don't be a stumbling block. And finally, third thing, each one of you should act out of faith. If you believe something is sin, do not do that thing. You can ask God to help you understand better His will, and maybe you'll come to a point where you'll realize, "You know, it's not really a sin to eat shrimp, or drink this wine, or eat meat in the market, even though it might have been sacrificed to an idol. I don't believe in that anyway. It's okay." But as you are in the process of coming to understand, act according to your current understanding of the will of God. If you think it's a sin, don't do it. Act by faith.

Having just written these things to the Romans before setting sail to Jerusalem, it is very interesting to get an example here in Acts of Paul practicing what he preached. He told the Romans, do not be a stumbling block when it comes to non-essentials that are not a clear moral issue. You are free not to do these things. But you are also free in the Gospel to do them if you find yourself in a situation where it would be wise and loving to do attend Temple ceremony, you are free to do that in the Gospel. It is not sin. Paul finds himself in that kind of situation. Verses 22-26,

²² “What, then, is *to be done*? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ “Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴ take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. ²⁵ “But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.” ²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.

Paul recognizes a value in spiritual disciplines. In 18:18 Luke told us Paul had his hair cut because he was keeping a vow. That was a matter of Paul’s personal relationship with God, not a ritual ceremony he was bound to observe. And Paul can approach this request in a similar way. He can offer this behavior, this vow to God, and he can give worship through it. He is not advocating the necessity of Mosaic Law. He is not even saying that Jews ought to keep these customs. He is recognizing the importance of these customs to thousands of Jewish believers, and he is recognizing the symbolic importance this act provides by showing he is not against Moses. His behavior could certainly be misinterpreted by Jewish believers to support their own theology. That is one of the problems with trying not to be a stumbling block. You can do what you can do, but ultimately other people bear responsibility for how they interpret what you do. And you cannot control that.

In this case, Paul is acting out of love for fellow believers, and he is not re-establishing Temple worship, this is an act of love in his freedom in the Gospel to do this thing. And he is also acting out of his goal to promote Christian unity between Jew and Gentile. That is why he is here in Jerusalem. That is why he brought the money as a gift from the Gentiles, to show good will to Jewish brothers and sisters. If Christian unity will cost some money, and some time, and require giving up some personal freedom to perform a ceremony as in this instance, that’s not too big of a price for Paul in promoting unity in the essentials of the Gospel. We can do these non-essential things if that will help us to come together in the essentials. And Paul is willing to pay the price, even without a guarantee that his gesture will be well received. And that is love. You do what you can do but you can’t guarantee how the other person is going to receive you. So, Paul is going to try.

We never will know how well his gesture was received by Jewish believers. Things took an ugly turn when non-believing Jews from the province of Asia confronted Paul in the temple as he was concluding the ceremony. Verses 27-36,

²⁷ When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, *began* to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, “Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. ³⁰ Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. ³¹ While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the *Roman* cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³² At once he took along *some* soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ Then the commander came up and

took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he *began* asking who he was and what he had done.³⁴ But among the crowd some were shouting one thing *and* some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.³⁵ When he got to the stairs, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob;³⁶ for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, “Away with him!”

The men who raise the cry against Paul are not from Jerusalem. They are from Asia. We do not know if they were from Ephesus or another place in Asia. We have already seen in our story how Paul was pushed out of the Ephesian synagogue because of heavy opposition to his message and how he took up teaching in the lecture halls of Tyrannus. These men have some experience with Paul in Asia. And they testify falsely to his teaching, claiming he preaches against the Jews, and the Law, and the Temple, you know, everywhere he goes. It is a false testimony, though perhaps how they understand Paul from their conservative Jewish perspective, it’s accurate in their mind. They have these assumptions about who Paul is and the implications of his teaching. A Gospel that sets up a spiritual reign of the Messiah rather than a physical one, that proclaims Jesus to be the end of the Law, and that opens the door for all people to enter without regard to Temple ritual and sacrifice, that Gospel may very well feel to them like a message hostile to Jewish identity, hostile to the Law, hostile to the Temple. The charges do place Paul in the company of Stephen and Jesus before him, who were both charged the same, with teaching against the Law, teaching against the Temple. It’s a misunderstanding of Christian teaching of this understanding of continuity from Old Covenant to New Covenant.

The thought that Paul would bring Trophimus into the Temple shows how much his opponents’ religious zeal prevents them from rightly assessing Paul’s character or his message. They are not being fair to him at all. They do not get him at all. And in their prejudice and hatred, they imagine behavior that is actually unthinkable for Paul. In his love for the Temple and in his love for the Jewish people he would never use his Gospel freedom to bring Gentiles in and defile the Temple. But that charge, true or false, is a very provocative charge and it’s enough to stir up wrath among many gathered in the Temple. Like a spark struck in a dry pine forest, the flames catch immediately and quickly spread from the Temple and out, into the city.

And this rioting mob, they drag Paul out of the inner court of the Temple, where he had gone to offer sacrifice for himself and the young men. And they pull into the outer court with the intent of killing him. And we will see later in Paul’s own words that he is reminded of something very similar that happened twenty-seven years earlier when another man had been dragged out by the mob, but at that point, Paul was part of the mob. And held the coats of men that were similar to these as they picked up stones to murder Stephen. And now they plan to kill Paul. They are beating him. And maybe the tradition of death by stoning creates enough of delay for the Roman soldiers to intervene. It does a little explanation to show how they got there so quickly.

The Roman governor over Judea did not live in Jerusalem. His provincial headquarters were situated in Caesarea. That’s why we are going to spend a lot of time there in the next few chapters. It is a majority Gentile city with a good coastal port more suited to an elite Roman community than Jerusalem was. So, the governor is not here, but a military battalion is garrisoned in Jerusalem to keep things under control. You are probably quite familiar with the term, “centurion,” that is one we hear a lot in the Bible. It is an officer over a hundred. My Bible translates the officer present as, “commander.” “Tribune” is another translation you sometimes get. The actual Greek word is, “chiliarch.” So, as a centurion is a commander of a hundred, a chiliarch is a commander over a thousand. Though the typical battalion, or cohort, was never at full strength. It’s usually more 600-800 soldiers.

So, these Romans are stationed in Jerusalem. They are stationed in the center of Jerusalem, in the Antonia Fortress; a fortress that was named after Mark Antony. And it was built into the wall of the

Temple's outer court. I mean, they are right here, near the center of action. So the soldiers only need a few minutes down two flights of stairs to get from their barracks to the Temple's outer court, where Paul is being beaten.

And the alertness and close proximity of the soldiers have saved his life. The soldiers stopped the beating. Due to the intensity, and noise, and confusion of the mob, the commander quickly removes him. And they start going back up the stairs, into the fortress, to the barracks, so that the commander can make further investigation.

We will find out that the commander has already made some quick assumptions about Paul. And of course, he would. Rushing into this flared up Jerusalem mob his adrenaline would have been pumping, and he is at full awareness, and his mind is rushing around, trying to assess the situation. You know, what's going on here? How much force do I need to use? I don't want to make things worse, but I am willing to if I need to.

And the assumptions the commander makes, that is going to bring up our misconception that needs to be corrected, which is the second part of our structure for these movements in Acts part VI. The misconception and correction are both recorded in chapter 21:37-39.

Misconception Corrected: The Commander's View (21:37-39)

³⁷ As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek?" ³⁸ "Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" ³⁹ But Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people."

Okay, what is this? Four thousand assassins? Beaten, bruised and bloodied, Paul regained his composure quickly and addressed the commander with this request as he is being carried up, dragged up the stairs, and we get the misconception and the correction at the same time. Because when he hears Paul speaking, he gives us the misconception. "So you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness? You're not that guy?" The commander had made a guess about who Paul might be and it sounds like a pretty outlandish guess. You know, where is this coming from? But he did not make it up out of nowhere. He refers to a contemporary troublemaker who could reasonably be responsible for such a disturbance like this. F.F. Bruce provides this background in his commentary.

Some three years previously, an Egyptian adventurer appeared in Jerusalem, claiming to be a prophet, and led a large band of followers out to the Mount of Olives. There he told them to wait until, at his word of command, the walls of the city would fall flat; then they would march in, overthrow the Roman garrison, and take possession of the place. But Felix, procurator of Judaea, sent a body of troops against them; they killed several and took others prisoner.⁵⁶ The Egyptian himself discreetly disappeared. Those whom he had duped would cherish no friendly feelings toward him. Now, thought the tribune, the impostor had reappeared and the people were venting their rage on him.²⁷

So that's the misconception. The correction of this misconception comes before the commander has even voiced his thoughts when Paul made his request in well-accented Greek. And his choice of language challenged the commander's false assumption. I often wonder if the commander's surprise at Paul's well-spoken Greek kind of threw him off enough to explain why he lets Paul speak to the crowd. Maybe he reasons too quickly that the mob has made a mistake, too, you know, they think he is somebody that he is obviously not somebody and they just need to let him speak. And so I'll let him speak and he'll explain who he is, and that will settle things.

²⁷ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 412.

Moving now to Paul's speech before the mob, we enter into the defense section of our movement. Paul's speech will be the first of three approaches the commander uses to get to the bottom of things. Along with Paul's own testimony, the commander will attempt torture as another way to get to the truth, and then he will turn to an inquiry before the Sanhedrin, hoping that at some point he is going to find out what is going on with this riot and who Paul is. And the investigation really works as a defense for Paul, because at each point Paul is going to be shown innocent of any civil or criminal charges.

We begin with Paul's own testimony to the crowd of how he came to be a witness for Jesus Christ. It is not going to satisfy the mob or the commander really, but it is golden for us. It is wonderful to hear Paul's testimony. And as you listen to his testimony, notice the simple three-part division of his life before meeting Jesus, how he met Jesus, and after meeting Jesus. And also notice how he contextualizes his own story for this particular audience. This is Acts 21:40-22:22.

Defense Given: The Commander's Investigation (21:40-23:11)

Explanation From Paul (21:40-22:22)

⁴⁰ When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying, ¹ "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now *offer* to you."

² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said,

³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, ⁵ as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

⁶ But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, ⁷ and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' ⁸ And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' ⁹ And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.' ¹¹ But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus. ¹² A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, *and* well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. ¹⁴ And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. ¹⁵ 'For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ 'Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.'

¹⁷ "It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, ¹⁸ and I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.' ¹⁹ And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. ²⁰ 'And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.' ²¹ And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.' "

²² They listened to him up to this statement, and *then* they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!”

The text begins, “Brethren and Fathers, hear my defense, which I now offer to you.” Paul is giving a defense. That is the assumption we are using for the end of each movement in Acts part VI. Here the text says that explicitly. Paul speaks in the Hebrew dialect. That would be a Hebrew version of Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jews from Judea. Paul does not speak in Greek for the Roman Commander. He wants to speak to the heart of the crowd. And if you want people to listen to you, if you speak their language, they are much more likely to listen. And the crowd quiets down and he is able to get his defense in the form of personal testimony.

We have already gone through Paul’s history. Some in chapter 9. That was from the author’s perspective, not from Paul’s personal perspective. It wasn’t first-person. We will get another version of Paul’s first-person perspective in chapter 26, when he speaks to King Agrippa. Both of Paul’s personal testimonies are contextualized to his audience, so we get additional details that Luke did not include with his introduction of Paul.

Paul’s life before meeting Jesus

For example, considering Paul’s life before meeting Jesus, we find out here that even though he was born in Tarsus, he was brought up in Jerusalem and educated under Gamaliel, the most famous Rabbi of the day. And Gamaliel was so well esteemed, he is referred to with respect in both the Mishna and the Talmud, the two most important Rabbinic texts apart from the Old Testament. We met Gamaliel and saw his wisdom in chapter 5 when he cautioned the Sanhedrin to let the Apostles go. You know, they’re of God! Don’t stand in the way!

Paul’s mention of growing up in Jerusalem and studying under Gamaliel is relevant to this crowd of zealous Jews. He has better credentials than the Jews of Asia who have made accusations. He goes on to emphasize that he was raised according to the strictness of the Law, and that is certainly believable if he studied as a disciple under a Rabbi like Gamaliel. His background contradicts the charge that he would so blatantly break the Law by bringing a Gentile into the Temple.

He suggests personal similarity between himself and the crowd. “I was zealous just as you all here today.” And he means that literally. His life was not the life of a passive religious scholar. He burned with the righteousness of his cause. And he was willing to go to great effort to stamp out Christianity. Just as these are ready to put him to death, in his former life, he “persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons.”

He even went so far as to get official letters to go to Damascus and bring Christians back to Jerusalem for punishment. That is who Paul was. He tells it in a way that relates to who this audience is. Then he explains how he met Jesus.

How Paul met Jesus

Jesus manifests himself to Paul, bathing him in this very bright light, and Jesus speaks out of the light. And don’t worry about comparing your conversion story to Paul. Very few people have such a dramatic conversion story as he did, at least in the literal sense. And it is not surprising, Paul is pretty unique. He is the thirteenth Apostle, one untimely born. It shouldn’t bother us that he has this amazing story. But as amazing as the story is, all who believe in Jesus Christ share the underlying reality of this experience. This physically happened to Paul, this light. And the light itself is a metaphor, it’s symbolic of a spiritual experience. Every true believer was walking in darkness until Jesus Christ has made the light of His presence shine in their soul. You cannot see Jesus if He doesn’t turn the light on. If he doesn’t give you eyes to see and ears to hear, you would not have understood the Gospel, or received the Gospel if Jesus hadn’t met you and done something inside of you. So here with Paul it’s something outside and inside.

Paul shares with this crowd the question that Jesus asked him, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Paul makes the right response to this question. It is the right response whenever a person is

confronted by God. He asks, “Who are you Lord? I need to know who you are.” I am reminded of Moses standing before the fire of the burning bush. There is some similarity there. And Moses wants to know, “What is your name, Lord?” That’s the most important question any of us can pursue. “Who are you, Lord? What is your name?”

When Paul asked that question, Jesus answered very specifically for that moment, “I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.” Paul’s personal story, you know, what happened to him, is both a rebuke and an invitation to the mob. You think you are persecuting me. You’ve dragged me out of the Temple. You are beating me. You are not. This is what I found out. You are persecuting Jesus, who is so much more than you believe Him to be.

In chapter 5, Luke told us the men with Paul “heard the sound, but saw no one (Acts 5:7).” Luke didn’t say there they saw nothing. He says they saw no one. Paul says here they saw the light and heard the sound, but they did not understand. Again, his personal story is relevant to this crowd. Some of the older, he calls them, “brothers and fathers,” some of those fathers very well may have seen Jesus, the light of the world. They may have heard Him speak. They saw the light, they heard the sound, but just as the men who had been with Paul on the road to Damascus, they did not understand. This rebuke is not direct. It is Paul’s story, and he is telling it from first person. But it is there for those who have ears to hear. And for those who do not, it is still his own explanation of what happened to him. It still stands as his personal witness, as his personal defense.

Paul then asks a second question of Jesus, “What shall I do?” And put those two together, that’s a great pair of questions, “Who are you Lord?” and, “What shall I do?” That’s a question for every day of your life. “Lord, show me who you are today. Show me what I am to do today.”

The most immediate step for Paul, what he was supposed to do right away, was to go find a guy named, Ananias, because this is how God works. God uses the body of Christ to bring other people into relationship with Him. Meeting Jesus Christ was something very personal for Paul, but it was not going to be something private. God wanted to link Paul to Ananias. He wanted Ananias to help Paul, and then to introduce Paul into the community of believers in Damascus. This is God’s standard strategy. The critical act of coming to know Jesus is something God does inside of us. The process God uses to bring about and then to build on that critical act includes people, the body of Christ, someone who gets witnessed, people that help us.

And usually, that’s the way it works. We hear the Gospel from a human witness, a person. Paul first heard directly from Jesus. And that can still happen nowadays through a dream or some solitary experience. But God does not then send Paul out into the wilderness where he will receive more explanation in isolation. Paul is not directed to a hermit’s cave. He is directed to Ananias whom Paul describes as “a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, *and* well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there.” So, Ananias served an important, human role in helping Paul meet Jesus.

Reference to Ananias is also an important point in Paul’s defense. He offers Ananias as a credible character witness described in a way that would be meaningful to this crowd as a man “devout by the standard of the Law.” Christians believe in a fulfilled Law. That does not mean Christians are disrespectful of the Law or that they might not even be devout in their keeping of the Law. Ananias is one such man. He is an example of a Christian who honors the Law as Paul does.

Paul is not going to give the meaning of what has happened in his own words. He is going to let Ananias do that. He is going to quote Ananias. And Ananias had a word for Paul, “This is what has happened to you, Paul. And this is God’s commission for you, Paul. And this is God’s invitation for you, Paul.” So, this is what God has done for you. The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will (1), to see the Righteous One (2), and to hear an utterance from His mouth (3). And this is what happened to you. This is the God of our fathers, Paul. Jesus is the Righteous One, Paul. Let me help you understand this. You have been given this opportunity to know, to see, and to hear. And let me tell you why, Paul. The reason this has happened to you is so that you will be a witness to all men. God has a plan for you. That’s the commission. Finally, Ananias invites Paul to express his acceptance,

by faith, of this word that he has received; this vision of Jesus of who He is, and this commission from God. He says, “Be baptized and call on his name, and then your sins will be washed away.” And of course, we know from Acts and Paul’s other teaching that baptism as a work does not wash away sin. But baptism here is this opportunity for Paul to affirm his new faith in Jesus. You know if you have believed. If you receive the name of the One who has appeared to you in light and who has shown Himself to you, and you receive commission to be a witness for His name, if you yield to Jesus and accept His salvation, accept His forgiveness, then your sins are washed away. And you can express your acceptance of that through baptism. It is a right expression of your newfound faith.

This is how Paul met Jesus. Paul continues with a little bit about how his life changed after meeting Jesus.

Paul’s life after meeting Jesus

And as with all three versions of his story recorded in Acts, Paul skips ahead quickly from Damascus to Jerusalem. We only hear that he spent a lot of time in Arabia in his letter to the Galatians. Paul is keeping this testimony very brief and wants it to be relevant. God indicated to Paul more than once that he was to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. And at least one of those times God spoke to Paul in a vision. And the circumstances of that vision are very relevant for this audience. The fact that it took place in Jerusalem is very relevant. Even more relevant, it took place while Paul was praying in the Temple. It shows that Paul saw the Temple as a place to worship and he is praying there. He met God there.

And even more relevant, in that vision all those years ago Paul confessed to God his role in the death of Stephen, a man killed by a mob just like this one. Paul said to God, “When the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.” Again, Paul’s personal testimony, his own sin serves as a rebuke to his former way of life. You know, he was convicted. But it also provides an opportunity of conviction for the crowd in front of him. I was where you are now. I participated in a mob in this Temple against a Christian teacher just as you are doing now. And we killed him. And I was there. And I did that. But I have come to understand that Stephen knew what I did not know. When the heavens opened up, he heard the voice of God, he saw the face of God, and that was real. Stephen was a true witness. Now, I have seen God. I have met Jesus. And this is what he said to me. “Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”

We do not know the emotion of the crowd up to this point of the speech. I imagine anger was simmering in the hearts of the majority. They don’t know where Paul is going to go with this. They don’t trust Paul. All of Paul’s bridging allusions, the connections to the Law and the Temple may have worked with a more neutral crowd. This crowd was already stirred up with religious hatred. So when Paul got to his commission to go to the Gentiles, they heard rejection of Jewish identity, rejection of Jewish religion, rejection of Jewish culture. Their anger boiled over.

²² They listened to him up to this statement, and *then* they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!”

They shout that he must die. But based on what crime? What has Paul done? Paul’s personal testimony is offered to us as the first point in his defense.

It did not, however, clear things up for the commander. He is still left wondering what all the anger is about. What has this Paul done? To get more information, he moves to the second stage of his investigation, examination by scourging. This is in verses 23-29.

Examination by Scourging (22:23-29)

²³ And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air, ²⁴ the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. ²⁵ But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was

standing by, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?”²⁶ When the centurion heard *this*, he went to the commander and told him, saying, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.”²⁷ The commander came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman?” And he said, “Yes.”²⁸ The commander answered, “I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.” And Paul said, “But I was actually born *a citizen*.”²⁹ Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.

Paul has a habit of not flaunting his Roman citizenship. He holds that card close to his chest until things have really taken a turn for the worst. The strategy of holding on to that knowledge until after the authorities have overstepped their legal boundaries worked out for Paul in Philippi, where he actually was tortured. It works here, too, preventing him from being tortured.

The law requires a Roman trial before scourging a Roman citizen. Paul’s Greek language gave him some credibility in the eyes of the commander but not near so much as now when he learns Paul is a Roman citizen by birth. This is legal status. Paul is even able to one-up the commander who was not born a citizen but had to pay for it. Paul’s parents or grandparents had at some point acquired citizenship, so that as soon as he was born, he was already a citizen of Rome.

The commander was saved from the grave mistake of beating Paul. And as a result shows Paul an increased level of respect and treatment, though not going as far as setting Paul free. He still does not have an answer to why the riot happened in the first place and whether Paul instigated it. His next idea for investigating the matter is to require the ruling Jewish Council to question Paul.

Luke’s summary of the Sanhedrin’s inquiry comes in 22:30-23:11. This is our last episode in this movement. As we read the account, remember that the Sanhedrin is not acting here on their own authority. If the Sanhedrin were acting on their own authority, they could conduct a trial and impose sentence. In this case, they are acting in an advisory role for the Roman authority, sort of like a grand jury that has the job of determining whether or not there are adequate charges for a trial. They will advise. It is up to the commander to make a decision. He might set Paul free. He might hand Paul over to the Sanhedrin for trial. Or he might send Paul to the provincial governor for trial. His decision depends on the inquiry. Acts 22:30-23:11.

Investigation before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:11)

³⁰ But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them.

Notice that language, “wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews.” That’s the commander’s goal in bringing Paul to the Sanhedrin is to answer that question, “what’s going on?”

¹ Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.”² The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth.³ Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?”

Paul’s response is fierier than Jesus’ response in a similar situation. The same point is scored. Striking Paul is contrary to Jewish law. How can the high priest represent the Law justly if he perverts the Law in the course of his inquiry?

⁴ But the bystanders said, “Do you revile God’s high priest?”⁵ And Paul said, “I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, ‘YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.’ ”

Now, I can’t imagine that Paul is saying that he does not visually recognize the high priest. I think we have to assume Paul knows who the high priest is. So, what is he saying? You know, when he says, “I

was not aware that he was high priest.” I think he may be saying two things at the same time. First, I think he is using sarcasm to point out the unjust behavior of a high priest who would so easily break Jewish law in having Paul struck. This high priest is acting like a Roman ruler. He is even worse than a Roman ruler. So, Paul’s language back is sarcasm. “I didn’t realize. How could he be the high priest if he orders me to be struck?” And it’s enhanced by Paul quoting the Law back to his accusers. The quote he chose suggests a second point. I think Paul is referring to someone else when he says, “You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.” I think that he is implying that the right ruler of Israel is Jesus Christ. He is both King and High Priest. These men are stewards who refused to accept the return of the King and the establishment of a new priesthood. To say, “I was not aware he was high priest” could carry the meaning, “because I recognize another high priest of the order of Melchizedek, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” Anyway, that’s what I think Paul meant by that.

⁶ But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul *began* crying out in the Council, “Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” ⁷ As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. ⁹ And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and *began* to argue heatedly, saying, “We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” ¹⁰ And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.

Paul does not see any good reason to allow the leaders of the Sanhedrin to investigate him any further. I believe he fully knew what he was doing by claiming his affiliation with the Pharisees and introducing the question of the resurrection as the primary issue. He successfully divided the Council by reminding the Sadducees and Pharisees of their deep-seated differences and preventing them from having a joint attack on Paul.

So, Paul derailed the investigation. I think he was doing some other things at the same time. He successfully turned the question of inquiry to religious disagreement. And this is a point for the commander. This strategy had already been shown to work in Paul’s favor against Jewish opponents when stood before Gallio the governor of Achaia, who rebuked the Jews for bringing Paul to trial, saying,

“If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; ¹⁵ but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters.”

And the commander is going to eventually communicate a similar understanding to Felix, governor of Judea. “I can’t figure out any criminal charge against this man Paul.

A second thing Paul has done here is to keep the conversation focused on the critical point of faith that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. And this is my last point for this lesson. Paul did not select the resurrection as the point of debate simply because Pharisees and Sadducees disagree about it. No. The resurrection was a central point of the debate already. It is an essential aspect of Paul’s Gospel that he will not let go of. And it is not only the general belief of resurrection that is critical to Paul’s Gospel, but the specific belief that Jesus Christ has raised from the dead which is central. The resurrection of Jesus Christ affirms His divine nature and provides a foundation for the Christian’s hope in eternal life. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “He was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4)”. It’s the resurrection that proves that this is the Messiah that you have killed. Paul also wrote to the Corinthians, “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain (1 Corinthians 15:14).”

If Jesus is not raised from the dead, there is no hope that you will be, either. In providing a defense of Paul, Luke is also providing a defense for the Gospel of Paul. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not

debatable. It is an essential Christian belief. To deny the resurrection of Jesus is to not be Christian. This is one of those essentials on which Paul is immovable. You don't have Christian unity without agreement on this issue. There cannot be Christian unity without agreement on this belief, because if you disagree about this belief, you are rejecting the Christian Gospel.

We end our lesson with the last verse of this movement. It has been two stressful days for Paul, beginning with the danger of the riot, followed up by the misconception of the commander, and then the defense by personal testimony, by the threat of scourging and by an inquiry before the Sanhedrin. Paul survived. But we could understand if he was depleted, and shaken, and worried. Jesus understands and so He appears to Paul. This is our last verse.

¹¹ But on the night *immediately* following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 21:17-39. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Imagine yourself in Paul's situation when the elders of Jerusalem put to him the request that he participate in a vow in the temple. Would you have participated in the performance of the vow? Why or why not?
3. Would you participate in the religious ceremony of a traditional religion in your culture? Why or why not? How is your situation similar to and different from Paul's situation?
4. Would you describe Paul's speech to the Jerusalem mob as evangelism or as defense (apologetic)?
5. In what way does Paul adapt the details of his conversion for this specific audience?
6. How has the commander misread the situation and how is his misconception corrected?
7. Read Acts 21:40-23:11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
8. Is Paul's reference to the resurrection at the inquiry before the Sanhedrin a wise move to divide his opponents or a sincere emphasis on the core issue of his message?

Lesson 31: Acts 23:12-24:27 The Gospel's Attitude to Morality and Law

Introduction

There is an old-timey mechanic a couple of streets away from my parents' home. The side yard is filled with junk cars for parts. The cinder-block shop sits just off the road. The sign out front shows the shop's services on one side and declares "Jesus Loves You" on the other. Around that declaration of love are a couple of essential Gospel verses like, "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." More recently the "Jesus Loves You" message has been supplemented by spray painted messages on three of the shop's walls. That text denounces gay people, vilifies wearing medical masks, and damns certain political figures.

Driving by the shop years ago, I thought, "There's a guy willing to put his faith in Jesus up front for everyone to see." Now driving by the shop, I feel shame and frustration that the love of Jesus is being promoted with hateful rhetoric.

When a Christian presents the message of the Gospel in the public square and then that Christian falls under judgment, it is not the Christian only who is being judged. The Gospel is being judged by the words and character of the messenger. The neighborhood mechanic suggests that the Biblical Gospel of Christians claims love while producing narrow, unreflective, hateful people.

A Bible verse currently spray painted on the side of the shop reads, "God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline (2 Timothy 1:7)." I appreciate the need for Christian boldness as opposed to timidity. But I am struggling to see this man's reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit to speak in a loving and disciplined way. The quote is from Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul goes on to say in that letter, "The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 2:24-25)."

If a Christian wins a debate Drusilla condescending, hateful, belittling language, the Christian has lost the debate. Intellectual points may have been scored, but the Gospel has been tarnished in the eyes of the audience. The Christian himself is a Drusilla of the Gospel message. The Christian invites others, "Come be as I am. Experience the Jesus I know." It is right, then, for hearers of the message to ask, "What kind of people does this Gospel message produce?"

Paul is on trial through the whole of Acts part VI. That means the Gospel Paul proclaims is also on trial. What kind of man does this Gospel produce? What kind of behavior does this Gospel promote? What means are valid in defending oneself and winning over opponents? Do the means justify the end with this particular Gospel way?

In the first movement of Acts part VI, the Gospel of Jesus worked through Paul in the raising of a young man from the dead. There is real power in this Gospel way. In the second movement, which we considered in our last lesson, we saw the Gospel's respect for conscience in non-essential and essential things. The Gospel allowed Paul to perform a ritual vow in the Temple motivated by Drusilla for unity among Jew and Gentile believers. Paul did not consider the ritual ceremony contrary to faith in Jesus. The Gospel provided for Paul a great deal of flexibility in that which is non-essential. Jewish Christians believed ritual observance to be an important and necessary way to live for God. Paul did not agree. But his understanding of the Gospel allowed him to set aside his disagreement in that context and to limit his own personal freedom from ritual, so that he might not be a stumbling block to others in their walk with Jesus.

Paul's conscience was freed by the Gospel in those non-essential practices. At the same time, Paul's conscience was constrained by the Gospel in bold confirmation of essential truths. We saw Paul consistently proclaim his faith in Jesus and the resurrection. The Gospel is a statement of absolute

truth. That is the nature of Paul's Gospel. There are things he cannot, will not disavow. We saw Paul's unwavering commitment to those truths when he was in the hands of a violent mob, when he was under interrogation by a Roman commander, when he was at the inquest of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

By judging Paul, we judge the message of Paul. And this is what we concluded about the Gospel in that last movement. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls believers to respect differing attitudes of conscience regarding non-essentials and to hold tightly to an integrity of conscience regarding those beliefs that are essential.

In this lesson, the context of trial and defense sets up an opportunity to judge the Gospel by its attitude to morality and law. We will follow our same structure of danger avoided, misconception corrected, and defense given. The Jewish and Roman antagonists will serve as foils or contrasts to the behavior of the man Paul, who has been transformed by the Gospel in his thinking and behavior.

We begin with the danger avoided. So far God has brought Paul safely through two mob riots. In this movement and the next God will save Paul from two planned ambushes. The first of those is here in Acts 23:12-24, danger avoided.

Danger Avoided (23:12-24)

¹² When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who formed this plot. ¹⁴ They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ "Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near *the place*." ¹⁶ But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him." ¹⁸ So he took him and led him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you." ¹⁹ The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, *began* to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?" ²⁰ And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. ²¹ "So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you." ²² So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things." ²³ And he called to him two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." ²⁴ *They were* also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor.

As usual, there are main teaching points we are supposed to observe in Luke's narrative, and there are supporting details that create the historical context of the account and leave us wanting to know more. The reference to "the Jews" throughout this narrative is a generalization meaning, members of the Jewish religious and political establishment. The zealotry we encountered in Paul before his conversion and that we saw in the instigators of the recent mob is showcased here by forty men willing to give their lives to silence Paul. To attack Paul while being escorted by Roman soldiers means that some will likely die in the attempt. And others who are identified will be executed later.

The high priest and members of the established hierarchy were Sadducees, intent more on conserving their position than promoting personal morality. We should assume that the chief priests and elders approached by this group did not include the Pharisees, who supported Paul at the investigation of the Sanhedrin. So this is not all the Jewish elders.

The plot creates a contrast between the religion of these Jews and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There are some similarities to Paul. Just as Paul rejects their legalistic Judaism as false and destructive, so also they reject his Gospel-centered worldview as false and destructive. You know, they are on two opposing sides, and both of them reject the worldview of the other. Like Paul, life is not for them a supreme good that must be held on to. They are willing to die while carrying out a religious mission, and they have consecrated themselves to God by a vow of fasting. But their motives and their means sharply contrast Paul. Paul would have all who hear him come to faith in Jesus Christ to enjoy life and joy in relationship with God.

But when we consider this, the scheme, these plotters they tell the Romans they want a more thorough investigation. And the language of investigation and inquiry runs through this whole section. The Jewish establishment does not, though, really want an investigation. They do not care to have a debate on the truthfulness of Paul's Gospel. They are Drusilla's deception to kill Paul and to harm soldiers who might stand in their way. So, while calling for Paul to stand trial on capital offenses, they themselves are planning to break the Law by committing murder.

Now Drusilla, much violence has been done by Christians through the centuries in the name of Jesus, rightly leading multitudes of non-Christians to reject the Gospel of Christians as violent, prejudicial, and hateful. That violence in the name of Jesus is a perversion of the Gospel. It is not the picture we draw from the New Testament. Studying the life and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and continuing on in Acts with Peter and Paul, we see a different kind of Kingdom reign. This is not a political, human kingdom. Jesus told Pilate His followers would not pick up a sword to establish Him as King. That we have seen in Paul. He is willing to lay down his life in the preaching of the Gospel. But when he is kicked out of a synagogue or a city, he wipes the dust from his feet, and he moves on. He does not pick up a sword or call his disciples to suppress the opposition through violence or uprising. The religious message of these zealots provides a strong contrast to the kind of message that Paul has been proclaiming.

Once again, God steps in to protect Paul from danger. This time, he uses Paul's nephew. That is one of those plausible Drusilla Luke communicates to support the historical truthfulness of the narrative. It is also one of those very curious Drusilla we would love to know more about. We would love to know more about Paul's family. Paul's father had been a Pharisee. He was a son of Pharisees. The family was committed enough to Judaism and the Bible to send a young Paul to Jerusalem to study under the famous Gamaliel. Paul's family would have been greatly shamed at his conversion to Christianity. We do not know, but can imagine strong tension, even a full break, in his family relationships. Concerning this particular sister, we have no idea what she thought of Paul's life choices. And we do not know what her son thought of Uncle Paul. We can imagine a sister of Paul marrying into a family in Jerusalem or sending her son to study in Jerusalem. We can imagine relational connections with the establishment that would put Paul's nephew in a position to hear Drusilla of the plot, either in his official business or work, or through friends. And we can imagine that, even if family ties are strained, those ties might still be strong enough not to want Paul ambushed and killed. He might not like Uncle Paul, but he doesn't want to see Uncle Paul murdered. We don't know.

The nephew's access to Paul is also not strange. After the commander found out in our previous text that he was about to have a Roman citizen illegally whipped, Paul was unchained and shown some consideration. So, visitors have access to him. The commander's belief in the plot is also plausible. These are the days of the Sicarii, the term translated as, "assassins" back in 21:38. "Sicarii" literally means, "dagger-carrier," and refers to the practice of zealous Jews who carried concealed daggers into crowds to assassinate Romans or pro-Roman Jews. These forty men were not Sicarii. The Sicarii would not work with the high priest, who they considered a Roman sympathizer. First century Judaism is a bit complex. There are several different parties with different motives. The Sicarii were more likely to kill a high priest, especially this high priest Ananias whose legacy of greed was prominent enough to be referenced in the Talmud through a parody of Psalm 24:7.

“Lift up your heads, O ye gates;
that Yohanan ben Narbai, the disciple of Pinqai, may go in
and fill his belly with the divine sacrifices!”²⁸

That is a reference to Ananias. The forty men in this narrative were not Sicarii. But the reality of such activity in Israel Drusilla this period helps us understand the commander’s response to Paul’s nephew. He finds the plot credible enough to deserve swift action and so, immediately removed Paul from Jerusalem, sending him to the governor in Caesarea under a large contingent of soldiers.

The commander sent a letter along with the soldiers to explain his actions. That letter corrects a misconception suggested by Paul’s imprisonment. Is Paul a criminal? This is Acts 23:25-35.

Misconception Corrected (23:25-35)

²⁵ And he wrote a letter having this form: ²⁶ “Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷ “When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. ²⁸ “And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; ²⁹ and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. ³⁰ “When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you.” ³¹ So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. ³² But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. ³³ When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. ³⁴ When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵ he said, “I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also,” giving orders for him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium.

The letter is written to Felix, the procurator or governor over the region. Let’s do a quick review of the political authority over Judea. This will help us for our next few chapters. I covered the four Biblical Herods back in chapter 12. Herod the Great ruled over the territory of ancient Israel as a client king to Rome. The Roman Senate conferred on him the title “King of the Jews” in 40 BC. That title sounds familiar, doesn’t it, from the Gospels? We encounter this Herod in the Bible when the wise men come to him at the time of the birth of Jesus.

Herod died in 4 BC after the birth of Jesus. Did you catch that dating? Herod died in 4 BC, after the birth of Jesus. Jesus was not born at the beginning of 1 AD. The 4BC date of Herod’s death was not determined correctly by scholars in the sixth century who established the timeline for the Gregorian calendar that divides human history at the birth of Jesus. Here is a bit of interesting Drusilla that came up in a family conversation this week. AD is an abbreviation for *anno Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, “the year of our Lord Jesus Christ”. AD – the year of our Lord. BC is not an abbreviation for a Latin phrase. The abbreviation used to be “aCn” for, “Ante Christum Natum,” “before the birth of Christ”. So, for some reason, this is always confusing, English-speaking countries changed “aCn” to an English abbreviation, BC, “before Christ”, but kept the Latin abbreviation AD, “anno domini”. So, BC is English, AD is Latin. We do know, it’s common knowledge that though AD, the year of our Lord, it was meant to have begun with the birth of Jesus, it is off by a few years. The problem is not with the Biblical timeline, but with later scholarship that misinterpreted the year of the birth of Christ. Now, as we have seen through our study of the book of Acts, reference to contemporary political figures helps us to establish correctly the Biblical timeline because we have external Roman, and Greek, and Persian sources that fix for us the dates when these figures ruled.

²⁸ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 425.

Herod the Great died in 4 BC, shortly after the birth of Jesus, which occurred between 6 BC and 4 BC. We are not exactly sure of the year of the birth of Jesus. When Herod the Great died, his territory was divided into a tetrarchy of four regions ruled by three of Herod's sons and his sister. Herod Archelaus ruled most of the region we think of as Israel, Judea, Samaria, and Idumea (which was Edom). Though Galilee fell to Herod Antipas.

We do not meet Herod Archelaus in the Bible. He is not one of our four Herods. The Romans removed him from his position in 6 AD after ten years of rule, following a messianic uprising in Judea that required the intervention of the Roman governor of Syria. Archelaus wasn't considered competent to rule Judea. Two facts should be interesting to us in his history. One, the messianic uprising that cost him his position is an example of this expectation of the Jews and the tension that puts Romans on edge in dealing with the Jews. Two, his loss of the region as a client kingdom explains why the Roman governor Pilate was the one to try Jesus before His crucifixion. Judea was designated an imperial province from 6 AD on to 41 AD. Drusilla that time, Herod Antipas did maintain his position over Galilee. He is the Herod that Pilate, the Roman governor over Judea, enlisted to help try Jesus when he discovered Jesus was from Galilee. And Herod Antipas is our second Herod in the Bible.

Our third Herod, Herod Agrippa, was the one in Acts 12 who executed James. He was the nephew of Herod Antipas and the grandson of Herod the Great. The Roman Emperor Claudius made him king over Judea and Samaria from 41 AD to 44 AD, giving autonomy back to Judea. It became a client kingdom again for a very brief period. When he died, Rome again designated the territory as an imperial province, which is why Paul is being sent to a Roman governor, not a Jewish king, to Felix.

There is one more Drusilla Herod in the Bible. King Agrippa is going to show up in chapter 25. He is Herod Agrippa II, son of the Herod Agrippa from chapter 12 and brother to Bernice and Drusilla who are also going to show up in our text. King Agrippa never ruled over Judea. He is king over a small Syrian kingdom. He is just visiting Felix. The Romans never again allowed a Jewish leader to rule over Judea.

Felix ruled the province as governor from 52 to 60 AD. We are told in 24:27 that Felix kept Paul in prison for two years, leaving him there for the new governor Festus to deal with. That helps us place Paul's trip to Jerusalem and his subsequent imprisonment to the end of Felix' rule, to the years 57 to 60 AD.

We do not have outside reference to the commander Claudius Lysias, who is finally named here, though this is one of those Drusilla that points to the historicity of Luke's account. He gives us the name but it's not a famous name. It's not a name in the Roman record that we have access to. There are two very interesting attributes to this letter. One is how Lysias adjusts the narrative to make himself look better. So, if you noticed that before, it is a very human letter. He does not acknowledge the mob in the Temple, which might indicate disorder under his leadership. Instead, he says, "when this man was arrested by the Jews." So, there is no indication of a mob. He was just arrested by the Jews. Another reason not to mention the mob is to make way for the new motivation he creates for intervening. Instead of rushing out of the fortress at the sound of rioting, Lysias claims to have learned of Paul's citizenship. He claims his action was an intentional rescue. And that claim puts into writing a defense against any charge that might be made against Lysias for chaining and preparing to beat a Roman citizen. "No, no, no. Paul was never chained. He was never to be beaten. I knew he was a Roman from the beginning and so, intervened." Concerning the plot against Paul, Lysias simply says, "when I was informed," leaving room for Felix to assume Lysias came to this knowledge through his own information network. You know, he didn't have to depend on the prisoner to be informed of the plot. But, you know, "when I was informed." But then he tells the truth about the plot, because the plot provides a satisfactory rationale for why he is sending Paul to Felix in Caesarea.

Lysias provides for us another contrast to Paul. Lysias lies in his letter to make himself look capable and efficient, and to defend against any charge of wrongdoing. Paul does not lie to promote himself or to protect himself. Paul does show himself to be clever and astute in his communication. He chooses which ideas to communicate and which ideas to not communicate in a given situation, as when he directed focus to belief in the resurrection at the inquiry of the Sanhedrin. Paul does not twist the truth. He does not lie. Something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ will not allow him to.

The second interesting Drusilla in the letter is Lysias' opinion about Paul's case. Lysias goes on record to state, "I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment." Paul is currently under arrest. That leads to the natural assumption that he has done something wrong. Lysias corrects that misconception. Not only does he say Paul does not deserve death, he does not even deserve imprisonment. The charges against Paul have to do with Jewish religious law. Lysias has discovered no infraction of Roman criminal or civil law.

Before proceeding, Felix asks where Paul is from. If Paul had been from a client kingdom of Rome, Felix may have waited to communicate with the authorities of that kingdom. Since Cilicia was a province of Rome, Felix saw no problem conducting the trial himself. Paul is to be kept in Herod's Praetorium. Praetorium had referred to a Roman general's tent in the field. The term later was used for the building or set of buildings from which a Roman ruler governed. The Praetorium in Rome was Caesar's palace. You know, that's THE Praetorium. Herod the Great had refashioned Caesarea from a Phoenician naval port into a modern Roman city. Here, the reference to Herod's Praetorium is a reference to the palace constructed under Herod's orders that is now being used by the Roman governor as provincial headquarters. This is where Paul will spend his next two years.

Lysias had instructed the Jewish leaders to report to Felix in Caesarea to present their charges against Paul. That occurs in the third section of this movement, the defense given. Luke provides us with a summary of the trial and a bit of follow-up of the trial. I will read the report of the trial first. Then we will finish with the follow-up. The trial is in Acts 24:1-23.

Defense Given (24:1-27)

The Trial (1-23)

¹ After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney *named* Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor against Paul. ² After *Paul* had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying *to the governor*, "Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, ³ we acknowledge *this* in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness. ⁴ "But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing. ⁵ "For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶ "And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. We wanted to judge him according to our own Law. ⁷ "But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, ⁸ ordering his accusers to come before you. By examining him yourself concerning all these matters you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him." ⁹ The Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so. ¹⁰ When the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded: "Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense, ¹¹ since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. ¹² "Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city *itself* did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot. ¹³ "Nor can they prove to you *the charges* of which they now accuse me. ¹⁴ "But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; ¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men cherish

themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.¹⁶ “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men.¹⁷ “Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings;¹⁸ in which they found me *occupied* in the temple, having been purified, without *any* crowd or uproar. But *there were* some Jews from Asia—¹⁹ who ought to have been present before you and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me.²⁰ “Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council,²¹ other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, ‘For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.’ ”²² But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.”²³ Then he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and *yet* have *some* freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him.

Based on examples of Greek and Roman trials, the text provided here by Luke is much too short to be a full trial transcript. Luke has taken the language of the trial and given us an abbreviation. My Bible calls Tertullus “an attorney.” The literal word is, “rhetor,” someone trained in rhetoric. The term applies more broadly than our idea of attorney, but that translation fits well for this man’s function at this trial. He is trained to make a verbal argument and has been employed by the High Priest to present the case of the prosecution against Paul. Though Tertullus is a Greek name, it seems most likely he was a Hellenistic Jew.

No good Jew would agree with Tertullus that Felix had brought peace to Judea, nor praise him for reforms, nor give thanks to God for him. Felix brought peace through the Roman way: through the violent suppression of revolt. Tertullus’ compliments are the expected flattery an attorney uses to gain a positive ear from the judge.

Tertullus then presents charges, starting with a general accusation that Paul is a pest. The Greek word literally means, “pestilence,” or, “plague.” In this context, the word suggests treason, one who foments insurrection against Rome wherever he goes. Three more specific charges follow. (1) First, Paul is accused of stirring up dissension among the Jews throughout the world. Disturbance among Jews has followed Paul in his travels through the eastern Roman empire. Luke has shown through the record of Acts, that Paul was not responsible. Paul had not engaged in any illegal or violent action against Jews or Romans. The response to his Gospel message had, at times, turned violent, but as a response to a message of grace and peace. Still, it is a dangerous charge to be made before a Roman governor like Felix, who has had to deal with violent Jewish messianism.

(2) Second, Paul is identified as a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. The word, “sect,” here carries a more neutral meaning than it might for us. A sect was a political or religious party and is also applied to the Sadducees and Pharisees. The term, “Nazarenes,” is only used this once in the Bible as a reference to Christians. But the term was used by early Christians and continues to be used as a general term for Christians today in both the Hebrew and Arabic languages. Tertullus intends it as a negative reference to an unofficial Jewish party whose beliefs and practices led to the kind of unrest this leader Paul fomented. Not only is Paul’s belief in a Messiah supposedly treasonous to Rome, but this whole unofficial movement is suspect. Their core Gospel message is treasonous.

(3) Third, Paul is charged with trying to desecrate the Temple. That is the most concrete charge and probably the most important for the prosecution. Romans allowed Jews to execute a person who had desecrated the Temple. The charges of unrest throughout the Empire do not need to be proven. Those claims support this more specific claim.

In the first part of verse 6a, Tertullus claims the Temple authorities arrested Paul when he was caught trying to desecrate the Temple. So just like with Lysias, the Jewish version leaves out reference to a mob. Nobody wants to admit to a mob, unless they are blaming Paul for one. Verses 6b-8a where Tertullus puts blame on Lysias may not be original to Luke’s text of Acts. Your Bible might note that these verses are not supported in the earlier manuscripts. The verses are believable

as a way for the prosecution to shift blame for confusion of the situation onto the commander. If Lysias had not intervened with the legal process, the Jews would have processed Paul justly according to their own Law, which they had the right to do in the case of Temple desecration. So, the only reason we are here is because Lysias acted inappropriately. That is believable. We are just not sure if those verses are in the original.

That's the case against Paul. The high priest, with a select group of anti-Paul elders, joined in with their own claim that these charges were true. When Felix decided he had heard enough from the prosecution, he nodded to Paul, giving him opportunity to defend himself against the charges.

Paul also begins his speech with respectful words for Felix. But he does not try to butter him up, like Tertullus did. He does not stretch the truth about Felix's record. Paul states simple fact and launches into his defense.

“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation [fact], I cheerfully make my defense,¹¹ since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship.

Paul implies that Felix has enough personal experience Drusilla Judea to discern for himself the difference between truth and fiction. Paul then denies the charges and provides his understanding of the facts. Denying the charges, Paul says he did not even carry on a discussion after arriving in Judea; not anywhere, not in a synagogue, not in the Temple, nowhere in the city. Nor did he do anything to cause a riot. That is all untrue.

This is what Paul did admit to. First, he admits to being a Nazarene, but he uses his more preferred term, “the Way.” And he does not call the way a sect or a party as his opponents do. It is the Gospel Way. It is the Way by which he serves the God of their fathers. Paul sees the Way, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as fulfillment. By following the Way, he says he is walking,

in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

That is a theologically important phrase. We get mostly a focus in the New Testament of the resurrection of the righteous, but if you quote in a creed or belief that both the righteous and the unrighteous will be raised on the last day, this is the text that supports that idea. Paul is saying there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. Interesting theological point. Now, back to the defense. Just as he did before the Sanhedrin, Paul is drawing attention to his hope in the resurrection, and he argues that this is a Biblical hope that all true Jews embrace.

Second, Paul asserts that this hope leads him “to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men.” Contrary to those who claim that salvation by grace through faith promotes sin, Paul argues that, for him, the Gospel of Jesus Christ provides moral motivation in his relationship with God and with people. His third and fourth points support this claim.

Third, in his Drusilla to maintain a blameless conscience before God and men, he came to Jerusalem bringing alms, financial gifts for those in need.

Fourth, he also presented offerings. And we know the motive for that was to show respect to fellow Jewish believers so that none would speak negatively against the Gospel of Jesus Christ being proclaimed among Gentiles. Paul claimed that he had gone to the Temple, properly purified to present offering. It was a pious act performed with a small group of believers. There was not any preaching involved. Those are the facts.

Paul then calls for evidence, the one thing completely lacking in the prosecution's case. Where are the witnesses to these charges? Where are the men from Asia who stirred up the crowd in the Temple? What evidence was put forth at the Sanhedrin's inquest?

Paul concludes by again focusing attention on the resurrection of the dead. There are no valid charges of civil unrest or Temple desecration. The real reason for opposition is a spiritual claim. My only misdeed was,

this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, ‘For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.’

Paul means the hope of resurrection in general and more specifically, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the beginning point of his Gospel. Felix ends the trial there without condemning Paul. The prosecution’s attempt to cast Christianity as a subversive, anti-Roman messianic sect with Paul as a pestilent ringleader does not work on Felix. Luke tells us he had “more exact knowledge about the Way.” Felix does not turn Paul over to Jewish authority, but neither does he acquit Paul. He puts off both sides, with the reasonable claim that he wants first to hear from his commander Lysias.

In reality, political and financial motives are both at play in Felix’s mind. He will let Paul go only if the advantage outweighs the disadvantage of upsetting the Jews. Paul will remain in limbo for more than two years. Felix does allow friends to visit Paul. And we even have an idea of some of the people that might include. The report of Paul’s journey in chapter 21 told us Paul met with brothers and sisters of the church in Caesarea on his way to Jerusalem. And Paul is now in Caesarea. Among those brothers and sisters are Philip the Evangelist, you know, who took the Gospel to Samaria and shared with the Ethiopian eunuch, and his four daughters who very well may have ministered to Paul Drusilla his imprisonment. Certainly, Luke also spent time with Paul Drusilla these two years. You know, two years in which he had ample time to research and write the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Just the reference to two years is one of those historically interesting facts that is putting things in context for us but making me want so much more about what went on. We just skipped over two years! What went on in those two years?

There is one last paragraph of text in this movement. Luke gives us a brief follow-up to the trial in 24:24-27.

The Follow-up (24-27)

²⁴ But some days later Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him *speak* about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you.” ²⁶ At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him. ²⁷ But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.

Here we get an aspect of Paul’s Gospel not focused on in the book of Acts. Acts highlights the Drusilla Gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the lead off message of both Peter and Paul in their preaching. I have referred to this as the answer to the first question of Covenant, “How can a sinful person enter into a relationship with Holy God?” That’s the first thing we’ve got to address. And it’s the question of justification. “How can I be justified, or righteous before God?” The second question of Covenant asks, “Now that I am in relationship with God through grace by faith, how should I live?” That’s the question of sanctification. How do I become like Jesus? Acts gives some focus to this question, “How shall I live?” in relation to ritual and ceremonial issues because those issues became very important in the early mission to Gentiles. So, we address the second question of Covenant in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem Council. We are thinking what behaviors are we requesting from Gentiles, and it’s focused mostly on ritual and ceremonial religious behaviors.

We have not, however, received direct moral teaching like we do in the Gospels and in the letters. Acts provides some idea of the Gospel’s moral vision through examples in the narrative. We have noticed several examples of early Christians sharing wealth to care for those in need. But we do not see specific lists of dos and don’ts like we see in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-8, or in the

second half of Ephesians, chapters 4-6, or in Paul's presentation of the Gospel in Romans, particularly Romans 5-8 and 12-15. Jesus called His followers to righteousness. Paul also called the faithful to holy living. But description of the Gospel's moral vision has not been a central theme of Acts. So we recognize here we are being told something we haven't really been told yet.

We notice Luke's choice to point out Paul's moral challenge to Felix and Drusilla. We haven't gotten this kind of preaching in Acts, but we know Paul's letters, and so we are not surprised that his explanation of the Gospel to Felix and Drusilla includes a discussion of righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come. A person needs to recognize their own failure in the way of righteousness if they are going to understand the need for the gift of grace provided by Jesus. And having accepted that gift of grace, new believers need to understand the way of life opened up before them. Grace is not freedom to sin. Grace is freedom from sin to live life with goodness and purpose.

We are not surprised by the content of Paul's preaching when we rightly understand the connection between grace and righteousness. But we still might ask, "Why did Luke include reference to moral living here when it has not been a highlight through Acts?" I think the answer is, "Well, it's a highlight here." Though Luke's focus has been on the first question of Covenant in conjunction with the early growth of the Church, he wants to provide a full defense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And he has taken opportunity in this movement to put the Gospel on trial in regard to law and morality.

The Jewish establishment and the Roman commander Felix have provided contrast to the integrity we see in Paul. Felix provides one more contrast. It is not surprising that Felix would become afraid hearing when about the judgment to come on those who do not repent and turn to Jesus. Felix, as a Roman governor, has executed much violence on the people of Judea. He also convinced his wife Drusilla, the beautiful daughter of Herod Agrippa I, to leave her husband and marry him. Felix has reason to fear a judgment to come based on righteous behavior. And it was quite bold of Paul in speaking to Felix and Drusilla to focus on righteousness and self-control. Felix is going to keep calling Paul back so it's kind of strange. Paul is willing to convict him but there is something about Paul that is genuine and real, and some reason... it's hard to explain why a sinner wants to keep hearing the message of the Gospel. But he resists in his heart. He is not submitting to the Gospel.

Luke tells us Felix was afraid. But he was also greedy, and he hoped Paul would pay a bribe for his release. So we can imagine that Paul, he is entertainment, he is a distraction, there is some draw to the truth, but there is also this greed that causes him to hold Paul. And Felix never seems to make that essential decision to finally give it all up and place his faith in Jesus. But he had the opportunity. And instead of giving a bribe, Paul chose to remain in prison for the last two years of Felix's rule. That is the kind of man whose life has been transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Unredeemed man is represented in this movement by religious zealots who plot to murder Paul, chief priests and elders who provide false testimony to silence Paul, the commander Lysias who lies about the circumstances of Paul's arrest to protect his own position, and a Roman Governor who hardens his heart to the Gospel, keeping Paul imprisoned out of political reasons and sheer greed.

Paul's attitude towards the Law and towards morality is governed by his understanding of the Gospel and the working of the Holy Spirit in him. He does not twist the truth for his advantage. He does not flatter Felix with lies. He does not offer a bribe. He gives testimony in his trial of his Drusilla to live a blameless life before God shown through the alms he brought to Israel for the poor and his observance of the purity laws in the Temple. He does not see this purely as a relative personal choice, just the way he is going to do it. He understands righteous behavior as the right response to the grace of God presented in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is Paul's Gospel: grace leads to righteousness. As he wrote to the Ephesians,

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*; ⁹ not as a Drusilla of works, so that no one may boast [That's grace]. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. [That's the life that follows grace.]

Saved by grace for good works.

The Gospel message is judged by the Gospel messenger. The failure of the Gospel messenger does not mean the Gospel is false, but it might be enough evidence to discourage some people from investigating further. It is a logical fallacy to judge the truthfulness of a claim by the integrity of the one promoting the claim. Terrible people can say things that are true. But the Gospel is not simply a philosophical system. The Gospel provides a vision of morality and claims to transform individuals through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is rational to question the validity of such a Gospel when the messengers of the Gospel don't look any different from anyone else. If the sign out front says, "Jesus loves you," but all the supporting text is hateful and lacking understanding and ungentle, and mean-spirited, then the presentation of our message is disconnected from the transformation that we proclaim. Where is the Drusilla of the Spirit in the message?

²² ...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

The audience listening to our message ought to ask, "Is there really any truth to this or is it all hypocrisy, religion, and politics as usual?"

Gospel messengers are not perfect. But they ought to be in process. The process of becoming like Jesus. God empowered His servant Paul persevere in ministry with moral integrity. He stood out in contrast to his persecutors. He represented well the Gospel of Jesus Christ, following his own charge to other believers. Let's end with Ephesians 4:2-3,

"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:2-3)."

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 23:12-35. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. In the last verse of the previous section (23:11) Jesus gives encouraging words to Paul. What do you think those words meant to Paul as you imagine what is happening in this section? How do those words relate to this whole last part of Acts?
3. In 23:23-30, how does Lysias adjust reality in his report to Felix? Why did he do that?
4. What misconception concerning Paul did Lysias correct?
5. Read Acts 24:1-27. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. What is the trial strategy Paul's accusers in 24:1-9? What is their goal? What strategy are they using to accomplish that goal?
7. What strategy does Paul use in his defense in 24:10-21?
8. What are Felix' motives in not releasing Paul? What are his motives in not handing Paul to the Jews?
9. Considering the commander's letter, Paul's words before Felix and the contrast of Paul's behavior compared to Felix, what does this section add to the defense of Paul?

Lesson 32: Acts 25:1-26:32 The Gospel's Message for the World

Introduction

Paul held out two years in prison, never giving in to Felix' hope for a bribe, and yet, Felix never turned him over to the Jewish authorities, either. The year is now 59 or 60 AD. Felix has ended a disturbance in Caesarea between Gentile and Jewish residents, but his response has resulted in the deaths of several leading Jews. The emperor has removed Felix from office to reduce tension and appointed Porcius Festus as the new governor over Judea.

We do not know much about Festus apart from what Luke tells us. Our only other report of him in the historical record are two brief mentions by the Jewish historian Josephus, who judged him a successful governor who suppressed "the brigands and revolutionaries who had so plagued the countryside during Felix's administration."²⁹

From Luke's account, we see similarities in Festus' treatment of Paul to other Roman governors of Judea, all of whom were caught between the obligation to carry out Roman justice and the political benefits of placating Jewish leadership. The Jewish people were not easily controlled by the threat of Roman violence. Too many were willing to die. But an inability to maintain order could create a black mark on a Roman governor's resume, as had happened both to Felix and to Pilate before him. Any governor looking to advance his position after his stint in Judea faced the tricky decision of when to exert Roman authority and when to give in to Jewish demands.

Festus' handling of the Paul problem provides the historical context for our fourth movement of Acts part VI. The narrative follows Luke's standard structure for this part of Acts, beginning with a danger avoided, moving to a misconception corrected and ending with a defense given. Paul's defense challenges gathered dignitaries to make a judgment on the Gospel's message for the world.

We begin with a danger avoided, a second attempt by Jewish leaders to ambush Paul on his way to inquiry before the Jewish Sanhedrin. It is recorded in Acts 25:1-12.

Danger Avoided (25:1-12)

¹ Festus then, having arrived in the province, three days later went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. ² And the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews brought charges against Paul, and they were urging him, ³ requesting a concession against Paul, that he might have him brought to Jerusalem (*at the same time*, setting an ambush to kill him on the way). ⁴ Festus then answered that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea and that he himself was about to leave shortly. ⁵ "Therefore," he said, "let the influential men among you go there with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them prosecute him." ⁶ After he had spent not more than eight or ten days among them, he went down to Caesarea, and on the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. ⁷ After Paul arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him which they could not prove, ⁸ while Paul said in his own defense, "I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar." ⁹ But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these *charges*?" ¹⁰ But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to *the* Jews, as you also very well know. ¹¹ "If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is *true* of which these men accuse

²⁹ J. B. Polhill. *Acts*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992) 488.

me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar.”¹² Then when Festus had conferred with his council, he answered, “You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go.”

Paul remained a sore point on the Jewish agenda. Two years had passed and still certain elements within the Jewish establishment were prepared to ambush Paul while he was guarded by Roman soldiers. Festus does not give in immediately, but raises Jewish hope, inviting prosecutors to join him in Caesarea that he might make his own investigation. The best case would be to convince Festus that Paul is guilty of Temple desecration and gain permission to execute Paul. Second best would be to convince Festus to transfer Paul to Jerusalem for trial. Since that might take the possibility of a death penalty off the table, they would murder Paul in an ambush on the way. And in that, Jewish leaders might even be able to avoid connection to the plot, considering the problem of bandits and rebels that have plagued Roman administration of Judea.

After a short stay in Jerusalem, Festus proceeds back to his new home in the provincial center, Caesarea. Jewish prosecutors follow him. Paul is brought forth for another inquiry. Luke does not here repeat the prosecution charges, which we can imagine to be similar to the accusations made in the trial before Felix. We are told later in this text that Festus came to the same conclusion as all the Romans who have tried Paul in Acts, that the charges are matters of religious law, not transgressions against Roman law, civil or criminal.

In agreement with the previous trial, Luke adds that the charges were made but not proven. He then summarizes Paul’s response as a denial of offense against Jewish law, the Temple, or Caesar. And that reference to Caesar foreshadows the strategic decision Paul is about to make.

Festus responds to Paul’s defense asking, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these *charges*?” Festus is not outright agreeing to hand Paul over to the Jews for trial. He asks, “Are you willing to stand before me?” He has in mind something similar to the court of inquiry held by the commander Lysias. He will retain control as the Roman governor but grant the Jews their request of a trial in Jerusalem. And that is going to be enough for the Jews because they are planning to ambush Paul on the way anyway. Paul responds by appealing to Caesar.

I have read some scholars who suggest Paul’s appeal was made too quickly, too rashly. He did not give Festus time to consider his response, to consider the case. Agrippa’s comment at the very end of this movement we’ll get to later in verse 26:32 supports that idea. He is going to say, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” Did Paul jump the gun? Might he have been set free? Well, no. That is not likely at all. We need to give Paul more credit than that. Luke is only summarizing the content of this inquiry. Much more was said, as we will see in the following section.

We can assume that Paul had enough information to read the way the wind was blowing. Festus desired strongly to do a favor for the Jews. He may have asked Paul whether he was willing to stand trial in Jerusalem but is not going to base his decision on the response of a prisoner. Paul *could* have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. But he *would* not have been set free. Paul assumed Festus was going to give in and have him sent to Jerusalem. Whether Festus was aware or not of the earlier plot to ambush Paul, we know that Paul remembers. And what Festus may or may have not done is not really the primary point, anyway. Walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, trusting his strategy to God, Paul appealed to Caesar. His ultimate hope is not in this strategic decision. He is not trusting in Ceasaer. His hope is in the sovereignty of God.

Listen carefully to Paul’s appeal, and you hear a rebuke of Festus.

¹⁰ Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to *the* Jews, as you also very well know. ¹¹ “If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is *true* of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar.”

Paul points out that Festus knows he has done no wrong to the Jews. He willingly accepts the right of the government to carry out judgment, even the judgment of a death penalty, if indeed he is found

guilty of a capital offense. Then he points out to Festus the illegality of being handed over without proof of guilt. “I stand before Caesar’s tribunal...” Festus is a representative of the Roman government. “No one can hand me over to them.” He means, “No Roman judge should hand me, a Roman citizen, over to a non-Roman body for trial if I have not been found guilty of any charge.” Based on Roman law he should not be given over to the Jews. But he discerns that is exactly what Festus is planning. Festus will relax Roman justice in favor of political expediency to score points with the Jewish leadership at the beginning of his rule. Paul takes the only legal action left open to him. It is a course familiar in modern judicial systems. He makes an appeal to a higher court. In this case, it is an appeal to the highest court. Here is Bruce’s explanation to give us more background on this point of Roman law.

There are many unanswered questions about this process and how it worked in the middle of the first century, Acts itself being one of the main sources for this period. Paul seems to have made use of an ancient right of Roman citizens that goes back to at least the fifth century B.C., known as *provocatio*, it gave a citizen the right to appeal a magistrate’s verdict to a jury of fellow citizens. Under the empire the emperor himself became the court of appeal, replacing the former jury of peers. Although governors seem to have had the right to pass capital sentences and even to deny appeal in instances involving established laws, in cases not involving well-established precedent (*extra ordinem*) such as Paul’s, the right of appeal seems to have been absolute; a procurator such as Festus would not have been in the position to deny it. Though appeal was generally made only after a verdict had been reached, Paul’s appeal *before* condemnation seems to have been in order. It is unclear whether the process was irrevocable, i.e., whether a magistrate could stop the appeal should the innocence of the appellant be determined before remission to the emperor. Probably in Festus’s case it would not have made much difference. He really had no desire to establish Paul’s innocence for fear of the repercussions from the Jews. He probably was relieved by Paul’s appeal. It took the whole troublesome matter out of his hands.³⁰

That is Bruce’s explanation. So now the danger of ambush is avoided, and we turn to the misconception corrected. The correction comes from Festus’ own lips in a private conversation with the visiting King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. This is Acts 25:13-22.

Misconception Corrected (25:13-22)

¹³ Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and paid their respects to Festus. ¹⁴ While they were spending many days there, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king, saying, “There is a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix; ¹⁵ and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. ¹⁶ “I answered them that it is not the custom of the Romans to hand over any man before the accused meets his accusers face to face and has an opportunity to make his defense against the charges. ¹⁷ “So after they had assembled here, I did not delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought before me. ¹⁸ “When the accusers stood up, they *began* bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting, ¹⁹ but they *simply* had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive. ²⁰ “Being at a loss how to investigate such matters, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there stand trial on these matters. ²¹ “But when Paul appealed to be held in custody for the Emperor’s decision, I ordered him to be kept in custody until I send him to Caesar.” ²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” he said, “you shall hear him.”

An appeal to Caesar implies disagreement with a lower court’s verdict. An observer hearing Paul had appealed would logically conclude Festus found Paul guilty of some crime. Paul then appealed the

³⁰ Polhill, 491.

verdict of guilt. But that is not what happened. Festus states his inability to discover any crime that Paul is guilty of. It is the same admission Lysias made when he sent Paul to Felix. So, Festus is glad for Agrippa's interest in the case, because he needs to come up with some explanation to the emperor for why a man not charged with any crime has appealed to Caesar's judgment.

This section follows the pattern already established by Roman judges, who continue to clear Paul of any credible charges. We do see in Festus' words that there was much more to the trial than reported by Luke. Apparently, Luke did not hear anything he wanted to add to the record of Acts, except for this one comment made by Festus.

¹⁸ When the accusers stood up, they *began* bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting, ¹⁹ but they *simply* had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive.

Okay, we have heard that before. Romans, listening to the prosecution and defense conclude, this is a matter of Jewish religion. The interesting bit here is how Festus understood the disagreement about Jesus. He says, "[they disagreed] about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive." We have repeatedly heard Paul argue that he is on trial for hope in the resurrection. I have interpreted that hope to be based on the specific resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a hope in general resurrection for everybody, that everybody who believes in God would be raised to eternal life. But it is based on the specific resurrection of Jesus. This comment supports that interpretation. They were discussing Jesus, is He dead or is He alive. And even though Luke doesn't go into more detail about the disagreement between Paul and his Jewish accusers concerning the resurrection, we see from this account of Festus who was listening to the disagreement that it revolved around the resurrection of Jesus. Our own resurrection to eternal life is grounded in our belief that Jesus defeated death, He took care of sin, He was raised again, and He ascended to eternal life. As Paul told the Corinthians, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain (1 Corinthians 15:14)."

This is the Gospel message to the world. We call all people to accept the historic reality that God took on flesh and lived among us as the man Jesus Christ. In His crucifixion, He became an atoning sacrifice for the sin of all humankind. In His resurrection, He has accomplished victory over death and proved by the power of the Spirit that he is God.

Paul has argued this message of Good News to the Jews. Now, once again, the message of the Gospel is to put on trial before representatives of the world. The defense given in Acts 25:23-26:32 is not another trial. It is an evaluation of Paul in front of King Agrippa without any prosecutors present.

Defense Given (25:23-26:32)

Of Paul's seven speeches in the book of Acts, the defense before Agrippa is his longest. Not by much. It is similar in length to the first speech we were given, in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, and his speech before the mob in the Temple courtyard. Because it is long and because it follows a pattern similar to the trial before Felix, rather than read through the whole at one time, I will divide it into three simple subsections: introduction to the defense given, Paul's speech, and conclusion to the defense given. We will need to further sub-divide Paul's speech. But we start with the introduction to the section, Acts 25:23-27.

Introduction to the Defense Given (25:23-27)

²³ So, on the next day when Agrippa came together with Bernice amid great pomp, and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴ Festus said, "King Agrippa, and all you gentlemen here present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me, both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ "But I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him. ²⁶ "Yet I have nothing definite about him to write to my lord. Therefore I have brought him before you *all* and especially before you, King

Agrippa, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. ²⁷ “For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.”

Imagine the scene. My translation says they came together with Agrippa and Bernice “amid great pomp.” “Fantasia” is the Greek word translated here as, “pomp.” Its where English gets the word, “fantasy.” It is an appearing. It is magnificent splendor, solemn and formal. King Agrippa, the last of the Herodians, educated at the court of emperor Claudius, ruler over lands bordering the Sea of Galilee to the north and east, interacts with people at the highest level of Roman society. He will later in history plead with the Jews to submit to Roman rule, siding with the general and future emperor Titus Vespasian, and retire to Rome after Titus destroys Jerusalem.

Bernice, or in Greek, “Berenice,” was one of the two most famous names repeatedly used in the long line of Ptolemaic Queens, who were Macedonian rulers of Egypt. You are very familiar with the other name that was handed down for generations. That name was, “Cleopatra.” This Bernice is sister to Agrippa and a power-player in her own right. She has already outlived two husbands and separated from her third, the king of Paul’s home province Cilicia. She will become the lover of Titus during his campaign in Judea and return with him to Rome. Like Cleopatra the VII, she almost becomes a Roman empress. But also like Cleopatra, there is popular resentment against an eastern queen, considered to be a seductress. Giving in to that popular opinion, Titus will send her away.

When God sent Ananias of Damascus to open Paul’s eyes at his conversion, he said to Ananias, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” Paul has lifted up the name of Jesus to Jew and Gentile. He now lifts that name up to a king on his way to the court of the king of kings, Caesar.

All the pomp surrounding King Agrippa and Queen Bernice includes the Roman governor Festus, commanders of the Roman legion, and prominent men of this Gentile city Caesarea. Mostly Gentile but maybe some Jews, as well. This one moment encapsulates the commission given to Paul through Ananias to bear the name of Jesus before the world. This is a specific fulfillment of the prophecy God gave through Ananias.

Festus brings Paul in and repeats the persistent message we get in the second half of Acts. “The Jewish establishment wants him dead. I find nothing wrong with him.” Festus goes on to tell Agrippa he needs help coming up with something to say to Caesar, “For it seems absurd to me to send a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.”

That’s our introduction. Now we turn to Paul’s defense. And it is going to be less of a defense, and more of Paul’s message to the world that is gathered to judge him. The speech also subdivides into introduction, body, and conclusion. Here is Paul’s introductory statement to his speech, 26:1-8.

Paul’s Defense (26:1-23)

Introductory Statement (1-8)

¹ Agrippa said to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and *proceeded* to make his defense: ² “In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; ³ especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among *the Jews*; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. ⁴ “So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my *own* nation and at Jerusalem; ⁵ since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived *as* a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. ⁶ “And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; ⁷ *the promise* to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve *God* night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. ⁸ “Why is it considered incredible among you *people* if God does raise the dead?

Paul begins with respectful remarks to Agrippa. That is appropriate. When Paul says Agrippa is “an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews,” that is casting Agrippa’s knowledge in quite a positive light, but it is not wrong. His great-grandfather Herod the Great converted to Judaism and his great-grandmother was a Jewish princess. Rome did not make him king over Judea but did grant him authority over the affairs of the Temple, with the responsibility of appointing the high priest. Agrippa used his influence with Rome to argue for moderation in the treatment of the Jews. Both he and Bernice had palaces in Jerusalem. Paul is rightly able to speak to Agrippa as a Jewish insider in a way he could not communicate to Festus.

In verses 4-8 Paul provides a summary of his defense focusing on his consistent main point of emphasis: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul establishes his own credentials as an expert of the customs and questions of the Jews, having grown up in Jerusalem and studied and practiced Judaism according to its strictest sect, the Pharisees.

Paul skips over his conversion and missionary work among Gentiles to immediately establish the bottom line that he is on trial for the hope of resurrection. Referring to the fathers of Israel, Paul makes sure to establish his belief in line with Jewish Scriptures, not in opposition with them. Paul’s belief is in the promises of God that go all the way back to Abraham. Abraham received a promise of land, and descendants, and a name with the purpose that through him all the families of Earth might be blessed. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham saw past the physical land in which he sojourned, looking ahead to “the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).” Abraham’s faith was an “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).” The promise of a heavenly Zion is a hope that Paul can describe here as one “which our twelve tribes hope to attain.” The hope of Israel looks ahead to a new Heaven and a new Earth; a new Jerusalem.

As a historical aside, Paul’s reference to the twelve tribes of Israel is very interesting here. A student recently asked me in an Old Testament class which tribes returned to Israel after the exile. Tribes returning from Babylon would have been Judah, and Benjamin, and Levi. Simeon fell out of the Biblical record a long time before the exile. Those are the tribes that made up the Southern Kingdom of Judah, that had been defeated and exiled by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. The presence of Judah in the 1st century is necessary to carry on the line of David into which Jesus was born. And Levi is necessary to carry on the Levitical priesthood. But what about the other tribes?

The ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom were exiled 120 years earlier by Assyria. The poor remnant of the north intermarried with other peoples and became the Samaritans. But Paul here speaks of twelve tribes in the present. Closer study shows that the myth of the lost ten tribes (you may have heard that, that they are lost, and nobody knows where they are) is not supported in the New Testament. Political organization of Israel on tribal lines is not present in this time period so we get very little reference to the tribes. But we can assume Jews scattered throughout the eastern and western empires had returned to Israel. There is little additional evidence in the New Testament apart from Paul’s comment here, though the prophetess Anna, who recognized baby Jesus in the Temple in Luke 2:36, was identified as from the tribe of Asher, and James addresses his letter “to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad (James 1:1).” It seems to be a New Testament assumption.

Paul’s language of twelve tribes here includes all Jews together as one whole, while also connecting us back to the historical promises. It is a very Old Testament way of describing Israel. The hope of an eternal future planted in the promise to Abraham had become intertwined with salvation and blessing through the Messianic Son of David. So, by the end of the New Testament, through the Prophets, the plan of salvation is very focused on this “Messiah.” In stating his thesis, Paul switches to the second person pronoun, “you”, directing his thesis towards Jews. You know, either rhetorically, or to those who are present, or both. How can you piously speak of a spiritual hope and then reject out of hand the evidence so powerfully displayed among you in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ? “Why is it considered incredible among you *people* if God does raise the

dead?” In light of your hope in the promises of God, it is irrational to not even acknowledge the possibility that God has fulfilled His promise through the resurrection of Jesus. You have this religious tradition that you want to hold on to, but you don’t really want to believe it.

With his thesis established, that he is on trial for the hope of the resurrection, Paul launches into the body of his speech. Rather than defend himself, Paul gives witness to Jesus by sharing with them his personal testimony. This version of Paul’s testimony includes main points already communicated in Luke’s narration of his conversion in chapter 9 and Paul’s witness before the mob in chapter 21. This is our third example of Paul’s testimony. There are notable differences as Paul fits his words to the present context, dropping out some details and including others. So, we want to pay attention to those differences. I’ll read the whole text, verses 9-20.

Body of the Speech (9-20)

[We start with life before meeting Jesus.] ⁹ “So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ “And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ “And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

[Then we get how Paul met Jesus.] ¹² “While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, ¹³ at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. ¹⁴ “And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ¹⁵ “And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ ‘But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; ¹⁷ rescuing you from the *Jewish* people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸ to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’

[Paul then goes on to life after meeting Jesus.] ¹⁹ “So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but *kept* declaring both to those of Damascus first, and *also* at Jerusalem and *then* throughout all the region of Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

Paul’s description of life before meeting Jesus is briefer in this account than in the previous two accounts of his conversion. Paul had already made reference to his personal biography in the introduction of this speech, pointing out that he studied from his youth in Jerusalem and joined the ranks of the Pharisees. And this sharing of his testimony is to point more towards his audience than towards himself. He does point out that he, too, had once stood in judgment over Christians, and he cast his vote to put them to death. That’s an interestingly honest admission for a prisoner trying to avoid the same kind of injustice being done to him.

Paul mentions the bright light, but he does not mention being blinded. I think that is an example of how Paul is crafting his words to be a Gospel witness for this audience and not as a description about himself. The description of the bright light is for his listeners.

This is the first time Paul tells us that the time of day was midday and that the light shone brighter than the sun. This light was not the sudden appearance of the sun coming out of dark clouds to shine in the faces of the travelers. This was an unmistakably miraculous light. And from that light a voice spoke.

The God of Israel is the God who speaks. And Paul is going to give us more of what Jesus said here than in the previous two tellings of the story. There is a reason for that. Jesus gave Paul a

commission. That commission was repeated several times. In the first account of Paul's conversion, Luke tells us a version of the commission that was given to Ananias to give to Paul. And he doesn't give us the one spoken directly from Jesus. That commission included the idea of witness before Jews, and Gentiles, and Kings. Luke used it to foreshadow what was to come in the book of Acts. You know, this final standing before kings. In the testimony before the mob, Paul spoke of a later repetition of the commission that came to him in a vision while he worshiped in the Temple. Paul's choice to communicate that version of the commission fit well with the context of a mob having dragged him away from worship in the Temple. That vision was in the same context. This is the first time we are getting the commission that was spoken directly to Paul as the bright light shone on him. And as we consider the words of Jesus in that commission, we will see why Paul chose to communicate that commission at this time to these people.

In recounting Jesus's question, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Paul here adds for the first time the further words of Jesus, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." A goad was a sharp stick used for driving oxen in the desired direction. Jesus is saying, "You are an ox and I am pointing you in a direction. The goad is not going to hurt much unless you press back against it, kick against it." To kick against the goads is a futile act of resistance against the will of one's master that only brings pain and possible injury to oneself. Bruce cites examples of this proverb occurring in Greek and Roman sources. Jesus had used a known metaphor that had meaning for Paul and would also have meaning for this Gentile audience. Everyone present would understand the idea that Paul has just realized holy inquisition against Christians is, in fact, a persecution of God. He is resisting God. It's an ultimately futile act that brings harm to the one who is engaged in it.

Paul responds, "Who are you?" Jesus answers, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Then Jesus commissions Paul.

¹⁶ 'Get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; ¹⁷ rescuing you from the *Jewish* people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸ to open their eyes...

The idea of being rescued from Jews and Gentiles fits this context exactly. Paul has been rescued from the mob. Paul has been rescued from Jewish animosity and Paul has been rescued from Roman expedience. He is going to Caesar. He is leaving this place. And did you catch the wording of why Paul has been rescued? He has been rescued so that he might open the eyes of those he has been rescued from. That is what Paul is doing right now. He is seeking to open eyes. Paul's conversion story is a story about how he himself came to see and about how through him Gentiles will come to see. He didn't talk about his blindness here. He is not talking about what happened to him. His emphasis is on the second part: opening the eyes of his audience.

What does he want them to see? This is the rest of the quote.

...to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'

In sharing the words of Jesus, Paul turns the tables on his judges. They are among those judged by Jesus. They are the ones who walk in rebellion, in darkness, in the kingdom of Satan. They are the ones in need of forgiveness and the sanctification that may be only found in Jesus.

Paul continues, sharing the words communicated to him, knowing that these words apply to his audience.

I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but *kept* declaring both to those of Damascus first, and *also* at Jerusalem and *then* throughout all the region of Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

Is Paul telling his own story or is he inviting a response? Paul's speech concludes with the atonement of Christ, and an invitation.

Conclusion of the Speech (21-29)

²¹ "For this reason *some* Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. ²² "So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; ²³ that the Christ was to suffer, *and* that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles."

Paul is not the source of light to the world. Jesus is the light. Jesus is all that is true and good and beautiful. The light of His gracious and just nature shines through His suffering, death, and resurrection. And this saving plan of God in Jesus Christ flows from the Old Testament Scriptures. Just as Jesus did, Paul consistently connects his Gospel message to what came before. The resurrection is not something new. It's not our only focus. We want the world to hear that this comes from a very old and ancient context. Faith in Jesus is not a movement away from the Prophets and Moses but a fulfillment of the Prophets and Moses.

²⁴ While *Paul* was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind! *Your* great learning is driving you mad." ²⁵ But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. ²⁶ "For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. ²⁷ "King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." ²⁸ Agrippa *replied* to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." ²⁹ And Paul *said*, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains."

Festus and Agrippa understood rightly the goal of Paul's testimony. He shared his story with the hope of leading all who listened to personal faith in Jesus. Festus recognized Paul as a man of great learning, but he could not wrap his mind around Paul's claims. The story sounded foolish to him. Agrippa, on the other hand, found Paul persuasive. Paul's response to him was an invitation to repent and believe – an invitation to everybody. "I wish you all might become such as I am, except for these chains."

Every person present stood at a crossroads. Each one existed in an ongoing life story of relationships and experiences. They are in a river, and the river of life has just intercepted the flow of their story. Will they resist its current? Or will they go with it? You know, Felix intersected with the story of Paul's life for a couple of years. He and Drusilla had their own illicit love story. They have their own problems, their own relationships. They heard the Gospel message, were challenged to recognize the judgment of God but then they moved on. Felix failed politically. He was recalled to Rome and protected by his wealthy brother. Felix and Drusilla had children. One son, Marcus, was later stationed in Pompei, dying under the fall of molten ash blown out of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. There is always more of a story. In every name, in every person we meet there is more story.

We do not know what happened to Festus. He would leave Judea only after two years. Agrippa never married. Bernice continued to live with him. He pleaded with fellow Jews not to fight Rome. They did not listen. Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple burned down, a million Jews dead or sold into slavery. Agrippa and Bernice would follow Titus to Rome. Bernice will be sent away eventually. Agrippa will die there.

This moment is a crossroads. King, queen, governor, commanders, influential citizens, attendants, slaves, they all hear Paul's story: his witness to Jesus Christ. And King Agrippa understood Paul was speaking to him even as he told his own story. "You will persuade me to become a Christian."

²⁹ ...I wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.

What had Paul said to them?

¹⁸ ...open [your] eyes!...turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God...receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in [Jesus].’... ²⁰ ...repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance...²³ [believe] the Christ was to suffer, *and* that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles.”

Who in that room took a turn on the road? Who left the kingdom of darkness and entered into the Kingdom of light? At that moment or later in life? We don’t know. God knows. It is the task of the witness to proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and entrust the results to God. This movement ends in Acts 26:30-32.

Conclusion to the Defense Given (Acts 26:30-32)

³⁰ The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, ³¹ and when they had gone aside, they *began* talking to one another, saying, “This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment.” ³² And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

The gathered dignitaries turned from Paul’s words back to the task at hand. They had gathered to judge the prisoner and concluded, “This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment.” We recognize that statement to be the consistent judgment of all the Romans who have considered Paul’s case. He has committed no crime.

We also notice that Paul’s defense was not a defense of himself. The Book of Acts is not primarily about the defense of Paul. Paul would not want to be the primary focus. The book of Acts is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what Paul made this trial about. In telling his story the way he did, his primary goal was not his own defense. His primary goal was the salvation of his listeners. Amidst their own pomp and splendor, Paul lifted up the name of Jesus Christ. He gave the Gospel to them to judge. Paul will take this witness to Rome. He is not ashamed of the Gospel. He believes it to be the power of God for the salvation of the world. He will take this message to Caesar and to all who listen on the way.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 25:1-22. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Paul again faces the danger of ambush. He avoids the danger by appealing to Caesar. Did Paul need to appeal to Caesar? Why do you think Paul thought appealing to Caesar was necessary?
3. How are misconceptions about Paul corrected in 15:13-22? And by whom?
4. Read Acts 25:23-26:32. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
5. What new information do you see in this version of Paul’s testimony? How does Paul adjust this version for this specific audience?
6. Considering the way the trial ended, would you say that Paul’s goal in the trial was primarily his defense of primarily evangelism?

Lesson 33: Acts 27:1-28:6 God's Sovereignty Over the Journey

Introduction

²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶ *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷ *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 2 Corinthians 11:25-28

Paul has been through a lot. And God has always brought him through, though not always without pain and suffering. Paul has always escaped with his life and with something more, a continued resolve to trust God. The wisdom he offered to the Romans came from his own personal experience.

³ ...We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; ⁵ and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

Suffering has not driven Paul away from God. Suffering has solidified Paul's hope in God. Paul has an ongoing experience of the love of God poured out into his heart, even when he is hurting. He does not turn away, or grow bitter, or give up. He is convinced that God is good, that God is sovereign, and that God loves him. That does not mean God will keep him from danger or pain. That does mean God has a plan, and God will bring him through to glory.

That's a point I remember my sister-in-law made years ago on one of our family beach trips. She had completed chemotherapy treatment for the early stages of cancer. Thinking of how awful that must have been, I remember how calmly she spoke of God's sovereignty. He is in control. And He is good. And He loves me. That is not being naïve. That is fundamental truth. That is building your life on the rock that is God. That truth had worked its way from her head into her heart and soul through tribulation and perseverance to produce in her the reality of proven character and hope.

Paul makes that connection between God's love and sovereignty in Romans 8:28-29.

²⁸ And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. ²⁹ For those 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;

That is one of the major things life is all about. Life's struggles, life's pains, the things that make no sense. If we are in a relationship with God, where He has loved us and we have loved Him, that means that He has caught us, and He has this plan. And the plan here is that we'd be conformed to the image of His Son; that we become who we are truly created to be. That we become a true Adam, a true Eve. That we reflect God. It's not going to be complete till Heaven, and God will take us through all the ups and downs, the valleys of death to get us there. He will bring us to glory.

We have come to the final movement of Acts part VI. The sovereignty of God is on display in this final act of Acts; His sovereignty over all the events in Paul's life and His sovereignty over the growth of the Church. I will address this final movement in two lessons. In this lesson, Paul has yet another danger to avoid before Luke concludes the story.

While highlighting the sovereignty of God, the story of shipwreck in Acts 27 also provides a wonderful literary climax to the book of Acts. Is Paul going to take the Gospel to Rome, center of the western world? Or will he die trying? Acts part VI began in 19:21 with this declaration from Paul, "After I have been [to Jerusalem], I must also see Rome." Paul then escaped a mob in Ephesus, traveled to Jerusalem in spite of all the voices telling him danger is there. He escaped another mob

in the Temple, escaped an ambush, escaped another ambush, and now finally makes it on to a ship for a leisurely cruise to Rome.

No! Not a leisurely cruise to Rome! It could have been, but it wasn't. This is not the falling action of the story, just bringing us to the end. This is the climax. Does Paul make it to Rome or not? We thought he would, but then dark clouds gather on the horizon.

This chapter really deserves to be read through with all the dramatic pauses and intonation of a good story. The next time a big storm comes up wherever you are, try standing out on a balcony and reading through Acts 27. It's really a great story.

What I want to do now is read through the story at a slow pace with interruptions for interpretive commentary. Starting with chapter 27 in verse 1.

Danger Avoided (27:1-44)

¹ When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius. ² And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. ³ The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care.

So, if you have a map of the Mediterranean in your head, the ship carrying Paul is not headed out to sea directly west to Rome but is heading north up the coast and will then curve around to the west, following Asia Minor's coastline. This is a safer route. Also, the ship is Adramyttian, a city up and around the coast of Asia Minor close to Troas. They will have to switch ships at some point to catch one going to Italy. You can get some indication of how long this trip is going to be by noting on your map the short distance between Caesarea, where they just left, and Sidon, their first stop, which took a day to accomplish. This is going to be a trip of weeks or months, depending on the wind and on whether or not they can beat the onset of winter weather.

Paul is not alone on this trip. The "we" indicates that Luke is on board with him. So is Aristarchus, a believer from Thessalonica who joined Paul as a traveling companion on his third missionary journey. In fact, Aristarchus was one of two men dragged into the theater of Ephesus during the riot there. Later in his letter to the Colossians, Paul will refer to Aristarchus as his fellow prisoner, indicating that at some point in the future, Aristarchus will be imprisoned for his faith. So, like Paul, he will say he escaped a mob, he escaped a shipwreck, and he was imprisoned for his belief in Jesus.

Not only was Paul allowed to have traveling companions accompanying him on board, but the centurion also allowed him to disembark at Sidon and receive care from believers in that city. This continues the kind of low-level security Paul was under when he was in Caesarea.

⁴ From there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary. ⁵ When we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. ⁶ There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it. ⁷ When we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us to go farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone; ⁸ and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

Luke's style of writing, as we have seen, is historical. He regularly gives us names and details that ground his narrative in real human experience of the first century. He has done that well throughout Acts, and he really stepped up his game in this chapter, especially with all the sailing details. He speaks about the problems and decisions of the voyage with the familiarity an author might use today in talking about a car trip across Europe or air travel. A modern author could refer to traffic jams, or snowplows, or weather delays, or security lines with no explanation because readers would

either know what he is talking about from personal experience or know enough about modern travel to understand him and to feel that he is describing something very real in the present world.

Luke does that with sea-travel. He is not going to go into so much technical detail that a sailor would know exactly what is going on. He leaves open some questions. But he gives us plenty of detail to imagine the trip, especially if we have a general sense of travel by sea in a wind-powered ship.

Changing ships at Myra, the new ship continues to sail west along the Asia Minor coastline. They changed course turning south to Crete because the winds did not permit a westerly course. The comment, “we had sailed slowly for a good many days,” indicates either a lull in the wind or that they are sailing directly into the wind. Tacking back and forth, they could continue west but would gain ground slowly. After rounding Crete on the south side of the island and turning back to the west, the contrary winds again make progress difficult, and the ship stopped at the port called Fair Havens.

⁹ When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul *began* to admonish them, ¹⁰ and said to them, “Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.” ¹¹ But the centurion was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship than by what was being said by Paul. ¹² Because the harbor was not suitable for wintering, the majority reached a decision to put out to sea from there, if somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing southwest and northwest, and spend the winter *there*. ¹³ When a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had attained their purpose, they weighed anchor and *began* sailing along Crete, close *inshore*.

Winter was a dangerous season to travel the Mediterranean. Ships just did not sail. Captains had to judge in the autumn when to stop and find a place to winter in. The fast referred to in verse 9 would be the Day of Atonement. The reference might help establish the year of this journey. In 59 A.D. the Day of Atonement fell on October 5. Because the Jewish calendar was a lunar calendar, the Day of Atonement didn’t occur on the same day of the year on our calendar. It occurred in September both years before 59 A.D. and both years after 59 A.D. The October date is later, it fits well with the worry of the men on this voyage. If it is 59 A. D., attempting to sail the open water from Crete to Sicily would be quite risky.

Everyone agrees they should not try for Italy. Paul speaks up to say they should not even try for a more favorable port on Crete. You know, not one more day of travel is safe. As we’ve read, Paul has experienced three shipwrecks in his life. He spent a day and night in the deep. He is not a complete novice to the dangers of sea travel. But he is also not a sailor, and certainly not the captain. The fact that he has just said, “Men, I perceive...,” would be taken very seriously by Luke and Aristarchus, who put a lot of weight on the guidance Paul receives from God. But that trust in Paul’s insight is not shared by the centurion or the captain. At this point they are not trusting Paul.

The majority reached a decision to travel on to a port better suited for wintering. The ancient site of Phoenix did have two inlets, one from the southwest and another from the northwest, affirming Luke’s description. Fair Havens was open to three points of the compass. The next day, a moderate south wind seemed to affirm their decision to head further west to Phoenix, though every sailor knows how quickly the wind can change. The captain stays cautiously close to shore.

¹⁴ But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; ¹⁵ and when the ship was caught *in it* and could not face the wind, we gave way *to it* and let ourselves be driven along. ¹⁶ Running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the *ship’s* boat under control. ¹⁷ After they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on *the shallows* of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor and in this way let themselves be driven along.

In Split, Croatia I had my first experience of living somewhere where a wind had a name. The Bura blew down the coastal mountains out to sea, sometimes with hurricane force winds that twisted metal road signs. The Euraquilo, a northeaster, was one of the worst-case scenarios for Paul's ship. The powerful gale blowing down from the mountains of Crete forced the ship out to sea. In other circumstances the ship's boat could be set out with rowers to tug the ship along. In the face of Euraquila, the sailors barely rescued the boat, pulling it out of the water. And then Luke mentions that they were going by a small island, and that gave them just enough of a buffer to be able to accomplish that, to get the ships both safely aboard. The wind and waves pressured the ship so much that the wooden planks expanded, leaving gaps for water to pour into the hull. And that's why cables were wrapped around the ship to keep the planks together. A sea anchor was set out to create drag on the ship and slow its headlong plunge into waves as she was given up to the driving wind. The hope now was just to stay alive and intact until the wind blew itself out.

¹⁸ The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo; ¹⁹ and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰ Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing *us*, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.

You notice the understatement there, "No small storm was assailing us." This wasn't just a moment of wind blowing off of Crete. That is what drove them out to sea. But this is a major storm that they are in. It did not abate the next day. It did not abate after three days. So further precaution was taken to lighten the ship, so that it might ride higher in the water and pass over underwater dangers, such as the sand shoals off the coast of North Africa. If the wind keeps like this, it could blow them all the way to that continent. Some of the cargo and the ship's tackle was thrown overboard. Ship's carried extra sails, an extra mast beam and other equipment needed for repairs. So, this is a desperate, real emergency situation if they are throwing that kind of tackle overboard.

²¹ When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. ²² "Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but *only* of the ship. ²³ "For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, ²⁴ saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.' ²⁵ "Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ "But we must run aground on a certain island."

Everyone goes days without eating. Much of the food may have been washed overboard or spoiled by sea water. The continued strain to keep the ship afloat may have allowed little time day or night to eat. The storm would make preparing food difficult. Whatever the combination of reasons, the men are not eating.

Paul speaks into this desperate situation. Though, the last thing anyone wants to hear is, "I told you so. I told you not to set sail." Still, Paul says it, so his listeners might take heart to his message for them now, that they might trust him now. The message has to do with God's plan for Paul. These words are the whole reason this story of storm and shipwreck has been included in this theological narrative of Acts. Luke included it to put an exclamation mark on the truth that God has a sovereign plan of salvation for all peoples. That plan does include the person of Paul. But this is greater than the person of Paul. God has decided that His Gospel message will go to Rome, and He has decided it is going to go to Rome through this messenger. And so, the Gospel is going to go to Rome through this messenger. Sailors know what it is to be dependent on forces beyond their control. God does not know what that is like. God is not dependent on other forces. God is always in control. Paul will stand before Caesar because God wills it.

This is a foundational theme of Acts. God's sovereignty has run throughout. Remember the words in Peter's Pentecost sermon,

²² “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)

And again in 4:27-28. This is the conviction of the believing Church as they are gathered to pray,

²⁷ “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, ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

Whatever the source of this storm, whether purely natural or whether also demonic, the storm does not happen if God does not permit the storm to happen. It is not only God’s will that Paul be saved from the storm. It is God’s will that Paul be in the storm. That is true of every storm we encounter in life. Whether the crisis we face is purely natural, the result of actions by others, or the consequence of our own choices, whatever the source, human or demonic, the crisis does not happen if God does not allow it to happen. God has a multitude of reasons for allowing crises to happen. There may be many reasons for this storm. One clear reason for this storm is to identify Paul as God’s messenger and so allow Paul to participate in bringing glory to God. These men know this storm is beyond the power of any man to control. As the sailors who threw Jonah into the sea recognized it was Jonah’s God with whom they had to deal, so also these men are going to eventually recognize they are dealing not with Paul, but with the God who Paul serves.

Again, I think Luke and Aristarchus would receive Paul’s word with great encouragement, since they already trust in Paul’s walk with the Lord. They would believe him when he claimed an angel appeared and spoke to him. Luke does not report any immediate effect on the others. We don’t have reason to believe that they started to trust Paul, or they believe him. As far as they know, it was an angel, or it was a demon that appeared to Paul. But we can be sure they are going to remember these words later.

²⁷ But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors *began* to surmise that they were approaching some land. ²⁸ They took soundings and found *it to be* twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found *it to be* fifteen fathoms. ²⁹ Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak.

That last phrase just hit me. We all know what that is like, going through life, going through a dark night, and just wishing for daybreak, just wishing light would shine into the darkness. I take the fourteenth night here in this text to be the fourteenth night since the storm struck at Crete. So, we’ve had two weeks, being driven by the storm. Taking soundings required dropping a line from the ship to the bottom of the sea. Twenty fathoms is 40 yards or 36 meters. Just a little further on, that depth shortens to 30 yards or 27 meters. Because of that, because of the shortening of the depth, the sailors fear they may be approaching land. More anchors are thrown out, not only to create drag but with the hope that if they are approaching land, the ship will be held in place until daylight when they can see what land may appear and decide what to do.

The reference to the Adriatic Sea in verse 27 makes me wonder if the maps generally depicting the ship’s journey in the storm are way off base. I lived on the Adriatic Sea in Split for eleven years. It is the body of water bordered on one side by modern day Albania, Montenegro, Croatia, little bit of Bosnia, and Slovenia, and on the other side by Italy. Just imagine the back of the boot of Italy. That’s the Adriatic Sea. The Greek in Acts 28:1 will identify the island where the shipwrecked as “Melita.” Two islands shared that name. An argument has been made that this Melita is not the southern Melita known as “Malta” but northern Melita which is now the Croatian island of Mljet in the Adriatic

Sea. So, could our Bible maps be way off? Is it Malta or is it Mljet? Three points are enough to establish Paul was stranded on Malta.

First, the body of water in the middle of the Mediterranean on the way from Crete to Malta was also referred to as “the Sea of Adria”. Some Bibles make the better choice of using that translation, rather than the more confusing translation “Adriatic Sea”. The second-century mathematician and geographer Ptolemy distinguished the Sea of Adria in the central Mediterranean from the gulf of Adria, which is the Adriatic Sea. Josephus also tells of his own shipwreck in the Sea of Adria which happened in the Mediterranean on the way to Italy.³¹ If we lived around the time of Luke’s writing, we would see no conflict in identifying the body of water between Crete and Malta as the Sea of Adria.

Second, according to Bruce, the first identification that Melita is not Malta, but the Croatian island of Mljet seems to have been made by the tenth-century Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus.³² That makes the reference appear ancient from our modern perspective, you know, wow, it was the tenth century, but in reality, it also nine hundred years after the actual events without supporting evidence from earlier sources. So, we don’t have a credible reference to say that this is Mljet.

Third, the northeaster Euraquilo that Luke says blew the ship off Crete could not have blown the ship north up into the Adriatic Sea. To get the ship up into the Adriatic requires going against the plain understanding of the text that works very well when we recognize the Sea of Adria as a valid, ancient name for the body of water east of Malta. Malta is the body of land the ship approaches as the sailors take their soundings.

³⁰ But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the *ship’s* boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow, ³¹ Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, “Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved.” ³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the *ship’s* boat and let it fall away. ³³ Until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. ³⁴ “Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation, for not a hair from the head of any of you will perish.” ³⁵ Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶ All of them were encouraged and they themselves also took food. ³⁷ All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons. ³⁸ When they had eaten enough, they *began* to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Paul had advised wintering in Fair Havens. He had also sought to give them courage, telling them an angel told him the ship must run aground but all would be saved. Now again, Paul gives advice and encouragement. And it is based on that message he got, “Everybody is going to be okay.” This time it is heeded. The soldiers heard Paul, and had looked at the sailors, and they believed they were trying to escape the ship. Paul then repeats his prophecy of rescue, “not a hair from the head of any of you will perish.” They take his advice to eat, and they are actually encouraged.

The great Christian preacher and leader, John Wesley wrote in his diary about a storm that overtook his ship while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. He could not get over this group of Moravian men, women, and children who gathered on the deck to worship and sing hymns during the storm. Wesley, on the other hand, hid in his cabin through the storm. When it had abated, Wesley asked one of the men how they could all sing so calmly with the wind and the waves raging around. The

³¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 489-490.

³² Bruce, 490.

man replied, “We are not afraid to die.” After arriving in Georgia, Wesley followed up with the Moravians and eventually back in England he came to true faith in Jesus because of this moment, because of their witness to calmness that he saw in the midst of the storm.

I wonder what kind of impact Paul’s calm assurance through two weeks of storm made on the sailors and the soldiers with him. What would they think or feel on this night as Paul lifted up bread, giving “thanks to God in the presence of all,” as he “broke it and began to eat”? It is hard as a Christian not to hear a reference to the Lord’s supper in the way Luke wrote that. Especially when we consider he is breaking the bread at night, one last supper before either death or rescue. Probably only Luke or Aristarchus could have made that connection to Jesus.

But all of them, all two hundred and seventy-six, would have the opportunity to see a man who truly believed in Jesus, who trusted in the word he had received from God, who believed in the sovereign love of that God. This time Paul’s words did sink in at least on some level and the men are encouraged.

That encouragement they received from Paul’s faith did not lead them to wait and to see what would happen. You know, let’s sit back and let God rescue us. The encouragement led them to keep fighting for life. After eating, they got back to work. Thrusting in God does not contradict taking the rational steps that are under our own power to make it through a storm. We see now that this was a grain ship, delivering food to Rome from a distant province. There is no hope for the ship anymore. There is a renewed hope for life. The men throw the remaining cargo of wheat overboard.

³⁹ When day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could. ⁴⁰ And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders; and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach. ⁴¹ But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern *began* to be broken up by the force *of the waves*. ⁴² The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none *of them* would swim away and escape; ⁴³ but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, ⁴⁴ and the rest *should follow*, some on planks, and others on various things from the ship. And so it happened that they all were brought safely to land.

One remaining, climatic scare occurs within sight of land and safety. In what is now known on Malta as St. Paul’s Bay, a smaller island shelters the bay. That smaller island is separated from Malta by a narrow channel about a hundred yards or ninety meters wide. That channel is an example of a place described by Luke as “where two seas met.” Stuck fast on an unseen barrier of hardened mud, waves began to batter the ship to pieces. Countless sailors and passengers have died through the centuries in just such a situation, run aground offshore with land in sight. It is now every man for himself. Some will live. But only some. And yet, out of this impossible situation, even with sword-happy soldiers ready to kill the prisoners on board, God’s sovereign hand brings every single soul safe to land.

From a literary point of view, this is the climax of Acts. Chapter 28 provides falling action that will bring us to resolution. God has brought Paul safely through once again. The travel to Rome will be mostly uneventful from here on out. Well, except for one event.

This final movement of Acts part VI is following our standard structure. Danger has been avoided. That was this section. God is sovereign over the storm. Let’s conclude this lesson with the misconception that is corrected in 28:1-6 and we will save the defense given for our final, next lesson. This is Acts 28:1-6, misconception corrected.

Misconception Corrected (1-6)

¹ When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. ² The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in

and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all. ³ But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand. ⁴ When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they *began* saying to one another, “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.” ⁵ However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶ But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and *began* to say that he was a god.

The natives receive all the survivors with kindness. Shipwrecks were not an uncommon event. The islanders could see the ship breaking up offshore in the waves. They prepared a fire in advance to warm the wet and weary victims of tragedy. But when Paul is bitten, saved from shipwreck only to die hours later by snake poison, the islanders jump to the conclusion he is not a victim of natural tragedy. “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.” That’s a consistent conclusion based on their understanding of how the gods work.

The inhabitants had enough experience with this kind of snake to know Paul was a dead man. So, when nothing happened, “They changed their minds and *began* to say that he was a god.” They are not far wrong in their interpretation that the gods are behind this event. It is not the gods. It is God. God has again allowed danger to befall Paul that through his rescue he would have credibility in the eyes of the islanders. The misconception of the islanders is not totally corrected. They recognize that Paul is not under sentence of the gods for crimes he has committed, but they do think he is a god. And as we saw on Paul’s first missionary journey, correcting that misconception does not necessarily lead to a positive outcome.

Spoiler alert, in this case the outcome will be positive. God’s sovereign plan requires that Paul stand before Caesar in Rome. And that’s where we will be next time in our last lesson of this series Interpreting Acts.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 27:1-44. Try reading this narrative out loud with appropriate dramatic stress. If you can read it near a large body of water that would be ideal. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Luke has provided for us a wonderfully detailed narrative of peril on the sea in the first century. What are some examples of narrative detail provided by Luke that help you imagine the reality of this journey? Details about the sea and land, or weather, or the ship, or the sailor’s actions?
3. How are the sailors’ and soldiers’ opinion of Paul changed through the narrative?
4. What promise is Paul trusting in? How does he express his trust?
5. What is the moment of climax in this story and how is it resolved? (Imagine that scene in a movie.)
6. What is the misconception voiced in 27:1-6 and how is that misconception corrected?
7. Consider back over the five sections of Acts Part VI, starting in 19:21. What dangers has Paul avoided? What misconceptions were corrected? What defenses have been given?
8. From this information, what are five or six points you could make if you were asked to defend Paul during his trial before Caesar?

Lesson 34: Acts 28:7-31 The Kingdom of God

Introduction

The book of Acts opened with a question about God's kingdom. The book of Acts closes with the preaching of God's Kingdom. Throughout we have used the language of Acts speaking about the spread of the Gospel or the spread of the Church from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the outer ends of the Earth. The Gospel spreads by the power of the Holy Spirit through human witness.

The Kingdom of God language is not primary to Luke's narration. It does not appear in any of the other speeches given by Peter, or Stephen, or Paul. Luke emphasizes the more personal or individual language used by Christian leaders in evangelism - the language of repentance, belief in Jesus, forgiveness, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Still, reference to the Kingdom occurs six times as a consistent summary of the Gospel message. Philip preached the Kingdom of God to the Samaritans. Paul strengthened the new disciples of his first missionary journey with reference to the Kingdom of God. Paul also referred to the Kingdom of God both in the synagogue of Ephesus and when he was speaking to the Ephesian elders.

Kingdom of God language occurs much more in the synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus spoke of the Kingdom as an already and not yet reality. In Luke 17:20, he says, "The kingdom of God is in your midst." Another possible translation would be, "The Kingdom of God is within you." That is the "already." The Kingdom of God IS in your midst. Jesus also taught His disciples to pray for the Kingdom to come, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That's the "not yet." Well, that prayer encapsulates two ideas. The Kingdom of God is present when the people of God yield to Him as King. When we do the will of God on Earth as it is done in Heaven, we are a spiritual extension of God's Kingdom. The prayer also looks ahead to the physical reign of God on Earth described in Revelation, where His enemies are vanquished and His subjects live in His will, in the light of His presence. On Earth as in Heaven.

The Kingdom of God is a major motif running through the Bible that brings together several significant theological themes. When I teach about the Kingdom of God, I emphasize six themes that make up kingdom. Just think about it. What do you need to have kingdom? What is absolutely necessary? What do you have to have, to have a kingdom? The two essential elements are a King and a People. Without those there's no even concept of kingdom. Four more themes are present in the Biblical understanding of kingdom: a covenant, a covenant mediator, a land, and a palace or a temple.

And we can follow each of those elements of kingdom through Scripture as a major theological theme: the Covenant as a theme; or Temple as a theme; the mediators of Covenant as a theme. Each of these aspects of Kingdom takes on a new or fulfilled aspect after the coming of Jesus Christ. The King is Jesus, who reigns from Heaven. The King's will is now expressed through the New Covenant, which explains both how we are able to be in relationship with God, and how we live as citizens of the Kingdom. Whereas the servant Moses was the mediator of the Old Covenant, the Son Himself came to mediate the New. Our land is no longer the geo-political land of Israel. Our land is currently spiritual, and this is one of the major aspects of the "already, not yet." We are citizens of a Heavenly Kingdom, and we already live in that Kingdom in the spiritual sense. But our land is going to become physical when God renews Heaven and Earth. The Temple, the place God dwells, is no longer a physical building, but is now with individual believers. God indwells you and the community of believers. God indwells the Church. We are the place God reveals His presence. And the people of the Kingdom are no longer centered around and defined by the land Israel and the Temple within that land. The New Covenant people of God are centered around and defined by belief in Jesus. It is everybody in every land who believes in Jesus. And that is a huge difference.

We refer to all of these realities when we use the phrase, “Kingdom of God.” It’s a motif that covers a lot of theological ideas, or realities. To simplify, we can think primarily of the reign of God expressed through those who have entered His Kingdom by faith in Jesus. “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” So, thinking mainly of King, and People, and that King’s right authority, and our loving obedience. We will talk more about the Kingdom when we come to each reference in our concluding text of Acts.

From a literary point of view, our final movement of Acts part VI balances the first movement of Acts part VI. All three defenses given in the middle movements occurred in the context of trial and investigation made by Roman officials. Paul is on trial. The defense given in our first movement consisted of the miracle of raising a dead boy, followed by words to the Ephesian elders. Here in the last movement the defense parallels that pattern with the miracle of healing a sick man, followed by words to the Jewish elders of Rome.

This whole movement that began with shipwreck and is going to end in Rome provides a conclusion to the book of Acts. The danger avoided gave us a climax. Paul was rescued during that climax and given a promise that he must stand before Caesar. The misconception corrected on the island of Malta and the defense given of miracle and words to Jewish elders in Rome provide falling action and resolution. The falling action after the climatic shipwreck are the miracles on Malta and the concluding stages of the journey to Rome. We are going to finally get to Rome. The action is winding down. Though, once we get to Rome we will have to ask, “Exactly how does the end of Acts provide resolution?”, because it really feels like it leaves Paul’s fate hanging. We don’t know what happens. So, does it provide resolution and if so, how?

I’ll address the defense given in three parts: the miracle of healing; the journey from Malta to Rome; and Paul’s concluding speech to the Jews. Here is the miracle in Acts 28:7-31.

Defense Given (7-31)

Defense Through Miracle (7-10)

⁷ Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days. ⁸ And it happened that the father of Publius was lying *in bed* afflicted with *recurrent* fever and dysentery; and Paul went in *to see* him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. ⁹ After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured. ¹⁰ They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied *us* with all we needed.

Luke gives us one specific miracle of healing as a representation of many miracles God performed through Paul on Malta. The power of the miracles again affirms Paul as God’s messenger. It’s part of the defense. Why would God continue to do all these great healings through Paul if Paul is a criminal? The story also works for Luke as he begins to wrap up his narrative. Paul began his first missionary journey on the island of Cyprus where he was eventually brought before the Roman governor. There, Paul spoke, a false magician was blinded, and the governor believed. Here, Paul is eventually brought before the head man of the island, he heals the man’s father, and he is favored.

The balance created here is a mark of Luke’s style as a historian. We have seen throughout how he recognizes connections and parallels in historical events, and then he arranges his narrative in a historically accurate and artistic way. The story of Paul began as he journeyed from Antioch to the island of Cyprus. The story of Paul ends as he moves from the island of Malta to Rome.

Completion of the Journey to Rome (11-16)

The journey continues in Acts 28:11-16.

¹¹ At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead. ¹² After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. ¹³ From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day

later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli.¹⁴ There we found *some* brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome.¹⁵ And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.¹⁶ When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

The dangerous sailing period ended at the beginning of February. Ships wintered three to four months. I thought the Twin Brothers would be Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, and wondered why they would be on a ship based in Alexandria, Egypt. Bruce corrected me. The twins are the Castor and Pollux of Greek mythology, the Gemini, patrons for sailors.

Syracuse is on the southeastern corner of Sicily, the large island that looks like a ball being kicked by the boot of Italy. It makes sense as a port of call for ships traveling from Malta, as does Rhegium, situated right on the toe of Italy's boot. Puteoli is two days further up the coast in the same bay as Naples and Pompeii. Puteoli is not a name widely known now, but at one time it was a major Roman port where ships from around the Empire would dock to unload wares that continued to Rome by land. Since the time of Claudius grain ships would continue further, putting in at a new port closer to Rome, but passengers would still disembark at Puteoli.

Josephus claims the Jewish community in Puteoli was the second oldest in Italy, second only to Rome. So, though we may have not heard of Puteoli, it's not surprising Paul found a Christian fellowship in this important port city. Close to Puteoli the travelers would have encountered the famous Roman road called, the Appian Way. Following the Appian Way, they would come first to Three Taverns, that's about 33 miles (53 kilometers) from Rome, and then the Market of Appius just 10 miles or 16 kilometers from Rome. Believers from Rome came and met Paul's group at both places. Apparently, the week-long stay in Puteoli allowed news of their arrival to precede them to Rome. Luke tells us Paul was greatly encouraged by the show of Christian fellowship.

Later in verse 30, we will be told that Paul stayed in rented quarters. So, the house he is staying in was probably provided by a wealthy patron in Rome. Paul continued to be under a light form of arrest watched over by a single soldier. He would be chained to that soldier by the wrist with a chain that allowed room for movement. Soldiers would rotate every four hours. Imagine how many soldiers heard the Good News of Jesus Christ, either in direct conversation with Paul, or by listening in on his conversations with others! The description provided here at the end of Acts of Paul chained to a soldier meeting with visitors fits a comment he is going to make later in Philippians 1:13 where he writes, "my imprisonment... has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else." The praetorian guard is Caesar's legion, Caesar's guard. And all these soldiers are rotating through, listening to Paul for two years as he is continually witnessing and teaching everybody that comes to see him.

Defense Through Paul's Words to the Jewish Elders (17-29)

We now come to Paul's seventh and last speech in the book of Acts. He is speaking to the Jewish leaders of Rome. Luke does not really give us his speech. He gives us two summaries and a rebuke. First, Paul summarizes his treatment over the last two years. Then Luke summarizes Paul's teaching to the Jewish leaders. And the text ends with Paul rebuking them.

The summary of Paul's treatment by Jews and Romans over the past two years is in 28:17-22.

¹⁷ After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he *began* saying to them, "Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.¹⁸ "And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death.¹⁹ "But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation.²⁰ "For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am

wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.”²¹ They said to him, “We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you.”²² “But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.”

Paul does not shy away from engaging the Jewish leaders in Rome. He has felt an obligation to preach first to the children of Israel everywhere he’s gone, in every city. He doesn’t change that now. He invites Jewish leaders to come to him, since he cannot go to them this time. The group that comes is likely composed of leaders from many synagogues that are scattered throughout Rome.

Paul is forthright about his treatment by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. He does not smooth out the seriousness of the rejection he experienced. Though he does tell the story carefully, recognizing potential concerns of this particular audience.

“Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

Paul claims not to have acted against “the customs of our fathers.” That is a debatable point from the Jewish perspective. Paul has proclaimed freedom from Old Covenant law for both Jew and Gentile. These Jewish leaders would be aware of Jews in Rome who, at the very least, began associating with unclean Gentiles after belief in Jesus.

Paul is able to make the claim that he has not acted against “the customs of our fathers” because of the care he took in limiting his own personal freedom in the grace of Jesus Christ, particularly when he was in Israel. He did not have to follow food laws, or make sacrifice, or go through ritual purity. But in order not to set up a needless stumbling block, he did follow those laws when among Jews. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:20, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews.”

Paul provides an important example for Christians of all times in all places in his strong commitment to the principles of freedom in grace, combined with his personal choice to restrict his own liberty out of love for other people. Paul’s choice to restrict his liberty has enabled him to remove one of the barriers that might immediately shut down his witness to these Jewish leaders. He wants them to know that he is not preaching against their customs.

Paul also attempts to counter the emotional barrier of fear that these Jewish leaders might be feeling as they learn a famous Jewish Rabbi converted to Christianity is set to be judged before Caesar. What is he going to say? What trouble might he cause for the Jews in Rome? Only ten years have passed since Claudius expelled Jews from Rome, and that may have been motivated by disturbances over Jesus who Suetonius called, “a certain Chrestus.” Claudius’ expulsion was probably ended when he died five years later, and Nero became emperor. So, they have only been back in Rome for five years. With that major upheaval still very much impressed on the Jewish community of Rome, we can expect that they would be very nervous about what the Jewish Christian Paul might say to Caesar.

Paul’s words seemed designed to allay that fear. He insists he is innocent. But he does not bear any grudge against his own people. He says that specifically, “I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my own nation.” He does not plan to accuse or defame the Jews of Rome. In fact, he says, “I am on trial for the hope of Israel.” That will be his message to Caesar.

He does not get into the unfair treatment that he experienced in Jerusalem. He does not go into the mob riot. He simply says he was delivered into the hands of the Romans. He makes the point Luke has been making through these chapters, “when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death.”

Not mentioning the mob, Paul also does not mention the planned ambushes. He is not getting into the behind-the-scenes motives and schemes. He simply says, “But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation.” Paul’s argument is with the governing establishment of Israel and against the religious leaders who have rejected Jesus Christ. He loves the Jewish people. He wrote to the Roman believers,

“I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart, for I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh (Romans 9:2-3).”

He loves his people. He does not want to accuse the nation. In fact, he claims to wear his current chain of imprisonment “for the sake of the hope of Israel.” That chain is a reference to the chain attaching him to the Roman guard, who is listening to the whole conversation. “The hope of Israel” is a phrase we have already encountered. It is the hope of all the promises of the Old Testament coming true in a new Heaven and a new Earth with a new Jerusalem. Paul claims that the fulfillment of all the promises depends upon the death and resurrection of the person, of the Messiah, who is Jesus Christ.

That’s Paul’s summary of the events that have brought him to this point. “I have done nothing against the Jewish people. I was unjustly imprisoned. My only option was to appeal to Caesar. I am arguing for the hope of Israel.”

²¹ They said to him, “We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you.

That does not mean they are positively inclined to Paul.

²² “But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.”

There must be enmity between the synagogues of Rome and the Jews who have stolen away the Gentile God-fearers of Rome and set up a rival community. That community has become even more Gentile in nature since the expulsion of Claudius, when strong Jewish Christian leaders like Aquilla and Priscilla were forced from Rome. That affected both synagogue and church. Over the past ten years, we can imagine a separation between church and synagogue in Rome, so that these Jewish leaders speak of the Christian movement as something quite separate or other. And they would like to hear Paul’s views. They have already heard the views of less distinguished Jewish Christians who were from Rome, then came to Jerusalem and came back but they would like to hear this Rabbi’s views.

“Spoken against everywhere” is rather strong, and we need to remember who is saying that. The Jewish communities everywhere Paul has gone have split between those who believe in Jesus Christ and those who reject Jesus Christ. We have not encountered an example where a whole synagogue believed and became a Messianic fellowship. It is always the Christians leaving. The record of Acts shows a consistent pattern of believers in Jesus being pushed out of the synagogue or choosing to leave because of animosity against their faith.

So we can assume that those who remain in the synagogue, holding onto a Judaism separated from fulfillment in Jesus, speak badly of the Christian movement. So, when these Jewish leaders say, “concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere,” they are not speaking for everybody in the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire. They are speaking of the reports they have gotten from Jewish synagogues that have split over the issue of Jesus.

Okay, so Paul has summarized the past two years. Luke is now going to summarize for us Paul’s conversations with these Roman Jews. This is Acts 28:23-24.

²³ When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. ²⁴ Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.

This summary is representative of the Gospel message that has been preached throughout Acts. There are three phrases here: first, “testifying about the kingdom of God;” second, “trying to persuade them concerning Jesus;” third, “from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.”

As with the book of Acts, the concept of the “Kingdom of God” underlies Paul’s theology in his letters, but it is not language that he often uses. The phrase just pops up. Paul speaks several times

of inheriting the Kingdom of God. In that sense he is looking forward to the “not yet”, to the second coming of Jesus Christ. He does say write in Colossians 1:13 that God has “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” That speaks to the already present spiritual reality of the Kingdom. Everyone who has yielded to Christ as King has been transferred into His Kingdom. Paul also wrote in Romans 14:17, “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” In the “already” Kingdom we are talking about the transformation of the Spirit in our lives. When we live according to the will of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are displaying the values of the Kingdom.

Paul’s preaching about the Kingdom, and we can only imagine how much he got into, but what we know is that it is tightly connected to persuading them about Jesus. “Christ” means, “Anointed One.” It means “Son of David,” it means, “the King.” So, the Kingdom of God is a Kingdom under Jesus Christ. Preaching that Jesus is the Christ led to accusations that Paul envisioned a political movement. The Thessalonians brought a charge of sedition against Paul arguing that following Christ constituted a challenge to Caesar’s rule. “[These Christians] all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” We have argued through Acts, based on Jesus’ own words to Pilate, that the early Christian teachers understood the Kingdom of Christ to be spiritually defined, not politically defined. They did not seek to set up Christian kingdoms on earth. They sought to establish spiritual assemblies or bodies of Christ in all kingdoms on earth. And that is important for us to recognize. If what is our mission as the Church is our mission to set up a Christian Kingdom, it is not necessarily a bad thing, but is that our mission? The mission of the Church in Acts is the same as the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20; we are to go and make disciples or in Acts, that we are to be the witnesses for Christ from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, to the outer ends of the Earth; and that is both the geographical move “out”, and it’s a ethnic or cultural move “out” - to go to all peoples. That is the Kingdom of God that is being set up in the “now,” before the second coming of Christ, is that we bring people into spiritual relationship with God. And we do as Paul did. we try to establish “ekklesia,” assemblies, communities of believers in Jesus Christ, whose lives will be transformative in their families and in their communities. Through them, the Gospel will go out into their city and beyond their city.

So, Paul was talking about the Kingdom of God to these Jewish leaders. He was persuading them about Jesus Christ, who was the King of that Kingdom. And there is a final phrase here, that he was persuading “them from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” The Old Testament is a great starting point with the Jews. We can see why he would start there with them, but it is not only that. This is how the book of Acts began, with Jesus revealing Himself from the Old Testament Scriptures to His disciples. This is the background and context of their witness, that they give witness to Christ grounded in the teaching of the Scriptures. Full understanding of the New Covenant comes from an understanding of the Old. It is not difficult to show that in all of Paul’s letters he is quoting and referencing Old Covenant. Since we are in Rome, I’ll use the letter of Romans as a quick example. That letter begins and ends by establishing the Gospel’s connection to the Old Covenant. So, in the beginning, Romans 1:1-2,

¹ Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures...

A reference to the Prophets, then at the end of Romans 16:25-26,

²⁵ Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, ²⁶ but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, *leading* to the obedience of faith...

It is a significant mistake to separate our preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the revelation of Jesus Christ that occurs in the Law of Moses and the Scriptures of the Prophets. We rightly depend more on the New Covenant for our witness today because we have the New Covenant, but it is

grounded through all the history of Scriptures to the whole narrative, beginning with the book of Genesis, moving through the Law of Moses, and through the Writings and the Prophets.

As Paul spoke from morning until evening, “some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.” Paul does not create division. Jesus creates division. We have seen this pattern of division in all the synagogues where Paul has preached. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not something that can both be believed and be rejected. A relativistic approach to truth is rejection of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel presents absolute truths to be affirmed or denied. Jesus is the Jesus of the Bible, Old and New Covenant, or He is not Jesus at all.

Paul has a lot of experience debating the Gospel of Jesus with his Jewish countrymen. And led by that experience and by the Holy Spirit, Paul concluded the day with a rebuke. This is Acts 28:25-29.

²⁵ And when they did not agree with one another, they *began* leaving after Paul had spoken one *parting* word, “The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, ²⁶ saying, ‘GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY, “YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; ²⁷ FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES; OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES, AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.” ’ ²⁸ “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.” ²⁹ When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves.

As a first impression, this rebuke seems to come too quickly in Paul’s preaching to this group. Will he not give them a chance to consider such astounding claims being made about Jesus? Must they believe in a day? Well, no. For close to thirty years, the synagogues of Rome have wrestled with the question of Jesus Christ. Our best guess is that the community of believers in Rome came into existence when Jewish pilgrims believed at Pentecost and then they returned to the synagogues of Rome. The claims of Christ are not new to this group.

Paul knows what is going to happen with these more conservative Jews. They are not among the ones who believed and eventually left the synagogue. They are the ones who stayed. They will leave Paul and settle back into the rationalizations they have already used to reject Jesus. The majority will not believe. But some have begun to be persuaded by Paul. And they need a jolt, a kick to push them over. And Paul gives them one. He compares the spiritual resistance that they see in the synagogue to the people of Israel in Isaiah’s day. Just as that people refused to believe, so also the contemporary people of Israel find security in their man-made theology. That is a message for these on the fence. Don’t be overcome by the fact that the majority refuse! That doesn’t mean they are right. In fact, they might be spiritually resistant to the truth. They are comfortable in their own definition of righteousness, their own definition of God. And Paul is saying that spiritual obstinance is not new. They may hear words of Scripture, but they do not understand what they hear. They may see prophecy unfolding before them in the death of Jesus and the response of Gentiles, but they do not perceive the significance of those events. They may have a heart for their traditions and communities, this kind of a zeal for their man-made righteousness, but their hearts are dull the Spirit of God. They have closed their eyes and they have shut their ears. They are like a child who had screwed his eyes shut, so as not to see what he does not want to see. If they would just open their eyes a little and try to see, then God would come and give them sight and heal their hearts.

Paul concludes with the declaration that the Jews don’t like but these are the Prophets, this is the promise of God, “Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.” The story of Acts has shown these two things: a largescale rejection of the Gospel by God’s Old Covenant people the Jews, and a largescale reception of the Gospel throughout the Gentile world.

The book of Acts concludes with this sixth and final summary statement found in Acts 28:30-31.

Summary statement (28:30-31)

³⁰ And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, ³¹ preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

I like that! But it is not the resolution to the book of Acts we might expect. During the storm at sea the angel of the Lord informed Paul that he must stand before Caesar. Why does Luke end before Paul stands before Caesar? We are just left hanging. And we are really left hanging in history: we don't really know what happens to Paul from this point out. We have some future letters, and they describe him in prison. We have some letters that make him sound like his life is near end, but we don't know. After these two years we get no historical narrative about Paul.

One reason Luke might end here is that Paul's day in court has not yet come, and he is producing Acts as a defense for Paul before the trial.

That is technically possible. I think it is quite right to accept that Luke used the Gospel of Mark in writing the Gospel of Luke. I think Mark came first and then all the text that you see is the same in Matthew and Luke is that way because both of those authors used Mark as a source. So, if Acts is going to be written now, then Luke must be written, and Mark must be written before this point of time. That is technically possible. Mark depended on his close relationship to Peter, and Church tradition says Peter died in Nero's persecution in 64 A.D. So, if Mark wrote his Gospel a couple of years before Peter's death, it is possible that Luke completed was able to have access to Mark, especially if Mark came to Rome, if Peter was in prison, and so when Mark finishes it and Luke has access to that, he could have completed his Gospel and the book of Acts by 62 A. D. The tightness of that schedule, though, means we ought to consider the possibility that Luke completed Acts after 62 A. D. And if he did, why did not he not tell us whether Paul was released or not? And that is one of those questions we can only think about, but we can't be sure.

A plausible reason is that whatever did happen - whether Paul was released or whether Paul was kept in prison - whatever the outcome, it was well known to everyone who would be reading Acts. And Luke has solidly presented the Roman position that Paul ought to be set free. And so, if it goes bad for Paul before Caesar and Caesar decides to keep him in prison for some reason, Acts is justifying Paul. It is saying everybody knows about that decision. It was an unjust decision. Here is the real story. But this story is not ultimately about Paul. We don't have to resolve what is happening to Paul. This story is ultimately about defining and defending the Gospel of Jesus Christ as that Gospel spreads from Jerusalem outwards, eventually to Rome. This is the story of the kingdom of God being established on earth.

Conclusion

That is the resolution Luke is giving us. In the beginning of Acts, Jesus' disciples asked Him whether now was the time for restoring the Kingdom of Israel. They misunderstood the mission of the Church. Peter, going through Pentecost and as he is growing in his understanding, not much later he preached, "heaven must receive [Jesus] until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient time (Acts 3:21)." The physical establishment of the Kingdom of Christ on Earth belongs to the future renewal of Heaven and Earth. That is not the mission of the Church now. The mission of the Church now is Acts 1:8,

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

Against all odds, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the gospel went forth. From a scared and oppressed group of 70 men and women praying in an upper room, the Gospel message exploded on Pentecost to be established by the thousands in Jerusalem. The persecution that sought to extinguish the flame kicked embers out into Samaria and Judea. And by the bright light of Jesus' appearing to Paul, a

messenger was chosen to set the Gospel loose from Jewish tradition and culture, so that it might spread through the Empire, even to Rome.

Luke chose to focus on the evangelistic ministries of Peter and Paul. We also recognize in his narrative the importance of what Michael Green calls “amateur evangelists,” like those who returned to their hometowns after Pentecost and those who were scattered by the persecution after Stephen’s death. Normal believers who went everywhere gossiping the Gospel in synagogues, and homes, and in the shops of the marketplace. They went with the joy and conviction that came from their personal experience of life transformation in Jesus.

The book of Acts is a story of individuals who believe and new communities that are formed.

Groups do not repent and believe. Individuals repent and believe. Even when we are told the whole household of Cornelius believed, we know that means each individual of that household had a personal experience with Jesus. Not all the individuals mentioned in Acts responded positively. To some the Gospel is the smell of life, to others the Gospel is the smell of death: some repent, some waver, some oppose. Looking back over the names Luke mentions in Acts, I am reminded this is a real story with real effect in the lives of real people.

These are the names Luke mentions: Theophilus, Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James, Simon, Judas son of James, Mary the mother of Jesus, Barsabbas, Matthias, Annas, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, Barnabas, Ananias, Sapphira, Gamaliel, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas, Stephen, Saul also called Paul, Simon the magician, an Ethiopian eunuch, Ananias of Damascus, Aeneas, Tabitha, Simon the tanner, Cornelius, Agabus, Herod, Mary the mother of John Mark, John Mark, Blastus, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius, Manaen, Sergius Paulus, Elymas, the priest of Zeus, James the elder, Silas, Timothy, Lydia, a slave-girl, a jailer, Jason, Dionysius, Damaris, Aquila, Priscilla, Titius Justus, Crispus, Gallio, Apollos, Tyrannus, Sceva, Demetrius, Gaius, Aristarchus, the town clerk, Sopater, Secundus, Gaius, Tychicus, Trophimus, Eutychus, Mnason, Claudius Lysias, Felix, Tertullus, Drusilla, Porcius Festus, King Agrippa, Bernice, Julius, Publius, and of course Luke, who does not name himself.

The mission of the Church is to give witness to Jesus Christ so that individual people may know their need, may know their Savior, may enter into the Kingdom of God. And while faith in Jesus is something we experience as individuals, it is also something we experience together in community. The mission is to give witness to Jesus Christ, calling people to repent and believe and gather together in *ekklesia*, assemblies of believers who share their joy of knowing Jesus, who bear one another’s burdens, who help each other grow in love and who carry on the mission of sharing the Gospel in their town, or city, or region.

Luke expressed the growth of the Kingdom in communal terms. Remember our six summary statements.

Acts 6:7, “The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

Acts 9:31, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.”

Acts 12:24, “But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.”

Acts 16:5, “So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.”

Acts 19:20, “So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.”

Acts 28:30–31, “And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.”

Luke's theological narrative has taught us that the Gospel insists Jesus is the only name by which a person might be saved. Luke showed us how the Gospel transitioned out from Old Covenant Jewish culture to New Covenant Gentile cultures. We understand that the Gospel speaks into the politics, religion, philosophy, and economy of all human societies. We see that we are not called to build a Christian kingdom patterned after the kingdoms of this world. We recognize that the Kingdom of Christ expands as individuals of faith and communities of faith live in the love and obedience of the King who is above all kings. We have been shown how, in a short thirty-year period, the spiritual Kingdom of Christ became established throughout the Roman Empire. And we understand this was only the beginning of the story.

In the first verse of Acts, writing about his Gospel, Luke explained, "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach..." Jesus began to do and teach in the Gospel of Luke. That was the story of His physical presence on Earth with His disciples. Luke is saying that Jesus continued to do and teach after He ascended into Heaven. He ascended into Heaven, so that the Holy Spirit might indwell believers. As disciples live for Him in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues to do and teach through them. The Gospel of Luke was the first chapter. The Book of Acts is the second chapter. We live in the successive chapters.

The Book of Acts wraps up with Paul in Rome, and yet, leaves the story open for all the chapters that must come later. The Gospel is to go out to the remotest parts of the Earth. It has arrived in Rome. That is only the beginning. The story must continue. And it has. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has spread around the world. We are living in that story. We are writing the next chapter of what Jesus will do and teach through us who believe in our generation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, go and be my witnesses, in your Jerusalem, in your Judea and Samaria, and out into the remotest places of the Earth.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 28:7-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. The defense given in this last section of Acts Part VI parallels the defense given in the first section of Part VI in chapter 20. There the narrative of Paul's journey to Jerusalem was interrupted with the account of the boy's resurrection and a pause for Paul to speak to the Ephesian elders. Here the narrative of Paul's journey to Rome is interrupted with the account of healing on Malta before concluding with Paul speaking to the Jewish elders of Rome.
 - a. How do the resurrection of the boy and the healing of Publius' father serve as a defense of Paul and the gospel?
 - b. Do the words of Paul to the Jewish elders sound like a defense to you?
3. Read again the first verses of Acts Part VI in 19:21-22 to remind yourself of Paul's sense that he must go to Jerusalem and then to Rome. Then reflect on the five sections that follow each with a danger to be avoided, misconceptions to be corrected and defenses made. What moments stand out to most in affirming God's sovereign hand over Paul's life? What life principles or truths do you see in the way God took Paul on this journey?
4. Considering back over the whole book of Acts, how would you summarize "this salvation of God that has been sent to the Gentiles (28:28)." What is this gospel of salvation according to Acts?
5. Read again the disciples' question to Jesus in 1:6, "Is this the time you are restoring the kingdom?" Also read Jesus' redirection in verses 7 and 8. Now at the end of Acts we read that Paul was preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning Jesus Christ. What is this preaching of the kingdom, according to the book of Acts? How did Peter and Paul carry out the statement Jesus' made in Acts 1:8?
6. What is the role of believers in the spread of the Gospel? What is the role of God in building his kingdom?