

Bible Study Series: The Book of Acts (Week Two Notes)

March 11, 2013



St. Peter in Prison, 1631 (Rembrandt van Rijn, 1606-1669)

In [week one](#), we discussed the apostles' perhaps surprising first steps after Christ's return and ascension, the beginning of their persecution by the temple authorities, their creation of the position of deacon, and the martyrdom of Stephen.

Acts 8:4-9:43

Now we move on to the story of another deacon, Philip. Philip had taken the bold step of making his ministry among the Samaritans. Talk about a leap of faith! In doing so, he sparks several rather remarkable things. He gets Peter and John to challenge a magician, and defeat him. Then he becomes the divine instrument for converting a court official from a far-off land to the faith – and, in doing so,

demonstrates for all that this new experience of Jesus is not just for the Jews but for everybody in the whole world.

First of all, Philip has this ministry beginning in Samaria that is so wonderful that Peter and John go up to see what is going on. They get up there and are confronted by a magician who wants to buy some of their power. Peter literally curses the man and he folds.

Then an angel tells Philip to go for a walk. Philip doesn't ask why he just gets up and goes. He is walking down this road in the middle of nowhere and runs into an Ethiopian eunuch. This man may or may not have been a castrated male; the term often applies to people who have made a total commitment to their station in the court of a ruler. But if he was a eunuch as we think of that term, this is all the more splendid a tale. For it shows that the gospel is not limited by the exclusions of the torah, in which a eunuch could not receive salvation. No, here salvation is available to anyone who accepts baptism and believes.

The positioning of this story is crucial, for it is one of several stories strung together to show the power of the gospel to overcome impossible situations and to change the hearts of those who were previously thought to be unreachable. Roman centurions, Samaritans, Ethiopian eunuchs are all just a set-up for the greatest conversion story yet to come. Now as we go into this story, remember, this story is being told in the context of conversion stories. Don't demean its power by thinking about the rest of the story of St. Paul. Think of it in the context of conversion of those who have been thought to be beyond the pale, and you will see the power of it to stand on its own.

So, Saul is heading for Damascus to round up more Christians. He supposedly has authority from Jerusalem to do this, but historians find that questionable. Why would Jerusalem have authority to order the arrest of those in Damascus? That would be like saying we could send Frank to Montreal to arrest someone for something they were doing there.

At any rate, notice that nowhere in the story does it say that Saul was riding a donkey. That is a later adaptation of the story – like the apple in the Garden of Eden. But he is struck down and he hears the voice of Jesus asking him why he is persecuting him. Saul is taken into Damascus, where he is blind for three days.

Does “three days” sound familiar? Then Ananias comes to heal him. Out of this comes the faith experience that changes his life. He states that Jesus is the son of God and begins to proclaim this in the synagogue in Damascus. He is so powerful in his preaching that he has to be taken out of town secretly. He was taken to Jerusalem where Barnabus brought him to the apostles. They were amazed at the change in him. This is a very important point for us to consider.

We tend to think of religion as being a private experience. But here in the story we have a graphic example of how Paul’s conversion had to be verified by the apostles before he was allowed to continue to preach. It is the same way in our church today. When I felt the calling to become a priest, I had to go through this great thing called the “process.” The process is, at its best, a means by which the church can affirm that inward calling that I felt. Neither then nor now is it enough to just “feel” this calling. It must be heard and affirmed by the church. This keeps us from going off in 268 million different directions. It lends a sense of order to what otherwise might be a chaotic experience.

At any rate, the story of Saul is dropped for now, and the focus comes back to Peter. He travels around and performs more miracles, always in the name of Jesus. His travels among the Jews set him up for the greatest conversion experience of all – his own.

You see, up until now, Peter is convinced that this Jesus experience is basically for the Jews, or gentiles who would become Jews before becoming Christians. And the question for Peter as well as Luke is not whether the Jews will be saved, but whether gentiles can be saved. So he goes to Joppa, and while he is there, a message comes from Caesarea, the seat of Roman power, from a centurion named Cornelius.

But before the message gets to him, Peter has this vision that begins to change his mind about who is pure in the sight of God and who is not. Peter, a very good Jew, is told to eat animals that are unclean. He replies three times that he won’t, but God tells him not to be so hasty – that whatever God declares to be clean *is* clean.

Now Cornelius by all accounts is a good guy, for a Roman. So when the message comes to him, Peter consents to go. And when he gets there, he understands

what the vision was all about. Peter's heart is changed, and that sets up the next great stage in the growth of the church. For now, the apostles are buying into the idea that this is not a Jewish thing, but a world-changing thing. And the Holy Spirit enters all who are in attendance, and those who were circumcised were amazed at the gifts of the spirit that were visited upon the gentiles. So there was a great baptism, and things moved on from there.

Acts 11:1-19

Peter then goes on to Judea and explains what has happened to him and shows how this conversion thing is about a new beginning for everybody, not just for those who feel that they are pre-chosen for it. Note here, too, that Peter's experience, even though he is Peter, must be confirmed by the community. He can't just go off on his own; he brings that experience back and argues for it to make it a valid experience for all. In doing so, Luke keeps telling a story of the community and how it changes, and how it affirms the changes that will alter its course into the future. Not even Peter can go off on his own; later on, we will see that Paul brings his directions to the community for affirmation. Today we still do the same thing. For example, if I come up with an idea for our church to do something, the first thing I do is try to bring it to others to see if they think it is a good idea, too. This is not to see affirmation for myself, but to make it a communal experience. By bringing these ideas to the community, both then and now, we make them communal experiences, and then community-changing experiences.

Acts 11:20-29

Now we start to hear the stories of congregations in other places; but, note that they are still being orchestrated by those in Jerusalem. These other churches are not entities unto themselves; they are part of a team. Kind of like we are part of our diocese, they were part of their own diocese. What affects one affects all. The evangelists who go out to these communities have oversight, too, which keeps them on an agreeable path. It keeps the doctrine pure and helps them all remain a part of the same faith instead of becoming new faiths on their own. It also allows these churches to nurture each other and help each other out when there might be trouble. Trouble may only be local, and when it occurs in one place another might not be affected. By staying in touch with each other, they are then

able to share the burden and go on from there together, stronger for the helping experience on both sides.

Here we also note that it states that it was in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians – and I'm sure it wasn't a compliment.

Acts 12:1-25

Now the trouble starts for real, as Herod, the same Herod who had Jesus crucified, gets wind of what is going on. He doesn't like the fact that this Jesus stuff is still going on, so he starts to act. He has James, the son of Zebedee, killed and Peter is arrested. Peter's imprisonment comes during the Passover, probably the one after the death of Jesus. The symbolism of this is both powerful and important.

Peter is cast into an earthly hell, a prison cell. During the night, an angel comes and rescues him. While the rescue is going on, Peter is sure it is real. So he heads for Mark's house and a funny thing happens. The slave girl comes to answer his knock at the gate and gets so excited that he is there that she leaves him standing in the street! Not a wise thing to do when Herod's guards are undoubtedly looking for him. The people in the house don't believe it is him until they go to the gate for themselves. They welcome Peter and then get him out of town, not wanting to overwork the angels.

The next event recounted is important. Herod is struck down by God for acting like he is a god. In a sense, that is normal for a person who had as much power as he did. Note that the people of Tyre and Sidon, both large communities, came crawling to him because he had the power to cut off their food supply. Herod starts believing his own press and acts like he has even more power than that. But God strikes him down, and he dies, becoming the food for worms. In the meantime, the church continues to grow.

It is possible that Herod broke some of the dietary laws of the Jews by eating pork and became infected with trichina. There was no cure for that in those days. And his flaunting of the law would definitely be seen as an affront to God. If this is true, isn't it funny how some Jewish law is still held in high regard, while others, like circumcision, and are looked down upon.

It is important for us to note what is going on here. Luke is not trying to show how the church can fit into society, but is demonstrating in many ways how the Church will be transforming society, sometimes against its will. You must remember that at the time Luke was writing, history had changed significantly. The time of wholesale conversion, or even the hope of that, of the Jews was gone. The Church is turning towards the gentiles for its new converts, and will be establishing itself as a bridge between those two cultures. It is also establishing itself as being a culture of its own, not subservient to any power in the world. For the laws that the Church obeys are the laws of God, a much higher authority than any on earth. Hence, Herod's death is interpreted as divinely imposed, and then the footnote of "the church continued to grow" is shown in the light it was intended to be seen. The Church will go on, in spite of the best efforts of the powers of this world. Could this be a word of encouragement to a struggling church, a church of Theophilus that is suffering persecution? Possibly, but we would be guessing a lot to say so.

Still, we must notice that the whole thrust of this last section of the book of Acts has to deal with people of power. The king, jailers, persecutors, Romans, courts, and judges... all of these are overwhelmed by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is why it was so important not just to morph the story of Saul into the stories yet to come of Saul who becomes Paul. That story serves more than one purpose. Yes, it is a precursor to the stories we are going into now, but it also served another purpose: showing us how the powerful of this world are really puny in the face of the power of God.

Acts 13:1-14:28

When Saul/Paul was commissioned on the road to Damascus, he was told three things. 1) He was to be the instrument to carry the name of Christ, 2) he would be going before both gentiles and kings, and 3) he would be suffering for the sake of Christ. Here is where that journey begins.

Saul/Paul is liked with Barnabus and they are sent out on a mission together. Almost immediately, they get into confrontations with some of the local powers. Paul – note that he is now only referred to as Paul (a sign that he has changed so completely he had to have a new name) gets into a conflict with a magician, and later with some people who owned a slave who had the power to tell fortunes.

These confrontations are important because they once again show the power of Christianity over the powers that are accepted by the world.

In the midst of these conflicts, Paul is given the opportunity to make a speech at a synagogue. This speech is divided into three parts: 1) Jesus is part of the royal house of David. 2) Even though the synagogue is a place of study and wisdom, they did not recognize him or understand what he was saying. 3) It is through Jesus and only through Jesus that the forgiveness of sins is offered or received.

His words are so powerful he is invited to come back the next week and speak again. Many, both gentile and Jew, want to hear more. But during the week the Jews get organized and turn the experience into a fiasco. So much so that Paul and Barnabas tell them they are going to leave and shake the dust off of their feet as a sign of their displeasure with them. They also say something important: They will turn to the gentiles as they are receptive to the message of salvation.

So it is strange to see that the first place they head for is another synagogue. Did they not mean what they said? We don't know if that is the case or not, but when they head to Lyconium, they go to a synagogue and begin converting people all over again.

Then at Lystra, Paul heals a man who was crippled from birth. This action places him in the same category as Peter, showing how the Holy Spirit is working through him. But the healing starts to backfire on them. The people of Lystra think they are the Greek gods who have come to earth. Paul and Barnabus are not amused, and Paul dives in directly to show them that it is not his power but the power of the living Christ that healed the man.

After the healing, things turn ugly. Jews from Antioch and Iconium come and get the crowds all worked up to the point that they take Paul out and stone him. They leave him there, thinking he is dead – but he's not. After the stoning, Paul gets up and offers consolation to those who found him. Note how Luke reacts to this persecution: He says it helps to make new disciples.

This is important scripture for us to be reading as we get ready to launch an evangelism program. Note what happens when Paul and Barnabus try to convert the old crowd to this new way of thinking about God. They get stoned by them.

But when they go to the new people, the gentiles, their message is received. That's not unlike thinking about making our church grow by only going around getting back those who have left. Luke has a message for us here, too, that the new frontier of growth for us is not in trying to rebuild the past, but in building a future. That future will be in finding our equivalent of the gentiles in the scripture, the unchurched. The kingdom of Christ does not grow if we concentrate on getting members of other churches to come here either. Luke is sending us a very clear message that we need to break the mold of most Mainline Protestant churches. Luke could not imagine a church that was not trying to make new disciples. Yes, he says, this work will be tough, but that is where the work needs to be done, in finding those who have not yet heard the word of Christ.