

GOD WITH US

Part 9: ACTS

Message 3 – The Ministry in Judea & Samaria

Acts 8-11

Introduction

Section one of the book of Acts told the story of the re-offer of the Messianic Kingdom to the Jews. The martyrdom of Stephen was the closing of the door on that re-offer. At the same time, his death opened a door for the gospel to move out to the non-Jewish world. A persecution arose from within Jerusalem against the followers of Jesus. As a result, they were forced to spread out into the surrounding regions, thus leading to part 2 of the mission “*in Judea and Samaria*” (see Acts 1:8). In this section of Acts, we see geographical, national and religious barriers crossed as the disciples of Jesus take the message of salvation beyond the walls of Judaism into the wider world. We will also see the conversion of the foremost persecutor of the disciples, Saul of Tarsus, and the preparatory steps to his becoming the apostle to the Gentile world.

The Church Scattered: 8:1-3

This section opens with a summary of the persecution that erupted after Stephen’s death. The disciples of Jesus were forcibly ejected from Jerusalem. Luke emphasizes the attitude of Saul toward the church. (He would later become the close travelling companion of the apostle Paul, all the way to the end of Paul’s life.)

“And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison” (8:1-3).

Paul later refers to these pre-conversion days, saying that God chose him, “the chief of sinners,” for one reason (1Tim. 1:12-17). *“Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life” (1Tim.1:16).*

Tragedy. Often when a person is killed or dies of natural causes prematurely, there is great confusion, grief and questioning as to 'why?' There are no easy answers, especially when the motives are evil. At times like these it is right to be bewildered and even angry. 'God, don't you see what is happening?' Yes, He does. The story of Acts is full of puzzling injustices that we can relate to. We don't usually ever find out 'why?' but in some cases we can see as with Saul, that God had a greater story He was writing. Those believers who died at Saul's hands were true heroes, ushered into God's presence. We must lean into God in the mystery and the sad 'whys?'

Philip in Samaria: 8:4-25

Philip was one of the seven chosen to serve the growing needs of the church (6:5). Like Stephen, he proved to be a powerful evangelist and miracle-worker, particularly in Samaria – a region that had been on hostile terms with the Jews for centuries. Philip's miracles astounded even Simon the magician, who was famous in that region for the practice of his magic arts.

“Simon believed and was baptized. He followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw” (8:13).

The Holy Spirit normally comes to believers the moment they accept Jesus as Savior. In these early chapters of Acts, however, we see two cases (Acts 8 & 10) where the bestowal of the Spirit was delayed until the apostles from Jerusalem arrived to pray for the coming of the Spirit. This was the Holy Spirit's way of *uniting* the church even as it was *dispersed* into people-groups that had long-standing divisions. The church would be ONE CHURCH, even with many locations and nations being part of it.

“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (8:14-17).

Luke notes that the apostles Peter and John continued to share the gospel in Samaria on their return trip to Jerusalem:

“After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages” (8:25).

In Part 8, we studied the encounter of the Samaritan woman with Jesus near her village (John 4). She became a believer in Jesus being miraculously delivered from her shame and reputation and became a witness to her entire village, leading Jesus and His disciples to stay and minister to the villagers for 2 more days. Perhaps this set the stage for Philip to enter this region.

Philip and the Ethiopian: 8:26-40

The next scene shows the gospel moving into Ethiopia, via the conversion of an official from the royal court of Candice the Queen. It also provides a clear example of how the early Christians “shared their faith” with others. The man was reading from Isaiah 53 – the “Suffering Servant” passage – while returning home to Ethiopia from a visit to Jerusalem.

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him (8:30,31).

Using Isaiah 53 as a starting point, Philip explained the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to this man. He must have placed his faith in Jesus, because when they came to a place where there was water, the Ethiopian asked to be baptized, and Philip consented.

“When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea” (8:39,40).

Although Philip went to Caesarea, it would later be the apostle Peter who was sent to Caesarea to share the gospel with the Gentile centurion Cornelius, thus opening the door for the Gentile mission. Again, Peter’s role in *unifying* the various ethnic and geographical segments was significant. As for Philip, Acts 21:8 implies that he spent much of his life in these western coastal areas bordering Israel, raising a family and doing ministry.

The Conversion of Saul: 9:1-31

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," He replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (9:1-6).

It took a lightning-strike kind of appearance from the risen and ascended Lord to get Saul's attention. He spent three days in blindness, not eating or drinking; only recalculating his entire understanding of JESUS in light of his vast knowledge of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures. It took the prayer and touch of a disciple named Ananias, living in Damascus, to bring Saul's eyesight back. Ananias was extremely reluctant to go see Saul, for he knew his reputation as a persecutor of the disciples.

"But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is My chosen instrument to proclaim My name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for My name" (9:15,16).

Ananias first reminded the Lord of what kind of a person Saul was and had been doing to the followers of Jesus, as if God didn't know already! It was a normal reaction, but Ananias was not being stubborn, rather just expressing his concerns and fear. Ananias had to obey God completely going against his fear of what might happen. He was a useful vessel for Jesus. Are we?

After receiving back his sight . . .

"He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength" (9:18,19).

Saul then immediately began preaching *in the synagogues* (v.20) of Damascus that Jesus was the promised Jewish Messiah.

"Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah" (9:22).

Soon the tables were turned, and Jews were trying to persecute and kill Saul! He had to be lowered in a basket, under cover of darkness, through an opening in the city wall to escape from those seeking to kill him in Damascus! When he returned to Jerusalem, Barnabas introduced him to skeptical believers as a true disciple of Jesus.

“So, Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus” (9:28-30).

Note: Luke has condensed the timeline of Saul’s early years for the sake of space. According to Galatians 1:15-20, Saul spent 3 years in Arabia after his conversion, then returned to Damascus, before finally going back to Jerusalem. Ultimately, he would return to his hometown of Tarsus where he spent much of the next decade maturing in his faith until the time when Barnabas brought him to Antioch to help shepherd the growing Gentile Christian community (Acts 11:25,26).

Peter raises Dorcas (Tabitha) from death: 9:32-43

Peter continued to be used by the Holy Spirit to expand the gospel outward into Judea and Samaria. He healed Aeneas in Lydda, then went to the coastal city of Joppa where, in one of his greatest miracles, he raised a disciple named Dorcas from the dead.

“This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon” (9:42,43).

The Raising of Dorcas: Comments from Shirley

Dorcas was a woman of faith living in Joppa and is first introduced to us as “a disciple, always doing good and helping the poor.” It was obvious to the believers of Joppa that she was a fully devoted follower of Christ. What’s special about Dorcas is that she seems to have been unmarried, yet it was not a cause for bitterness or self-pity. Her value and self-worth came from her relationship with her Heavenly Father, and His loving affirmation of her as His ‘daughter’. She was a vessel through whom God’s compassion flowed to others who needed encouragement.

James 1:27 says, "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of our God and Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you." Dorcas was a living example of this verse. She used what she loved to do – sewing clothes and giving them away – to bless the widows and those in need. Joppa was famous in history as being the sea port where the prophet Jonah had gone to board a ship to run away from God. Perhaps, there were more widows and orphans than usual here because the fishermen and other men had drowned in storms at sea.

However, the widows had lost their husbands, their ability to make ends meet was incredibly difficult. There was no government subsidy in those days. It was the responsibility of the other believers to care for those who needed help. And, it is still the responsibility of the church today. The widows had grown to love Dorcas as a true friend and leader among them. Her love had in turn caused them to be grateful to God for her and to genuinely love her.

Sadly, Dorcas became ill and died. They prepared her body for burial and she was laid in state in an upper room. This was a huge loss and caused much grief among the women. So, the disciples sent two men to Lydda and urged Peter to hurry back with them. Peter soon understood the urgency of the disciples, when he met all the widows who were weeping and showing him their clothes that Dorcas had made and given to them. Peter knew from Jewish history that Elijah and Elisha had been urgently summoned to an upper room and had been given the power to perform a resurrection of two sons. And, Peter had been present watching, when Jesus brought Jairus' daughter back to life, as recorded in Mark 5: 35-42.

So, he imitated what he had heard and what he had experienced first hand from Jesus. Sending the widows out of the room, Peter got on his knees and prayed that God would raise her from the dead. Then He said, "Dorcas get up!" She immediately sat up just like Jairus' daughter had! He took her by the hand, helping her to her feet and called the widows and believers to see that she was miraculously alive!

Her generous life, death, and her resurrection helped to accelerate the gospel of Christ being known, and many put their faith in the Lord. Indirectly she became a great witness for Jesus through her sewing! Today groups are literally known as "Dorcas Groups" whose purpose is to feed and clothe needy people in society. Her impact is ongoing, and world-wide. What a legacy! Dorcas is an example to us all of someone who used her gifts and talents to bless those in need. Hers was sewing, but what is mine? Or, what is yours?

Peter visits Cornelius' house: 10:1-48

Next to the death of Stephen (Acts 7), Peter's visit to the house of Cornelius marks *the second great transition point* in the progress of the gospel. Cornelius was a Roman centurion who had, at some point, converted to Judaism. An angel appeared to him, instructing him to send for Peter and invite him to come to his house and to present a message. The angel indicated that Cornelius had been chosen for this unique visit because of his sincere heart for God:

“Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea” (10:4-6).

Meanwhile, Peter's heart was being prepared by the Spirit, as it still was not customary for Jews (even Jewish disciples of Jesus) to go into the homes of Gentiles, or to eat the meat of animals that had been forbidden for Jews. Peter's vision is summarized:

He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven (10:11-16).

The vision occurred 3 times, indicating its importance, although Peter did not understand the meaning. The simultaneous arrival of the messengers from Cornelius interrupted his pondering:

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So, get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them” (10:19,20).

Upon arriving at Cornelius' house, Peter found a large gathering of people waiting to meet him. His opening comments show that he was beginning to understand what God was up to with regard to opening the door for the gospel to go to the Gentiles:

He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown

me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So, when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection” (10:28,29).

When he was invited by Cornelius to give a message, Peter reviewed the life and ministry of Jesus, and then spoke of how the gospel was being offered to the Gentiles.

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right” (10:34,35).

As he neared the end of his message, the Holy Spirit “interrupted” him, falling upon those gathered:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days (10:44-48).

The coming of the Spirit upon these new Gentile believers happened in a manner “just as” it had first happened to the Jewish believers at the beginning (Acts 2). The Spirit was thus making it clear that the Gentiles had the same privileges and full access to the gospel. They did not have to become converts to Judaism first. As Luke indicates, this was shocking to the “circumcised believers” (Jewish) who had accompanied Peter to Cornelius’ house. This was a pivotal moment in the movement of the gospel, breaking open the door to the Gentile world.

Peter’s Report to the Jerusalem Church: 11:1-18

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was forced to defend his visit to the house of a Gentile.

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ^{and} said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them” (11:1-3).

Luke, who himself was a Gentile, gives great attention to this significant moment as he narrates Peter's *complete re-explanation* of the events recorded in ch.10 in detail here again in ch.11. To give this much scroll-space to one event indicates how important it was to the overall narrative. The conclusion to Peter's defense summarizes the issue well:

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as He had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So, if God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life” (11:15-18).

The “Gentile issue” will continue to be a subject of great debate as the story continues (see Acts 15). It took time for the Jewish believers to grasp and accept this change in God's plan for the salvation of the non-Jewish world.

When God wants to bring about ‘a change’ in His ways, He uses willing people who will accept that He is doing something new. God affirms His new emphasis through a few, then many others. In this case Peter and Cornelius were God's instruments who experienced God's revelation, followed by those apostles in Jerusalem. Changes happen slowly but will be affirmed by many through their experiences. Often what seems to be ‘new’, has actually been in the Word for thousands of years. God chooses the time in history to bring it to light and fruition.

The Church in Antioch: 11:19-30

Luke provides another important summary showing the movement of the gospel outward from Stephen's death onward:

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (11:19-21).

Antioch became the “Gentile center” of early Christianity, and the launching point for each of Paul’s 3 missionary journeys. It was here that “the disciples were first called Christians” (11:26). It was also here that Paul became a co-pastor with Barnabas, learning how to minister under his mentoring.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (11:25,26).

Summary: In the overall story of Acts, Luke has now narrated the conversion of the future apostle to the Gentiles (Saul of Tarsus) and the opening of the door for the gospel to go to the Gentiles (through Peter). He has set the stage for the final section of the book of Acts (chapters 13-28) where the gospel will go out to the wider Gentile world, through the three missionary journeys of the apostle Paul. Surely Acts 10 & 11 may be considered the hinge on which the entire book of Acts turns.

Discussion Questions

1. We studied through the Old Testament, noting that it was always God’s intention to bless all nations *through* the Jews. Why, then, do you think it was so difficult for the Jewish disciples of Jesus to grasp the fact that God was offering the gospel directly to Gentiles (without requiring them to first convert to Judaism)?
2. These first Christians were courageous in taking the message of Jesus to their world, even though it was difficult and dangerous. They were not always welcomed warmly. How does their example impact you?
3. How does the example of Dorcas speak to you? She may be a “minor character” in the story; but she had a major impact on the experience of the early Christian community. What can we learn from her?
4. Think about God’s choice of Saul to become the minister to the Gentiles and a major contributor to the New Testament (and to the entire history of the church). How does God’s choice of Saul impact you, given his background?

4. PAUL'S FIRST JOURNEY: 12:1-15:35

STUDY AHEAD

- 1. Acts 12.** This is a “transitional” chapter, taking us back to Jerusalem where the story started. Note how the disciples were faring under intense persecution. Also note the final appearance of Peter in the book of Acts.
- 2. Acts 13:1-3.** Notice how the Holy Spirit initiated the next phase of the mission. Who was Paul’s key companion?
- 3. Acts 13:4-22.** Why do you think they chose to go to the island of Cyprus first? Hint: See Acts 4:36. Who was their “helper?”
- 4. Acts 13:7,12.** Who was the first convert on Cyprus? Why was this significant?
- 5. Acts 13:13-43.** Luke gives a rather full account of Paul’s first sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (there were two Antiochs; one in Caesarea, the center of the church, and one further north [Pisidian Antioch] in the Galatian region). Read it through. What do you learn about Paul’s message to his fellow Jewish countrymen from this sermon?
- 6. Acts 13:44-52.** What happened when they returned to the synagogue a week later?
- 7. Acts 14:1-7.** What happened to the team in Iconium?
- 8. Acts 14:8-20.** What happened to Paul in Lystra (v.19)? Where did he go when he “revived” (v.20)? Would you have done that?
- 9. Acts 14:21-24.** Study these verses carefully. After they reached “the end” of the Galatian city-tour, where did they go (v.21)? What did they do in these cities? What does this tell you about their care for the welfare of the newly forming Christian communities?
- 10.** What do you think it would have been like to be a Christ-follower in one of these cities, after Paul and his team departed?
- 11. Acts 15:1-35.** Read through the account of the very first “Church council” meeting. What was the dispute about? How did they go about resolving the dispute? What was the resolution? How did they communicate the resolution to the wider Christian community?