

Acts of the Apostles

Luke, the beloved physician

Discussion 3

Chapters 9-12

Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (pgs.)

Outline:

- I. Home missions (Acts 1-12)
The witness to the Jews in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.
Outstanding leader—Peter.
Important city—Jerusalem.
- II. Foreign missions (Acts 13-28)
The witness to the Gentiles, to the “uttermost parts!”
Outstanding leader—Paul.
Important cities—Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome.

Things to do:

1. Read all of the Book of Acts.
2. Answer the questions and fill out the outline. Use your own words. Do not quote unless the questions asks for that.
3. Be able to locate on the map, the places mentioned in Acts 1-12.
4. Draw Paul’s first and second journeys on the map, and Paul’s third and fourth on the maps provided.
5. Memorize Acts 1:8, 4:12, 16:31 (Optional)

Make a report on the life of at least one great missionary

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the ministry of the apostle Paul and the many truths You saw fit to reveal through his ministry. May I, like Paul, have a receptive heart and a deep desire to pray fervently, preach enthusiastically, and forever lift Jesus up. May I proclaim to all that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the Savior of the whole world, the Son of Man, and Son of God Who takes away the sin of the world. In Jesus' name, AMEN.

“And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.” (Acts 9:20)

Discussion Questions

Home Missions- ACTS 1-12

ACTS 9 (1887-1899)

1. Why was Saul going to Damascus? _____ he went to the synagogue and asked for letters saying that he if he crossed any of those who were preaching the good news or “the way” he could arrest them as prisoners of Jerusalem. _____
2. What did he see near Damascus? _____ ”A light from heaven flashed all around him, he hear a voice saying “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” This voice was the presence of Jesus, and he was to get up and go into the city and await further instructions. _____
3. What did Saul say when he realized his mistake in persecuting the Christians? (9:6) _____ “He asked who are you, Lord?” _____
4. How long was Saul blind? _____ He was blind for three days _____
5. What believer in Damascus visiting Saul, caused him to receive his sight and baptized him? _____ Ananias _____
6. After Saul was converted, how did the Jews in Damascus treat him? (9:20-25) _____ They were astonished with his turn around, and baffled by his teaching, proving that Jesus is the true Messiah. _____
7. Who in Jerusalem welcomed Saul into the fellowship of the believers there? _____ Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul was on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. _____
8. When the Grecians were about to slay Saul where did the brethren send him? _____ The took him to Caesarea, and sent him to Tarsus. _____ (This was Saul’s own birthplace.)
9. What miracle did Peter perform at Lydda? _____ He raised a paralyzed man Ananeas.
10. What were some of the Dorcas’s good works? (9:36, 39) _____ She was doing well and helped the poor, made Peter’s clothes. _____
11. Why did Peter go from Lydda to Joppa? ___ In Lydda he went to see and heal a man named Aeneas who was paralyzed and be ridden. After that he traveled to a city called Joppa where he met Tabitha later called Dorcas, who died and he raised from the dead. _____
12. Later with who did Peter stay at Joppa? (9:43) _____ He stayed with a tanner called Simon. A Tanner is someone who dealt with carcasses and

strong odors, they were normally outside the walls of the city. _____

ACTS 10

1. Describe Cornelius. _____ Cornelius was a centurion in the Italian Regiment. He was devout and God fearing, gave generously to the poor, and prayer regularly. A truly devout Christian _____
2. Where did Cornelius live? _____ Cornelius lived in Caesarea _____
3. What did Peter see in his vision on the house top of Joppa? _____ 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 called to Peter "Get up, kill and eat. _____
4. What did God tell Peter about unclean animals? (10:15) _____ Do not make anything unclean that God has made clean. _____
5. Also, what people did the Jews consider unclean? (10:28) _____ Eating with Gentiles. _____
6. What Gentile in Caesarea did Peter now willingly visit? _____ Cornelius _____
7. After Peter preached Christ to the household of Cornelius what amazing thing happened? (10:44, 46) _____ The Holy Spirit came on all who heard his message, and they spoke in tongues and praised God. _____
8. Did Peter expect God to do this for the Gentiles? (10:45) _____ No because they were not considered to be God's own people, but we now understand that God's own people is everyone on earth regardless of race, color, sexual orientation, background, ethnicity, etc. _____

ACTS 11

1. What great experience did Peter explain to the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem? (11:1-18) _____ Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, _____
2. Who was sent to strengthen the believers in Antioch? (11:22) _____ Barnabas _____

3. Whom did Barnabas bring from Tarsus to help him in the church at Antioch? _____ Saul (Paul) _____
4. Where were the disciples first called Christians? _____ Antioch _____
5. The church in Antioch sent relief to the brethren in what place? _____ Judea _____

ACTS 12

1. What king began to persecute the church? _____ Herod _____
2. Who was the first of the twelve apostles to be killed as a martyr? _____ James _____
3. When Herod saw this please the Jews, what other apostle was imprisoned? _____ Peter _____
4. What did the church do when Peter was in such danger? _____ they prayed earnestly _____
5. How were the apostles' prayers miraculously answered? (12:7-10) _____ An angel of the Lord appeared, light shown in the cell, he woke Peter up, Peter's chains fell off. He was told to dress, then follow the angel who led him out of prison. _____
6. In what house did Peter find the believers gathered together praying? _____ Mary the Mother of John also called Mark. _____
7. What girl answers the door? _____ a servant named Rhoda _____
8. Why did Herod suffer a loathsome death? (12:21-23) _____ Because he did not give Praise to God. Angel struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. _____

Closing Prayer

Prayers for the people: Martha and her family, Dad, Emelia, Alexis, Patrick, Aunt Julie, Reynaldo, those who are afflicted, suffering anxiety, turmoil, veterans (men and women overseas).

Heavenly Father, thank You that I am a Christian and part of the family of God. Thank You that Jesus died and rose again to save me from my sin. I pray that I may never be ashamed of the gospel of Christ or the name of Jesus but be prepared to live by faith and trust You in all things, no matter what difficult circumstances may arise. I pray that I would continue to assemble together with my brothers and sisters in Christ, and all the more as I see the day approaching. This I ask in Jesus' name, AMEN.

“And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.”
(Acts 11:26)

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“And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.” (Acts 9:20)

Chapter 9

In the beginning of this chapter we arrive at the primary topic of Luke's book, which is life and work of the Apostle Paul who became God's chosen instrument to bring the Gospel to the gentiles. Luke has already mentioned Saul in the previous chapters, as the one who had voted in favor of and assisted in the execution of Stephen. Here he comes to us as the main factor in the persecution of the church. The Greek text which is rendered: “Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples,” is very emphatic. The statement that Saul was breathing murder implies that he was personally responsible for the death of several believers, both men and women in Jerusalem.

Why Paul was particularly interested in persecuting Christians in Damascus is not explained. Samaria would have been closer target, but being a devout Jew, Paul was probably not willing to contaminate himself by entering there.

Luke fails to explain why Saul experienced the most radical turn in his life. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus has become a well-known story titled “The Road to Damascus” which has become a standard expression of any pivotal occurrence in one's life. Much has been said written about the inner conflict that must have plagued this inquisitor because of his witnessing the martyrdom of Stephen. This triggered hatred in his soul, but it must also have planted a seed of wonder about the truth of Stephen's Gospel for which he had been willing to die. Saul may have seemed singled minded in his effort to stamp out Christianity, but what he wanted to eradicate most of all was, probably, his own inner conflict.

As he grew closer to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Saul and stopped him in his track. Paul recounts this experience twice in Acts, once addressing the mob that tried to kill him, and the second time when defending himself before the Roman governor Felix and King Agrippa. In the latter version, Paul adds some

words, spoken by Jesus, that are not found in the other accounts: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” Since Paul used the words in his account before Felix and Agrippa, however, they must have been part of the conversation between Jesus and himself.

In the story of Saul’s conversion, we understand that the people who accompanied Saul on the road to Damascus saw the light but did not hear the voice of Jesus speaking to him. The sound they heard, as Luke records, must have been Saul’s voice.

We see that Jesus penetrates the core of Saul’s problem. Saul never thought that he persecuted Jesus of Nazareth: he may have thought that he only persecuted the people who were corrupting Judaism by following a counterfeit prophet. Saul had set his heart against Jesus Himself. Saul may have dismissed the person of Jesus as irrelevant since He had been crucified and that he was no longer a threat. However, deep within his resistance was focused on Jesus, who had claimed to be the Messiah. The beauty of Jesus’ words is that He identified Himself with those who were persecuted. In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus expressed the same principle in a positive way. He says to the righteous “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

The divine encounter left Saul of Tarsus blind. The fiery inquisitor, who planned to search out Christians and kill them, entered Damascus as the blind man he had always been, being led by the hand. The experience left Saul shaken to the core. He was unable to eat or drink for three days. One of the most painful experiences for a person is to see himself as God sees him. He would later confess to the church in Corinth that he saw himself as “one abnormally born.: The Lord left Saul to himself in the dark for three days, giving him time to digest what happened to him.

We do not know what went through Saul’s mind, but we do know that he fasted, prayed, and had another vision, of a man name Ananias. He came and prayed for Saul but was unable to determine whether or not the blindness was a lasting condition or not. Jesus however, would not let him settle to think that he would have condition for the rest of his life.

The amount of Ananias that is provided is very minimal. We are given three verses. He may have been a refugee from Jerusalem, but the most important

fact is that he was a prevailing citizen of Damascus. How he gained his belief is unknown. Jesus had to convince Ananias fulfill this vision for Saul. The disciple's reluctance is quite understandable to us. He only knew that Saul had come to Damascus for the sole purpose of catching Christians and to kill them. Jesus overruled his objections by ordering him to go. Ananias must have been more than amazed at God's surprises. Who could ever have thought that Jesus could turn a murderer around for the better? A man of God with exemplary obedience.

Jesus said to Ananias is worth a closer look: "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for me name." Ananias shared these words with Saul.

Saul was then sent out with a purpose to testify before governors and kings, but also that this would involve personal suffering. The testimony before the highest worldly authorities would involve imprisonment, a fate to which Saul had subjected his own victims. God wanted to give Saul a taste of his own medicine. Through the rest of his life, he would not be able to forget this. This was the same for his suffering as well. There was total forgiveness and restoration, there is also righteous retribution. God's grace does not let us "off the hook." We do not pay for the sins we have committed before we confessed them. There is healing but the scars will remain with us as a constant reminder.

C. S. Lewis illustrates this beautifully in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in *The Horse and his Boy*. A girl, Aravis, is clawed by a lion who mauls her back. Aravis had fled her parental home, after drugging the slave girl who was responsible for her safety. The girl is beaten when she wakes up. It turns out that the lion is Aslan, and that the claw marks respond exactly to the number of stripes the whip had made on the slave girl's back. Aslan makes Aravis pay for what she had done to her slave girl. Saul, or Paul, would know for the rest of his life why he suffered pain and persecution. Paul would later recognize this. Writing to the church in Corinth and comparing himself to other Christian workers, he writes: "I have ... been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a

night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”²³⁰ And to Timothy he wrote: “And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am.”²³¹

It was part of Ananias obedience to the vision he had received that he accepted Saul as a brother in Christ. We can take into consideration that this was not an easy transition. It is possible that Ananias was aware of Saul’s criminal record. It is also possible that he may have personally known some of the individuals that Saul may have murdered. “Saul, brother!” contains a world of grace. In placing his hands on Saul’s head, Ananias forgave Saul his sins against the church in the name of the church.

Scholars have argued the point as to whether Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit before his baptism or afterward. Ananias’ role in this has been a matter of discussion. So far the Holy Spirit had either come upon people without intervention of human prayer or as a result of the prayers and imposition of hands of the apostles. Some have concluded that Ananias must have been the leader of the church in Antioch. None of this is explained in the text.

When Saul’s blindness was released from his suffering, “something like scales fell from his eyes.” The cure was sudden, the restoration to sight was an immediate, as if such an interposing substance had been suddenly removed. This is all that the expressions fairly implies, and this is all the nature the case demands. As the blindness had been caused by the natural effect of the light, probably on the optic nerve..... it is manifest that no literal removing of scales would restore the vision. We are therefore to lay aside the idea of literal scales falling to the earth. No such thing is affirmed, and no such thing would have met the case.

Some scholars have suggested that Saul’s vision caused permanent damage to his eyes and that “the thorn in the flesh”²³² was an eye disease that plagued him for the rest of his life. The apostle’s reference to a sickness in his Epistle to the Galatians would support this. We read there: “As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a

trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.”²³³
This theory has not received much following.

There seems to be a discrepancy between Luke’s account of Saul’s subsequent activities, which states: “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God,” and Paul’s own version of the facts as stated in his Epistle to the Galatians: “But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.”²³⁴ It is generally supposed that at one point in Luke’s narrative, Paul left for Arabia where he spent two or three years. The question is, at which point. Was it after he had given testimony to his conversion in Damascus, or did he only preach in Damascus after his return from Arabia? The Pulpit Commentary mentions the possibility that the place of Paul’s retirement was “Auranitis, bordering upon Arabia Deserts, and reckoned as part of Arabia, not above two days’ journey from Damascus.” The majority of commentators, however, favor the Peninsula of Sinai.

It is only logical to suppose that the radical change in Saul’s heart required a prolonged period of reflection and maturing. The emphasis in Paul’s testimony to the Galatians seems to be that the Father took His time to reveal His Son in the life of Paul before allowing him to begin preaching the Gospel. We may, therefore, suppose that there is a large gap between verses 19 and 20 in Luke’s account. It is difficult to determine how long Saul spent in Arabia. In Galatians, he mentions “three years,”²³⁵ but whether this includes the period of his Arabian exile is not clear.

It is stated that Saul preached in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus was the Son of God and that He was the Messiah. This is the first instance in the Book of Acts where it is stated that Jesus is the Son of God. There had never been any doubt in the minds of the Jews that the Messiah would be the Son of God. The question was whether Jesus was the Messiah.

The irony in Saul's preaching in Damascus was that it was done in the very synagogues for which he had received letters from the high priest to arrest Christians and bring them to trial. Saul may have had high expectations about the results of his preaching. He may have thought that the fact that, as a former inquisitor, he now preached the message he had tried to eradicate would have enormous results. He probably had not counted on the suspicion he aroused in his audience. Many of them didn't trust him. As his testimony became more irrefutable the opposition also mounted to the point where the Jews plotted to take his life. From Paul's own account of his escape in his letter to the Corinthians, we understand that the Jews had involved the Roman government in the matter. There must have been some political tension behind this which does not come to the surface in the text. In Second Corinthians we read Paul's rather laconic report: "In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands."²³⁶

Saul encountered the same kind of suspicion concerning the genuineness of his conversion from the side of the apostles in Jerusalem as he initially met with in Damascus. It seems strange to us that, of all people, the apostles could not bring themselves to believe that the Lord Jesus could turn a man like Saul around in his tracks and turn a murderer into a saint. Evidently, they had never prayed for his conversion. Had they asked the Lord if Saul's conversion was real, they would have known. It also seems that in the three years between Saul's journey to Damascus and his return to Jerusalem, news would have come to Jerusalem about the events. Their suspicion that Saul wanted to trick the church in Jerusalem and work his way into the inner circle in order to destroy it, must have kept them from searching for the truth. Even the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit as they were, did not always follow the right path. An exception was Barnabas, the man who had lost the vote to become an apostle. It probably did not take Barnabas too long to recognize Christ in brother Saul. Barnabas earned his name: Son of prophecy, or son of consolation." This humble man became an important link in the spreading of the Gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the world, by simply introducing Saul to the apostles.

Saul's fervent testimony and his superior logic in debating with the Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem accounts for the new trouble he got himself into. Saul's knowledge of Greek was probably superior to that of the

other apostles, which made him the ideal person to address the Greek speaking section of the population. Instead of allowing themselves to be convinced and convicted, they reacted with such hatred that they plotted murder. As it turns out, the apostle Paul appeared prone to become the object of assassination plots. A strange reputation!

When the other apostles heard about this they decided to assure Saul's safety by making him return to his native Tarsus. Paul's vision in the temple during his stay in Jerusalem may have played an important part in his return to his birthplace. We read in the apostle's defense later before the mob that wanted to lynch him: "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' 'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"²³⁷ Tarsus was the chief city of Cilicia, the southeastern portion of Asia Minor, with a substantial Jewish colony, but definitely in gentile territory.

Saul of Tarsus was not a man of light, fickle, and uncultivated mind. His natural powers were vast, his character the most decided, and his education, as we learn from his historian, and from his writings, was at once both liberal and profound. He was born and raised in Rome and enjoyed every privilege that that brought. He was also a rival both of the arts and science in both Rome and Athens. Although he was a Jew, his education was not limited.

The question is proposed "Was it likely that such a man, possessing such a mind, cultivated to such an extent, could have imposed on or deceived? It is not likely thought, because the circumstances of his conversion forbid the supposition; they do more; they literally render it impossible. His conversion took place in daylight, in the open air, in company of those who were employed only to exterminate Christianity. Cheating in any form could not be practiced.

The entire history of Paul proves him to be one of the greatest men; and his conduct after he became a Christian, had it no sprung from a Divine motive, of the truth of which he had the fullest conviction. So, the conclusion therefore is self-evident that in Paul's call there could be no imposture, that in his own

mind there could be no deception, that his conversion was from heave, and the religion he professed and taught, the infallible and eternal truth of Yahweh. The ninth chapter of Acts will ever remain an inexpugnable fortress to defend Christianity and defeat its enemies.

Acts 9:32-11:18- The Mission of Peter

Read Acts 9:32- 43 (Pgs. 1891-1892)

With Paul safely in Tarsus and the church in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria growing in numbers and strength (9:31). Luke turns to the ministry of Peter. He records the details of two Miracles Peter performed the healing of the paralytic Aeneas (v 32-35) and the raising of the disciple Dorcas (v. 36-43).

A similar event as in Lydda occurred in Joppa, where Tabitha, or Dorcas, was raised from the dead by the power of Jesus Christ, working through Peter. The meaning of the name of the woman, in Hebrew as well as in Greek, is “gazelle.” A question, pertinent to the resurrection of Dorcas, is why the miracle was performed. It doesn’t seem that the woman was torn away from a family of young children. She was a widow whose main testimony had been that she performed many good deeds for people poorer than herself. Bringing such a person back from the presence of the Lord she loved and from the heavenly glory she had begun to enjoy may have been wonderful for the bereaved, it certainly was not what Dorcas would have chosen herself. This was not a case of extreme need, such as the raising of the son of the widow in Nain,²⁴⁰ whose death had robbed the mother of her support.

Luke has painted a picture in vivid colors for us. The demonstration of grief by the recipients of Dorcas’ labor of love is accompanied by a display of all the clothing she made for the poor while she was alive. Peter followed the example of Jesus’ resurrection of Jairus’ daughter by ordering everybody to leave the room, leaving him alone with the corpse.²⁴¹ Peter’s kneeling down in prayer before attempting to raise the dead woman suggests that he was uncertain of the will of God in that matter. As far as we know, he had never called anyone back to life. The Holy Spirit must have given him the assurance that the miracle was in accordance with the will of God. Yet, when Jesus had sent out His disciples on their first evangelistic journey, He had given them the charge: “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out

demons.”²⁴² We may assume that some resurrection had occurred during that campaign.

Read Acts 10 (pgs. 1892-1896)

Luke describes Cornelius as God-fearing, who prayed to God and was generous. He was obviously not a proselyte to Judaism but he was convinced of the truth of the Jewish religion. From Peter’s sermon, we also understand that he must have been familiar with the baptism of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus. Otherwise the words in verses 37,38 would make no sense: “You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached- how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” Yet, Cornelius had never taken the final step that would have brought him into God’s covenant with His people. People such as Cornelius were known as “proselytes of the gate,” meaning that they were not allowed inside the temple of Jerusalem. In this he differed from the eunuch to whom Philip brought the Gospel. Cornelius was still officially a pagan.

Later, an angel appeared to Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea, and directed him to find Peter in Joppa and return him to Caesarea. As they were arriving in Joppa. Peter also received a corresponding vision which puzzled him.

Peter’s vision was a strange one. Some commentators suggest that, in his trance, Peter saw a spiritual reality that is usually hidden to the carnal eye. It is difficult to imagine though that, even in the spiritual world, sheets with animals constantly descend from heaven. Part of Peter’s vision was, undoubtedly, triggered by his hunger for food, but it was also definitely God’s way of teaching him a lesson that would rid him of his prejudice. The sheet was filled with animals among which some were not in the category of kosher food. At the command to kill some of the animals to satisfy his appetite, Peter vigorously protested: “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The Jews had always understood that the distinction between what was kosher and not kosher was symbolic to teach God’s chosen people the difference between those who worshipped God and those who worshipped idols. That is what kept devout Jews from entering the house of a pagan. This is illustrated in Jesus’ trial before Pilate, where we read:

“To avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.”²⁴⁹

When Cornelius asked Peter what the Lord had commanded him to say, Peter told the story of the gospel. He began with the life and ministry of John the Baptist, then spoke about Jesus’ ministry and death, and resurrection, and concluded with the spread of the gospel in the early church (v. 36-42). He ended up baptizing Cornelius and his family.

Read Acts 11:1-18 (pgs. 1896-1897)

Peter had a lot of explaining to do on his return to the Jerusalem church (11:1-18). When criticized for eating with Gentiles, Peter merely offered a description of what had transpired (v.4-15). He then recalled the earlier words of Jesus (v. 16), and the witness of the Holy Spirit, which was the same as that which they themselves had received on Pentecost (V. 17). His conclusion was, “Who was I to think that I could oppose God?” Thus, the offer of the gospel to Gentiles as well as Jews was not planned strategy of outreach. Rather, “even to the Gentiles God had granted repentance that leads to life,” and the early church could only praise God and offer “no further objections.” (v. 18)

Acts 11:19-30 (pgs. 1896-1897)

The Congregation of Antioch

The act of imagining how hefty the threshold was that the Jewish community had to cross in order to reconcile themselves to the legality of Peter’s conduct. We find the point on which Peter was attacked recur throughout Acts and even in the Pauline Epistles. The principle of legalism has yet not conceded defeat in the Church.

Peter entered Jerusalem expecting to receive criticism and brought the six brothers of Joppa with him for this purpose. One could think that Peter’s testimony alone would hold enough weight to convince Jerusalem, but that is not the case.

Peter broke bread with Gentiles, but later he was accused of the opposite, but Paul of all people. Paul wrote: “When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to their group.

Paul was joined by other Jews in this hypocrisy. When he saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Peter in front of them “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” This criticism of Peter’s behavior evidently did not cease in the meeting that Luke describes. Peter later buckled under this pressure. The Jewish critics were persistent, this is evident in the Epistles.

This pressure split the church, and it was never healed. They accused Peter of giving up his Jewishness in accepting people as brothers in Christ who had not become Jews themselves. The Holy Spirit shed a new light on those Scriptures had not convinced them. Later the church would support Peter unlike the opposition.

The sad part of this report is that the fact that the Gospel had reached the gentiles caused a split in the church that was never healed. The group that was later called “The Circumcision” actually accused Peter of having given up his Jewishness in accepting people as brothers in Christ who had not become Jews themselves. One of the problems was that the opposition based itself on a rigorous interpretation of the Scriptures. The fact that the Holy Spirit had shed new light on those Scriptures had not convinced them. The church would officially take her stand beside Peter, but the opposition never died.

The question is, of course, whether Peter ceased to be a Jew when he set aside certain Jewish practices. The question plagues modern Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah and it is often cause for severe persecution from the side of the family to which the converts belong.

Luke tells the story from the viewpoint of a gentile believer in Jesus. Although this may have influenced him in the choice of his material and the colors of his painting, we may believe that Acts being the inspired Word of God, the Holy Spirit guided the author also in expressing his gentile sentiments in the matter. Peter’s vision and his interpretation of it were, of course, subjective. The fact that people have visions does not always prove that they understand the mind of God. The vindication of Peter’s experience was in the fact that the

Holy Spirit came upon a group of gentiles, even as Peter was speaking, before there could be any question about circumcision or baptism. There were seven people, standing next to Peter, ready to testify to the truth of the event.

When the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his guests, Peter remembered the promise Jesus had given to His disciples on the day of His ascension: “For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”²⁶⁴ The first one ever to speak those words was John the Baptist. While preaching at the River

Jordan, John had announced: “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”²⁶⁵ For Peter it must not only have been a matter of remembering the words, but he must also have relived the experience. To see people come to the point where they turn to the Lord for salvation is a thrill equal to the one we experienced when we took the same step ourselves. It seems that Jesus’ words had acquired a new meaning for Peter and that he realized, more than ever before, that water baptism is merely an outward expression of an inner spiritual reality, the transformation of a life through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

When the Spirit came upon Cornelius and his guests, Peter had exclaimed: “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?” In front of the church counsel, he said: “Who was I to think that I could oppose God?” The statement implies that there had been traces of opposition in Peter’s heart. This was evinced even in his reaction to the vision of the sheet filled with animals and the voice that said: “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” Peter had retorted: “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” Not all tradition is, of course, wrong. It is amazing to see, however, how difficult it is for most of us to be free from the grip of tradition and enter into the freedom of pure fellowship with God. Jesus promised us: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”²⁶⁶ The key to the freedom in knowledge of the truth through the ministry of the Holy Spirit is our willingness to obey.

Peter’s inquisitors are finally convinced. They praise the Lord, saying: “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.” The rendering of the Greek word *kai* with “even” is linguistically legitimate but it does express the lingering prejudice of a Jew toward a gentile. The translation: “also the Gentiles” would have been just as correct. One gets the impression that these Jewish Christians felt as if God had to overcome the same cultural obstacle they did, in taking the Gospel to all nations and in all the world.

In 11:19-26, Luke adds an explanation that Peter's experience was not isolated. Even though, for the most part, Christians were spreading the gospel "only among Jews" (v. 19), some were also evangelizing the Greeks in Antioch (v. 20), and believers were being added. The Jerusalem church decided to investigate and sent Barabbas to Antioch; they were content with the evidence of "the grace of God" as seen in verses 22-24. At this time, Paul (Saul) came to Antioch, and both he and Barnabas remained there for a full year, teaching "great numbers of people" (v.25-26) Here believers were first called "Christians" (v. 26b) Barnabas and Saul went to Judea or Jerusalem with a gift of provisions from the churches there. (v.37-30)

Acts 12:1-25 (pgs. 1898-1899)
Peter's Miraculous Escape from Prison

Read Acts 12

Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch when they "had finished their mission.... Taking with them John, also called Mark." (v. 25) During this time Peter was imprisoned and miraculously rescued (v. 3-19). Luke has carefully woven the two narratives together to emphasize the dual leadership of Peter and Paul in the Church at Jerusalem.

As his last word on the situation in Jerusalem, Luke includes a brief account on the death of Herod (12:9b-25), one in a long line of kings who opposed Jesus and the church (cf. Luke 9:9, 13:31-33, 23:7-12). Luke perhaps intends his narrative as a commentary on the fate of the Jewish leaders who, in response to the growing church, "did not give praise to God." (Acts 12:23)

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You that I am a Christian and part of the family of God. Thank You that Jesus died and rose again to save me from my sin. I pray that I may never be ashamed of the gospel of Christ or the name of Jesus but be prepared to live by faith and trust You in all things, no matter what difficult circumstances may arise. I pray that I would continue to assemble together with my brothers and sisters in Christ, and all the more as I see the day approaching. This I ask in Jesus' name, AMEN.

“And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.”
(Acts 11:26)