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THE BOOK OF ACTS ***Acts 8-12***

By Dr. James E. Potts

The Glorious Gospel (8:1-8:40)

The events in the first seven chapters of Acts limit Christian activity mostly to Jerusalem. In this lesson now, we see the Good News spreading throughout Judea and into Samaria. Here we see the Church on the move. But we first need to look at the circumstances that brought on this moving-out process. Luke tells us that the stoning of Stephen was the beginning of ***“a great persecution against the church” (8:1)***, and then he adds, ***“As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison” (8:3)***. Here is a picture of brutality. The harassment of the Christians was horrible—they were dragged from their homes and thrown into prison (8:3).

The organizing verse is in **Acts 8:4**: ***“... they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.”*** Luke is showing here, through the ministry of several key people, how the Church expanded its territory under the leadership of the Spirit. It was this violent persecution that forced the Christians to leave Jerusalem and seek refuge in the surrounding countryside of Judea and Samaria. But remember, the Jerusalem church membership already ran into the thousands. This was no small exodus. It was a mass migration, an event of importance. We read that even though they were a persecuted people, they did not shrink from preaching and teaching about Jesus wherever they went.

In an effort to squash the Christian witness Stephen is killed and Saul of Tarsus tries to throw all the Christians into prison or frighten them into silence. But instead, the apostles continued their witness boldly in Jerusalem while thousands of other Christians moved out to infiltrate the surrounding countryside.

Luke’s selection of characters in this drama is important to the story. Three men—Philip, Peter, and Paul—stand out above everyone else. Not only were they outstanding leaders, they were also three examples of the Spirit’s ability to use people. Peter was representative of the apostles—the established ministry of the time. These were the “ordained clergy.” Philip was one of the “new ministers,” one of the seven deacons referred to in chapter six. And there was Paul, probably selected as a prime

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example of how God can use the unlikely people in His service, and the surprising ways God works to accomplish His will.

No sooner had the Christian believers been scattered than Philip went **“to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them” (8:5)**. The important thing to note here is that Philip boldly went with his message of salvation into an area where the people were violently opposed to anything related to Judaism, and that would have included Christianity at that time. The bitter hostility between Jews and Samaritans was several hundred years old.

It is for this reason that Philip’s move to Samaria was a landmark event because it proved that the gospel was not just for a select number of Jerusalem Jews but was for everyone—even Samaritans. New Christians (converted Jews) were going places they had previously avoided and were sharing their Good News with people they had previously despised. And they were received with open arms! As a matter of fact, Luke says, **“And there was great joy in that city” (8:8)**. The Samaritans passed a true test of Christianity—they were full of joy. Then and now genuine Christianity produces people who are full of joy, not of doom and gloom.

In the midst of this joyful setting a minor character entered the scene. His name was Simon, and he was a magician, a sorcerer. Luke indicates that because of Philip’s preaching Simon became a believer and was baptized (8:13). But it wasn’t long before things changed. When the apostles back in Jerusalem got word about what was happening in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to confirm and affirm the results of Philip’s ministry (8:14). After seeing what had happened, Peter and John prayed that the new Samaritan converts would receive the Holy Spirit, and as Luke writes, the apostles **“laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost” (8:17)**.

The laying on of hands by Peter and John and the reception of the Holy Spirit by the new converts made a strong impression on Simon. Offering Peter and John money, he asked, **“Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost” (8:19)**. Peter’s response to Simon (8:20-23) is a strong condemnation. The gift of the Holy Spirit was not for sale.

Simon’s real tragedy was not that he had asked (though that’s bad enough); instead, it was that he had thought the power of God could be purchased with human means. He had failed to see that what was happening was not the property of any person—it was the activity of a sovereign God. Two thousand years later we will still need to remember that. There is not enough money in the world to get a corner on God’s

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blessings and on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit still moves where and when He wills.

We leave this tragic scene with Simon crying for mercy (8:24-25). While Simon's words here may indicate repentance, we do not know for sure. But we do know that from his name comes our modern term *simony*—the making of profit from sacred things.

Our Scripture lesson further tells us that the gospel continued to produce converts in other Samaritan cities (8:25). The gospel of Jesus Christ is effective wherever it goes despite problems and even corruptions. The picture of the Christian Church for almost 2,000 years has often been blurred and discolored by the words and actions of people who dishonor the spirit of Jesus. But in the face of human sin, God is still in charge; His purposes and will prevails.

The Gospel to Gaza and Ethiopia

Luke now moves us from Samaria south to a busy highway. We read: ***“And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert” (8:26)***. It was this highway that Philip was instructed to go. Philip had no idea why he was going; he was simply told to go and he did. Most of us would have argued with the angel. We would have wanted a plan of action. But God doesn't always work that way; in Philip we have a model for obeying the word of the Lord without question.

The scene shifts now to the desert highway. And it was there Philip came upon an Ethiopian who was sitting in his chariot and reading from an Isaiah scroll. Luke tells us that the Ethiopian was a eunuch and attached to the court of Candace as the royal treasurer. The Ethiopia mentioned here is not located where we know it today, but was located on the Nile River in what is now Sudan.

Philip was next instructed by the Spirit of the Lord to join the man in the chariot. He did, and then follows the story in which Philip explained the Scripture to his fellow traveler. This led to the Ethiopian's conversion and baptism (8:28-39). And from there, through this next convert, the gospel spread toward the heart of Africa.

We see that Philip was led by the Spirit in this rendezvous with the Ethiopian. One key to our discipleship is our willingness to listen and to heed the “nudges” of the Spirit. As we obey those nudges—that guidance—we, too, may be led to be of help, a witness, to people in need. Along with Philip we will have the opportunity to point a searcher toward Jesus Christ.

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The challenge for us here is to break out of our self-preoccupation and to live in the presence of the Spirit who is able to use us in new and exciting ways. Through Philip, Luke has shown us a glorious gospel of Good News—one that works when it is applied. This is not to say that we will not always ride the waves of success. There will be down moments of resistance and difficulty. But this part of our lesson provides ample hope for us to believe that Christianity can reach people where they are and bring them into a saving relationship with God.

A Sudden and Surprising Surrender (9:1-9:31)

Luke has planted a man who now becomes the central figure in one of the greatest dramas in Christian history (9:1-8). We first met Saul when he witnessed Stephen's death. He is then described as creating havoc within the Christian community. Now Luke moves him onto center stage "... *breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord*" (9:1).

A Mission of Vengeance

But Saul of Tarsus was no ordinary religious fanatic. Born in Tarsus in Cilicia, young Saul had been raised in an intellectual atmosphere flavored with Greek thought and rich in the culture of this ancient city. From that heritage Saul moved on to Jerusalem where he became a student of Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the greatest Jewish teachers of that time. It is not surprising that Saul advanced rapidly, and as a zealous Pharisee, he had become a sworn enemy of the Christians.

Some of the Jewish Christians had migrated to the city of Damascus. Saul had heard about this Christian community and, armed with papers of extradition, he set out to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

A Dramatic Confrontation

Saul of Tarsus is without doubt the last person mentioned so far that we would expect to become a Christian. Yet Luke tells us that as Saul and his party were getting close to Damascus, he had a dramatic confrontation with One who identified Himself as "*Jesus whom thou persecutest*" (9:5). And out of that bright light Jesus added, "*It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.*" There is much about the Saul of those days that we don't know, but we do know that on that Damascus Road the grace of God shone brightly, and Saul was converted.

This is a familiar story to Christians everywhere and some have used it across the years as the "model" for all conversions. There is much cause for us to rejoice in

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Saul's experience, but it is wrong to consider it normal for everyone else. What is normal, is the ability of God to break through even the most hostile and stubborn defenses and to win us to Himself. This event is a marvelous reminder that no one is beyond the reach of God!

In this next part of our story (9:10-19) we come to the confirmation of what happened. It was necessary that outside confirmation be given to Saul's conversion. This is how it worked out. In response to Saul's question, "***What wilt thou have me to do?***" (9:6), the Lord told him to go into Damascus and wait for further instructions. This he did, but since he had been blinded by his encounter with God, he had to be led in by those who were with him. And Luke next tells us that he waited three days—blind, refusing to eat or drink—before he received any further word.

The Lord's Special Messenger

Once again the scene shifts, and it goes to a man named Ananias, a resident of Damascus, who the Lord had selected to be the one to confirm the conversion of Saul (9:10-18). Ananias put his life on the line in approaching the very person who was arresting and putting Christians in prison. Ananias had to know a deep level of communion with God to be willing to take the risk involved.

Picture this next scene. Saul has been waiting—alone. His world has been turned upside down. What would happen next? The door opens, and he hears someone walking up to him. Silence. And then, "***Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightiest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost***" (9:17). Once Saul had been an enemy; now he is a brother.

The Rest of the Story

Luke seems to hurry on as if he can't wait to tell us the rest of the story. Saul receives his sight back, he is physically restored, and enjoys a newfound fellowship with the other believers in Damascus—his new status as a brother in Christ is affirmed by them.

Then we come to the final confirmation of what happened through Saul's own testimony: "***And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God***" (9:20). He preached Christ to the very people who had once been his allies in hating Christians. Their response was understandable (9:21). But Saul held steady with his message, "***... and confounded the Jews which dwelt in Damascus, proving that this is very Christ***" (9:22).

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We move now to the next part of the story—the challenge. It was only a matter of time until Saul’s old cronies had taken all they could. Luke writes, “... *the Jews took counsel to kill him*” (9:23). Silencing the opposition has always been a tactic of evil. But God was just beginning His work with Saul, and so the plans of his enemies were frustrated, and he escaped (9:24-25). His problems weren’t over just yet, but he still had to face the challenge of acceptance by the Christians in Jerusalem (9:26-31). Here were people who had felt the sting of Saul’s persecution. They could remember firsthand his threats and violent acts. It is not surprising they were afraid and unwilling to accept him.

Once again it was necessary for someone to vouch for Saul’s legitimacy. This time it was Barnabas who pleaded Saul’s case (9:27). And this was the beginning of a long relationship between Saul and Barnabas that God would use to spread the gospel. No doubt, the word of Barnabas was trusted because Saul was now welcomed into the fellowship at Jerusalem.

This part of our lesson ends with an important summary verse (9:31) that tells of the expansion of the Church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. And it also indicates that the Christian believers were “at rest,” enjoying a time of peace and blessing “in the comfort of the Holy Ghost.” After the fast-paced events of this part of our lesson, it is encouraging to know that there may come periods of calm.

The Gospel for Everyone (9:32-11:30)

Luke now suddenly shifts characters. Peter returns to center stage, and we read that he was traveling from place to place preaching the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to the Jews (9:32). We have already seen through the ministry of Philip and Saul (Paul) that the Good News was well received. Up to now, the strategy of the Chaldeans had been to win converts from Judaism.

But in this part of our lesson a new push begins—gentiles, as well, are seen to be recipients of the gospel. The glorious gospel not only reaches unlikely people (i.e., Saul), but it also penetrates unlikely cultures and races. For us, over 2,000 years later, there is nothing unlikely or unusual about the idea that the gospel of Jesus recognizes no social, racial, or geographic boundaries. But in those early morning hours of the Christian movement, it was still thought to be only for Jews, wherever they lived.

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Peter in Lydda and Joppa

We pick up Peter now as he **“came down also to the saints which dwelt at Lydda” (9:32)**. Here we see Peter acting in Jesus’ name as he is instrumental in the healing of a man with the palsy by the name of Aeneas (9:33). Word of his healing got around. So, we read next that when a Christian in Joppa named Tabitha (Dorcas in Greek) died, her fellow Christians asked Peter **“to come to them” (9:36-38)**. In response to their request, Peter left Lydda and traveled the ten miles to Joppa, where, after he prayed, life was restored to Tabitha (9:40-41).

There are two things in the Lydda and Joppa stories that needs to be pointed out. First, you will notice that Luke uses the word *saints* to describe both the believers in Lydda (vs. 32) and those in Joppa (vs. 41). This word comes from a Greek word that means “different.” In other words, the Christians, the saints, were different in belief and behavior from the non-Christians. Now, as then, we are to be a “different people” in this world, but not of it.

Second, we see in these two stories that God continues to be able and willing to meet the needs of people and of His Church. The miracles performed in these two stories were vehicles by which others came to believe in Christ. But it is important to notice that Peter was not on some sort of a miracle show. The miracles simply occurred in the natural course of his ministry, and those who saw what happened were convinced of the genuineness of Christianity.

Introducing Cornelius, the Centurion

Once again Luke gives us an unexpected shift of scene. Some thirty-five miles north of Joppa was the thriving port city of Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government in Palestine. Now a new character moves into the Christian drama: **“There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band” (10:1)**.

Cornelius, we are told, was a devout man—a man who abandoned a belief in polytheism and was searching for the true God. Luke tells us that he **“prayed to God alway” (10:2)**—he was already a man of prayer. And it was while he was praying one day that an angel appeared to him, affirmed his prayers and good works, and instructed him to make contact with Peter, who at that moment was just a few miles south of Joppa. Cornelius then dispatched two servants and an aide to find Peter (10:2-9).

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Peter's Vision

Act two in this drama opens with Peter at noon prayer. First, God had been in communication with Cornelius; now He is working on Peter through a vision (10:9-17). Luke takes us into the scene—Peter sees what appears to be a sheet coming down from heaven, and in it ***“were all manner of four-footed beasts... and creeping things, and fowls of the air”*** (10:12). Then a voice told him to kill and eat. Peter was horrified—he still adhered to the dietary restrictions of Judaism. In spite of the fact that the voice from heaven assured him that in God’s sight nothing was unclean, Peter did not respond. The scene was repeated twice more before it disappeared, but he still failed to understand (10:17).

God’s timing is always right. For while Peter was pondering what had happened, the three messengers from Cornelius arrived and told him all about the angel’s visit to Cornelius. Peter then fed them and put them up for the night while he made preparations to go with them to Caesarea.

In the context of the rest of the story, we know that through Peter’s prayer and his vision he was prepared for this drastic next step. His doubts were erased with the appearance of the messengers from Cornelius and the words of the Holy Spirit: ***“... go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them”*** (10:20).

The Conversation of Cornelius and His Household

God had spoken. Matter of fact, He had to speak more than once to Peter through the vision. But that didn’t matter. The important thing was that now Peter obeyed. And what matters most for us is that we obey God, for His will and purposes are accomplished by people who obey Him.

Next, we travel with Peter to Caesarea and to the home of Cornelius. And here comes the proof that Peter finally understood what God had been trying to tell him. ***“Ye know how that it is in an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean”*** (10:28).

With that introduction Luke gives us a full account of what happened (10:24-48). The seeker is reached by the obedient disciple, and this is followed by a clear presentation of the message of salvation through Christ and the attentiveness of Cornelius and his household. And right in the middle of this scene, the Holy Spirit came—just as He had come to the believers on the Day of Pentecost. For the hearers, it was the fulfillment of their desire to know God more fully. For Peter, it was proof positive

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that ***“God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (10:34-35).***

Peter’s Defense

In the next part of our lesson (11:1-18), when word of what had happened at Caesarea got back to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, they really got nervous. So, when Peter returned, they held him to account. Peter had broken the sacred traditions by eating with an uncircumcised gentile. And at this point we must remember that the early Christians, all of whom were Jews or Jewish converts, still tended to understand their new faith in Jesus in terms of their ancestral faith.

The “circumcision group” just could not believe that Peter would dare go to those who were uncircumcised. By their standards, even though Cornelius feared God, he was not a candidate for salvation. Luke goes into detail here. Peter rehearsed the entire sequence of events at Joppa and at Caesarea, and then in telling how the Holy Spirit came to the household of Cornelius, he recalled for them the words of Jesus: ***“John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost” (11:16).***

We have in Peter’s defense here a plea for understanding—a presentation of truth. And it was accepted as such, for Luke now writes, ***“When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (11:18).***

The Church at Antioch

The rest of Acts 11 gives us two other lessons on the theme that the gospel of Jesus is for everyone. First, we see further confirmation of the fact that gentiles were to be included in God’s new fellowship of believers (11:19-26). As the scene shifts to the metropolitan area of Antioch, we find that not only was the gospel preached there but it was well received. It was a major center of culture and of pagan worship of the goddess Daphne. Antioch was also known as a center of immorality, but it was here that the gospel took firm root and where believers were first called Christians (11:26).

One in Spirit

The second lesson that comes to us now has to do with the intense connection that existed among the believers (11:27-30). They cared for and about each other. This is demonstrated by the visit of Agabus to Antioch. When he told the Christians there about the threatened famine in Judea, they immediately banded together and provided generous relief. They were one in the Spirit and one in the Lord. The wall between

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Jew and gentile was broken down. Christianity was on the verge of becoming a world religion.

Growing Pains (12:1-12:25)

The Death of James and Peter's Arrest

To please the Jewish religious leaders Herod Agrippa launched an attack on the Christian community in Jerusalem: "... **he killed James, the brother of John with the sword**" (12:2) and he threw Peter into prison (12:3). The period of calm referred to in 9:31 was over, and a campaign of intense persecution was brought against the Christians. But in the midst of this time of testing we catch something of the mood of the Church: "**Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him**" (12:5). In times of difficulty, stress, and persecution, victory comes through prayer.

Up to this point in our lesson we have seen prayer as the vehicle for service and ministry. Now we see it as the means to deliver and defend Christianity against its enemies. But prayer should never be interpreted as a sort of magic "cure-all." It is not a divine vending machine into which we drop requests and get back answers. Instead, prayer is communion with God that strengthens us in our faith whether at the moment the results are what we expected or not. In the face of evil, prayer will help us rise above our difficulties and suffering to see the God who is still with us.

Peter Delivered

In Peter's case, the church prayed, and a miracle occurred (12:6-11)—an angel of the Lord freed Peter and led him out to the street. When he appeared at the locked door where the Christians were praying for him, it created quite a commotion. The girl Rhoda answered the door and recognized Peter, but she was so surprised that she forgot to let him in and slammed the door shut as she ran to tell the others that Peter was outside.

But they didn't believe her (12:15)—even though they had been praying for Peter, that evidently had not expected this kind of an answer. So, Peter had to keep knocking until they finally opened the door for him. So often we are like those Christians that night—we pray and then we are surprised when the Lord answers.

Good was making an important point here for those early Christians—prison bars, evil plots, and even murder cannot stop the movement of the faith. Luke underlines this in these words: "... **the word of God grew and multiplied**" (12:24).

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Christianity had now moved out beyond Judea and Samaria. It is true it did not happen without problems and persecution. But there was no attitude of defeat among these early believers. Matter of fact, our Scripture lesson closes with the word that Saul (Paul) and Barnabas and young John Mark were getting ready to leave on what we commonly refer to as Paul's first missionary journey.

In our lesson we have seen that unlikely people, unlikely races, and unlikely circumstances all came together to show us a Christianity on the move. All of this should cause us to pray that God will do something unlikely with and for us. Who knows what adventures of faith may lay out ahead of us as we commit our lives to the Lord and pray "without ceasing" for His guidance.

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