
Day 327 - November 23

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Persecution and Preaching

Conversion of Saul

Readings: *Acts 8:1-9:31*

Reflections:

- Church scattered: Jesus' warning to his disciples about the persecution they would suffer is quickly realized as Saul organizes a systematic attempt to imprison and forcibly stop the spread of their message. Saul went from house to house to arrest disciples of Jesus and so we see again Luke record that the primary place Christ-followers met were in homes. The Apostles stay in Jerusalem but the spread of the gospel will now spread beyond the city to the entire nation. Again the words of Jesus are fulfilled: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria..." (Acts 1:8)
- Philip's Samaritan ministry: Philip carries on the ministry of Jesus as he proclaims Jesus as Messiah, heals people, particularly paralytics, and casts out evil spirits. Through the Spirit, Jesus, through his followers, continues to bring rescuing power to people in need. The result of a full proclamation and demonstration of the coming of Christ's kingdom is joy. "So there was great joy in that city!" Although the religious institution responds with anger, insult, and persecution, the average person responds with incredible joy at the grace and mercy of God.
- Simon the sorcerer: The irreligious revolution confronts all forms of religion. Here in Samaria Philip confronts a magical form of religion in the person of Simon, a sorcerer. Luke's book records the stories of various leaders, the summary of numerous sermons, the impact on many cities and importantly, the confrontation of all different types of religion. Luke wants to give his readers a clear understanding of what the advance of this kingdom actually looks like. Simon's obsession with magic was rooted in his pride as he was trying to aggrandize himself through his magic and boasts. He declared he was someone great and he had the power of the Great Power. Magical religion is rooted in the attempt to save ourselves through the control spiritual power. Whether it is a witch doctor in Africa or a faith healer in North America, the basic model is the same: one special person has a special ability to control spiritual power. Boasting, pride, self-centeredness, and greed all are natural extensions of a person who is obsessed with magical religion. It appears at first that Simon converts to Christ and is baptized as a follower and yet his magical mindset continues.

- Prayer for the Holy Spirit: Peter and John hear about the impact of Philip's teaching and they go to Samaria to pray for the new disciples to receive the Holy Spirit. We see the clear separation between committing to follow Jesus and baptism from the intentional laying of hands and praying for someone to receive the Spirit. The sharing in the Spirit happens relationally, person to person, not magically, one special person doing a special holy act. The practice of placing hands on a person when you pray for the Spirit to enter their lives may appear magical but this is not the intent. The focus is connecting people relationally and personally. Life in the Spirit is not an individualistic experience but a community experience.
- Simon rebuked by Peter: We see in Simon the religious mindset. He offers the disciples money for the ability to give the power of the Holy Spirit away. He wants to turn this into a money-making venture as he had done with his magic. He doesn't see God as relational but rather as an impersonal force that is controlled with a spiritual light switch. Peter confronts magical religion head on and declares that it has not part of the kingdom of Christ. He confronts Simon's heart and points out that it is not right before God. He calls him to repent and pray. He also points out that Simon is full of bitterness and controlled by sin. Is this Peter having a divine insight into Simon's secret life and therefore showing that Simon needs the Spirit not to impress others but to change his own life? Or is he suggesting that at the heart of magical religion, and the desire to control spiritual powers is a low-self esteem that is seeking to compensate? Did something happen in Simon's upbringing that caused him to become bitter to other people and therefore set him on a mission to prove himself? Or could both be true? We don't know but we know one thing: magical religion; like legalistic religion and ritualistic religion and political religion have no place in the kingdom of Christ.
- Return to Jerusalem: The apostles fearlessly continue to proclaim the message of Jesus as they return to the center of the persecution, Jerusalem. Again it is incredible how radically transformed the disciples are by the power of the Spirit.
- Philip teaches Ethiopian: Here in this encounter we see modeled for us how a person is led by the Spirit. An angel first appears to Philip (in a vision or in person, we don't know) and gives him specific directions on where to go without explaining why. Philip responds in obedience even though he doesn't know why he is doing what he is doing. This is sometimes the case with following the Spirit. God doesn't give us the whole plan in one sitting but simply leads us one step at a time and seeks to cultivate active submission and obedience in our lives. Philip runs into an important Gentile who works for the queen of the Ethiopians and is a God-fearing person. The Spirit now directs Philip how to position himself to meet this person. The result is that God has orchestrated the perfect set up for this Ethiopian to hear and respond to the message of Jesus. We see here that God is always working and we can trust him to create opportunities for us to share the message if we are open to being led by the Spirit.
- Ethiopian baptized: The Ethiopian responds immediately to the message and we see modeled for us how simple baptism should be. It doesn't need to be a big religious

ceremony. Do you have a new believer and some water nearby? Go for it! The Spirit had more work for Philip to do and so immediately after the baptism, Philip's work there is done and he is sent off immediately. Although the text reads like Philip was somehow spiritually beamed from one location to another, we probably shouldn't understand this as a miraculous transportation but rather how quickly the Spirit can redeploy people. There was more people to reach and so the Spirit moved him on in a hurry.

- Conversion of Saul: There is probably no other conversion in the history of the Jesus movement that has made more of an impact than that of Saul of Tarsus who became known as Paul the apostle. He will write thirteen letters that will be considered Scripture to the Jesus movement. He will lead three church planting missions and establish churches in Turkey, Greece and Italy. He will father what will become the largest segment of the Christian church, the Gentile church. He and his co-workers will basically take on the entire known world and in the end he will ultimately die as a martyr. As a trained rabbi, Paul's education will prove invaluable as he becomes one of the early church's most influential leaders and teachers.
- The story of Paul's conversion is recorded many times in Acts as well as in his writings (See Acts 21:40-22:21; 26:1-23; Galatians 1:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; 2 Corinthians 12:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-13; 1 Timothy 1:12-14). Although each account or reference to his conversion highlights different elements, we are clear that Paul was a religious leader, led a persecution against the church, experienced some form of vision of the resurrected Jesus, was called by Jesus to be an apostle (or "sent one") to the Gentile world, and became recognized as an apostle and key leader within the church. Galatians records the most details of any of Paul's writings on his own personal life but as we see by the other accounts, Paul regularly referenced his own conversion as a part of reminding people of his apostolic calling.
- Jesus appears to Saul: We see here that the Jesus movement is called the Way. This nickname for the movement refers to the "the way of life" they shared together. They were not called the Truth or the Faith but rather the Way because what stood out was their approach to life, relationship and community. When Jesus appears to Saul, at first all he sees is a light and he hears a voice questioning him. This light is a blinding light. God makes Saul temporarily blind so that he comes to the terms with his own spiritual blindness. It is a sign to him to help him understand his true spiritual reality. Saul's religious approach to God had blinded him from the truth. We also see that Jesus is clear that Saul is persecuting him. Jesus' identification with suffering of his followers is complete as they are his body. As we suffer, so Jesus suffers. Later Paul will write to the Philippians that in his desire to know Christ, he desires to have complete fellowship with his sufferings. To be one with someone is to enter into their experience. Jesus does this with his followers. Those traveling with Saul see nothing but hear the sound. We know from this that this was not just a personal vision for Saul but a divine encounter that was confirmed by his traveling companions. As Jesus reaches out to Saul, we see Jesus once again practicing enemy love as he takes his greatest

known enemy and in mercy reaches out to him and through love, turns him into his strongest ally.

- Ananias sent to Saul: God has to now convince the church to accept Saul into fellowship and this is no small feat as one can imagine. God selects Ananias a trusted Christ-follower and meets him through a vision to explain in detail how he is to go to and pray for Saul. We see that through the Spirit God can talk to us whenever he wants and guide us into his will. Not everyone has as dramatic experience as Saul, Ananias or Peter (as we will see) but Christ-followers should expect God to guide them into his will for their lives. Ananias protests for obvious reasons and models for us the honesty God desires in an open relationship. We don't have to be robots but we can talk with God to sort out his will for our lives. God makes it clear to Ananias and we see his faith as he obeys even when doing something that looked completely crazy and even life-threatening.
- Saul baptized by Ananias: Imagine Saul's reaction when Ananias comes in and he knows exactly what happened? Talk about faith building. True prophecy can build faith as we hear in other people clear insights into our own journey that comes directly from God. Scales fall from his eyes and so we see another clear, unforgettable sign God gives Saul to help him know that he is going from religious blindness to a true relationship with God that allows him to see the truth clearly.
- Saul proclaims Jesus: Saul doesn't waste any time but immediately goes on the offense declaring that Jesus is the son of God. Interestingly Saul's message is simple: Jesus is uniquely God's Son and the Messiah. Again this notion would have been blasphemous but the vision Saul had of Jesus must have confirmed without doubt the unique status of Jesus as "God with us". Paul will later write about the divine identity of Jesus in both his letters to the Philippians and Colossians.
- Conspiracy to kill Saul: No surprise here. Saul must escape the city through a basket being lowered over the wall. We see Luke capture a bit of the drama of the story like an ancient spy novel.
- Mixed reception at Jerusalem: Barnabas returns to the scene this time to serve as an advocate for Saul. The apostles and disciples in Jerusalem are a bit afraid of him but Barnabas takes a risk on this young leader and helps him establish a trust relationship with the other apostles. Barnabas will partner with Paul now for many years to come until later in life Barnabas will again advocate for another young leader named John Mark and this will cause a division between him and Paul. In Jerusalem Saul starts to preach and once again stirs up the threat of persecution against the church. He is sent off again for safety reasons to Tarsus, his home town.
- Peace and continued growth: With Saul now out of the picture, the church experiences a time of peace within Israel and it continues to grow. We see again the key role the Holy Spirit plays in their life in community as more and more people come to faith and grow in an intimate friendship with God and each other.