
Day 328 - November 24

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

First Gentile Converts

Persecution by Herod Agrippa 1

Readings: Acts 9:32-12:25

Reflections:

- Aeneas healed of paralysis: This first miracle is brief in description and falls closely in line with the miracles of Jesus. Peter makes it clear that it is Jesus the Messiah who is healing this man. Jesus through the Spirit working through people is continuing to rescue people and restore their lives.
- Dorcus raised from dead: We see in Dorcus the value placed within the first church on serving those in need and particularly the poor. She was a seamstress and most likely that was one of the ways she helped the poor. Peter again follows the example of Jesus and raises her from the dead. These dramatic miracles speed the spread of the Jesus movement.
- Cornelius has a vision: The fact that Peter is in Joppa when God speaks to him about reaching out to Gentiles would have no doubt caused the Jewish readers to reflect on the story of Jonah. Jonah went to Joppa when he was trying to run away from God's call for him to go and preach to the Gentiles of Ninevah (see Jonah 1:3). With this story of God speaking to Peter through Cornelius, we now see a turn towards reaching Gentiles and those outside Israel. This story of Cornelius again models God's love for those considered enemies. Although Cornelius was the leader of 100 Roman soldiers, a Centurion, he was a God-fearing centurion. God fearing centurions were not uncommon in Israel. The Roman army attempted to place people in regions where they would fit in well with the culture. It would have been natural for those serving within the Roman Army who were God-fearing to be posted in Israel. Cornelius again demonstrates his true heart for God as he gave generously to those in need and consistently took time to pray. God reaches out to Cornelius through a vision of an angel speaking to him. What is fascinating is what the angel says to him. Although Cornelius knows nothing of the message or person of Jesus, his prayers and gifts to the poor were coming before God as true expressions of worship. God knew him by name and he had some measure of relationship with God simply because his heart was in the right place. He didn't participate in any religious ritual and he had not even proclaimed Jesus as Lord. God simply saw his heart and knew that his heart was in the right place. God wanted Cornelius to enter into a more complete and intimate friendship with him and so he directs

Cornelius to Peter. In the vision the angel is very specific with Cornelius so that he knows exactly where and who he is supposed to meet.

- Peter has a vision: God needs to close the loop and so he gives Peter a vision as well to prepare him for Cornelius' visit. His vision zeros in on what will be a long-term struggle for Jewish Christians: dietary laws from the Torah. The dietary laws, including the prohibition from eating meat sacrificed to idols along with circumcision will be raised again and again as real struggles for Jewish Christians and their association with Gentile Christians. Peter here receives a clear vision three times that declared to him that anything or anyone God declares clean (fully acceptable) should not be rejected. He is reminded that God is the ultimate judge of what is acceptable, not even his own Law or well-established religious social convention. This is something Jesus modeled and taught again and again. Having said that, Peter later falls back in the habit of not wanting to associate with Gentiles (See Galatians 2:11-14). This reminds us how deeply entrenched are our own emotionally reinforced religious patterns.
- Cornelius sends for Peter: We see the Spirit actively guiding every step of Peter and Cornelius connecting as the Spirit prompts Peter about the men coming to visit him.
- Peter goes to Cornelius: Cornelius is obviously excited as he gathers his family and friends. Spiritual seekers can be some of the best evangelists as they often feel no inhibitions to inviting their friends and family into their own process of exploration and discovery. Cornelius kneeling before Peter shows his humility. Peter making him stand on his feet and declaration that he is only a man shows Peter's humility. Ultimately the kingdom is about Christ and people learning to live as brothers and sisters, as equally loved and valued. Servant leaders in the kingdom need to model this kind of humility and treat people as equals.
- Cornelius tells of vision: Peter doesn't assume that he knows what Cornelius needs from him but rather allows Cornelius to share his own spiritual experience first. Again we see Peter's humility to listen before speaking.
- Peter proclaims Jesus: Peter affirms what God has been wanting him and the other disciples to embrace as truth: God loves everyone equally. There is no favoritism. This truth contradicts what Israel believed about itself. Rather than seeing itself as a nation called to be a light to the Gentiles, they viewed themselves as the spiritually elite and privileged. In Christ, all of this is undone as Paul would later write to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) Peter's single statement is loaded with meaning: "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news (royal proclamation) of peace (this is what the Romans' were proclaiming – "Pax Romana") through Jesus Christ (Joshua the Messiah or anointed King), who is Lord of all (a title ascribed to Caesar)." Peter made it clear that this Roman Centurion was going to have to switch loyalties to become a Christ-follower. He was loyal to the Roman Empire and Caesar but now must become loyal to the kingdom of God

and the true king, Jesus Lord of all. We see Peter emphasize the fact that they are witnesses as Jesus declared in Acts 1:7,8 . We also see Peter explain that reconciliation with God, particularly forgiveness, is now freely given through Jesus and without any need for a sacrificial system or religious ritual.

- Cornelius baptized: Interestingly the Holy Spirit comes on the household without any apparent prayer, confession or obvious repentance. Their hearts were in the right place and the Holy Spirit comes on them with power and they receive the same gift of speaking in other languages as the Jews received. Again we see God giving the early church very clear pictures of how he is restoring relationships, enabling strangers, even enemies, to true unity by helping them understand each other, the reversal of the judgment of Babel. Once Peter sees that God has already baptized them with the Spirit, they follow up with water baptism. Apparently God doesn't care about the sequence of these things. Sometimes people are baptized with water and then filled with the Spirit. Here they are filled with the Spirit and then baptized. What matters is not a mechanical sequence but a growing submission and intimate friendship with God.
- Peter responds to questions: When Peter returns to home base, Jerusalem, he has to explain everything that has happened. You would think that the believers would be excited but it first takes some explanation since this seems way out of the box for the Jewish Christians. Old religious habits die hard.
- Gospel preached in Antioch: Messengers start to carry the good news to Gentile regions and receive early positive reception. We see the early seeds being sown.
- Barnabas and Saul in Antioch: Barnabas re-enters the scene and takes up the challenge to disciple the Gentile Christians. He recruits Saul and they become a team. Barnabas is again affirmed as a solid leader: "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." We see again a direct connection between faith or complete trust in God, being guided by the Spirit and then God using a person for kingdom impact. It is ultimately God working through us that accomplishes all of the significant things of the kingdom. It is here in Antioch that Christ-followers were first called "Christians" or "Little Christs". A cool title that demonstrates how much people saw Jesus at work in and through these first followers.
- Agabus predicts famine: We see here the first prophet of the early church called by name and title. He predicts a famine so that the church can be ready to care for the poor. The Spirit helps the church organize and be ready for serving the poor and everyone in need.
- Gift taken to Jerusalem: The first fruit of seeing Gentiles come to faith? They actually take up an offering to help their Jewish brothers and sisters. Talk about humbling the first Jewish Christians. The Jewish Christians wondered should they accept these Gentile Christians and then at the first opportunity, the Gentile Christians are giving sacrificially to help the Jewish Christians in their need. We need to be careful to accept everyone God has welcomed into his kingdom. Everyone is desperately needed and God works through all who submit to him.

We can't judge who God will use. He delights to use the weak, the new believers, the struggling to show his power is greater than all of our strength, wisdom or knowledge.

- **Persecution on Herod Agrippa 1:** Herod Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth and ordered the execution of the infant boys. He was the nephew of Herod Antipas who executed John the Baptizer. All of Agrippa's uncles, Archelaus, Philip, and Antipas had ruled various provinces of the kingdom but were now dead or banished. Agrippa now ruled the territory that once belonged to Herod the Great. As this brief history reveals, rulers of this period were ruthless and kept control through brutality and intimidation, even within their own families.
- **James killed:** One of Jesus' three key disciples, James (or literally Jacob) was put to death by the sword by Agrippa as he instigates persecution against the church. There is virtually no other details provided which is striking in light of the lengthy account of Stephen's death. Most likely James was killed in prison and no one was able to find out any details other than he was killed by the sword. We must remember there was no news media at that time and everything had to be personally witnessed or shared via word of mouth. Peter is also seized with the anticipation of a public trial after Passover. It is apparently one year after Jesus' own death. The church turns to the only place they can for help: God.
- **Angel rescues Peter:** The miraculous rescue of Peter from prison reminds us that God can do anything he wants. Why he rescued Peter and not James is completely in God's court. God must have had more work for Peter to do while James must have completed his work. Peter's escape reveals personal thoughts of how Peter thought he was having a vision. Sometimes when God works it is so fantastic that it is hard to believe it is reality even when you are the person experiencing it.
- **Peter tells of deliverance:** Peter goes to John Mark's home. John Mark, who will later just be referred to as Mark, is the son of Mary (or literally Miriam). Miriam was a very popular name for obvious reasons but it does raise the question if this Mary is one of the Marys that followed Jesus in his ministry. This would make sense as Peter obviously has a close relationship with Mary. Luke loves humor and so he captures the story of a young girl Rhoda who leaves poor Peter standing locked outside and is so excited that she forgets to let him in. She was probably given strict orders not to open the door for anyone. No doubt people laughed when they read this story. Peter is clear when he is finally welcomed in that the Lord had rescued him and that they should report this directly to the brothers of Jesus, particularly James. We see here that James, Jesus' brother is now starting to take a prominent role in leadership. Possibly the death of James the disciple has opened the way for James the brother of Jesus.
- **Herod has guards killed:** We see the ruthless and vindictive nature of Herod Agrippa as he executes the guards for having allowed Peter to escape. Now this raises a moral dilemma as God's decision to rescue Peter led to the death of some innocent soldiers. The text doesn't explain anything more about this situation. It reminds us that sometimes God in

accomplishing his ultimate purposes may end up initiating events that have secondary negative consequences. Again we are left in these situations simply trusting God and his sovereign wisdom.

- Herod dies because of pride: This is a weird story. Apparently Herod in making peace with Tyre and Sidon, a region historically known for its wickedness, is worshipped as a God for his willingness to make peace. Blastus is mentioned by name as he may have been the source of this story. Someone in the inner courts would have needed to report this story and Luke is usually pretty careful to mention his sources in the text. God's decision to end his life for his blasphemous pride reflects God's anger against the proud even as he has grace for the humble. How did an angel strike him down and what does it mean that he was eaten by worms? Is this a figure of speech or did this actually happen? In any case Luke describes a completely horrible death.
- John Mark taken to Antioch: Luke notes again the spread of the message of Jesus or the word of God as their community increases. Today we would describe this phenomenon as a buzz. We should note that Barnabas' name is mentioned before Paul's suggesting that he is the leader of the team at this point. Therefore the decision to bring John Mark was most likely Barnabas'. This is important to note as down the road John Mark will play a significant role in the decision for Paul and Barnabas to split up and go in different directions. Antioch is now the home base for their leadership team. The excitement is about to be taken to a whole new level!