

Acts 1: Lesson Three,
Saul's Conversion and Salvation for the Gentiles
Acts 9 – 12

Subject: Saul was converted about the same time that the first Gentiles were converted at Caesarea and Antioch.

Main Idea: God always planned that people of all nationalities would be part of Christ's Church and Jesus (and His Spirit) intervened to keep the Church on course.

Principles:

1. *All that happens in Jesus' Church matters deeply to Him.*
2. *By His Spirit, Jesus periodically intervenes and corrects dangerous thinking that threatens His Church and its mission.*
3. *The Jews have experienced a hardening, and at least for the time being, largely continue to reject Jesus as Messiah.*

Introduction

One of our daughters married a man she had known in their infancy. During the years they were growing up, they had come to live on opposite sides of the country and lost contact altogether. Through a random comment on social media, he discovered that she would be visiting a family who lived in his vicinity. Out of curiosity, he risked showing up at the family's doorstep to see her. Today, they have a wonderful marriage and two small children, all as a result of a seemingly random comment. As someone once said, "God swings big doors on small hinges."

The events of Acts 9-12 are pivotal in the life and history of the Church. In them, Luke reveals the three hinges on which the door of a mission to the Gentiles swung open. In reality, God's expressed *will* that people of all nationalities would be part of His Church (Genesis 12:3) was the foundation of the mission. But in Acts 9-12, Luke describes the three events upon which the *Church was prepared* to receive and embrace this mission.

In the last lesson, we discovered that Stephen had a broader view of God's plan of salvation than the Jews and their religious authorities. Stephen saw the Law of Moses, the Temple in Jerusalem, and the promised land of Israel as means to an end, not as an end in themselves. Not only was Judaism incomplete, Stephen went so far as to claim that the Jewish people, in their arrogance, had actually missed God's purpose for them as God's representatives to people of all nations. Jewish Christians of the early Church, for their part, needed to recognize the need for a radical departure from Judaism – not culturally, but a departure from Judaism as a religion. In Acts 8, some change in thinking is suggested by Philip's witness to the Samaritans, who were half-Jewish by ethnicity. At the end of the chapter, one Gentile, an Ethiopian eunuch, also came to faith in Christ. But Philip's witness to him does not really illustrate *intent* to proselytize Gentiles, since the eunuch had asked Philip for help understanding the scriptures. It seemed to have been an isolated incident. Thus, when we come to chapter 9, we see the Spirit intervening to keep Christ's Church on course with His plan that people of *all* nationalities would be saved. God swung open a large door on the hinges of Saul's conversion, the conversion of Cornelius' Gentile household, and the development of a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile converts in Antioch, all of which occurred about the same time.

I. **Saul's Conversion and Early Ministry** – Acts 9:1-31

A. **Saul's Conversion**

- i. Background: According to Acts 7:58, Saul was a young man (presumably no more than thirty years of age) at the time of Stephen's death. With this in mind, and by comparing other New Testament information and secular records, Saul was probably born sometime between AD 4-14.ⁱ His hometown was Tarsus, a major city in the province of Cilicia in southeastern Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). The facts that he was born a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37-38, 22:25-39) and related so comfortably with Gentiles suggest that he received a Greek education. But Paul (his Roman name) also describes himself as having been a Pharisee and "Hebrew of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5) who studied under the famous rabbi Gamaliel I (Acts 22:3). In Acts 8-9, where we learn that he not only approved of Stephen's stoning but later also began to destroy the Church (8:1, 9:1-2), his total commitment to this religious heritage is apparent. But God had a different plan.
- ii. Jesus Confronts Saul
 1. While Saul was en route to imprison any followers of the Way in Damascus, a light brighter than the sun (26:13) flashed around him and a voice speaking in Aramaic (26:14) said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" All that happens in Jesus' Church matters deeply to Him. Saul's traveling companions saw the light and heard the sound but didn't understand the voice (22:9). Not knowing who had spoken, Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" How shocked he must have been when the voice replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."
 2. Jesus gave Saul a new mission, appointing him as a servant and a witness to Jews and Gentiles of what he had seen and would yet see of Jesus (26:16-17). Jesus then instructed Saul to get up, go into Damascus, be baptized and have his sins washed away by calling on Jesus' name (22:16). In Damascus, he would receive further instructions.
 3. The risen Jesus had personally confronted Saul. The brilliance of His glory was so completely blinding (22:11) that Saul had to be led by the hand into the city, where he remained blind and fasted and prayed for three days. These must have been a time of deep contemplation, in which Saul mentally reviewed the Scriptures and came to a new understanding of each passage that aligned with his knowledge of the living Christ!
- iii. Ananias: Meanwhile, the Lord also appeared to a believer in Damascus named Ananias and instructed him to go to Saul. Ananias knew Saul by reputation and had good reason to fear him, but the Lord assured him that

He had chosen Saul as His instrument and that Saul now belonged to Him. Ananias went to the place where Saul was staying, and addressing him as “brother Saul,” laid his hands on him, restoring Saul’s sight. He also received the Holy Spirit, as his complete transformation testifies: He immediately and powerfully began to preach to the Jews in Damascus that Jesus was the Christ!

B. Saul’s Early Ministry

- i. Saul in Arabia: Sometime after Saul’s conversion, he left Damascus for Arabia and then returned (Galatians 1:17-19). Luke never mentions Paul’s time in Arabia, but it may have occurred between verses 22 and 23 of Acts 9. Saul could have gone to Arabia to witness. He proved his eagerness to do that in Damascus immediately after his conversion. However, in the context of Galatians 1 (where Paul explains that his calling and instruction came by direct revelation from the Lord Jesus [1:12]), it seems more likely that the Lord called him to Arabia for a period of solitude, study, meditation, and prayer that prepared him for his life calling. As we discover in his epistles, Paul had greater insight than anyone had before him about the implications of the Gospel, insights that must have been revealed to him. In one of Paul’s letters, he wrote of a man who had been caught up to heaven and heard inexpressible things (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Many scholars believe he was talking about himself. Although we don’t know exactly when that happened, Jesus had indicated on the road to Damascus that Saul would see more of Him (26:16). Whether or not Jesus personally appeared and instructed Saul in Arabia, Saul would have had the Holy Spirit as his tutor.
- ii. Return to Damascus: Sometime after Saul’s return to Damascus, the Jews conspired to kill him. In order to save his life, under the cover of night, his followers lowered him over the wall of the city in a basket, after which he fled to Jerusalem.
- iii. In Jerusalem: We first read about Barnabas in Acts 4:36-5:11, where his generosity is contrasted with that of Ananias and Sapphira. In that passage, Luke told us that “Barnabas” was not his real name. His real name was “Joseph,” but the Church called him “Barnabas” since it meant “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36). In Acts 9, Barnabas lives up to that name. It had been three years since Saul had last been in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18). Since he been a fanatic persecutor of the Church when he left, it is not surprising that the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of him when he returned. However, Barnabas found Paul and brought him to the apostles. Significantly, in Jerusalem, Saul resumed the ministry to Grecian Jews that had belonged to Stephen before his death, boldly talking and debating with them. But when they tried to take Paul’s life (as

they had Stephen's), the believers in Jerusalem sent Saul to his hometown of Tarsus, via the port city of Caesarea. Apparently, Paul's witness had been so powerful that after he left, the persecution in all of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria subsided and the Church enjoyed a season of peace and growth (9:31).

Summary Statement: Paul's conversion was so important to early Church history that Luke recorded in three times in Acts (chapters 9, 22, and 26). The common emphasis in all three is Jesus' personal appearance and His words, "Saul, Saul, why do you *persecute Me*... I am Jesus *whom you are persecuting*" (my emphasis).

Principle: *All that happens in Jesus' Church matters deeply to Him.*

To persecute the Church is to persecute Jesus. The New Testament uses the image of Jesus as a groom and the Church as His bride (John 3:29, Revelation 18:23, 19:7, 21:2-9, 22:17). In Ephesians, Paul instructs husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the Church. He loved us and gave Himself for us (Ephesians 5:25). He is the head over the Church (Ephesians 5:23) and *all* that happens to it and in it matters deeply to Him. Of course, this applies to worldwide persecution of believers today, but shouldn't we look within the Church before we point our fingers at outside persecutors?

Application: John 17 records the prayer that Jesus prayed for unity among all believers. My husband and I have four adult children, each of whom is talented in their own way. We are proud of them. Regardless of their accomplishments, we have been disappointed on the couple of occasions when one of our kids has had a falling out with one of the others. It hurts us. On the other hand, when we see our kids loving and honoring one another, it brings us great joy. Perhaps some of you are parents and have had a similar experience. Now, imagine how our Father God must feel when He sees us mistreating or harboring resentment against a brother or sister-in-Christ! On the other hand, when we love and honor one another, it brings Him great joy. What happens in His Church matters deeply to Him. In 2020, due to COVID-19, social distancing and mask-wearing have become emotional issues. Some are angry about wearing a mask and others are hurt by their friends and family's refusal. What is your attitude toward believers who think differently than you on this? Some things may be beyond our control, but we freely choose our attitude toward one another. And by it, we either grieve the Holy Spirit or bring joy to our Savior's heart.

Transition: The early Christians were at risk of missing God's plan to bless and save people of all nations, so Jesus intervened by calling Saul to be the apostle to the Gentiles. At the very same time that this hinge was being placed on the doorframe, the Lord was also preparing Peter to embrace God's plan to include Gentiles in the Church. He was aligning the Church with His mission.

II. The Conversion of the First Gentiles – Acts 9:32 – 11:30

A. Peter's Vision and the Conversion of Cornelius' Household

i. Peter's Travels and Miracles – 9:32-43

1. Peter was last mentioned returning to Jerusalem from Samaria, following the Samaritans' conversion. Acts 8:25 indicates that he and John had preached the Gospel in many Samaritan villages. In Acts 9:32, he is pictured traveling as an itinerate preacher. After the miraculous and impactful healing of a bedridden paralytic in Lydda (present-day Lod), Peter was next called to nearby Joppa (present-day "Jaffa" [the oldest part of Tel Aviv]). A believing widow named Tabitha, who had a reputation for acts of kindness and service, had just died. Peter knelt beside her dead body, prayed, and then commanded her to get up. It is the first recorded incident of someone being raised from the dead since Jesus Himself was resurrected. As a result, many in Joppa were converted.
2. The healing of the paralytic in Lydda and Tabitha's resurrection set the stage for what happened in the household of Cornelius, not only by confirming the continuing significance of Peter's ministry, but also by explaining how he came to live in the home of a tanner in Joppa named Simon. A tanner's work with dead animals made him ceremonially unclean. There is little doubt that Peter would have struggled to remain undefiled while living there. The point is that it was something to which he would have been constantly attuned. With this as context, we are prepared to hear about the household of Cornelius, about 33 miles (63 km) up the coast in Caesarea.

- #### ii. The Angel and Cornelius – 10:1-8: Cornelius was a centurion in the Italian Regiment and thus, an important man. But more significantly, he and his family were God-fearing. Romans were generally polytheistic, but Cornelius had somehow come to worship the one true God of the Jews. At three in the afternoon (one of the Jewish times for prayer [3:1]), an angel of God appeared in a vision and instructed Cornelius to send for Peter. Cornelius immediately called for and sent two of his servants and a devout soldier who attended him.

iii. Peter's Vision – 10:9-23

1. As the three men were nearing Joppa, Peter had a vision in which a sheet covered with all kinds of unclean (and possibly some clean) animals descended to earth, and the Lord commanded Peter to kill and eat them. The Law permitted the eating of what was considered "clean," but not "unclean," animals. Peter was already surrounded by dead, unclean animals in Simon's home and now the Lord was commanding him to *eat* unclean ones! The vision repeated three times for emphasis, and then the sheet was taken back to heaven.

2. While Peter was pondering the meaning of the vision, the Holy Spirit informed him that three men were downstairs looking for him and that he shouldn't hesitate to go with them; the Lord had sent them. It was already late afternoon, so on the following day, Peter traveled with Cornelius' men to Caesarea. He must have suspected what would occur, since he brought along some of the believers from Joppa as witnesses.
- iv. Response of Cornelius' Household to the Gospel – 10:23-48
1. *Peter's Audience*: Cornelius was a Gentile. Normally a Jew would not contaminate himself by entering a Gentile's home, but Peter understood the vision well enough to enter without hesitation. In expectation of his arrival, Cornelius had already gathered his relatives and close friends.
 2. *Peter's Message*: Peter began by saying that he now realized how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation. In saying this, Peter affirmed the Old Testament teaching that the Jews had so long ignored: God had called them to represent Him (Exodus 19:6) and to bless all nations (Genesis 12:3). As Peter proceeded to explain the ministry of Jesus, declaring Him to be God's appointed Judge of the living and the dead and the Christ who offers forgiveness of sins to all who believe, Cornelius' household responded in faith and the Holy Spirit came on them. The believers from Joppa were astonished to hear the Gentiles speaking in tongues. Peter ordered that they be baptized and then remained with them a few more days.
- v. Peter's Explanation to the Church – 11:1-18: News of the conversion of a Gentile household traveled quickly throughout Judea. By the time Peter returned to Jerusalem, the believers there had also heard and they criticized Peter for having entered a Gentile home and eaten with them. Instead of being angry or hurt and defensive, Peter simply presented all the facts and shared God's instructions to him. In this way, the believers in Jerusalem were forced to recognize that God had initiated the conversion of Gentiles, and what He called "clean," they had no right to consider "unclean" (10:28). The second hinge was on the doorframe.

B. The Formation of a Mixed Congregation in Antioch: Meanwhile, God was also preparing His Church for the reception of Gentiles in another location, far to the north of where Cornelius and his family lived. Among those who fled Jerusalem after Stephen's stoning were some Grecian Jewish believers, originally from the island of Cyprus and the city of Cyrene in North Africa. These men resettled in the Syrian city of Antioch, 300 miles north of Jerusalem and began actively proselytizing Gentiles. A great number believed and turned to the Lord. Prior to this, all those scattered after Stephen's death had only spread the word among the Jews (11:19).

- i. The City of Antioch: Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, following Rome and Alexandria. It was founded on the Orontes River in 300 BC and named for the Seleucid ruler Antiochus. Many other cities had also been named for Antiochus and this Antioch was distinguished as "Antioch on the Orontes." By the first century AD, the city had become a melting pot of Western and Eastern cultures and was filled with gross immorality and ritual prostitution. Yet, with the exception of Jerusalem, no other city in Christian history compares in significance in the early life of the Church. It was the birthplace of foreign missions, and when Paul made his missionary journeys, it served as his home base.
- ii. The Roles of Barnabas and Paul – 11:19-26
 1. Just as it had when the Samaritans had been converted, the church in Jerusalem sent someone to investigate once again. On the earlier occasion they had sent Peter and John, but this time, they sent Barnabas (who also happened to be from Cyprus). Apparently he had become a trusted church leader, for his impression and report would bear great significance for the Church as a whole. When Barnabas arrived, he was gladdened by what he saw and many more came to the Lord by his influence (11:23-24).
 2. Eventually, the work in Antioch became so great that Barnabas recognized the need for another leader. Saul was well suited for working with Gentiles and so he traveled to Tarsus to find him (based on Acts 22:21, Saul may have been ministering to Gentiles in Tarsus ⁱⁱ). For a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church in Antioch and taught great numbers of people. It was the very first congregation containing both Gentile and Jewish believers, and Barnabas' confirmation of what was happening served as a sign of the Church's approval. All three hinges were now in place, and as we will see in Acts 13, the door for evangelizing Gentiles was fully prepared to swing wide open. But before moving on, Luke gives another significant detail.

- iii. A New Name for Followers of the Way - 11:26: In Antioch, “followers of the Way” began to be called “Christians” for the first time. The term may have been initiated by those outside the Church (Acts 26:28, 1 Peter 4:16). Regardless, the new name was significant since it suggested that, by including Gentiles, the ministry in Antioch *went beyond the boundaries of what could be defined as a sect or variant of Judaism in any sense* (Jews simply did not tolerate Gentiles). Additionally, the new name would have “helped develop the self-consciousness of the early Christians,”ⁱⁱⁱ who thus far had enjoyed the protection of the Roman law, since Judaism had been legalized as a religion that posed no threat to the State. As we will discover when we come to Acts 15 and Paul’s letter to the Galatians in our next lesson, the many implications of Christianity breaking away from Judaism caused problems that eventually would have to be settled. But for the time being, the great significance for the Church in general of the mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles in Antioch was its acceptance (in principle) of the mission to the Gentiles.
- iv. The Meaning of the Great Commission: As a result of the mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile believers that developed in Antioch, the Church was surely forced to see the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 1:8) in a new light. Jesus had told them to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Why then had they not known from the beginning that the conversion of Gentiles was part of God’s plan? Apparently, it wasn’t inherently obvious in the Great Commission, at least from their perspective. Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that Jews had been scattered outside Palestine for hundreds of years. The first believers were Palestinian Jews, that is, they were natives of the lands formerly belonging to Israel. As such, they very well could have believed that Jesus intended them to carry the good news to the Jews who lived outside Palestine, those whom they knew as Grecian Jews. As we discovered in chapter 6, some Grecian Jews had migrated back to Palestine and had then become converted believers in Jesus (perhaps many were those who had been in Jerusalem on pilgrimage at Pentecost). Stephen had himself been a Grecian Jew. As his speech revealed, he had been more insightful than the local believers, realizing that God’s people had worshipped Him for centuries outside the strict confines of Judaism. The events of Acts 10-11 show the Holy Spirit intervening and bringing Gentiles to saving faith so that the Church was forced to see, just as Stephen had, that Christ’s mission was never meant to be limited within the boundaries of Judaism. As Peter told Cornelius’ household, “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right” (Acts 10:34-35).

v. Famine Relief Effort – 11:27-30

1. Acts 11 closes with a final glimpse into the Antioch church. A visitor from the church at Jerusalem named Agabus prophesied regarding a famine. In response, the believers at Antioch collected a monetary gift for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, to be used when the famine hit. Each gave according to their ability.
2. At some later point, Barnabas and Saul carried the gift to the church elders in Jerusalem. This is the first mention of elders in the New Testament. As we have noted, Peter's responsibilities (and thus, probably those of the other apostles) carried him outside Jerusalem with growing frequency. It seems that, as apostles increasingly focused on preaching, the responsibility for church oversight began to be slowly passed off to other church leaders.

Summary Statement: God always planned that people of all nationalities would be part of Christ's Church and in Acts 10-11, we see Jesus intervening to align the Church with this mission.

Principle: *By His Spirit, Jesus periodically intervenes and corrects dangerous thinking that threatens His Church and its mission.*

Illustrations: Throughout Church history, the Holy Spirit has often worked to correct dangerous thinking. For example, the early Church inherited the strong monotheistic belief of Judaism (Deuteronomy 6:4). However, Jesus claimed that He was the Son of God and fully divine. He taught that the Holy Spirit was also fully God. As the Church wrestled to understand the relationship of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to God the Father, a number of heresies developed. One such heresy was Arianism. The founder Arius believed that since there is only one God, Jesus must be His perfectly created Son, through whom God in turn, created the world. Accordingly, Jesus is not eternal or co-eternal with the Father. This particular heresy so threatened the Church's understanding of the deity of Christ that in the fourth century, the Church gathered an ecumenical council to deal with the issue. They saw that the Bible confirms the existence of a triune God, even beginning in Genesis 1. As a result of the convention, the Nicene Creed was written, a statement of beliefs that insisted that the Son is of one substance with the Father, a clear rejection of Arianism. Although Arianism persists to this day *outside* orthodox Christianity (for example, in Mormonism), the Holy Spirit intervened and corrected this dangerous thinking within His true Church.

Another example is the Reformation of the Middle Ages, which addressed the legalism that crept into the Church once the state institutionalized it. In more recent years, the Charismatic Movement of the 1950s helped draw the Church's attention back to the long-ignored role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. But when a focus on the Holy Spirit's gifts eventually threatened to consume the Church's attention with emotionalism, the Lord brought about a renewed interest in scholarship. As His Church has drawn deeper into the Scriptures, the imbalance has corrected. Jesus still intervenes in the life of His Church to correct dangerous thinking.

Application: One of the ways in which Christians today are often led into wrong thinking is by interpreting the Bible in light of circumstances. Circumstances must be interpreted in the light of the Scriptures and not the other way around. The Bible is the standard of truth. How do you determine God's will for specific issues in your life? Do you base your determination on circumstances alone? Have you studied the Bible completely enough to know what it teaches?

Unlike the time in which Peter lived, today we have the complete body of the Scriptures. Yet even Peter looked to the Bible of his day (the Old Testament). He saw that God does not show favoritism (Deuteronomy 10:17) but had always accepted people from all nations who feared Him and did what was right (Acts 10:34-35 [he probably thought of believing Old Testament Gentiles like Melchizedek, Rahab, Ruth, and others]).

Transition: From Acts 13 to the end of the book, Luke focuses exclusively on *the mission to the Gentiles*. But before doing that, he concluded this unit in chapter 12 with information about Herod Agrippa and the church in Jerusalem that highlights *the Jews' ongoing rejection* of Jesus and His followers.

III. Herod's Threats and Death – Acts 12

A. Herod's Persecution of Believers in Jerusalem – 12:1-19

i. Herod Agrippa I

1. The "Herod" of Acts 12 is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of the partly Jewish "Herod the Great." Herod the Great was a paranoid ruler who had some of his own relatives put to death because he feared they meant to overthrow him. One of these was his son Aristobulus, Agrippa's father. At the time, Agrippa (who was still a child) and his mother were sent to Rome. There, Agrippa was reared among Roman aristocrats, including his friends Caligula and Claudius.

2. When Caligula became emperor, he granted Agrippa the title of king, giving him rulership over the Transjordan and the Decapolis (north of Galilee). Soon after, Agrippa's rule was extended to Galilee and Perea, and finally, when Claudius became emperor, Agrippa was granted rule of Judea and Samaria, and thus came to rule over all of Palestine, almost as large an area as his grandfather.
3. However, Agrippa shared some of his grandfather's insecurities. Caligula had given Agrippa most of his authority and Caligula had not been a popular ruler. Thus, after Caligula was assassinated, Agrippa was eager to curry the favor of his subjects, the Jews, so that they had no reason to complain to Rome about him. Apparently, he was especially eager to please the influential Pharisees. According to Acts 12:3, this explains his purpose for having James arrested and killed and thereafter, arresting Peter.

ii. Persecution of the Apostles

1. Despite the persecution after Stephen's death, the apostles had remained in Jerusalem, traveling as needed to preach and teach. Until the time of chapter 12 (early AD 40s), there is no hint that the apostles were targeted for persecution. Stephen had been a Grecian Jew and it is likely that the persecution that followed his death focused on other Grecian Jewish believers. But Luke tells us, at about the time the church in Antioch was collecting their offering, Herod decided to persecute the church in Jerusalem. Verse 3 indicates that he did this to please the Sanhedrin and other influential Jewish religious leaders.
2. Herod arrested Peter during the week of Passover and although he clearly intended to kill him as he had James, he left Peter in prison until after Passover. Herod was so intent on ensuring that Peter would not escape (as the apostle had once before [5:18-19]) that he stationed 16 soldiers around him, two of whom were chained directly to Peter.
3. Peter trusted the Lord so completely that the night before his trial, he slept soundly. In fact, the angel who was sent to deliver him had to strike him on the side to awaken him. Even then, Peter was so groggy that the angel had to tell him to put his clothes on. Not until the cool morning air hit Peter did he awaken enough to realize that what had happened was more than just a dream. He hurried to the home of one of the regular meeting places of the church, the home of John Mark's mother, Mary.

- iii. The Church in Prayer: Meanwhile, the gathered believers had been earnestly praying for him. The humor of the account continues as Peter knocked at the door but was left standing outside by the servant girl who answered. Furthermore, although those inside had been praying for Peter's deliverance, they didn't believe it was possible that he was at the door! Every sincere believer must admit a failure at some time, and in some measure, to fully believe God will answer his or her prayers. After showing himself unharmed, Peter then moved on to a safer, undisclosed location.

B. Herod's Death – 12:20-23

- i. Herod Hailed: After this, perhaps due to the frustration of Peter's escape or to get out of the heat of Jerusalem, Herod relocated to his palace in coastal Caesarea. The circumstances leading up to Herod's speech are not clearly defined, but it apparently had to do with the demand of the neighboring Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon for some kind of economic relief. The speech was so successful that the people shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man."
- ii. Herod Stuck Down: The Bible tells us that since Herod did not deny his deity and give glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died. The nonbelieving first century Jewish historian Josephus corroborates this account and adds interesting details. According to Josephus, when Herod failed to deny his deity, he looked up and saw an owl. When he had been imprisoned in Rome many years earlier, he had seen a vision of an owl and a fellow prisoner told him it was a sign of good fortune (which proved true, in that he was released and became king in Palestine). However, the same prisoner predicted that if he ever saw an owl again, he would have only five days to live. Josephus added that after Herod gave the speech and saw the second owl, "he was immediately stricken with pain and carried to his bed chamber, and he died exactly five days later."^{iv} The Lord had overturned Herod's plans to kill Peter and according to verse 24, He also overturned his plans to diminish the Church, for the "word of God continued to spread and flourish."

Summary Statement: Once again, we see examples of Jesus' intervention on behalf of His Church – in this case, the Jewish believers of Palestine. All that happens in and to His Church matters deeply to Him. On the other hand, Herod's interest in pleasing the Jewish religious authorities highlights the persistent rejection of Jesus and His followers by the Jewish religious community.

Jesus had said that, in the Jew's rejection of Him, the prophecy of Isaiah had been fulfilled: "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them" (Isaiah 6:9-10, Matthew 13:14-15).

Principle: *The Jews have experienced a hardening, and at least for the time being, largely continue to reject Jesus as Messiah.*

Beginning with the Book of Genesis, the Bible teaches that God has always planned that people of all nationalities would be part of Christ's Church, and in this lesson, we see Him intervening to keep the Church on course. But now that Gentiles have been included, have the Jews been largely excluded? Since the first century, many individual Jews *have* come to faith. However, as Isaiah foretold, the Jews as a people have largely continued to reject Jesus. How then will all this play out? What does the New Testament have to say on the subject of Israel and the Church? Interpretations have been greatly debated, especially among evangelical Protestants since the late nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century, Lewis Chafer set forth an extensive systematic theology of what is today known as Dispensationalism. "Chafer argues that God had two distinct plans for two different groups of people He has redeemed: God's purposes and promises for *Israel* are for *earthly blessings*, and they will yet be fulfilled on this earth at some time in the future [and especially in the millennium]. On the other hand, God's purposes and promises for the *church* [sic, here and throughout] are for *heavenly blessings*, and those promises will be fulfilled in heaven." According to this view, "it is not right to think of Old Testament believers and New Testament believers as constituting one church."

More recently, a new group, calling themselves "progressive dispensationalists," has become popular. They teach that, "*God does not have two separate purposes for Israel and the church, but a single purpose – the establishment of the kingdom of God – in which Israel and the church will both share.*" Furthermore, there will be no distinction between Israel and the Church in the eternal state and "the church will reign with Christ *in glorified bodies on earth during the millennium.*" However, this group still differs from the rest of evangelicalism in one point: "They would say that *the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel will still be fulfilled in the millennium by ethnic Jewish people who will believe in Christ and live in the land of Israel as a "model nation" for all nations to see and learn from.*"^v Thus, they do not expect Old Testament prophecies about Israel to be fulfilled spiritually in the Church.

Both of these views are rejected by the greater body of evangelical scholars, who point to Paul's affirmation in Romans 2: "He is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal" (Romans 2:28-29). Thus, they see the Church as the "New Israel" and unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies to Jews as being fulfilled in the Church in a spiritual sense.

Regardless, Paul still seems to imply a future large-scale turning of ethnic Jews to faith in Jesus (Romans 9-11, especially 11:25-26). It is not certain that he predicts this. Some argue that all future Jewish conversions will occur in the very same way they do today, on an individual basis. But it seems probable that Paul intended for us to expect a future mass acceptance by Jews of Jesus as their Messiah. Evangelicals have traditionally believed that if and when this occurs, they will be grafted back into the one true Church of believers.

Conclusion

God has always planned that people of all nationalities would be part of Christ's Church. In Acts 9-12, we see Jesus intervening to prepare the Church to embrace God's purpose. Previously, no one would have believed that a Jewish group of any kind would ever embrace a mission to Gentiles, and yet they did.

The saying is, "God swings big doors on small hinges." Sometimes, as in the case of Saul's conversion, the conversion of Cornelius' Gentile household, and the mixed congregation that developed in Antioch, the hinges are not small. But more commonly, the Lord does seem to work change through the small things.

Is there a door of opportunity, a door of changed thinking or behavior, or maybe the door to someone's heart that you have been waiting for the Lord to open? Perhaps you have been waiting a long time. The door may seem so massive that you have trouble believing it could ever open. But if God wills it, you can be sure that He easily opens even the biggest doors, and that He may even do so on a very small hinge: a simple word or conversation, or some little suggestion or circumstance that, in and of itself, might have seemed nearly insignificant. He intervenes to ensure His mission is fulfilled.

With the Church now receptive to a Gentile mission, the remainder of Acts focuses entirely on this mission and the Apostle Paul.

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ⁱⁱ Toussaint, S. D. (1985). Acts. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 383). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Longenecker, Richard (1994). *The Expositor's Bible Commentary - Abridged Edition: New Testament* (p. 446). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

^{iv} Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 285). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^v Grudem, Wayne (1994). *Systematic Theology* (p. 860) Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.