

CHAPTER 33: Acts 5 thru 12

Early on we see the church in Jerusalem growing and flourishing. **The group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but everything was held in common.** (Acts 4:32)

For there was no one needy among them, because those who were owners of land or houses were selling them and bringing the proceeds from the sales and placing them at the apostles' feet. The proceeds were distributed to each, as anyone had need. (Acts 4:34-35)

According to the Law, Deuteronomy 10, this is something that should have been practiced all along by the Israelite people. Moses taught that worshipping God extends far beyond just meeting together corporately. It involves the way the Israelites treat each other. They are to take care of the poor. This includes foreigners, widows and orphans. But instead this practice had been neglected. The generosity being shown here by Jesus's followers, not only reflects the loving heart of God, but it stands in stark contrast to dead, lifeless Jewish legalism of their day.

Meanwhile the apostles, undeterred by the opposition they are facing from the Jewish religious leaders, continue their ministry of healing and preaching. **More and more believers in the Lord were added to their number, crowds of both men and women.** (Acts 5:14)

Once again the Jewish leadership becomes angry and has the apostles thrown into jail. **But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, led them out, and said, "Go and stand in the temple courts and proclaim to the people all the words of this life." When they heard this, they entered the temple courts at daybreak and began teaching.** (Acts 5:19-21)

The next morning the Sanhedrin convenes and sends for the apostles. But they are not in their jail cell! This is quite puzzling. **But someone came and reported to them, "Look! The men you put in prison are standing in the temple courts and teaching the people!" Then the commander of the temple guard went with the officers and brought the apostles without the use of force (for they were afraid of being stoned by the people).** (Acts 5:25-26) The apostles, like Jesus, are very popular with the people in large part due to their healing ministry, but also their message of hope.

The apostles are brought before the Sanhedrin **and the high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man’s blood on us!”** (Acts 5:27-28) The high priest has a terrible memory. Not that long ago an angry mob instigated by these same religious leaders had declared to Pontius Pilate: **“Let His blood be on us and on our children!”** (Matthew 27:25) They were, of course, speaking about this same man, Jesus!

Well anyway, the apostles are not the least bit intimidated. **But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than people. The God of our forefathers raised up Jesus whom you seized and killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him to His right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these events, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.** (Acts 5:29-32)

This, of course, angers the Jewish leaders. They might have delivered the apostles over to be killed (like they had done with Jesus) right then had it not been for the intervention of a respected teacher of the Law named Gamaliel. He speaks up and recommends that they hold off doing anything; basically, take a “wait and see what happens” approach. He says, **“So in this case I say to you, stay away from these men and leave them alone, because if this plan or this undertaking originates with people, it will come to nothing, but if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them, or you may even be found fighting against God.”** He convinced them... (Acts 5:38-39)

They have the apostles beaten and again order them not to speak in the name of Jesus. Then they release them. What was the reaction of the apostles to all of this? **So they left the council rejoicing because they had been considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name [of Jesus]. And every day both in the temple courts and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus was the Christ.** (Acts 5:41-42)

The Early Church continues to grow exponentially. More leaders are required to help meet the increasing needs of those in the church. These leaders become the first deacons. One of these men is Stephen. **Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. But some men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, as well as some from Cilicia and the province of Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen.** (Acts 6:8-9) Stephen has been out proclaiming the Gospel and these foreign Jews don’t like his message. **Yet they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.** (Acts 6:10)

Stephen is falsely accused of speaking against the temple, is arrested by the religious leaders, and brought before the Sanhedrin. Here Stephen preaches a long sermon – Acts 6 and 7 – where he recounts Israel’s long history of how her leaders consistently rejected God’s messengers who had been sent to them.

[Slide 21] Stephen concludes his message with a scathing rebuke of the current Jewish leadership: **“You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, like your ancestors did! Which of the prophets did your ancestors NOT persecute? They killed those who foretold long ago the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have become! You received the law by decrees given by angels, but you did not obey it.”** (Acts 7:51-53)

The leaders become enraged. **When they had driven [Stephen] out of the city, they began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul.** (Acts 7:58) Remember this man Saul. He is going to become important later on in the story.

They continued to stone Stephen while he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then he fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” When he had said this, he died. (Acts 7:59-60) Stephen’s last words are similar to those spoken by Jesus on the cross – **“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”** (Luke 23:34) Stephen becomes the first recorded martyr of Jesus’s Church.

And Saul agreed completely with killing [Stephen]. (Acts 8:1)

Stephen’s death launches a wave of persecution against the growing Jesus movement. Many of Jesus’s followers are driven from Jerusalem. They make their way north to places like Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch, and Damascus. Some head east into the Arabian Desert toward Babylon. Others head south into Egypt and west to Alexandria. But this is all part of God’s plan and purpose. These believers will now become witnesses of Jesus in the regions of Judea and Samaria and beyond.

Another important church leader that emerges is a man named Philip. This is not the apostle Philip. This is another guy. He’s one of those deacons chosen earlier. His ministry is mostly up in Samaria where he faithfully preaches the Gospel and heals people. He is widely known as Philip the Evangelist.

An angel of the Lord tells Philip to go out to a desert road between Jerusalem and the sea. So Philip goes as directed. And it’s there, out in the middle of nowhere, that Philip encounters an Ethiopian court official, a Gentile. He’s just been to Jerusalem to worship God. The man is sitting in his chariot parked alongside the road reading from

the prophet Isaiah, the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 53 – **“Like a lamb led to slaughtering block, like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not even open his mouth. He was led away after an unjust trial, but who even cared? Indeed, he was cut off from the land of the living, because of the rebellion of his own people he was wounded.”** (Acts 8:32-33 quoting Isaiah 53:7-8)

Philip is invited over to the chariot by this official and begins to explain to him the passage he had just read. Philip shows him how Jesus fulfilled this scripture; how He is the Jewish Messiah; that He is the Suffering Servant that Isaiah talked about. Now the Ethiopian official understands and he believes in Jesus.

Now as they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the [official] said, “Look there is water! What is to stop me from being baptized?” So he ordered the chariot to stop, and both...went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. (Acts 8:36, 38)

This story of Philip and the Ethiopian official marks a dramatic shift in the focus of the Church in preaching the Gospel. The move is away from primarily Jewish audiences that are centered in Jerusalem to places beyond Israel’s borders. Increasingly the Gospel message gets preached to Gentile audiences, with amazing results.

Two central characters in the book of Acts will play key roles in taking the message of Jesus to the Gentiles. They are Peter the Apostle and Saul of Tarsus. We know a lot about Peter. He’s one of Jesus’s original 12 disciples, Simon Peter. He’s become an outspoken leader of the church in Jerusalem. But what about this guy named Saul? Well, we were introduced to him just briefly earlier when Stephen was being stoned. But at this point we don’t know much about him. So let’s take a closer look.

Saul is a persecutor of Jesus’s Church. He’s a devout Jew, a Pharisee and quite zealous for the Law. He has a low tolerance for what he views as the blasphemous message being spread by the apostles. Saul actually believes that his work of squelching out the Jesus movement that calls itself “The Way” – frankly, he sees this as God’s will. Saul receives information that there is a large group of Jesus followers who have fled Jerusalem and are in Damascus. So Saul heads that way. His orders are to locate and arrest them, and bring them back to Jerusalem to stand trial.

As [Saul] was going along approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” So [Saul] said, “Who are You, Lord?” He replied, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting! But stand up and enter the city and you will be told what you must do.” (Now the men who were traveling with him stood there speechless, because they heard the voice but saw no one.) **So Saul got up from the ground, but although his eyes were open, he could see**

nothing. Leading him by the hand, his companions brought him into Damascus.”
(Acts 9:3-8)

Saul, blinded and in an unfamiliar setting, fasts for three days and awaits further instructions. This is what Jesus had told him to do. God sends a Jesus follower there in Damascus named Ananias to meet with Saul. **So Ananias... entered the house, placed his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, his strength returned.** (Acts 9:17-19)

For several days [Saul] was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “This man is the Son of God.” (Acts 9:19-20) A radical change has taken place in Saul’s life! Overnight Saul has been transformed from being a chief persecutor of Jesus’s Church to one who now boldly preaches that Jesus is the Son of God! The people of Damascus are stunned by this sudden change in Saul.

So, what caused it?

The answer is that Saul had encountered the resurrected Lord Jesus in all of His glory. This singular event on the road to Damascus profoundly impacts Saul’s life. It redefines who he is. It reshapes his priorities. It sends Saul in a whole new direction.

While Saul’s conversion is good news for believers, for those who follow Jesus there in Damascus, it is not such good news for the Jews there. They don’t like this sudden change in their man Saul. Not at all! And so they plot to kill him. The followers of Jesus learn about their plans. They intervene and help Saul escape the city. They let him down at night through an opening in the city wall (probably an exterior window), lowering him in a basket. From Damascus Saul heads back to Jerusalem. So, what kind of reception can Saul expect upon his return?

When [Saul] arrived in Jerusalem, he attempted to associate with the disciples and they were all afraid of him, because they did not believe that he was a disciple. (Acts 9:26) The believers in Jerusalem, which includes the apostles, are skeptical. And you can certainly understand why. This is a pretty drastic change from the Saul who had been persecuting them not that long ago. Is this for real or is it some kind of a trick?

But Barnabas took Saul, brought him to the apostles and related to them how he [Saul] had seen the Lord on the road, that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. (Acts 9:27)

So Barnabas takes Saul under his wing, so to speak. He introduces Saul and puts in a good word for him with the apostles. By the way, the name Barnabas means “**son of encouragement**” (Acts 4:36) and he certainly lives up to his name here.

So [Saul] was staying with them, associating openly with them in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. (Acts 9:28) This, of course, doesn't sit well with the Jewish leaders there in Jerusalem. They too plot to get rid of Saul. Poor Saul! He has been threatened by the Jews in Damascus. Now his life is again in danger because of the Jews in Jerusalem. To protect Saul, the apostles send him away. He is relocated well to the north into the mountainous region of Cilicia, to his hometown of Tarsus. It's here that we put Saul's story on hold. We'll come back to him later.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the church increased in numbers. (Acts 9:31) This is good. The church is growing!

The narrative of the book of Acts now shifts to the Apostle Peter. He's the leader of the apostles and a dynamic man of God. He carries on the work of Jesus with an effective healing and preaching ministry. We have already seen how effective his preaching ministry is. He preached two messages and thousands were saved. Acts 9 records that Peter, just like Jesus, heals a paralyzed man and raises someone from the dead. God is using Peter in a mighty way “**and many believed in the Lord.**” (Acts 9:42)

But Peter is not perfect. He has some personal issues that God must deal with. Having been born and raised a Jew, Peter has a deep-seeded negative opinion about Gentiles. God begins to work on Peter's prejudice against Gentiles. He does so by way of a vision. Peter is in Joppa. **About noon...Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted to eat, but while they were preparing the meal, a trance came over him. He saw heaven opened and an object something like a large sheet descending, being let down to earth by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals and reptiles of the earth and wild birds.** (Acts 10:9-12)

On this “large sheet” Peter sees animals such as rabbits, snakes, pigs and vultures. These are considered to be unclean by the Israelites based on the dietary restrictions of Leviticus 11. A good Jew does not eat these things.

Then a voice said to him, “Get up, Peter; slaughter and eat!” (Acts 10:13) But Peter, being the good Jew that he is, adamantly refuses. **The voice spoke to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not consider ritually unclean!”** (Acts 10:15) The message to Peter is clear – God now declares “clean” what was formerly considered “unclean,” what had previously been forbidden to eat.

Peter soon learns the practical application for this vision. God directs Peter to go to Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius the centurion, a Gentile. Cornelius is **“a righteous and God-fearing man, well-spoken of by the whole Jewish nation.”** (Acts 10:22) Peter is not told the reason for going, but Peter obeys and goes.

The following day [Peter and some of his brothers from Joppa] entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting anxiously for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. So when Peter came in, Cornelius met him, fell at his feet, and worshiped him. But Peter helped him up, saying, “Stand up. I too am a mere mortal.” Peter continued talking with him as he went in, and he found many people gathered together. (Acts 10:24-27)

[Peter] said to them, “You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, yet God has shown me that I should call no person defiled or ritually unclean.” (Acts 10:28) So here is the application of that vision Peter had.

Cornelius expresses his desire to hear the Gospel. So Peter preaches Jesus – **“About Him all the prophets testify, that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.”** (Acts 10:43)

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were greatly astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44-46) We see the same thing happening to Cornelius and his household here in Caesarea that happened in Jerusalem at Pentecost. It’s amazing! Peter directs that these new Gentile believers be baptized in the name of Jesus. The ramifications of this are huge! Both Jews and Gentiles are equally accepted into God’s family the same way – by believing in Jesus!

Peter returns to Jerusalem and tells the apostles and the church leaders everything that had happened – about the vision he had, being directed to Cornelius at Caesarea, preaching the Gospel, salvation of Cornelius and his family, and the Holy Spirit falling on all of them. He concludes... **“Therefore if God gave them [the Gentiles] the same gift as he also gave us after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to hinder God?” When they heard this, they ceased their objections and praised God saying, “So then, God has granted the repentance that leads to life even to the Gentiles.”** (Acts 11:17-18)

Let’s go back for a moment to Jesus’s Great Commission: **“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded**

you.” (Matthew 28:19-20) Jesus made it clear – the Gospel message is for EVERY nation and EVERY people group. It is not just for the Jews.

The very last thing Jesus told the apostles before returning to heaven became the outline for the book of Acts: **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8)

Thus far in the book of Acts we observed the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus’s followers at Pentecost. We saw the apostles and Stephen boldly witness for their Lord before the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. It cost the apostles some beatings and jail time, but it cost Stephen his life. We watched the Early Church suffer persecution which resulted in the scattering of believers to such places as Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch, Alexandria and Damascus. We noted Philip’s and Peter’s one-on-one evangelism as they witnessed about Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles in Judea and in Samaria. **“To the farthest parts of the earth”** will be the focus of the rest of the book of Acts.

Little by little the Gospel message is making its way into largely Gentile areas. **The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. A report about them came to the attention of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, because he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and a significant number of people were brought to the Lord.** (Acts 11:21-24) So a large church is developing in Antioch – a major city up north in Syria.

Several years have passed since Saul was sent by the apostles to Tarsus. Despite increased persecution, the Early Church continues to grow and flourish. Barnabas remembers that Saul is in Tarsus (not far from Antioch) and he knows that Saul can help teach the new converts in Antioch. **Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught a significant number of people.** (Acts 11:25-26)

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. (Acts 11:26) Before this Jesus’s Church had been referred to by many different names – followers of the Way, Jesus followers, Jesus’ disciples, Christ followers, saints, believers, brothers, witnesses. This designation “Christians” is one that has stuck for centuries. It simply means “little Christs.”

God has a purpose for everything. The persecution of the church in Jerusalem resulted in the Gospel being spread to other places. Now a severe famine in Judea and Jerusalem unites the church at Antioch with the church in Jerusalem. Believers in

Antioch reach out to their brothers and sisters in Judea and Jerusalem to provide them with much-needed food.

But famine is only one problem the church in Jerusalem has to deal with. Another problem the church here faces is King Herod. He is actually the third of the King Herod's mentioned in the Bible. The first King Herod, Herod the Great, was king when Jesus was born. He is the one who had all those babies in Bethlehem killed. The second King Herod, Herod Antipas (Herod the Tetrarch), killed John the Baptist. He is also the one who made fun of Jesus on the day of His crucifixion. The third King Herod, Herod Agrippa I, is the current King Herod. As you will see, he's no better than the other two.

About that time King Herod laid hands on some from the church to harm them. He had James, the brother of John, executed with a sword. (Acts 12:1-2) This James is the apostle James. He becomes the first of Jesus's original disciples to be martyred. Like John the Baptist, James is beheaded. **When [Herod] saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter too.** (Acts 12:3)

When [Herod] had seized [Peter], he put him in prison, handing him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him. Herod planned to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. (Acts 12:4) Herod's intention is to have Peter executed also. Like James, Peter is a high profile leader of the church in Jerusalem. As such he is hated by the Jewish religious establishment to whom Herod is tied to politically. **So Peter was kept in prison, but those in the church were earnestly praying to God for him.** (Acts 12:5) The church prays and God hears their prayer.

So here's Peter – in prison and heavily guarded. He is physically chained to two guards. If you recall from earlier, the apostles had been delivered miraculously from their jail cell; then went back out and started preaching again. Herod wants to be sure that embarrassing situation is not repeated.

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the prison cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly!" And the chains fell off Peter's wrists. (Acts 12:7) Peter follows the angel out of the prison and thinks he is just seeing a vision – he thinks he's dreaming!

After they had passed the first and second guards, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went outside and walked down one narrow street, when at once the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from [the Jewish people]." (Acts 12:10-11)

Peter heads straight for the house where the church had gathered together to pray for him. He knocks at the door and a young servant girl answers. She recognizes Peter's voice. But she is so happy that she leaves him standing outside. She runs back in and tells everyone that Peter is at the door. **But they said to her, "You've lost your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was Peter, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" Now Peter continued knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were greatly astonished.** (Acts 12:15-16)

With his life in imminent danger, Peter is forced to leave the area for now. But God is not finished with Peter yet.

The focus of the book of Acts now shifts away from the church in Jerusalem and to the church at Antioch. **While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work of which I have called them." Then, after they fasted and prayed and placed their hands on them, they sent them off.** (Acts 13:2-3) It is the church at Antioch that sends Saul out on his missionary journeys.

These endeavors will set into motion the spreading of the Gospel around the entire world.