

The Weekly Word
March 11-17 2019

Luke is taking us on quite a journey. I hope God is speaking to you through Acts. Happy reading...

Grace and Peace, Bill

To hear the Bible read click this link... <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/>.

Monday, March 11: Acts 8-...

Acts 1:8 reads: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* In some ways this verse acts as an outline for the book as the Gospel flows from Jerusalem out in radiating circles to the ends of the earth.

This morning's chapter describes a giant leap in the outward expansion of the Gospel. The persecution set off by the killing of Stephen launched the church into her God-ordained expansion. *And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (1).*

I often wonder if the church had been obedient to take the name of Jesus to Judea and Samaria on her own if this persecution would not have happened. There is no way to know but it is interesting to ponder.

Following one of the seven appointed in chapter 6, Luke shows the kingdom advancing propelled by testimony, signs and deliverances. People come to faith. The story of Simon the sorcerer demonstrates that the expanding faith was a deep faith. People come with their baggage, sins and flaws but the church leadership will not allow the baggage to dominate. Sin is confronted.

Philip then has the encounter, directed by God, with the Ethiopian Eunuch. This Ethiopian is either a Jew or a God-fearing Gentile who comes to faith and is baptized. Through this encounter the Gospel is headed to Ethiopia thus moving toward the ends of the earth.

The chapter ends with Philip being whisked by the Spirit to Azotus where he continues telling Jesus' story on his way to Caesarea... again the gospel is moving towards the ends of the earth.

In all of this the Gospel is advanced through everyday people telling Jesus' story wherever they are. The Gospel advances through normal human interactions.

In this nothing has changed since the time of the apostles. The Gospel continues to spread through normal human interactions... people talking with people about their faith in Jesus.

Lord, give me words to adequately share with others the message of Jesus. I pray in Jesu's name. Amen.

Tuesday, March 12: Acts 9- ...



I found myself noticing the town names in this chapter. It starts with Damascus. Paul is going there to arrest members of Jesus' way. He wants to create havoc there as he did in Jerusalem. It occurred to me that Paul's decision to go to Damascus meant that there was a thriving Christ-following community in that town. Damascus was beyond the bounds of Israel. It was the capital of the former Assyrian Empire.

It hit me, the Gospel was on its way *to the ends of the earth*.

Because of Paul's bold preaching in Damascus friends help his escape back to Jerusalem. After some time there, he again is a wanted man, so they take him to Caesarea and send him back home to Tarsus. You know that wherever Paul goes there will be preaching and witness to Jesus. Now the Gospel has ventured into Turkey.

The story of Acts shifts back to Peter, who travels to Lydda and Joppa on the coast. More cities touched by Jesus' story.

How organic the growth of the Gospel was in those days. As disciples moved about the world, the name of Jesus moved with them. And everywhere they went, people opened their hearts and minds to Jesus.

How is it that we have lost this natural advance of Jesus' name?

Our world is very different than Peter and Paul's. The church is firmly established. And since Constantine, the church has been connected with worldly power and at times rulership. Major religions have duked it out in history asserting power and killing people. Has our history tainted the ability to simply share Jesus?

The political correct world of the 21st century along with the secularization of life has added discomfort to sharing any kind of religious conviction.

Even as I chew on all this, I think excuses, excuses, excuses. I am not responsible for wars in religion's name. I am not exerting power over others in Jesus' name, so why can't I, in the course of everyday life, share how Jesus has touched my life? Why am I limiting my personal sharing because of 'what ifs' and the like?

Lord, I pray for the simple witness of the early Christ followers. Simply Jesus... sharing simply Jesus. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, March 13: Acts 10- One step at a time...

God's time has come. This was God's time to break the mold and invite Gentiles into the family. This was God's plan from the beginning (read Genesis 12; Abraham was a blessing for all nations). It might not seem extreme to most of us in the 21st century. However, the story of Cornelius was a major step for Peter and the Jewish followers of Jesus.

As a faithful Jew, Peter had never been in the home of a Gentile... never. Gentiles were unclean and Peter was taught that it dishonored God to break bread with them. If the 'ends of the earth' were going to hear about Jesus, then connecting with Gentiles was necessary.

God chose divine revelation to push through this boundary. The essence of the faith remained the same. Faith in Jesus is the entrance door to faith and baptism represents our acceptance. *All the prophets testify about [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins*

through his name.” ... “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (43, 47-48a).

The account of Cornelius pushes me to wonder if in the name of faith and faithfulness I have boxed some people away from hearing the gospel.

Oh, Lord God, I pray this is not the case. I pray that I am open to sharing the saving love of Jesus with everyone. Oh, God, probe my life and show me where I need to open my life to the work of Your Spirit... that the name of Jesus might go to the ends of the earth. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 14: Acts 11- Setting the truth, salvation is open to all who believe...

Yesterday I noted and commented on the monumental shift from Jew only to Jew and Gentile in God's family. God needed to give Peter a vision 3 times followed immediately by a divine appointment with Cornelius to cement this change in Peter's life.

Word spread quickly from Caesarea to Jerusalem and when Peter returned to Jerusalem he had some 'splaining' to do.

I think an indicator of how monumental the shift was for the early church is that Luke repeats Peter's vision account here in Chapter 11 almost verbatim with what he recorded in Chapter 10. Luke could have simplified the narrative by writing that "Peter recounted his vision and trip to Cornelius'..." This would have saved parchment and ink and not forfeited any detail.

However, God inspired Luke to record the vision in full detail a second time. Repeating the vision a second time essentially on the next page indicates to me its importance.

When a construction worker is nailing boards together he will 'set the nail' by hitting it one more time once it is flush to the surface. This setting blow secures the nail. By repeating this story, Luke 'sets' the truth that faith in Jesus is for both Jew and Gentile. No longer is God's family only for the blood relatives of Abraham and those who through circumcision convert. Faith in Jesus, confirmed in baptism, brings one into God's family, not ancestry and circumcision.

This truth will take some time to be fully embraced. In Acts 15 it will surface again. And Peter himself slid back from this stance for a time, see Galatians 2:11 ff.

Change and growth takes time to become anchored in the soul and psyche of a person and even more time in a group of people.

Maturity doesn't happen in a moment. Day by day, as we press close to Jesus, spiritual growth will happen sometime imperceptibly, sometimes in larger increments and sometimes we slide backwards. Still as we press close to Jesus growth and maturity will happen...

Lord, thank You for opening wide Your arms and inviting me close. Continue to show me and teach me and lead me to greater faithfulness. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Friday, March 15: Acts 12- Don't presume on God...

Out of the blocks, I love all the first hand, eyewitness elements in the story of Peter's miraculous freedom from prison. These little touches help bring the story to life and they give the account a ring of authenticity.

It is a pretty amazing tale of escape. It certainly qualifies as a miracle. I tried to imagine how Peter processed the events of his escape. I also wondered if it gave Peter a sense of peace and security. Talk about knowing God is with you...

I also know history chronicles that Emperor Nero martyred Peter. I wonder if Peter thought about God's providential hand and this escape while he was in Nero's prison? I imagine I would have, likely using these thoughts to 'will' my escape to happen again.

These two imprisonments by Peter remind me that simply because God acts positively toward me or someone in one moment, God is not obliged to do it again at another time. God's goodness to me over the years does fill my life with hope and trust for the Lord. But these two stories remind me that I can never presume on God. God is not bound to act in a certain way toward me... ever.

This is a helpful reminder... God is God and I am not. It is so easy for me to fall into the trap of presuming upon the Lord...

Lord God, thank You for Your miraculous saving of Peter. It reminds me that You are sovereign and with a single word You can cause anything to happen. I bless You, Lord, and I bow and worship You. Thank You for Your care and provision. I am Yours and I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, March 16: Acts 13- Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation....

Paul made some interesting statements in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch. I was particularly drawn to verse 39: *Through him [Jesus] everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.*

It was his closing words that got to me, *a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.* To Jews Paul was proclaiming the exclusive justification of Jesus.

Jew or Gentile it doesn't matter... faith in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. Male or Female it doesn't matter... faith in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. Old or young, religious or non-religious... faith in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation.

I realize for some people this exclusionary statement is a problem, but this is the message of the NT through and through. Jesus is the only way to justification before God. We cannot earn our way into God's good graces by any human means. No religious rituals, no attempt at perfect living can effect salvation. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation.

As I sit here on the eve of worship I am grateful and thankful for Jesus. And I delight that I was appointed for eternal life (see verse 48). So my heart wells with gratitude for Jesus and I look forward to being with God's family in worship tomorrow. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Sunday, March 17, 2019, Sunday Worship

If any of my thoughts or the Bible readings spark questions send an email reply and I will do my best to answer all questions from people on the list... I will answer personal questions privately; general questions will be answered in a subsequent email installment.

If you are reading along with me from the Living Hope website you can send questions or request being placed on the weekly email list by emailing Lisa at office@LivingHopeCT.org.

[Click here for a link to my sermons on the web.](#) Sermons are generally posted within 2 days.