

***Study 26: Acts of the Apostles II – The Gospel Preached to the Gentiles***

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**Paul, the Chosen Instrument.** Thanks to the *Acts of the Apostles* and the Letters written by Paul himself, we actually have a wealth of information on the life and ministry of St. Paul. Luke, of course, had no intention of offering us a biography of Paul. He was interested in Paul only as the instrument of the Holy Spirit in the spread of the Gospel along the road to Rome and in the early growth of the Church. But before we study Paul's active ministry, it will help to gain some understanding of Paul the man.

Paul, born Saul, a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, was a native of the city of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia, located near the Mediterranean coast in what today is south-central Turkey. We don't know exactly when Paul was born, but since he is described as a "young man" when St. Stephen was martyred [*Acts* 7:58], he was probably born sometime around 10-15 A.D. It's almost certain that Paul's parents were well-to-do since his father was a Roman citizen and had ensured Paul received a good Greek education.

We know, too, that Paul settled in Jerusalem, probably not long after Jesus' death, where he studied for the rabbinate under the renowned Gamaliel. We can say with some confidence that he was not much more than 20 years old at the time. As a Pharisee, it would seem Paul soon came under the sway of those who wanted to rid Judaism of this new and dangerous cult centered on the person of one Jesus of Nazareth. We learn in Acts that he actively and enthusiastically persecuted the Christians of Jerusalem.

Not content to attack the Church only in Jerusalem, Paul set out for Damascus armed with letters of arrest from the high priest. On this journey Paul experienced his life-changing conversion and became a Christian [*Acts* 9:1-9]. After his baptism in Damascus, we know that Paul spent some years in the Arabian desert before returning to Jerusalem and presenting himself to the Apostles and then finally returning to his home town in Cilicia [*Gal* 1:17-21].

Sometime later, probably around 44 A.D., Paul went to Antioch in Syria [*Acts* 11:22-26], located in modern-day Turkey at the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea. He and Barnabas spent a year there preaching the Good News until they were sent to Jerusalem on a relief mission during the famine [*Acts* 11:27-30].

Over the next decade and a half Paul made three missionary journeys. On the first of these [*Acts* 13-14], from 45-49 A.D., he and Barnabas and John Mark spread the Gospel to the island of Cyprus and then to southern Galatia in what is now central Turkey. Paul returned to Jerusalem in 49 A.D. to take part in the Apostolic Council that was to have such a lasting effect on the Church [*Acts* 15].

Paul's second journey [*Acts* 16-18] was a critical one for the Church. It began in Antioch in 50 A.D. after he and Barnabas had separated, and proceeded through Syria and Asia Minor. But it was on this journey that Paul, accompanied by the able Timothy, first entered Europe when he crossed over into Macedonia and Greece. He returned to Antioch in the spring of 53 A.D.

A year later, in early 54 A.D. Paul began his third missionary journey. He spent three years at Ephesus and a year at Corinth, eventually returning to Jerusalem at Pentecost in 58 A.D. While in Jerusalem a riot at the Temple resulted in Paul being taken into protective custody, later moved to Caesarea where he was held for two years. As a Roman citizen Paul appealed to the Emperor and was subsequently sent under guard to Rome. Awaiting trial, he was kept under house arrest in Rome. Sometime during Nero's harsh persecution of the Christians of Rome, Paul

was executed, probably in 67 A.D. His remains, only recently rediscovered, are under the main altar of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome.

**Now open your Bible** and read *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapters 9 to 28. As you read, make the following notations in the margin alongside these sections of *Acts*:

- ✠ The Conversion of Saul – *Acts* 9:1-30; 22:4-21; 26:9-23
- ✠ Peter and Cornelius – *Acts* 10
- ✠ Extension of the Church to Asia Minor – *Acts* 12:25
- ✠ First Missionary Journey – *Acts* 13-14
- ✠ Extension of the Church to Europe – *Acts* 16:6
- ✠ Extension of the Church to Rome – *Acts* 19:21

**Paul's Conversion** [*Acts* 9:1-18]. Luke places great emphasis on Paul's conversion experience along the road to Damascus; so great that, in addition to his description in Chapter 9, Luke provides two other accounts: *Acts* 22:4-21 and *Acts* 26:9-23.

As mentioned above, Paul, then named Saul, was zealous in his persecution of Christians. In his own words, "I imprisoned many of the holy ones with the authorization I received from the chief priests, and when they were to be put to death I cast my vote against them" [*Acts* 26:10]. Here he likely alludes to his participation in the martyrdom of Stephen the deacon [*Acts* 7:58], although there could well have been other executions not mentioned in *Acts*.

Indeed, it is at the stoning of Stephen that we first hear of Saul: "They threw him [Stephen] out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul" [*Acts* 7:58]. We also learn that young Saul agreed with this brutal execution of Stephen: "Now Saul was consenting to his execution" [*Acts* 8:1].

Saul didn't stop with the execution of Stephen, but became the scourge of the newly formed Church in Jerusalem: "Saul, meanwhile, was trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment" [*Acts* 8:3]. We learn a lot about Saul from this one verse. He sought Christians everywhere and ruthlessly *dragged* them their own homes, not caring whether they were men or women. Yes, Saul was a zealous, single-minded persecutor of those early Christians, who were almost all Jews.

Driven by his Pharisaic zeal, Saul decided to travel to Damascus to arrest any Christians he might find there and return them to Jerusalem "in chains." Damascus, a city about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem, was one of the most ancient continuously inhabited places on earth and like almost every city of the expansive Roman Empire was home to many Jews. Some of these Jews had become disciples of Jesus, quite likely as a result of the early teaching and evangelization of the apostles.

Paul's lifelong journey mirrors that of the Church itself; it began in Jerusalem and continued on to Rome. But the first steps of this journey had to be taken on that road to Damascus, for it is on this road that God acted in a unique way that changed the world for all time. Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle, the evangelizer, the Church's greatest missionary. God changed Saul. He changed Saul's name to Paul and He changed his life.

Today, looking back at this event, we might wonder why God would choose someone like Saul. After all, from every indication, he was a fanatical hater of Christians, a man who, despite what he believed were good intentions, seemed the personification of evil. I suspect many of those

early Christians whom he persecuted certainly thought so. This, of course, is one of the wonderful things about God. He acts in ways that always surprise us. His ways are surprising because they are so different from our ways. How did Jesus put it in His rebuke of Peter? “You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do” [*Mt* 16:23]. The work of God in the world never corresponds to what the world expects of God. Keep in mind what Paul later wrote to the Christians of Corinth:

“Consider your own calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God [*1 Cor* 1:26-29].

Yes, indeed, God’s ways are not our ways. But God’s choice of Saul also demonstrates that God’s mercy extends to all, even to those who to us seem hopelessly beyond His reach. Of course, no one is beyond hope, beyond the love of God. We must pray always for those who are separated farthest from God, that He will act in their lives as He acted in Saul’s.

Keep in mind, too, that those who are strongest in their opposition to and hatred of Jesus are often the ones whom Jesus calls to Himself. It is the lukewarm who place their souls in danger. What do we read in Revelation?

“I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” [*Rev* 3:15-16].

Saul, the cold, ruthless persecutor, was certainly not lukewarm. Here, therefore, God gives us another reason not to condemn those who would appear to be the committed enemies of God, lest we become a stumbling block to their conversion. One can’t help but think that many of those early Christians persecuted by Saul spent much time praying for his conversion.

Like almost all of the prophets who preceded him, Paul’s mission began with an inaugural vision [See *Ez* 1:1-3:11; *Is* 6:1-13; *Jer* 1:4-10; *Dan* 8:15-26] in which he is given the first instructions that relate to the mission God has prepared for him [*Acts* 9:6].

It is through this conversion that Jesus showed Saul and us that He and the Church are one; for it is Saul that the risen Jesus asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” [*Acts* 9: 4] And then declared, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” [*Acts* 9:5]. As we will see, both in *Acts* and in Paul’s letters, these words of the Lord had a significant influence on Paul’s teaching.

In Chapter 9, which begins with a description of Paul’s conversion, Luke goes on to relate Paul’s activities in Damascus, including his baptism, his bold preaching in the name of Jesus, and his escape from those who were plotting to kill him. Returning to Jerusalem, Paul was taken by Barnabas to meet with the apostles, after which he preached the Word in Jerusalem. When once again his life was threatened, the Christians of Jerusalem sent him to his home in Tarsus.

The only physical description we have of St. Paul can be found in the apocryphal book, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, in which Paul is described as “A man of small stature, with his eyebrows meeting and a rather large nose, somewhat baldheaded, bandy-legged, strongly built, of gracious presence; for sometimes he looked like a man and sometimes he had the face of an angel.” It’s also important to note that Paul was a man of extraordinary physical courage. Despite the constant threats to his life, he never avoided those who would do him harm.

**Peter and Cornelius** [Acts 10]. After Paul leaves for Tarsus, Luke concludes Chapter 9 with several brief descriptions of miraculous healings by Peter, healings that brought many into the rapidly growing Church. All of these converts, however, were Jewish and there were as yet no Gentile Christians...until Cornelius.

Once again God surprises us by whom he chooses to reveal His Word. Cornelius wasn’t a Greek philosopher, or a pagan priest, or a politician. He was a Roman centurion, an officer in the Roman army in charge of 100 soldiers. Cornelius lived in Caesarea, a coastal city that served as the Roman capital of Judea. He was also what the Jews called a God-fearer, a Gentile who worshiped the one God, Yahweh, observed the moral aspects of the Law, and was considered righteous by the Jews and God. Such God-fearers or righteous Gentiles were not obligated to observe the weekly or annual Sabbaths, nor follow the dietary or the other ceremonial aspects of the Law of Moses, including circumcision. As a God-fearer, though, Cornelius “gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God” [Acts 10:2].

After both Cornelius and Peter experience complementary visions [Acts 10:4-16], Peter visits the home of this Gentile. During his visit, while preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ to Cornelius and his extended household of relatives and close friends, Peter and his companions are amazed to witness the Holy Spirit manifesting Himself among the Gentiles. Peter then realizes the full meaning of the visions he and Cornelius experienced and states:

“Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” [Acts 10:47]

And then, Luke tells us, “He commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”

With this event, the Church begins to fulfill the commandment Jesus gave to His disciples before His Ascension:

“You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” [Acts 1:8].

**The First Missionary Journey** [Acts 13-14]. In this guide we will focus on Paul’s first missionary journey because it reveals a rather typical pattern of Paul’s apostolic activity.

On this first of Paul’s missionary journeys he is joined by Barnabas and Mark, who traditional tells us is the author of Mark’s Gospel. The journey begins in Antioch, a large Syrian to which many Christians had fled to avoid the persecution taking place in Jerusalem. It was during this persecution that the apostle James the Greater, the brother of John, was martyred and Peter was imprisoned [Acts 12]. Despite its small but active Christian community, Antioch was a city noted for its pagan superstition and was the home of the infamous pleasure garden of the goddess Daphne. And yet, as Luke tells us, Antioch is where the followers of Jesus Christ were first called “Christians” [Acts 11:26].

Following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit [Acts 13:3-4], the missionaries set off for the island of Cyprus, another center of early Christianity outside of Israel, and also the home of Barnabas. Strategically located in the shipping lanes between Europe and the Near East, Cyprus had a large Jewish population dating back to the days of Herod the Great. We are told little of their visit, only that the three “proclaimed the Word of God in the synagogues of the Jews” [Acts 13:5] and preached throughout the whole island. Luke also related Paul’s encounter with the Roman proconsul, one Sergius Paulus, who was accompanied by a magician and “Jewish false prophet” named Bar-Jesus. When Bar-Jesus tried to lead the proconsul away from the faith, an infuriated Paul called upon God to strike him blind, if only temporarily. A blinded Bar-Jesus then “went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.” This, of course, is reminiscent of the temporary blindness Paul suffered in the midst of his conversion. One can only hope that Bar-Jesus also accepted the truth once his blindness left him.



**Paul's First Missionary Journey**

Setting sail from Cyprus the missionaries landed in southern Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and entered the Roman province of Pamphylia. This was a poor region enclosed on three sides by mountains. They set off from Perga on the coast to Antioch of Pisidia (not the same as the Antioch of Syria, their starting point mentioned above). This was a long and dangerous journey through an area plagued by Isaurian bandits who had not yet been suppressed by the Imperial authorities.

Luke’s recounting of their stay in Antioch includes an excellent example of Paul’s preaching to the Jews [Acts 13:16-41].

Indeed, this passage reminds us that there

was as yet no written gospel. The “good news” of Jesus Christ was first preached, just as Peter preached it in the streets of Jerusalem on that first Pentecost [Acts 2]. The synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke would appear soon enough, but in the meantime the disciples preached the Word to “all nations” just as Jesus had commanded.

Paul and Barnabas were initially successful, for “many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God” [Acts 13:43]. When they returned on the following Sabbath, almost the entire city turned out to hear God’s Word. “But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy...and reviled” Paul [Acts 13:45]. And so Paul preached the Good News to the Gentiles who “glorified the Word of God...and believed.” Driven out of the city by the Jews, Paul and Barnabas “shook the dust from their feet” and went on to Iconium.

Their preaching in Iconium, and the “signs and wonders...done by their hands,” resulted in a divided city, with some people “siding with the Jews, and some with the apostles.” Once again their lives were threatened and they were forced to leave the city [Acts 14:1-6]. They moved on to the city of Lystra, about 20 miles from Iconium, and while there and in the surrounding region of Lycaonia, they preached the gospel. It was here that Paul healed a man crippled from birth, an event that caused quite a sensation among the residents who became convinced that Paul and

Barnabas were gods. Some of the locals actually identified Paul with the god Mercury, the god of orators. Ironically, it took all of Paul's rhetorical skill to restrain the people from offering sacrifice to them as they would to their pagan gods.

Jews from Antioch and Iconium had followed them to Lystra and were able to persuade the people to reject Paul and Barnabas. Subsequently Paul was stoned, dragged out of the city, and left for dead. But Paul survived this attempt on his life and the missionaries moved on to the city of Derbe, about 30 miles from Lystra, where they made "many disciples." From here Paul completed his first missionary journey by returning to Antioch (Syria) so he could follow up on those who had accepted the faith on his earlier visit.

**Apostolate, Heresy, the Church's First Council.** With the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit, the world entered a new age – the Age of the Church – brought about by the ongoing work of that same Holy Spirit. Throughout *Acts* we encounter the Holy Spirit intervening at the most decisive moments. But it might well be that His most remarkable work is in the life of His servant, Paul. When one considers that Paul, a man of strong personality, had vehemently persecuted the early Church, the change he underwent is truly miraculous. Throughout *Acts* we encounter a Paul who is almost docile in his openness to and acceptance of the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

In accordance with those promptings, Paul made it his custom, whenever he arrived in a new city, to begin his preaching in the local synagogue. This was, of course, in accordance with the divine plan that the Gospel should always be preached first to Israel, the Chosen People of God [cf. Mt 10:5-6, 15:24, 28:18-20; Jn 3:16, 10:16; Rom 1:16]. These houses of worship, where the Jews would gather for prayer and the reading of Holy Scripture, could be found in every city of the Roman Empire and therefore provided Paul with the perfect venue for beginning his missionary activity in a given community. Here in the synagogue Paul, as a Jew, would be accepted. Because it was customary to invite one or more of those who had gathered and ask them to speak, Paul, a rabbi (or teacher) most likely dressed as a Pharisee, would almost certainly be chosen to comment on the readings from the Law and the Prophets.

Many Christians today seem to think that heresies didn't arise until much later, but we find evidence to the contrary in Luke's description of how some of the Jews rejected the Gospel because Paul insisted that salvation was also for the Gentiles. In Acts 13 we see the pagans of Antioch overjoyed when they hear that the Good News is addressed not only to the Jews, but also to them:

"The Gentiles were delighted when they heard this and glorified the word of the Lord. All who were destined for eternal life came to believe, and the word of the Lord continued to spread through the whole region" [Acts 13:48-49]

But many of the Jews of Antioch could not accept that the Messiah was not just for them but for the entire world; and so they convinced the city leaders to expel Paul and Barnabas. As Luke tells us, the two missionaries did as Jesus had instructed [cf. Lk 9:5] and "shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium" [Acts 13:51].

This event, however, was just an early symptom of what was to come. Despite Peter's vision that led him to baptize the Gentile Cornelius – "a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, respected by the whole Jewish nation" [Act 10:22] – along with his entire household of "relatives

and close friends” [Acts 10:24, 48], many Christian Jews were reluctant to accept that the minutia of the Law no longer applied. They maintained that Gentiles who were baptized must also become Jews and follow the demands of the Law. This conflict – a conflict between the Church’s understanding of the Gospel and the Jewish understanding of the Law – is repeatedly addressed by Paul in his letters. Although this conflict would be resolved by the Council of Jerusalem, its causes didn’t disappear overnight. As we shall see later in *Acts*, Paul’s greatest opponents were not the Jews or the Roman government officials, but the *Judaizers*; i.e., those Christians who distorted the good news through an adherence to the Law of Moses and Pharisaical traditions. These Christians would follow Paul on his missionary journeys telling the new converts that Paul’s teachings were wrong and that all Christians must follow the Mosaic Law in all its details. This would, of course, include circumcision, dietary laws, dress restrictions, etc.

In *Acts* 15 Luke provides a summary view of the Council of Jerusalem at which Paul, Barnabas, the Apostles and the presbyters (priests) met to consider the question of Gentile adherence to Jewish Law. After “much debate” Peter again takes the lead and, speaking of the Gentile converts, tells the assembly:

“And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the Holy Spirit just as he did us. He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts. Why, then, are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they” [Acts 15:8-11].

It is the Apostle James, a leader of the Jerusalem Christians, who ultimately settles the matter when, agreeing with Peter, he states: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God...” [Acts 15:19].

As a result the Council – “the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church” – assigned representatives to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. These men were given a letter drafted by the Council in which its decision was put in writing. Briefly, the letter stated:

“It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell” [Acts 15:28-29]

Through this decision, received with joy by the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit would change the face of the early Church and open its doors to all of humanity. The universal nature of God’s plan, although resisted by many, was plainly described throughout the Old Testament. We see it declared by God Himself when He promises Abraham that:

“I will bless you and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants will take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth will find blessing, because you obeyed my command” [Gn 22:17-18].

And the prophets, too, vehemently opposed those who believed that the one, true God was the sole property of Israel. Amos, for example, stressed the fact that being a Chosen People was not so much a privilege as it was a responsibility:

“You alone I have known, among all the families of the earth;  
therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” [Am 3:2].

Isaiah revealed that God would call on the pagan nations to carry out His punishment of Israel for the faithlessness of its people:

“But when the LORD has brought to an end all his work on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, I will punish the utterance of the king of Assyria’s proud heart, and the boastfulness of his haughty eyes... Therefore the Lord, the LORD of hosts, will send leanness among his fat ones, and under his glory there will be a kindling like the kindling of fire” [Is 10:12, 16].

Isaiah also reminds the people that the mission of God’s People is to be a witness of God’s glory and to bring God’s message of salvation to the world. This message, then, is a universal message, one intended for all of humanity [cf. Is 40-55].

We see this same mission manifested in two wonderful books of Scripture – *Ruth* and *Jonah* – in which the message of salvation is brought to the Gentiles. Here we find the Holy Spirit clearly reminding His People that their “chosen” status should not be seen as a kind of nationalism, but rather viewed as a calling to witness God’s love, mercy and forgiveness to the world.

**Conclusion.** Throughout *Acts*, then we witness the “good news” being spread throughout the world in an atmosphere of love and faith in the risen Christ. It’s a history of events that the world tries to ignore, events that simply could not happen without the direct involvement of the Holy Spirit. This is evident from the very beginning, on that first Pentecost in Jerusalem, and continues with the miraculous growth of the early Church as it makes its way to what at the time was the center of earthly power, the city of Rome.

*Acts* is also a vivid reminder that even today we are all called to carry on with the work of Apostles, for evangelization remains the primary mission of the Church. One cannot be a true Christian without at the same time being an Apostle. We are also reminded of the need to submit to the urgings of the Holy Spirit in our lives, urgings that we will not recognize unless, like the Apostles, we have an active and deep prayer life. Questions we might ask ourselves:

- How often do I consciously unite my daily activity with the will of the Holy Spirit?
- How alert am I to the inspirations, those promptings, of the Holy Spirit? The Spirit is always calling us to be more effective witnesses of God’s love and for his plan of salvation for all men and women.
- Do I regularly ask the Holy Spirit for guidance in *all* things, even that which seems most trivial?

Just a simple prayer of trust is enough: “Come, Holy Spirit!” or “Speak, for your servant is listening” [1 Sam 3:10].