

New Testament Foundation 3

The Persecuted Church

As we continue our study through the book of Acts, it is important to remember what this book is and is not. *"It is not the acts of the apostles, a comprehensive history of the early church, or a manual on church order and function. It is rather an historical narrative motivated by theological concerns."*¹ Just as Dr. Luke recorded selective history about Jesus' life and ministry in his gospel, so too does Luke give an historical glimpse of the early church, showing how the gospel was spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, while also providing the background and setting for the epistles, especially those of the Apostle Paul.

The church was "born" on the Feast of Pentecost. While everyone was gathered at the House of the Lord, the promised gift, the Holy Spirit arrived. Through a dramatic display, the Holy Spirit arrived with wind and fire and language. (Acts 2:4) God had demonstrated his presence first with the tearing of the veil in the temple and now with the fiery arrival of the Holy Spirit that rested upon each believer, showing that God had changed his address. His new temple is now the life of every believer, and to give evidence of this empowering, they began speaking of the wonders of God in other languages. That day 3,000 believed that Jesus was the Messiah and accepted him as Savior and Lord. (Acts 2:41) This reversed what had taken place on Mt. Sinai, with the giving of the Law, when 3,000 died for their refusal to turn to the Lord for salvation. (Ex. 32:28)

The church grew quickly and because of the religious leaders' jealousy the apostles were forced to move their teaching from the Temple to the homes of the people, spreading the gospel even further. Both Hebraic and Hellenistic (Greek) Jews were accepting Jesus as their Messiah, resulting in conflict within the Jewish community. The first one to die for his faith was a Hellenistic Jew named Stephen. He was described in Acts 6:5 as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit," and in Acts 6:8 as "a man full of God's grace and power, (who) did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." The stoning of Stephen in about 34 A.D. did several things. It confirmed Israel's tragic choice to reject (and continue to reject) Jesus as her Messiah. It also gave validation and momentum to those who were against these early believers (like Saul) beginning the persecution of the church. But this persecution also had a positive effect as the believers moved further from Jerusalem, spreading the gospel deeper into the Roman Empire.

"On that day (Stephen's death) a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." (Acts 8:1)

The Conversion of Saul – Acts 9

1. Acts chapter 9 begins with the word "*meanwhile*." So while the gospel was being spread by the scattered believers, "*meanwhile*" what was Saul doing? (Acts 9:1, 2)

Who was this Saul?

- He is known better by his Roman name of Paul (Acts 13:9)
- Born in Tarsus in Cilicia in Asia Minor (Acts 21:39)
- Son of a strictly orthodox Jewish father, “a Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5)
- A “Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6)
- A Hellenistic Jew Saul was born in a Greek city, like Stephen, and would have been a Hellenist or Greek-speaking Jew. But Saul also could relate to the Hebraic Jews because of his orthodox training in Jerusalem. Rather than going to a Greek university, Saul was training first in the Jewish synagogue of Tarsus, and then in Jerusalem under the great rabbi Gamaliel.

If we try to piece Saul’s history together, it appears that at the time of Jesus’ ministry Saul must have been in Tarsus and returned to Jerusalem after Pentecost. We can deduce this because if he had been in Palestine during the ministry of Jesus, Luke would have told us. Saul was a powerful personality, exceptionally brilliant and knew the Torah and the traditions of Judaism. Therefore, if he had heard Jesus, he would either have become a disciple or, more likely, become one of those involved with the crucifixion. Coming after the events of Passion Week, he may have thought belief in Jesus was harmless, until he met Stephen. In Stephen, he found himself matched in both intellect and will and it may have been Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin that convinced Saul that the very survival of Judaism depended upon the total extermination of these new radicals who considered themselves followers of “the Way.”

2. Saul began traveling north. What took place as he was almost to the city of Damascus?
 - Acts 9:3
 - Acts 9:4a
 - Acts 9:4b

Saul responded by asking, “*Who are you Lord?*” The word “Lord” is most often used as we would use “Sir,” but according to F.F. Bruce, the premiere scholar on the life of Paul, he believes “*Saul was using this as a divine title not mere courtesy ‘Sir,’*” because Saul was steeped in the Torah, and recognized this as a divine encounter. Saul was zealous for the Law; he was a one man truth squad making sure there was no heresy in Judaism. He loved God with all his heart but he was going about it the wrong way! My first thought was maybe he was expecting God to affirm his pursuit of these heretics. But he never expected the answer he received.

3. Who identified himself in answer to Saul’s question? (Acts 9:5)

From our perspective we cannot fully understand the huge significance this was for Saul. First, Jesus was dead; the Messiah is not supposed to be killed. Then, at this crossroads of Saul’s life, he was challenged to recognize that the Yahweh of the Old Testament is the same as Yeshua of Nazareth, the very one he was trying to remove from Judaism. And, in identifying himself, Jesus also let Saul know that when he was persecuting the believers, he was

persecuting Jesus personally, for the church and Jesus are one body. During the encounter, Saul was temporarily blinded by the light and told to go into Damascus and wait.

4. The believers in Damascus were aware of Saul's mission and were praying for God to intervene. But rather than removing Saul, God turned his life around. When Saul arrived in the city, he found hospitality among the very believers that he sought to persecute. What did the Lord tell Ananias when he was sent to restore Saul's sight? (Acts 9:15, 16)
5. Saul put his knowledge of the Torah to use as he began to preach in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus was the son of God. What was the reaction among the Jews in Damascus? (Acts 9:21, 23)
6. It didn't take long before the persecutor became the persecuted. How did Saul escape the city of Damascus? (Acts 9:24, 25)
 - Where did he go once he escaped and how was he received there? (Acts 9:26)
 - How did that change? (Acts 9:27, 28)
7. Saul began debating with the Hellenistic Jews (Grecian), and like Stephen, was powerful in his argument. What resulted because of this? (Acts 9:29, 30)

The Conversion of Cornelius – Acts 10

8. With Saul back home in Tarsus, Luke records, "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord." (Acts 9:31) At this point in the narrative, Luke returns to his theme of how the gospel moved from Jew to Gentile. Peter was in the city of Joppa and around noon he went on the rooftop to rest while the meal was being prepared. Falling into a trance, Peter saw a vision from heaven. According to Acts 10:11-16 what did Peter see and hear three times?

9. “While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.’” (Acts 10:19, 20) Peter went with them to the seaport city of Caesarea where he was taken to the home of Cornelius. What did Luke write about Cornelius? (Acts 10:1, 2)
10. What was unusual about Peter’s going to the home of Cornelius? (Acts 10:28)
11. Peter asked why they had sent for him and Cornelius recounted the events of the day before. Then what did Cornelius say to Peter? (Acts 10:33b)
12. What was Peter’s powerful, Holy Spirit inspired message to Cornelius and his household? (Acts 10: 34, 35)
13. What happened while Peter was preaching the gospel to them? (Acts 10:44)
14. How did the “circumcised believers” (Jewish believers) that had accompanied Peter to Caesarea react to this display? (Acts 10:45, 46a)
15. Peter immediately recognized the hand of the Lord and asked, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47) When there was no objection, what did Peter do? (Acts 10:48)

In that time and culture this was huge because for the first time Gentiles were being accepted into the church and on an equal basis! All came to Christ the same way, through faith; all were filled with the same Holy Spirit, indicating that in God’s sight all were one people of God. The ramifications of that truth were yet to be realized!

The Letter of James – James 1 - 5

In the year 44 A.D. another martyr sent ripples throughout the church; the apostle James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa I. By now the believers had taken the gospel further from Jerusalem and deeper into the Roman Empire. James, the brother of Jesus, was head of the church in Jerusalem and around 48 A.D. wrote the first letter of what would become the New Testament. He wrote as their pastor to his fellow Jewish believers that had been scattered

(James 1:1) for the purpose of giving practical wisdom for daily life. **The key theme in James is "Faith that works."** James is sometimes referred to as the "Proverbs of the New Testament."

16. What did James say the attitude of the believer should be during difficult times? (James 1:2)
- Why? (James 1:3,4)
 - What if a believer doesn't know what to do in any given circumstance? (James 1:5)

Throughout this letter the pastor's heart of James for those who were part of his flock is evident. The constant stress of trials and persecution they experienced were to be embraced with an attitude of joy because God has found them worthy to suffer for His name. They were called to focus on the outcome of these trials and difficulties; if they are able to persevere it will bring about spiritual maturity. The whole letter was designed to stir these beloved Jewish believers to action. James calls for them to stand with confidence, serve with compassion, speak with care, submit with humility and pray for one another as they share each other's burdens. The letter of James puts high importance on being in a community of believers who will pray for and with each other. James said true faith works, and faith that works will lead to spiritual maturity and involves every area of one's life.

17. In Luke's narrative, the next major event in the spread of the Gospel took place in the church of Antioch in Syria. A large community of believers had gathered there and news of this community reached the church in Jerusalem. The church responded by sending Barnabas to Antioch. What did Luke say Barnabas saw and did when he arrived in Antioch? (Acts 11:23)
- How is Barnabas described? (Acts 11:24)
18. Barnabas quickly realized the job was too big for him to handle alone. Where did he find help? (Acts 11:25, 26a)
19. This team stayed in Antioch teaching and training the believers for about a year. What important event took place first at Antioch? (Acts 11:26c)

First Missionary Journey – Acts 13 - 14

20. According to Acts 13:2 on the day these first missionaries were called, what were the “Christians” doing?
- Who initiated this “calling?”
 - Who was to be “set apart?”
 - For what purpose?
21. “So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” Who sent them off? (Acts 13:4a)
22. The first destination of this missionary team was the island of Cyprus. (Acts 13:4b) Whom did they take along as their helper? (Acts 13:5b & 12:25)
23. It was on Cyprus that the Roman Proconsul Sergius Paulus became a believer in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And, it was on Cyprus that Saul began using his Roman name, Paul. They left Cyprus and headed by ship to their next stop in the region of Galatia. What did Luke note about John Mark when they landed at Pamphylia? (Acts 13:13)
24. Their second stop was Pisidian Antioch where, “On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down.” (Acts 13:14) The Jewish leaders said to Saul and Barnabas, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.” (Acts 13:15) Paul stood up and preached the gospel to all who were there that day. What was their first reaction to this good news? (Acts 13:42-44)
25. But, as the pattern continued, “When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.” (Acts 13:45) Eventually “They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.” (Acts 13:50) Where was their next stop? (Acts 14:1a)
- What was the result of that visit? (Acts 14:1b, 2, 4, 5)
26. But the plot became known and Paul and Barnabas went to the cities of Lystra and Derbe. Their time in Lystra was particularly eventful. When they first arrived, they saw a man crippled from birth and Paul healed the man. What was the result? (Acts 14:11, 12)

27. Paul was eventually able to clear up the situation but with great difficulty. As a city that had no synagogue or Jewish community, what surprising event took place? (Acts 14:19)
28. That was not God's plan, however. What does Luke record as taking place immediately after this? (Acts 14:20)
29. Little is recorded about Derbe except that "They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples." (Acts 14:21) At this point the Holy Spirit led them to return to the church in Antioch but before they did, Paul and Barnabas returned to each of the cities they had preached in. What was their reason for doing so? (Acts 14:22, 23)

That first missionary journey lasted about two years, from approximately 46 – 48 A.D. When they returned to Antioch in Syria, it wasn't too long before "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'" (Acts 15:1) Paul learned that these men had also been going to the new churches he and Barnabas had established in Galatia. This resulted in two things taking place. Paul wrote a letter to the churches in Galatia and he and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to get this issue resolved. Which event took place first is a matter of debate, but in my best understanding, I believe that the letter Paul wrote to the Galatians was before the issue was resolved in Jerusalem. Therefore, we will turn our attention to the first letter Paul wrote, to the churches in Galatia.

Letter to the Galatians – Galatians 1 - 6

In writing this letter, Paul had three purposes in mind: 1) to defend his authority as an apostle, 2) to explain and prove the gospel message and 3) to show how to apply the gospel message to daily living by the power of the Holy Spirit.

30. Paul knew the danger of allowing this false teaching to gain a foothold. These men were saying that in order to be saved, one must first become a Jew (circumcised). In this first letter of Paul's you will notice the passion and urgency as he addressed these baby Christians. What was his first stated concern? (Gal. 1:6, 7)
31. Apparently these men were trying to undermine Paul's authority as an apostle. How did he defend his "apostleship?" (Gal. 1:10-13)

32. Paul continued by writing his personal conversion experience and how he stood up, even to Peter, when it came to defending the Jewish and Gentile believers as one in Christ. He was adamant when it came to the false teaching of earning salvation. It is only through faith in Christ that one comes into salvation. "If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Gal 2:21) What was his next concern? (Gal. 3:1-5)
33. Paul argued his case for salvation by faith alone based upon the Galatians' experience and on the Scripture (Torah). Paul presented his argument showing how Abraham (considered the father of the Jews) was declared righteous not because he was circumcised or because he kept the law (which came 430 years later) but because "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." (Gal 3:6) The Law, however, had a purpose. What is the purpose of the Law? (Gal. 3:24)
34. In verse 25 Paul said, "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." What is the position of the one who comes to God through faith in Christ Jesus? (Gal. 3:26)
- What does that mean? (Gal 3:27)
35. In Galatians 5:13, Paul taught these new believers how to apply this truth, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." Freedom in Christ is not meant for self, but to serve others. In verse 16 Paul said they are to "live by the Spirit" and in verse 18 "to be led by the Spirit." If one truly is walking in the Spirit, what did Paul say the result or the fruit will be in one's life? (Gal. 5:22, 23)

The Council at Jerusalem - Acts 15

By 49 A.D., believers were spreading deeper into the Roman Empire and included many types of people. On one extreme was the devout Jewish believer living in Jerusalem and whose life was focused on the Temple and meticulous observance of the Law. On the other the Gentile believers like those in Lystra.² Their religious background had been pagan temples and they knew little of Judaism or its Law. As the gospel moved farther from Jerusalem, the Jews of Diaspora (in dispersion) increasingly rejected Jesus while the Gentiles increasingly accepted; the result was the church was quickly becoming more Gentile than Jewish. The major concern was how could these two extremes fit together into one church? With men traveling behind Paul teaching that salvation required one to convert to Judaism (Acts 15:1), a decision had to be made quickly. Paul and Barnabas, along with a delegation of believers, were sent from the church in Antioch to Jerusalem to discuss this issue. This meeting is referred to in Christian history as "The Council at Jerusalem" and is recorded in Acts 15.

36. Whom did Paul, Barnabas and the others from Antioch go to see in Jerusalem? (Acts 15:2)
37. "When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them." (Acts 15:4) During the debate, who were the first ones to take a stand and what was their position? (Acts 15:5)
38. After much discussion, Peter stood up and addressed the council. What did he have to say? (Acts 15:7-11)
39. After Peter finished, Luke said the assembly was silent. Who were the next ones to speak? (Acts 15:12)
40. James, as leader of the church in Jerusalem, listened to all the arguments and then, after discussion with the apostles and elders, made the final ruling. What was his decision? (Acts 15:19-21)

A letter was written stating, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell." (Acts 15:28, 29) The letter was hand delivered to the church at Antioch by representatives of the Jerusalem Church, Judas and Silas, and was accepted by the Gentile believers with "great gladness because of its encouraging message."³ (Acts 15:31)

The Council at Jerusalem is the midpoint of the book of Acts. Up until this chapter, the narrative focused mainly on the Jewish community of believers in Jerusalem. With the decision at the Council to accept the Gentiles just by faith, the stage is set for the second half of the book of Acts where the focus will change from Jew to Gentile. And, Paul will emerge as *the* missionary to the Gentiles as he moves deeper into the Greco-Roman world.

Our story continues in Acts 15:39 with a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. "They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company."

Bibliography

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³ Gould, Dana, *Shepherd's Notes, Acts*, Holman Publishing 1997, pg. 54