

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 26

Acts — Part 4

1. BACKGROUND

We will not repeat the background of Acts given earlier. Again, we do emphasize that Luke writes from firsthand knowledge and observation as well as from investigation. The timeline we have been following is also reproduced again for handy reference.

2. TIMELINE

A reasonable timetable of key New Testament events relevant to Acts¹ is:

Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost	April-May 30
Conversion of Saul of Tarsus	c. 33
Paul's first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem	c. 35

WE HAVE PREVIOUSLY COVERED ACTS 1:1 THROUGH ACTS 9:31 IN CLASS. THAT BRINGS US TO THIS POINT IN THE TIMELINE. THE EVENTS COVERED TODAY RANGE FROM THIS POINT THROUGH THE SPRING OF 44 WHEN HEROD AGRIPPA DIES.

Death of James, son of Zebedee; imprisonment and escape of Peter; death of Herod Agrippa I	Spring 44
I Famine in Judea; Paul and Barnabas sent with relief from Antioch	c. 46
First Missionary Journey (Paul and Anabas to Cyprus and Asia Minor)	47-48
Paul writes Galatians	c. 48
Apostolic Council at Jerusalem	c. 49
Second Missionary Journey (Lystra, Derbe, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth)	c. 49-50
Paul writes Thessalonian Epistles	late 50
Paul in Corinth	Fall 50-spring 52
Galiio becomes proconsul of Achaia	July 51

¹ The timeline is derived with modification from that given by F.F. Bruce in his commentary, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1951.

Paul's hasty visit to Palestine Paul at Ephesus	Spring-Summer 52
Paul writes First Corinthians	Fall 52- Summer 55
Paul's sorrowful visit to Corinth	Spring 54
Murder of Silanus, proconsul of Asia	late 54
Paul writes Philippians	late 54 or early 55
Paul sends Titus to Corinth and Timothy to Macedonia	early 55
Paul in Troas	Fall 55
Paul in Macedonia and Illyricum	Winter 55 – Fall 56
Paul writes Second Corinthians	56
Paul in Corinth	Winter 56-57
Paul writes Romans	Early 57
Paul's arrival and arrest in Jerusalem	May 57
Paul detained at Caesarea	57-59
Paul sails for Rome	Sept.-Oct 59
Paul in Malta	Winter 59-60
Paul arrives in Rome	February 60
Paul writes Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians	c. 60-61
Death of James the Just in Jerusalem	61
End of Paul's Roman detention	Late 61 or early 62
Destruction of Jerusalem	70
Spring-Summer 52	
Fall 52-Summer 55	

The general outline we are following divides Acts into these six sections:

- I. The Birth of the Church (1:1 - 5:42)
- II. Persecution and the churches' expansion (6:1 - 9:31)
- III. Actions of Peter and the entrance of Gentiles (9:32 - 12:24)
- IV. Paul's first missionary journey and the Apostolic Decree (12:25 - 16:5)
- V. The Church grows around the Aegean Sea (16:6 - 19:20)
- VI. Paul's unexpected route to Rome (19:21 - 28:31)

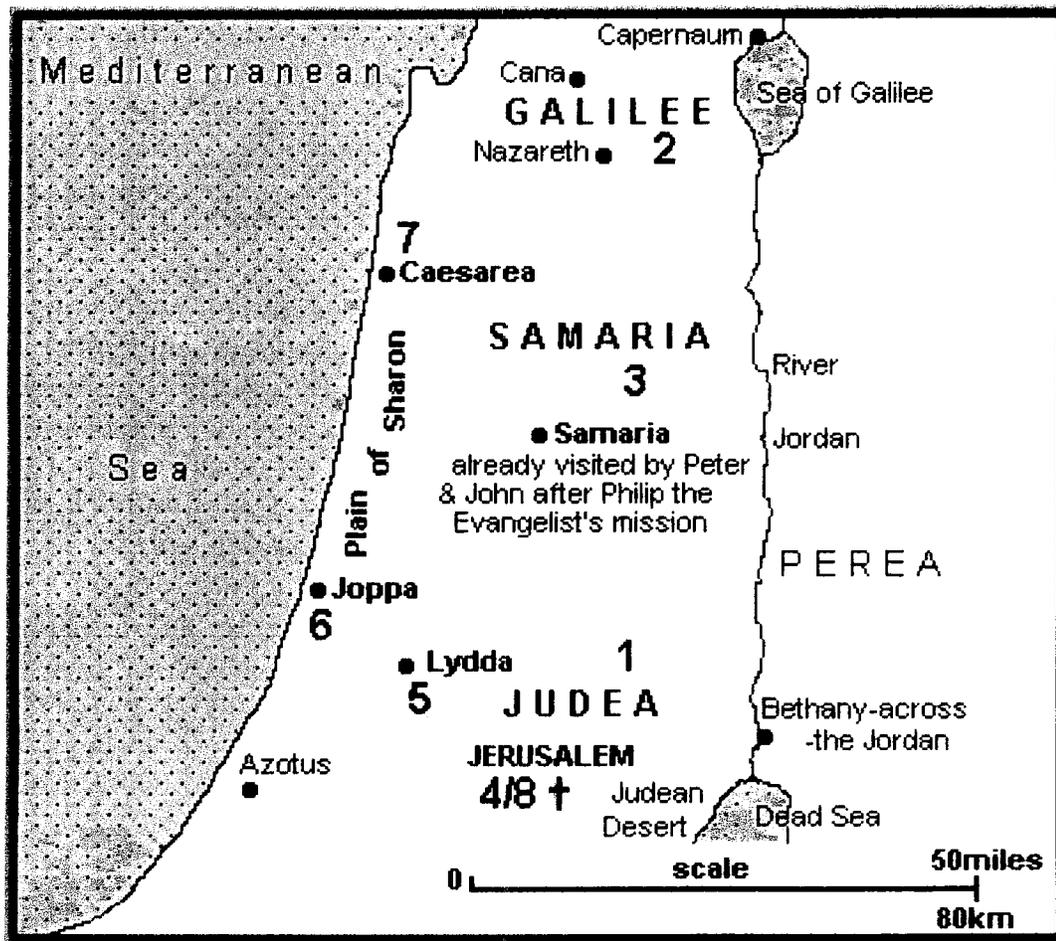
This week is section 3, the actions of Peter and the entrance of the Gentiles.

III. ACTIONS OF PETER AND ENTRANCE OF THE GENTILES (ACTS 9:32 - 12:24)

Section two ended with Paul returning to Tarsus and the church enjoying "a time of peace." During this time, the church was strengthened and encouraged "by the Holy Spirit," and it grew in numbers living in "the fear of the Lord" (9:31). Luke adds a point of emphasis and description to "the church." Luke specifies "the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria." These Jewish and semi-Jewish areas were the locus and center of the church. The explosion beyond those limited confines is set to come!

An interesting side note here – Luke never provides us with the stories of the church's expansion into Galilee. Certainly as the base of Jesus' operations and life, it is not surprising to see the church grow in this principle area of Jesus' earthly ministry. This serves to remind us that God's work is always much greater than we see, read, or know. Luke gives us small vignettes of a much larger work of God.

Our new section for this week starts with Peter as an itinerant preacher. He is traveling around the country visiting the "saints" (9:32). "Saints (Greek *"hagios"*) refers to those "set apart" for the church more so than to our modern usage of those who were especially devout.



When Peter is in Lydda, he comes across a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden from paralysis for eight years. Peter calls Aeneas by name and tells him to "get up," "Jesus Christ heals you." Immediately, Aeneas was healed, and he got up. A large number of people witnessed this act, and a number of folks in Lydda and nearby Sharon "turned to the Lord" (9:35).

About ten miles northwest of Lydda in the coast town of Joppa (modern Joffa), there was a well-known lady named Tabitha (which Luke translates for us into the Greek "Dorcas," it means "gazelle"). Tabitha was well known for her acts of kindness – doing good and helping the poor. Tabitha got sick and died. Friends of hers heard that Peter was nearby and sent for him. Peter came, got on his knees, and prayed. God raised Tabitha from the dead, a miracle that became well known throughout Joppa. Needless to say, many turned their hearts in faith to God. Peter, an old fisherman, chose to stay with a tanner named Simon "by the sea²."

From Joppa, the narrative takes us north to Caesarea, a major port town from which Paul had sailed to Tarsus earlier. At this point on the globe, something tremendous happened. Earlier in Acts, Peter opened the door to the church for the Jews in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Here in Acts 10, we read how Peter opened the door to the church for the Gentiles with the conversion of Cornelius and his family.

Cornelius was a centurion in the Italian regiment, which made him commander over a unit of 100 soldiers (we should remember that the first Gentile we see Jesus coming into contact with was also a centurion who had amazing faith in Matthew 8). Cornelius was "pious and God-fearing," which meant that although not circumcised as a Jewish convert, Cornelius worshipped and lived somewhat attached to the Jewish religion, probably observing the Sabbath, practicing monotheistic religion, etc.

One day at about three in the afternoon, Cornelius had a vision while praying. An angel instructs him to send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Peter. The angel specifies that Peter is "staying with Simon the Tanner, whose house is by the sea" (10:6). Cornelius does not delay, but immediately sends a soldier and two servants on the 30-mile trip to Joppa.

As the three were approaching Joppa about noon the next day, Peter went up on the roof to pray. Peter was hungry, and lunch was being prepared for him to eat. Peter fell into a trance and saw a tarp coming down from heaven with all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean. In the trance, Peter was told to kill and eat. Peter responded, "Surely not...I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice responds, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (10:14). This episode is repeated in the trance three times.

While Peter is contemplating this vision, the men from Cornelius show up at the gate of Simon the tanner's house and call out to see if a fellow named Peter is there. Peter, meanwhile, is told by the Spirit to go down from the roof and go with the

² Simon was a "tanner." Jewish law considered that occupation unclean at the time. Peter's willingness to stay, a precursor to what he is about to do, shows a certain understanding on his part of how the gospel loosened social stigmas and relationships.

three fellows looking for him. Peter goes down, tells the guys that he is Peter, and asks why they have come. The men explain that a "righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people" was told by an angel to get Peter to his house so that Cornelius could hear what Peter has to say!

After staying the night with Peter, the group sets out the next day for Caesaria and Cornelius. Some of the other Christians in Joppa go along for the adventure. It takes a day, but they all arrive and Cornelius falls at Peter's feet in reverence. Peter tells Cornelius to get up, "I am only a man myself" (10:26).

We do well to remember that even entering Cornelius's house was considered unclean to Jews. Interactions with Gentiles were to be avoided as much as possible. When Peter goes inside, he saw that Cornelius had convened a large audience to hear what Peter has to say. Peter starts out reminding everyone that Jewish law even forbids Jewish visitation of Gentiles. Peter is visiting, however, because God told Peter not to call anything God made unclean.

Peter then asked why he was sent for. Cornelius recounted the vision and instructions he had while praying four days earlier. In essence, the conversation went like this:

Peter: "I shouldn't be here under Jewish law, but God told me not to call you unclean. Why did you send for me? What is this meeting about?"

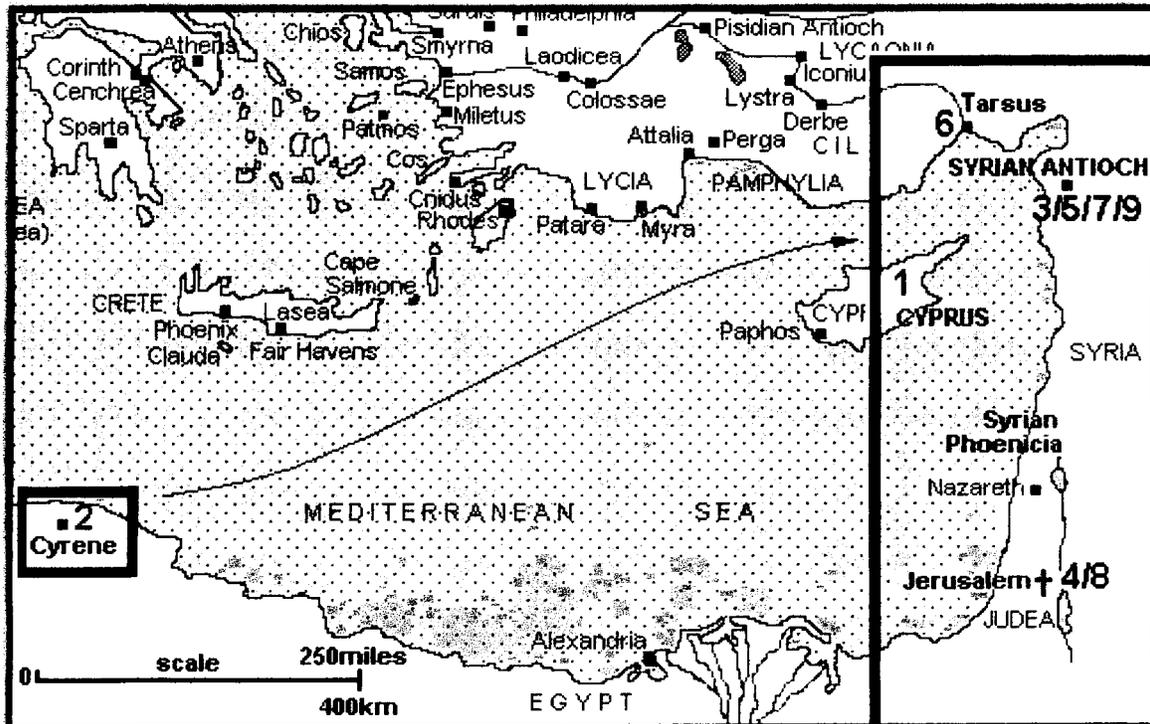
Cornelius: "I sent for you because God told me to listen to you. So what do you have to say? You tell us what this meeting is about!"

At this point, Peter sees what God is doing! Peter sees that God plays no favorites and that God seeks all his children, Jew and Gentile alike, into a restored relationship based on the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of mankind.

Peter explains the work of Christ including his death and resurrection. While Peter does so, the Holy Spirit comes on Cornelius and those in his household. Peter and the Jews who came with him were amazed. This happened without circumcision or conversion into the Jewish faith! Peter ordered the Gentile believers baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ" (10:48). Peter stays on for a few days.

Word spread quickly that Gentiles received the Spirit and placed their faith in Jesus as Lord. By the time Peter got back to Jerusalem, there was criticism that he went into the house of the uncircumcised and ate with them. Peter then detailed exactly how it all happened and the criticism quickly turned into praise for God and his work. The disciples said, "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life!" (11:18)

Because of the earlier persecution of the church, believers were scattered around the whole region as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch.



Some of the scattered from Cyprus and Cyrene started speaking in Antioch to Greeks as well, telling them about Jesus and the gospel (the "good news"). As noted in earlier lessons, Antioch traditionally was the home of Luke. It is likely that Luke has good firsthand knowledge of these events!

A great number of Greeks and others turn in faith in Antioch, and the church at Jerusalem decided to send Barnabas to help the church in Antioch. Barnabas helped the church grow and mature. Barnabas then went on to Tarsus to get help from Paul.

Luke tells us that in Antioch, the church and its people were first called "Christians" (11:26).

During this time, a prophecy was given in Jerusalem that a famine was coming. The Antiochan brethren put together a gift to help and sent it on to Judah by Paul and Barnabas.

This takes us up to the spring of 44 A.D. Luke tells us in chapter 12 that King Herod was arresting members of the church to put them to death to please the Jewish power structure. This Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great. Among the martyrs was James, the brother of John (as in James and John the sons of Zebedee). James and John were the brothers that sought Jesus' promise that one would sit at his right hand and one at his

left. Mark 10 tells the story with Jesus asking whether they could go through what Jesus was going to go through. Naively, not understanding what they were saying, they both said they could walk the path before Jesus. Jesus foretold the martyrdom of James when he replied, "You will drink the cup I drink..." (Mark 10:39)

Herod also had Peter arrested, put in prison, and overly guarded by four squads of four soldiers each! Herod was holding Peter for a Passover trial. While Peter was in prison, the church was "earnestly praying to God for him (12:5). The night before trial, while Peter is sleeping bound in chains between two guards with sentries at the door, an angel appears in the cell. The angel jabs Peter in the side telling him to wake up, get dressed, and get out! The shackles fall from Peter and he leaves with the angel in the dead of the night. Once they made it through the gates and into the street, the angel left, leaving Peter alone.

Peter makes his way to the house of Mary, the mother of John. In the middle of the night, Peter starts knocking at the outer entrance and Rhoda answers the door. Rhoda recognizes Peter's voice and enters the annals of faith as the patron saint of airheads! Rhoda runs into the house and tells all that Peter is here. While doing so, however, Rhoda leaves the jail escapee Peter on the street where he was knocking! Finally, they go to the door and let Peter in!

Peter fills the disciples in on what happened and then went to some other homes to tend to additional matters.

The morning after "there was no small commotion" (12:18). Herod himself cross-examined the guards on Peter's escape. With no satisfactory explanation coming, Herod has the guards executed. Before Luke leaves Herod, Luke explains that an angel of the Lord soon struck down Herod himself. And, "the word of God continued to increase and spread" (12:24).

IV. POINTS FOR HOME

1. All People are God's Creation.
2. God's Love Has No Borders.
3. God's Hand Moves Surely.
4. Prayer Wins.
5. Nothing Can Stand in God's Aeneas Bedridden 8 Year Way.