

Acts Part 13: The Final Voyage

Acts: A retrospective. Where we've been, where we are going

Sunday, July 10, 2022

- **Welcome everyone. This is Pastor Ethan, and today is Sunday, July 10th, 2022.**
- **We have concluded our journey through the book of Acts. Last week we jumped in our time machine and did an overview of the entire 30 year historical arc of Luke's history- seeing how all these stories tie together into the larger narrative of God working through these first disciples to bring about birth and growth of the church across the Mediterranean world.**
- **Today is our final message from Acts, and we're going to look at 5 big themes- 5 big takeaways from the entire story. These themes help us understand the big picture of the story, and importantly they speak to the church- to Christian culture, and our own lives- today.**
- **SO, here we go. The first big theme is that the birth and growth of the church was a...**

✠ A time of transition

Through the thirty year historical arc of the book of Acts, we see:

- **A transition of geography**
- **The Gospel grew from being only in Jerusalem, to moving into Judea, Samaria, Ethiopia, North Africa, and the entire Mediterranean/Roman world. At the close of Acts we see the Gospel moving out from Rome, literally into the ends of the known world at that time.**
- **Simply put, the great commission was fulfilled.**

Acts 1:8 *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."*

- **But we don't just see the church grow geographically, we also see a...**

• A transition in Ethnicity

- **At the outset we discussed how when the original disciples heard Jesus say the Gospel would go to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, WHAT THEY HEARD was... the gospel will go to the JEWS in Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. It never even occurred to them that God would take his gift of Salvation to the 'sinful Gentiles'.**
- **These were the outsiders- these were the oppressors, the people foreign to God and thought to be against God. SO, when God said... no, this same hope is for the Gentiles as well, it was a shock.**
- **When Peter returned from Cornelius' home, some of the believers criticized him, saying... "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." YOU ASSOCIATED with these sinners! But then Peter shared what had happened, and Luke tells us...**

Acts 11:18 *When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."*

- **By the end of Acts we see how the church has spread into every people group, culture, and language within the Greco/Roman world.**
- **For multiple generations, the evangelical church has been one of the most self-segregating institutions in America. There are of course MANY exceptions, but to a great extent evangelical churches segregate themselves ethnically, racially, financially, politically,**

culturally, and when it comes to discipleship and especially ministry leadership, by gender as well.

- **THE FIRST GENERATION CHURCH DID NOT DO THIS.**
- **By the AD 50's, the increasingly gentile church was incredibly diverse! It was thoroughly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-racial, politics played virtually NO role at all, and it can be honestly argued that the gentile church- and Luke- was more affirming of the role of women than some evangelical churches today.**
- **But perhaps most importantly, through the story of Acts we see....**
 - **A transition in theology**
- **The first big theological transition is what we just described- the Gospel opening to the Gentile world. Remember, the Jewish aversion to association with Gentiles had a theological foundation- a foundation that was completely dismantled when Peter received his vision of unclean animals.**
- **When giving his account back in Jerusalem, Peter described it like this:**

Acts 11:4-9 Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ ⁸ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’

- **This is the first step God took in setting aside the authority of the Mosaic Law. But it didn't just have to do with food and the concept of being clean or unclean-**

In Acts we see the real time transition from the OLD covenant (Mosaic covenant and Mosaic law) to the NEW covenant.

- **As we recapped last week, this transition was made complete at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15...**

Acts 15:5-11 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.” ⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

- **This reality of the New Covenant is the beating heart of the New Testament, and core to all of Paul's writing. In..**

2 Corinthians 3:4-6 Such confidence we have through Christ before God. ⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶ He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

- **Acts is a story of transition, as God's expand the Gospel, moving from:**
 - **The closed to open**
 - **The exclusive to inclusive**

- **From the old to the new**

- **NEXT BIG THEME...**

- ✠ **The centrality of community**

Acts 2:42-47 *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were **together** and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to **meet together** in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate **together** with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

- **This is one of the greatest recurring emphases throughout the book of Acts. Wherever the Gospel moved, it wasn't just about making converts, but establishing COMMUNITIES.**
- **In fact, if we look thru Acts, and the entirety of the NT, we will see that one of the most consistent, and EMPHATIC commands and callings Christ gives His church is the high calling of FELLOWSHIP. OF COMMUNITY- and in the midst of great diversity, the calling of UNITY.**
- **Going to be just a little BOLD... over my 18 years of ministry it's been striking how many people have told me they don't participate in church because of how they view the church as being compromised- doctrinally, morally, or in all honesty, politically.**
- **And yet, in 'taking that stand', these believers- as sincere as they may be- are contradicting one of the New Testaments most fundamental commands- which is to be an active, contributing, humble, and loving member of the community of believers- the gathered body of Christ.**
- **Church- apart from how we see the Holy Spirit working through the community of believers, there IS NO book of Acts. The story simply would not have happened.**
- **NEXT BIG THEME... Stories of decisions that were made, sacrifices made, and how the believers lived...**

- ✠ **For the sake of the Gospel**

- **At the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, he compelled Timothy- who was half-Jewish- to be circumcised. WHY? Paul would later write that "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything! What counts is a new creation." Why ask Timothy to be circumcised? FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL- Timothy's step, which would have been publicly known (different culture, I know), would help remove a cultural barrier within the Jewish community to whom Paul, Silas, and Timothy were bringing the Gospel.**
- **When he arrived in Rome Paul agreed to undertake a weeklong religious ritual- something he almost certainly would not have done on his own- and he did this for the sake of the gospel.**
- **The most profound example is when Paul and Silas were arrested in Philippi. They were flogged, thrown in Jail, miraculously delivered from Jail, and then the next morning this happened...**

Acts 16:35-39 *When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." ³⁶ The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can*

leave. Go in peace.”³⁷ But Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”³⁸ The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed.³⁹ They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city.

- **The question we asked was... Why didn't Paul pull his citizenship card – and CLAIM HIS RIGHTS as a Roman citizen, the day BEFORE they were arrested and flogged? We discussed this in depth, and the bottom line is that they endured this injustice for the sake of the infant church in Philippi, and for the sake of the Gospel.**
- **When we explored this story we discussed the principle- a principle that generated a good bit of discussion by the way- that as disciples of Christ, rather than being people who are quick to CLAIM OUR RIGHTS...**

Reality! When we consider the story of Acts and the overarching teaching of the New Testament, the calling, character, and love of *Christ in us* will lead us to lay down our rights for the sake of OTHERS, for the sake of the GOSPEL, and to bring GLORY to God.

- **Restate- IN CHRIST, at times, God will lead us to lay down our rights for the sake of the Gospel. This is a critical lens when interpreting some of the ethical and culturally based teachings of the New Testament, and we see it portrayed multiple times in the book of Acts.**
- **MOVING ON.. This is so important... when we consider how the community of believers grew from around just a hundred on the morning of Pentecost, to numbering in the tens and thousands across the entire Greco-Roman world- the question arises, HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? What...**

† **What made all the difference?**

- **If you were going to write a church growth book based upon the history of Acts, what would be your essential points?**
- **As we've already seen- centrality of Community of believers.**
- **Another thing- maybe the most important thing- was how the Gospel brought change and transformation to peoples lives.**
- **In Acts 19 we saw the story of the great riot in Ephesus.**
- **If you remember, Ephesus was the center of the worship of Artemis. The cult of Artemis was one of the most powerful and widespread cults in the Greco-Roman world, and the largest temple of Artemis- a wonder of the ancient world- was in Ephesus.**
- **As a result the idol worship of Artemis was an essential element of the cultural and economic life of Ephesus.**
- **But now, and increasing number of Ephesian citizens were coming to faith in Christ, renouncing the worship of Artemis, and destroying all their idols and religious artifacts.**

- **This terrified the artisans who created all these idols, and their leader- named Demetrius, got them all together and said this:**

Acts 19:26 *And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all.*

- **THERE IS THE ISSUE.** *In preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ, Paul proclaimed that there was only ONE GOD, and this God is NOT something, or someone, we create OR we control.*
- **THUS,** *all these other gods people have created- these idols- had NO POWER to provide what people TRULY NEED. Artemis, and all idols, were EXPRESSIONS of the human condition- peoples attempts to create God on their own terms....*
- **BUT JESUS CHRIST- the GOSPEL- WAS THE ANTIDOTE TO THE HUMAN CONDITION.** *The hope of forgiveness, mercy, Grace, and a NEW LIFE where GOD is our source of security, purpose, and identity- NOT things we create ourselves.*
- **AND SO,** *to Demetrius and everyone whose lives were vested in the cult of Artemis, this message was an existential threat*
- *You see, Demetrius feared the temple worship would be impacted, Artemis discredited, and people would stop buying all their idols. In that message, I said THIS:*
- **IN SHORT,** *this small, dispersed, hodge-podge community of people who professed faith in a Messiah with Jewish roots- whose great act was getting lynched and killed by his own people- this movement that lacked any political power, financial resources, buildings, and whose primary teacher was an intenerate tent maker who had been beat up and run out of virtually every community he had visited, THESE WERE THE PEOPLE whose message was seen as being on the verge of undermining the most influential and powerful religious system in the Greek speaking world!*
- *You see, Demetrius didn't hate the Christians because of their morals or they believed differently.*
- **NO!** *He genuinely feared the entire cult of Artemis was in danger of being discredited because of the growing evidence and testimony of how PEOPLE'S LIVES WERE BEING CHANGED BY THE GOSPEL.*
- **One more example.** *In Acts 13 Paul is in the city of Psidian Antioch, one of the early stops on his first missionary journey. He went to the local Synagogue, and at the end of his sermon said THIS:*

Acts 13:38-39, 48-52 *“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.*

- **THERE IS NOW a hope, a WAY to have PEACE WITH GOD, PEACE in life, that is NOT contingent on your own moral performance!**
- **THIS WAS GOOD NEWS,** *and the following week the entire town gathered to hear Paul speak. This filled the Jewish leadership with jealousy, and they began to opposed Paul. In response, Paul said- “since you are rejecting God’s message, it will now go the gentiles...*

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

⁴⁹ The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. ⁵¹ So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

- **Paul and Barnabas were driven from the city- but the believers who lived there- these brand new disciples who were now surrounded by a hostile environment opposed to their faith- THEY WERE FILLED WITH JOY.**
- **FRIENDS, takeaway church today needs to consider.**
- **When attacked, the church in Acts never defended itself through protest, political actions, or attacking those in opposition. The church didn't attempt to change the surrounding culture through moral imposition or coercion. Rather, the community of believers profoundly influenced the surrounding culture through the testimony of their own changed lives.**
- **THIS LEADS TO THE LAST GREAT THEME of Acts- THE ESSENTIAL ingredient to everything that happened...**

† **Is That...** The work of God was the work of God

- **Acts is not the story of extraordinary men doing great things for God. Actually, far from it. Acts is the story of ordinary, unremarkable, often uneducated, men AND women who were transformed by the Good News of God's Grace, who were filled with Spirit of Jesus Christ, and through whom God did what only God could do.**
- **Time and again Luke concludes a story by saying.. "And the LORD added to their numbers."...**
- **In the opening months of the church in Jerusalem, Peter and John had been arrested, brought before the Sanhedrin, threatened, and commanded to stop talking about this new hope of Jesus.**
- **When released, they went back to a gathering of believers, where they prayed...**

Acts 4:29-31 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. ³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

- **About 30 years later, while under house arrest in Rome, Paul would write a letter to the community of faith in Philippi- the city where he had been flogged and imprisoned years before- and he said this.**

Philippians 2:12-13 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

- *Friends, ACTS is the story of God at work in the lives of ordinary men and women, in the midst of our ordinary and everyday lives, to WILL and to ACT in order to fulfill HIS good purpose.*
- *DO WE BELIEVE God still does this? IF WE DO, it will change the way we view ourselves and the world around us. FINISH with a few observations of what a difference this simple faith makes. These are all things we saw and discussed as we worked our way through the stories of Acts...*
 - *When we truly trust that God is at work in us, we can exchange the burden of performance for the active rest of OBEDIENCE.*
- *We never have scene of Peter, Paul, or any of the church leaders stressing out under the crushing pressure of trying to get people to respond to the gospel. They simply let God bring change into their lives, and they took the next step of obedience as the Spirit led.*
 - *When we truly trust that God is at work in us, we can exchange the stress (and offense) of control for the power of INFLUENCE.*
- *The church in Acts never tried to control their communities or the people they encountered. The original church was never a top down phenomenon. Rather, these believers were a winsome and irresistible influence amid the great brokenness of the human condition in their day.*
 - *When we truly trust that God is at work in us, we can trust God with the OUTCOME, rather than trying to force the outcome.*
- *This is so hard- this is deep water faith- but this faith is at the heart of every story in Acts. This is a faith- and a deep peace- into which God continues to invite us today.*
 - *When we truly trust that God is at work in us, we will recognize that God will NEVER lead us to violate His nature in order to accomplish His purposes.*
- *Throughout all the trials, persecution, injustice, and suffering endured by Paul, he never compromised the nature and Character of Christ in Him.*
- *MY FRIENDS, JUST AS WAS THE CASE FOR THESE BELIVERS 2000 YEARS AGO...*
- *May we live as those who have been MADE NEW*
- *May we be alive and active as part of the fellowship and community of faith- the Body of Christ*
- *May we have hearts that desire to live for the sake of others, for the sake of the Gospel, and the Glory of God*
- *May we allow God to continue his work of bring change and transformation into our lives, as the nature and character of Christ is formed within us*
- *AND May we truly trust that God is at work within us, so that we will and act to fulfill HIS good purposes.*

This is a work that GOD DID, and it is a work God is still doing today. MAY IT BE SAID OF US