

ACTS 2:1–13

Acts 1:3–14

GOD'S WONDERFUL PROMISE (HIS HOLY SPIRIT)

Story Notes

File no. 167

1:3-14

Jesus spoke many things about the kingdom before his death. Now he is clearly alive and still speaking about the reign of God. His death has not been a lapse in this reign but the way of the kingdom's coming to its fullness.

Jesus commands his disciples 'by the Holy Spirit'—a sign of the new ways to come, and asks them to wait for the Spirit to baptise them—that is, immerse them in the life and work of Christ.

There are things about the kingdom, especially its timing, and in regard to Israel's restoration, that the apostles are not permitted to know. Such details will not be necessary to them.

Jesus is taken up into heaven, as Luke reported earlier (Luke. 24:51) but here, the disciples must be reminded by angels of what Jesus said earlier, that he will return in a like manner as they have seen him go (Luke 21:27). With this encouragement, the disciples are confident that everything will soon be in full flow. They are no longer diverted as in Gethsemane, or arguing about their greatness, but eager in prayerful anticipation for the fulfilment of Christ's promise.

Acts 2:1-13

The mission Jesus gave to his apostles cannot begin until the Holy Spirit is sent, but when he comes, the action is unmistakable. A sound like wind comes from above and fills the room where the 120 are praying, and flames like fire identify them as people with something to say. John the Baptist had announced this baptism with Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16), probably suggesting the purifying work that would then take place. Only the love of God through the Holy Spirit could effect this purification. It is a new beginning for the people of God, and, as with other beginnings, the coming of God to dwell among his people is made obvious (cf. Exod. 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11).

The 120 are enabled to speak in the languages of all the Jews and Jewish proselytes gathered in Jerusalem for the harvest celebration of Pentecost and this phenomenon cannot be contained within a room. Their message is soon being understood by everyone in Jerusalem, local Jews and others, from one end of the Jewish dispersion to the other and they identify the message as 'the wonderful works of God'.

The apostles now have authority, zeal, opportunity, potency and especially the understanding provided by the love of the Spirit. Israel will be without excuse because the declaration of the coming of their Messiah is being made known with power. Some struggle to understand and others pass it off with the unlikely suggestion that the apostles are all drunk.

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ACTS 2:14–47

Acts 2:1–13; Joel 2:28–29

PETER, A WITNESS FOR CHRIST / THE FIRST CHURCH

Story Notes

File no. 168

The apostles have been tutored by Christ himself and know that the coming of God's kingdom can only be understood through the prophecies already given to Israel. God had told Joel, at a time when Israel had been devastated by a plague of locusts, that God would come to restore them and pour out his Spirit on them (Joel 2:28-32). This grace of God is now being revealed. Israel had fallen into a terrible condition, as revealed by the murder of their Messiah, but God has come to restore her. They are before God as judge, but his grace is being revealed. Jesus is alive, and death (the great judgement on all sin) has been defeated.

David's Psalm (16:8-11) about being saved from death could not refer to David for, in the end, he died. He could not be the hope for Israel. Rather, David was prophesying about the Son promised to him (Ps. 89:3-4). Jesus himself referred to Psalm 110 to show that David anticipated his 'Lord' to sit at God's right hand as King (Luke 20:41-43)) and Peter uses this now to show Israel that this is what has happened. Jesus is now Israel's true 'Lord and Christ', their rightful King. He is alive and enthroned beside God as Lord of all nations. It is he who has poured out the Spirit to bless Israel.

What can Israel do? They have been caught in terrible sin and God has acted to reverse their deed (they killed him, God has raised him). Where do they stand? God graciously gives them the gift of changing their mind, of being joined (in baptism) to this Christ whom they have rejected, and of receiving forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is addressed to them, and also to others whom the Lord would call in the future (Gentile people, as seen in 13:48). They should get out of the terrible evil Israel has fallen into. Many do so, and the miraculous community of the church is born, a community who delight to live by every word that God speaks, and who love one another freely. At this early stage, it is hard for the population of Jerusalem to do other than have pleasure in what they see, and 'the Lord', that is, Jesus, adds to their number daily.

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ACTS 3:1 – 4:31

Psalm 118:22–23

THE LAME MAN / PETER AND JOHN IN TROUBLE

Story Notes

File no. 169

Acts 3

We have read about the miraculous announcement of God's kingdom at Pentecost; we have seen the conversion of many and the love of the converts for God and one another; this is followed by a third miraculous phenomenon, the Apostles' expectation that God will intervene to authenticate his word with signs.

At three in the afternoon, when many are assembling for prayer, a blind beggar seeks help from a passing Apostle. Peter says 'Look at us', and 'what I have I give to you'. He directs the man to himself and what he has—nothing less than healing in the name of Jesus. Then, Peter publicly disowns responsibility for the event: 'Why do you gaze at us?' and he turns the population to Jesus.

At a time when church leaders and members often do have silver and gold, our expectation of God's immediate action may easily be dulled, but the truth remains that an unbelieving public will only be convinced if God authenticates his own truth, however this may be (e.g. Rom. 15:18-19; 2 Cor. 12:12).

The man healed of lameness knows it is God who is to be praised, and the public know this man was the man who used to be lame, and they gather to learn more. The lame man identifies his benefactors by clinging to them, giving them opportunity to identify the cause of the healing. The 'line of evidence' is seamless. But what is in the heart and mind of the apostles?

Peter is not primarily concerned with the healing but with God, the God whom Israel should have known from the days of Abraham. This God whom Israel doesn't know has glorified his servant Jesus (v. 13), raised him up (v. 26, recalling Isaiah 52:13—53:12).

Israel has killed the man sent by God to be the Holy and Righteous One' (v. 14; with Ps. 16:10; Isa. 53:11), 'the Prince of life' (v. 15), 'his Christ' (v. 18), 'a prophet like [Moses]' (v. 22 with Deut. 18:15). The God they thought they worshipped has raised Jesus up, and here he is, still, doing good deeds among them. The grace of God could not be more thoroughly demonstrated.

The apostles show that their Old Testament has been transformed and every part of it is filled with Christ. Everything God has promised is now being fulfilled in Jesus' name, and the healing of the cripple is all about helping people to identify this Jesus as the One God has shown him to be. The prophecies said the Messiah would suffer and this is what has happened; but so has the 'raising up' about which Isaiah had spoken.

Israel should not be crushed by their mistake but change their mind. They are guilty, for sure, but have been ignorant, and this does not have to remain the case. They have before them, the proof that God is ready to bless them, not curse them. This man has been healed in the name of Jesus and through faith in that name. They should do the same with regard to the healing they also need. Their sins will be blotted out, times of refreshing will come, and the Messiah will return to fulfill all that God has promised—the restoration of all things (or 'regeneration' as in Mt. 19:28).

God's blessing through his Messiah at present is to turn them from their wicked ways. They should beware of failing to hear this great Prophet (Deut. 18:9) or they will be cut off from belonging to Israel (cf. Lev. 23:29). All their prophets, from Samuel onwards, were talking about these days when the promise of blessing to the nations would be fulfilled (Gen. 12:3). They are still the people to whom these promises were given and should now listen to God by receiving the good news of

THE LAME MAN / PETER AND JOHN IN TROUBLE con't

Jesus. The Abrahamic blessing would be released for the whole world through their turning to their Messiah.

Acts 4

Israel's leading priests and Sadducees have most to lose if faith in Jesus and the resurrection prospers. Sadducees, in particular, do not believe in a resurrection and they constitute the bigger proportion of the Sanhedrin or Council (the Senate and Supreme Court for all Israel). 5000 male converts is quite a movement and they are supposed to be in charge. They put Peter and John in jail for the night and assemble the Council in the morning to deal with the matter. By what name or authority have they healed the cripple? This 'name' (used 5 times) becomes the subject of their exchange.

Jesus had taught the apostles to trust in God for wisdom in such occasions as this (Luke 21:14-15) and the benefit of this trust is now evident. How ironic that the apostles are on trial for a good deed, and a miracle, done by God! The 'name' in question is 'Jesus', but the Council's enquiry is not a true one. In fact, the leaders are on trial, not the apostles, because the 'stone' for building the nation that they have rejected is being used by God as the cornerstone. Again, the Apostles understand what is going on by reference to prophecy (Mark 12:10-11; Ps. 118:22-23; Isa. 28:16). This becomes a key verse for understanding how Israel can reject its own foundation (Matt. 24:42-45; 1 Pet. 2:8). Peter wants them to be saved, as on the day of Pentecost, by receiving forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit. This can only happen by believing in the name of Jesus.

How can these disciples dispute with their leaders and interpret their history with no formal learning? The same question had been asked about Jesus (John 7:15) and the Council recognise the likeness of the authority being exercised. They, like their Master, have demonstrated that God is with them by the miracle that has been performed.

The Council is in an awkward position—they can't refute the evidence that God has done something, and are sensitive about the public delight in what is happening. They fondly hope that a quiet 'rap on the knuckles' will settle the matter. The Apostles however are confident in God. They want nothing more than that the name of Jesus would be acknowledged and loved. Their protest is hard to refute: should they obey God or man?

The apostles and the company of disciples pray like Hezekiah had earlier (2 Kings 19:15). They are living before their Creator, not public opinion. Their understanding is governed by a prophecy (Ps. 2) that foretold the nations gathering against the one God anointed to be Messiah. The same Spirit who inspired David is now showing them its fulfillment in Christ. The killing of Christ was no isolated event or misunderstanding but the outworking of the rage of nations opposed to God's rule over all things. They know this rage, evil as it is, has accomplished no more than what God purposed. So their prayer turns to a request. Effectively, they ask for God's kingdom to come, for his will to be done on earth as in heaven, and they know how God purposes to do this: 'Give us boldness!' and 'Continue to work miracles that show this is you at work!'

The prayer is answered immediately, with a shaking of the building they occupy and boldness to carry on as they had begun.

ACTS 4:32 – 5:14

ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

Story Notes

File no. 170

4:32-37

A whole community has been created in which people think of others rather than themselves, and, where the gospel is being proclaimed with power. Believers in Christ may have been excommunicated from the community of Israel so vulnerable people were without aid. The need for a welfare fund was immediate. There is no indication that selling property was required or that it continued to happen; it seems to be a spontaneous work of love arising from the fact that people no longer thought of possessions as their own but as a trust, to be used for the welfare of all. Jesus had called some men to leave everything and follow him for the sake of the kingdom, but others provided for them out of their abundance. He taught followers to trust God, to be content, to be good stewards and to be generous. Out of this teaching, and the coming of the Spirit, the young church now experiences an effusion of selflessness and powerful proclamation.

It could be argued that every effusion of the Spirit will develop generosity and powerful proclamation, and that these two things are necessarily connected.

John Foster in *After the Apostles* quotes Eusebius: 'And they, as being distinguished disciples of such great men, went on, in every place of the churches, building the foundation which had been laid by the Apostles, further extending the preaching, and sowing the saving seed of the kingdom of heaven widely throughout the whole world. For indeed most of those who were then disciples, soul-struck with a love, more violent than desire for wisdom, towards the divine Word, had fulfilled the former exhortation concerning salvation, dividing their goods among the needy. And then setting out on journeys abroad, they were fulfilling the work of evangelists, making it their aim to preach Christ to those who had not yet heard the word of the Faith and to pass on the scripture of the divine Gospels' (p. 27).

Barnabas, already recognized as an encourager, appears for the first time, and as part of this programme.

5:1-14

Annianias and Saphira participate in the selling of land and of giving to the welfare fund. Peter knows, probably miraculously, that they are deceiving God. They crave the appearance of generosity, laying their gifts at the apostles' feet, but, in fact, regard their property as their own. They were free to do as they wished with their property, and with the proceeds of its sale. Their sin is not just keeping some for themselves. Rather, Satan has filled their hearts; they have lied to the Holy Spirit, or put him to the test. Satan had 'entered into' Judas (Luke 22:3) and put into his heart the will to betray Jesus (John 13:2, 27). Whether something so serious is indicated here is not clear, but what is clear is that the Spirit will not have this hypocrisy as part of the church—both husband and wife die in the very act of their supposed generosity. They had tested the Spirit, but the Spirit tested them! Hypocrisy was a key factor in the killing of Jesus and the *Holy Spirit* shows it has no part in the church.

This 'zero tolerance' policy has its impact on the whole church and believers now fear what will happen to them if they misuse what God is doing among them. We recall the story of Achan who stole plunder devoted to God after the sacking of Jericho (Josh. 7). This jealousy of God in defending the holiness of his church continues, as Paul shows the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:6-14; 11:27-34).

Only the Spirit can join people to the church. Only his purifying work of justification and love enables them to live in God's holy church. The church continues to have a public presence in the temple as the apostles speak and heal, and as many come to faith.

ACTS 5:12–42

AN ANGEL OPENS PRISON

Story Notes

File no. 171

The church in Jerusalem is now well known and marked by loving generosity, miracles (like Jesus in Luke 8:44), fear of God, and centrally, by proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord. Everyone knows you can't join them at your own pleasure but only by Jesus himself and the gift of his Spirit. But this church is the source of enormous good because of the miracles being performed by the apostles and crowds come in from nearby.

The high priest and his associated Sadducee party have engineered the crucifixion of Jesus because of jealousy (Mark 15:10), and are further infuriated by the loss of face they suffer as these believers are doing more good for the community (and gathering bigger crowds) than they are. They attempt to put the apostles out of action (also 4:18-21) but are no more effective than they were in trying to silence their Master. Israel is in a head to head battle with 'an angel of God' who tells the apostles what they must do. They are soon back announcing 'the whole message of this life' (v. 20).

The Sanhedrin gathers the wider body of the Senate only to find that their prisoners are back at work. The temple guards have a problem because the apostles are held in high regard. They act delicately, perhaps persuading the apostles to come quietly.

The High Priest, calling Jesus 'this man' to avoid even using his name, resents the accusation that they have murdered their Messiah. But the Apostles show no fear of the Sanhedrin: he whom Israel has disgraced with crucifixion has been honoured by God with the highest office—at his right hand to be Prince and Saviour, so that Israel may repent and receive forgiveness. The apostles are more direct than previously. 'We must obey God rather than men.' In legal terms, we may say that the apostles are not **so much** on trial but have been made witnesses by God to the truth of Christ, and the Holy Spirit is witnessing too (cf. Luke 12:10-12). Love for this Lord has rooted them in obedience to God rather than to man.

For the time being, the Sanhedrin's strategy is foiled by the wisdom of Gamaliel. The Sadducean dominated Council must have the support of the more popular Pharisees and Gamaliel is their leading teacher. The Sanhedrin must also act carefully because of the public support for their prisoners. What Gamaliel really thinks is unclear. Does he have second thoughts about Jesus being Messiah? Or, perhaps he just fears the people and can see the political consequences if Israel acts too severely. He claims that the teaching of Jesus will fade, as has that of Theudas (unknown elsewhere), and Judas of Galilee (who staged a revolt in 6AD). He wins the day by calling Israel to entrust this whole matter to God, a typical Old Testament and Pharisaic position.

The leadership of Israel has been preserved from a 'head to head' confrontation with the church. The apostles suffer the chagrin of their leaders in the form of a flogging but think it all an honour, and they press right on with their task!

ACTS 6:1 — 7:2, 51–60

Acts 7:3–50

CHOOSING HELPERS IN THE CHURCH / THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Story Notes

File no. 172

6:1-7:2

The church must provide for the needy amongst them and it is in this practical setting that the church's first recorded dispute arises. Will the distinctions between Jew and Gentile that are so powerful in the world now shape the church?

The apostles know they must not be diverted from a ministry of the word and prayer. Apart from this there will be no life for the church, no gospel. They also see the need for this task to be administered by people who are full of the Spirit and wisdom, or full of faith and the Holy Spirit, or in the case of Stephen, full of grace and power, or full of wisdom and the Spirit (vv. 3, 5, 8, 10). The significance of this passage is not simply that they continue as a caring community but that it is created and controlled by the Spirit of God, the grace and power of God and the faith and wisdom of its leaders who believe in this message.

In the midst of these duties, Stephen in particular speaks boldly of the message that has formed the church. Certain that Christ is Lord, he reveals Christ's power through wonders and signs and speaks with the power of the Spirit (6:10). It is in this way that a new phase of the church's mission begins, moving from Jerusalem (6:7) into Judea, Galilee and Samaria (a story that concludes in 9:31).

Two of the synagogues in Jerusalem, whose members include freed slaves or those who have grown up in other countries, cannot bear to see their faith being undermined and contest Stephen's claims. The synagogue including Cilicians, may include Saul of Tarsus.

Proper argument with a wise and inspired man proves impossible so they turn to lies, using methods similar to that used with Jesus, and on the same issue, that Stephen is speaking against the temple (Matt. 26:60-61). Caiaphas is again in charge and the Council hopes to make their charges stick better with Stephen than they had with Jesus.

Stephen's defence is given in some detail and it is helpful to see the things that are on his mind as he stands trial for his life. They are certainly not the things that will secure his release. He may remember the word of Christ that we should not think beforehand what we are to say (Luke 12:11; 21:14). This is not a planned defence but an outpouring of the things that the Spirit of God has written on his heart.

7:2-50

Stephen puts Israel's life in Scriptural perspective, using the normal means of Jewish discourse (similar to Neh. 9:6-37 or Ps. 105; 106).

Abraham is the agreed starting point for Stephen and Israel (vv. 1-8) but Stephen wants Israel to know that Abraham's witness is relevant to their situation. The God of glory appears to Abraham outside of Israel (not in a temple). God moves him to Canaan but as a wanderer and with the threat of being taken elsewhere and enslaved for centuries, until God judges that nation. Already, Abraham has the covenant of circumcision binding him to keep God's commandments—before the giving of the law and the temple. True worship is expressed by doing what God wants and not merely by attending to the forms of worship.

CHOOSING HELPERS IN THE CHURCH / THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR con't

God's covenant extends to Isaac and Jacob, but this family won't recognise Joseph as God's means to save them (vv. 9-16). But God preserves their deliverer anyway. From his position of power, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and brings them under his care. It must be clear to Stephen that this is precisely what is happening now with the ascension of Jesus and he wants them to see how God works.

The patriarchs remember God's promise and are buried in Canaan. After some centuries, God makes them numerous, but they are persecuted. Again, God gives them a deliverer, beautiful in God's eyes. His parents 'expose' him, as required, but in a way that he will be pitied by Egypt's Princess (vv. 17-22). Moses, like Joseph, wills the good of his people and offers to help them (vv. 23-29). He wants to save them from slavery, but Israel is resentful of his authority and he must run far away to Midian.

God speaks to Moses well outside the borders of Israel (vv. 30-35). The burning bush is no temple but it is holy ground! Moses will in fact deliver his people and be their ruler and redeemer. Israel's slowness will not prevent God giving them a Saviour.

Of the many things Stephen could have said (vv. 36-41) about 'this' Moses (used 4 times), he refers to the gracious wonders and signs Moses did (which help us recall the signs done by Jesus, by the apostles and by Stephen) and moves straight to his prophecy of a later Prophet whom they were to heed in all that he said (Deut. 18:15-18). He received 'living oracles to give to us'—a way of life, and a gift to be treasured. But Israel did not obey Moses or the living oracles given to them, any more than Israel is now receiving the living oracles of the gospel. They preferred a return to their captivity, and idols. So what is Israel doing now?

Idolatry and disobedience become a way of life for Israel (vv. 42-43). God gives them over to this (cf. Romans 1). Stephen quotes Amos asking if Israel ever brought offerings to God, even in the wilderness (Amos 5:25-27 in the LXX), probably meaning that their offerings were not made to the Lord. Later in their history, they are offering sacrifices to 'the host of heaven', planetary deities associated with Assyria in particular (.....) and God sends them into captivity.

Stephen comes to his main point (vv. 44-50). The original tabernacle was made according to the pattern given by God and this is what they had for worship until settlement under David. This King loved God and wanted to make a better temple but the task was given to his son. Solomon constructed the temple but could see that God was not limited to that (2 Chron. 6:18). Stephen quotes Isaiah (66:1-2) saying that all heaven is God's throne and the earth a mere footstool for him. He is Creator and cannot be confined.

With the little he makes of Solomon's temple, Stephen may understand that Jesus is David's Son who will build a temple where God may be worshipped. This is certainly the meaning of Jesus in diverting attention from Herod's temple to his own body (John 2:19-22; also Luke 21:5-6). In contrast, Israel has no way to understand Jesus' statements because they do not know the God of the Temple, or love him, or his Law.

7:51—8:1

Stephen needs no further Scripture proof to make his point that Israel is consistently stubborn and effectively uncircumcised. They are proving that they are the same as their forefathers by killing God's Righteous One (Isa. 53:3, 11). *They who accuse him* are the blasphemers and breakers of the Law.

Stephen's testimony is like Christ's. Jesus revealed the hypocrisy in Israel's worship and pointed to himself as Israel's temple. He showed that keeping the law is done by honouring its Giver rather than by adding instructions to make it clearer. He was accosted with false witnesses misreading his intended meaning. Asked, at his trial, if he was the Messiah, he said they would see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God.

CHOOSING HELPERS IN THE CHURCH / THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR con't

Stephen is filled with the Spirit and sees this Son of Man standing at the right hand of God—standing perhaps because he is witness (witnesses stand in court) to this faithful servant. Apart from here, only Jesus ever uses the title 'Son of Man'. Stephen's choice of this term may tell us that he is thinking of what Jesus said at his trial. By this vision of Christ, he is able to tell Israel that the Jesus they killed *is* Israel's Messiah. His witness is complete.

Generally, Israel could not conduct executions, but Rome did leave Israel to their own resources when it suited them. In this case, though there has been no formal verdict of blasphemy, passion carries the day and Stephen is stoned to death. Again, he is like Jesus in his death (Luke 23:34; Phil. 3:10) and wishes that no one be charged with this crime. His accusation against Israel does not arise from a desire for vengeance but that they may see where they are in relation to God. He wants them to see that Christ is, in fact, at the right hand of God.

Saul of Tarsus sees all of this and cannot see the glory of God in Jesus Christ that Stephen sees. But he has this witness in Stephen's face, and words. He has met the heart and mind of the Church, and soon, will meet him in Person.

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ACTS 8:1–25

PHILIP AND AN EVIL MAGICIAN

Story Notes

File no. 173

Stephen's amazing witness in his death arouses the full anger of Saul. How could Stephen be so sure of his relationship with God? Saul is stirred to jealousy and makes plans to utterly destroy the Christian faith. Perhaps he refers to this later when he says, 'he would not know what envy was unless the Scripture had said you shall not covet' (Rom. 7:7).

Until now, Sadducees have been the prime stirrers of hostility against Jesus and his disciples (4:1, 5-6; 5:17), but Paul now abandons the reserve of his former teacher, Gamaliel (5:34ff), and leads the opposition. Resurrection, he could agree with but not what he saw as disregard for the law.

The church grieves deeply over the loss of Stephen (probably defying a Jewish law forbidding public mourning for anyone executed). Opponents have discovered 'what can be done' to eliminate Christian witness and persecution of the church increases greatly, possibly among the Hellenists in particular. Many are forced to flee for their lives but this only serves to fulfill Christ's announcement that his gospel will be preached in Jerusalem, *and* Judea, Samaria and onwards. They are 'scattered' like seed.

Stephen's fellow deacon, Philip (also a Hellenist), moves with others because of this persecution and comes to, not 'a', but 'the' city of Samaria. This may be Sychar where Jesus restored the broken life of a woman he met by a well. Jesus then told the disciples to lift up their eyes and see the harvest to be reaped; they would reap where others had sown (John 4:35-42). If so, Philip reaps where Jesus spent two days sowing. He has lead the way already, and leads it again now by his Spirit.

Philip tells these Samaritans that the Messiah they expect (John 4:25) is Jesus, and the signs he performs show that the same Jesus who exorcised and healed is still present. The same signs performed by the apostles in Judea (3:1; 5:16) are performed here too. This grace of God brings joy to the whole city. A well-known local magic worker, Simon, is notorious throughout Samaria and has been proudly accepting praise as 'the great power of God'. He may have relied on tricks, psychic powers or evil spirits (cf. 19:19), but he is impressed with what Philip is doing and wants to be baptized. But he has no idea of the holy power of God.

These Samaritan believers know Jesus is the Christ and that God's reign has begun in him. Apostles, who have responsibility for administration of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19), travel to Samaria to authenticate the faith of these people. They, and probably the believers themselves, know that faith is not complete without the Spirit bearing witness that they are children of God, so the apostles lay hands on them and pray for them to receive the Spirit. This does not suggest that this is the way the Spirit will always be given (cf. 10:44) but publicly declares the unity of these Samaritan believers with their Jewish brothers and sisters. The entrenched schism that stopped Jews having dealings with the Samaritans (John 4:9) has been broken.

Philip's grace filled ministry stands in sharp contrast with Simon's desire for power. His listening to the gospel and his baptism have been merely formal and his power hungry way of life remains. The Spirit is God's free gift so the idea of paying money for a franchise shows how evil and deep and enslaving his addiction is (as in Deut. 29:18). Only God's forgiveness can free him. Peter warns that 'his heart is not right before God' (v. 21 as in Ps. 78:37) and wishes he and his silver would go to hell. This has Simon asking for prayer! What becomes of him is left unsaid. Time will be needed to see which way he will go.

PHILIP AND THE EVIL MAGICIAN con't

The gospel has come to Samaritans, as Jesus announced (1:8), with deacon Philip taking the lead, but now the apostles join in preaching to the Samaritans and the next stage of the proclamation of the gospel is in full swing.

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ACTS 8:26–40

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN

Story Notes

File no. 174

Philip is a man of the Spirit (6: 3-5) and open to guidance by an angel. He needs to be because what happens now is new territory. God is asking him to preach to a Gentile God fearer. Given that he is asked to travel on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza he may travel back to Jerusalem with the apostles, but, like Old Testaments prophets, he attends to his commission promptly.

The road from Jerusalem to Gaza happens to pass through desert and the text expresses surprise, 'Look...!' when a traveller is found there. Again, Philip is led by the Spirit to join the chariot, there to find the man reading Scripture. He has travelled a long way to worship at Jerusalem, though, as a eunuch, he would not have been permitted to become a full Jew, even if he has wanted to (Deut. 23:1). He will soon find the truth of Isaiah's words about eunuchs being among God's people in the day when his salvation comes (Isa 56:1-8).

The Ethiopian has tasted success as a courtier to his Queen but remains a eunuch, probably involuntarily. The hunger in his heart for God is expressed in his having been in Jerusalem to worship, and in his not just reading but owning a copy of Isaiah. It is expressed also in his question about the silence of the Servant who is subjected to unjust suffering. Of all the remarkable passages he could be reading, he has come across what had become a key passage for the young Church—chapter 53. Does he remember his own sufferings as a eunuch and wonder at a man who endures without complaint for the sake of others?

Jesus himself alluded to this prophecy (Mark 10:45) and it has helped the apostles understand the reason for his death (see John 1:29, Rom. 4:25, 1 Pet. 2:22-25). Philip now shows the Ethiopian that Jesus the Messiah has fulfilled it. By the time his exposition is finished, the Ethiopian can see some water (in a desert!) and wants to be baptised into the name of Jesus. This Jesus had not merely suffered unjustly, but offered himself up as a guilt offering (Isa. 53:10). He now knows God personally through the forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:34).

The eunuch leaves for Ethiopia full of joy. We need not doubt that he received the Spirit (as in Acts 2:38), and we know he is now among the people of God, not kept at a distance as a Gentile or a eunuch. Philip, still moved by the Spirit, travels North from Gaza, up the coastal towns, via Azotus and all the way to Caesarea, probably speaking in Jewish synagogues. However, a delightful, although private, precedent has been established for Gentiles coming into the people of God. The public reception of Gentiles awaits Peter's visit to Cornelius.

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ACTS 9:1–20

Acts 26:15–18

SAUL BECOMES A BELIEVER

Story Notes

File no. 175

Judaism has drifted so far from God that Saul can get letters from their leaders to synagogue elders authorising the arrest of Christians, or people of The Way (v. 2; 19:9; 22:4). If he can also get cooperation from the Damascus synagogues, he will turn them into a secret police and Jerusalem into a repressive regime. Saul has been hardened by the testimony of Stephen and has all the marks of a desperado. However, such hostility is no match for the grace of Jesus Christ and Stephen's testimony bears its fruit in this conversion. The event is central to Luke's story because he includes it two more times, from Paul's own lips (22:5-16; 26:2-18). It is the starting point for all that Paul does (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8; 2 Cor. 4:6; Gal. 1:12-17; 1 Tim. 1:12-16).

A light like lightning arrests Saul in his tracks. Jesus appears, and Saul calls him 'Lord' before realizing who he is. This form of address, effectively, has Saul confessing that Jesus is Israel's *Holy One*. Like Isaiah before him, he is undone (Isa. 6:5; cf. John 12:41). Jesus says it is he, the Lord, whom Saul is persecuting. Gamaliel was right: Saul has been fighting God (Acts 5:39). But Christ only has thought for Saul's pain, not his own. Saul now knows God is embodied in Jesus Christ. Before long, he will also teach that the church is Christ's 'body', a physical reality in the world that bears the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24). Saul thought he had been attacking heretics but had been persecuting Christ.

Saul's life is totally altered. Years of rigorous piety now mean nothing. He had not loved God or his neighbour. He had not been sanctified (cf. Christians are called saints in this story). He had been building his own kingdom and not God's. Jesus *has* revealed God after all! The way to God is the way of Christ's grace and the way of his cross and resurrection.

Paul later regards this appearance as a further resurrection appearance of Christ (1 Cor. 15:8). If he were not a witness to the physical resurrection of Christ, he could not hold the office of apostle (Acts 1:22).

Saul is physically blinded by this encounter and has no interest in eating or drinking for three days—until the Lord completes what he has begun in him. The same Lord (this title for Jesus is prominent in this story) then appears to a Damascus Christian, Ananias. In a vision, he says that someone called Saul has also had a vision of Ananias coming to him to heal his blindness. Saul is praying, perhaps for the first time (cf. Luke 18:11). Christ is turning everything around and Ananias must see that this Christ works miracles of grace. Saul will be turned from persecutor to key witness for Christ before Gentiles and kings. He must receive the Holy Spirit, be joined to Christ and to his holy church, and to the sufferings that will be especially his in that fellowship. Ananias obeys Christ and goes to Saul, and calls him 'brother'.

So, all that Christ said to Ananias happens, and Saul of Tarsus is soon preaching in the local synagogues—Jesus is God's Son, the Christ. This is so effective that he must soon escape over a wall from the web he had helped to weave.

ACTS 9:19–31

Galatians 1:15–18

ESCAPE FROM DAMASCUS

Story Notes

File no. 176

Saul is immediately ready to preach that Jesus is the Christ. His Biblical training, now illuminated by the Spirit, have equipped him to take up this work. Letters introducing him to the synagogues provide ready access for his changed message and Jews find him 'amazing' and 'confounding'.

The 'many days' is undefined but must include some time 'in Arabia' (Gal. 1:17), probably the desert area of Nabatea out from Damascus. But he returns to Damascus, and the Jews, probably now over the initial shock of finding their strong man had changed sides, take issue with this new apostle. They may have the help of a Nabatean ethnic leader in this (2 Cor. 11:32) as it appears he has influence in Damascus at this point. Saul begins to feel the sufferings of Christ and is helped over the wall by some believers, not something he is proud of (2 Cor. 11:30-33). And so, after three years as a Christian and apostle, Saul returns to Jerusalem.

Saul was sent out from Jerusalem by the Sanhedrin but returns to confer with the apostles. They are understandably hesitant to receive him, but Barnabas, the encourager, introduces him and he is able to begin a ministry in Jerusalem. He refers to this visit in Galatians 1:18-19.

Again, his work draws fire from the same group who had stirred up trouble against Stephen, the Hellenistic Jews. For a second time, and after only two weeks, he must make a hasty exit from a city. The church family ('brothers') feels it best to send him back to his home city. It appears he is content to stay there for some ten years, or at least, we do not hear of him for the next ten years.

We now have the second closing refrain about the church's progress. Jerusalem was the first focus (to Acts 6:7), and now the church in 'Judea, Galilee and Samaria' is established (to 9:31), one church in many places. We are watching the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy concerning the spread of the gospel (1:8). The church is built up and characterized by fear of Christ (the fear that love knows, as in 2 Cor. 5:11, 14) and exhortation of the Holy Spirit, probably through the preaching of the apostles and the other leaders Christ is raising up. The peace they enjoy (v. 31) will always be the peace of living under Christ's reign, but may indicate that persecution is diminishing. The conversion of Saul has not lessened persecution from Jews but Jews are now under more pressure from Rome (Emperor Caligular until 41 AD) and perhaps did not have the luxury of going after the Christians.

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ACTS 9:32–43

MORE ABOUT PETER (DORCAS)

Story Notes

File no. 177

We have just been told of the church's spread throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria and Peter visits all these churches—he and the other apostles are busy men! Part of this travelling is to Lydda, from where he is called by believers to the Mediterranean coast town of Joppa. From here, he is called by the Gentile Cornelius further North to Caesarea. Luke wants us to see how the gospel moves from Jewish confines to the next stage of the ministry announced by Jesus (1:8).

At Lydda, the Christians are again called 'saints' or 'holy ones'. Peter meets a paralyzed man named Aeneas, presumably a disciple. Like Jesus before him, and as he did in the temple in Jerusalem, Peter announces that the man is to be healed. 'Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and make your bed!' There is no doubt in Peter's mind that Christ is present and active among them, leading the work of the kingdom.

As often in the ministry of Jesus, the point of this healing is to make it clear that God, who is reigning in Jesus Christ, is always ready for kindly restoration of people in distress, and the point is not lost on the locals in Lydda and the surrounding (Plain of) Sharon. They ('all' seems to indicate the larger part of the population) are not merely amazed but turn to the Lord. Miracles in Scripture are not to attract followers or bring an end to pain in this life but to glorify God. In the process of this, they do bring great comfort and attract those who see God's nature revealed in his works.

The Christians in nearby Joppa have their own distress. Tabitha, or Dorcas, has served many, particularly widows, by her kind and generous works and her death is keenly felt. They know Christ has restored loved ones who have died (Luke 7:11-15) and they recognise the power granted to the apostles to work 'signs and wonders' (Acts 5:12; cf. Matt. 10:8; 2 Cor. 12:12), so Peter is asked to come. Like Jesus with Jairus' daughter, Peter wants privacy (Mark 5:40; Luke 8:51). He prays, and calls Tabitha to rise up (very close to what Jesus said to Jairus' daughter"—Mark 5:41)—as she does. Again, the effect is that many in the town area drawn to this Lord who wonderfully enters into the griefs and sorrows of his people (cf. Matt. 8:17).

With all of this growth in the church, it is understandable that Peter stayed there many days. In fact, his billet is a tanner by trade—considered unclean by Jews. Perhaps Peter is being prepared for a further new experience.

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ACTS 10:1–48
PETER AND CORNELIUS
Story Notes
File no. 178

Like the Ethiopian eunuch, this Roman centurion appears in our story unexpectedly, is a fearer of Israel's God though still a Gentile, and comes to faith in Jesus Christ. Both stories include an angel and the Spirit of God guiding Philip and Peter in their respective missions, to show the way that God will include Gentiles among his people.

Cornelius would have been taught about Rome's gods but is now a God-fearer, accepting the revelation given to Israel and keeping their moral law. He is godly, generous and obedient according to the angel who visits him. We could say he knows Israel's law but knows it as Israel is intended to know it, as a wonderful gift, even while it awakens the need for grace. God opens his mind through a vision, directing him specifically to a servant of Christ some 50 kilometres away.

Meanwhile, God must also open the heart and mind of Peter to the fact of the gospel coming to Gentiles. Jews may have become more exclusive than necessary (the command saying they should not eat food offered to idols now means not eating with Gentiles at all) but Peter's conscience is highly attuned to this separation from Gentiles and only the Lord can tell him what is now clean and unclean. He is learning that God's elect now includes Gentiles.

Jesus has shown that ceremony cannot secure cleansing and that all foods are effectively 'clean' (Mark 7:1-19; c.f. Acts 13:39) but this needs to be worked out now in the setting of Gentiles coming to Christ. It needs to be worked out again when Peter forgets this (Gal. 2:11-14), and yet again every time we forget that our salvation is a work of grace and not the practice of our religion or culture.

The Spirit expressly tells Peter to travel with the centurion's servants. When Peter arrives at the home of Cornelius, the centurion receives him humbly, and, like the centurion who approached Jesus (Luke 7:7-9), this soldier understands that the messenger is commanded by God to say what he does.

Peter understands that they are all in the presence of God and reports what God has just taught him: God regards all nations alike (v. 34), and, 'any one who fears him...is acceptable to God' (v. 35). Paul says it has always been the case that those who seek God will receive his favour (Rom. 2:10-11) and Peter is finding the truth of this here.

The Spirit has brought Peter and this Gentile together but the gospel is the power to make them one people so Peter preaches the same gospel he has preached among the Jews and Samaritans. Jesus Christ announced peace to Israel—adding for his present company that this Jesus is 'Lord of all' and not just of Israel.

Peter then follows the order of Mark's Gospel, noting that Cornelius would be familiar with these facts: John the Baptist announced Israel's Messiah; this Jesus of Nazareth did many good deeds by the power of the Holy Spirit—God was with him and Satan's territory was challenged; the apostles saw these things and can vouch for them; the Jews had him crucified but God raised him from the dead—which the apostles can attest because they were chosen to see him, to eat and drink with him.

Peter continues: Jesus himself commanded this good news of Christ's victory over death be announced to 'the people', 'all nations' in fact. He says they were also to attest that Jesus is appointed to judge the living and the dead. No commissioning actually includes this but it was

PETER AND CORNELIUS con't

taught by Jesus and affirmed at his trial. Paul says his resurrection is the assurance of this (Acts 17:30-31).

Peter could have quoted Jesus regarding the command to announce forgiveness (Matt. 24:14; John 20:23) but he is moving in new territory and broadens the base of his authority to the prophecies Jesus fulfilled—all of them say that forgiveness will be available to all nations (e.g. 2 Chron. 6:21, 32-33; Isa. 56:6-7).

If the people at Pentecost could not wait for the end of Peter's message, the Holy Spirit here doesn't wait for Peter to work out what to do after telling them they can be forgiven. The form in which forgiveness is conveyed is in the coming of the Spirit (2:38) and he comes of his own accord to give indisputable proof that this is God's purpose, not an ecclesiastical decision.

These Gentiles speak in tongues as the apostles did at Pentecost (the likeness is to the apostles rather than to those who believed through their preaching); they extol God as they did at Pentecost. The signs are unmistakable; the Gentiles are joined to the people of God by God himself. The Lord is adding to his church those who are being saved.

The church in the person of Peter adds its seal to what God has done, the proper role for the church, and baptizes those who believe. They now know what it means to go into the whole world...baptising in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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ACTS 12:1–19

AN ANGEL TAKES PETER OUT OF PRISON

Story Notes

File no. 179

At this point in our story, the gospel has come to two Gentile God fearers—the Ethiopian, and Cornelius, and now, to many Jews and Gentiles who meet together at Antioch. The grace of God among these Gentiles (11:23) is visible in their conversion (11:18) but also in their generosity to the Christians in Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul are sent there with famine relief (11:27-30). So, the story returns to Jerusalem where the action had begun. Before we hear about the missionary journeys of Paul, the following story concludes the account of how ‘the word of God increased and multiplied’ (12:24-25).

Herod (Agrippa 1) comes from a whole family of ruthless rulers who intersect with the story of Christ at various points. (His grandfather tried to murder the infant Jesus, his uncle tried to get Jesus to talk, and later, his son, Agrippa 2 reasons with Paul). This Herod Agrippa 1, whose kingdom has gradually been increased to include Judea, courts the favour of Jews and has some approval from them because his grandfather married a Jewish princess. For some reason, he sees the church as a threat and has the apostle James executed. When he sees that this suits the Jews, he decides to extend his reach to Peter and locks him securely in his prison. He will parade him publicly after their Passover (cf. Mark 14:1-2) to demonstrate his responsiveness to Jewish issues. The respite enjoyed by the church after Saul’s departure from Jerusalem (9:31) is over.

Being Israel’s Passover or Unleavened Bread festival time (Exod. 12:14-15), the population of Jerusalem is augmented and national feelings raised. How will the church live in the midst of all this ferment? While Jews celebrate and Herod schemes, the church prays for Peter’s safety.

It is the last night before Peter will be paraded and then executed. He is in prison between two guards, bound with two chains and guarded by further soldiers at the door. Peter is asleep. Nothing will change here. But look! An angel of the Lord is present, the cell is lit up, Peter is sharply wakened with a hit to his side and told to get up. His chains fall off. He is told to get his shoes on, his coat on, and to follow the angel, and he is still thinking this is a vision, not real. The guards don’t stop them, the gates open by themselves, the angel leaves—and now Peter is in ‘the real world’, and knows that God has rescued him from the Jews and from Herod.

Now to persuade the church! Peter knows where the believers are meeting and knocks at the gate. Rhoda recognises his voice and is beside herself with excitement but the church is incredulous and prefers to believe it is Peter’s angel, not himself. And Peter must keep knocking! Finally, he is admitted and explains the Lord’s intervention. It is right that the church has prayed her way through this crisis because it is not their cunning or power that has secured her impact in the world but God’s direct presence and action.

The Elder James is informed and Peter is taken elsewhere for safety, or possibly, to another city, out of the jurisdiction of Herod. (We only hear of Peter once more—15:7—but this story makes a fitting conclusion to his exploits.)

Jesus said, ‘In the world, you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). What this will mean will depend on the purpose of God in each situation, but it is clear that neither religious hatred nor state power will prevent the spread of the word.

The guards are interrogated and executed. While this is the expected result for soldiers who lose their important prisoners (cf. 16:27-29), it is also true that Herod has lost face and must show himself to be strong.