

Study 4: Acts 9 - 12

As we continue through the book of Acts, we see the continuation of the church in Jerusalem, the development of the churches in Samaria, the conversion of the first Gentiles, the conversion of Saul, the great persecutor of the church who became the great apostle to the Gentiles, and the first death of one of the apostles (James).

Introduction

Chapter 9 – Damascus, Jerusalem, Joppa, AD 34-35

Chapter 10 – Caesarea, Joppa, AD 37

Chapter 11 – Jerusalem, Antioch, AD 37-43

Chapter 12 – Jerusalem, Caesarea, AD 43-44

Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read the notes as a review of the study
- Why was Herod killed?
 - What message does this give to us?
 - What practical ways can we apply this to our lives?
- What is your favourite gospel, and why?
- Skim-read Acts chapters 13- 19
 - Who are the major players in this part of the book?
 - What period of time is covered by these chapters?
 - What are the major events that happened in these chapters?

Notes for study 4: Acts 9 - 12

Introduction

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Chapter 9 – Damascus, Jerusalem, Joppa, AD 34-35

Saul moved from consent (7:58; 8:1) to havoc (8:3), and then to slaughter (9:1). He showed his frustration towards those (in his eyes) that perverted the Jewish religion, and became determined to stamp it out wherever it had spread. He went to the High Priest, (almost certainly still Joseph Caiaphas), and authorised him to “round up” the members of “the way”, bring them back to Jerusalem under bondage to face trial for blasphemy and (like Stephen) be put to death.

Damascus is about 200 km north of Jerusalem – the journey would have taken 3 or 4 days on foot. A great light appeared and shone around him. It was midday, and the light was brighter than the sun and blinded him. Jesus appeared to Paul, and he actually saw Jesus.

“...Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you...” (Acts 26:16 NIV)¹

Saul is told to “...*arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do...*” (9:6). It’s purpose was to qualify him to be an apostle (as a witness), and to “choose him” (select him) for the office of an apostle “...*he is a chosen vessel unto me...to bear my name before the Gentiles, Kings, and the children of Israel...*” (Acts 9:15). He was in Damascus for three days, before he was told what to do. Ananias came and laid his hands on him (9:17), and he immediately received his sight back again (22:13). Ananias told him all that the Lord had said about his ministry (22:14-15), and then commanded Saul to “...*arise and be baptised and wash away your sins...*” (22:16). It was not until he was baptised that his sins were taken away, and the command to Saul was exactly the same as that given by Peter on the day of Pentecost “...*repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins...*” (2:38). He spent “*some days*” with the disciples in Damascus.

Immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the Synagogues (9:20). News of Saul’s conversion would not have gone unannounced in Damascus. “...*All who heard were amazed...*” (9:21). They were in disbelief that such a change could take place – but Saul “...*confounded the Jews...proving that Jesus is the very Christ...*” (9:22).

Saul left Damascus “*immediately*” after his conversion (Gal 1:17-18), most likely 2 or 3 days. He then left Damascus and went to Arabia for three years (the “*some days*” of 9:19).

“... But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days....” (Gal 1:16-18 NIV).

The Lord had spent three years with the Lord in Judea, and He spent the same period of time to give Saul the understanding of God’s revelation. After that time he came back again to Damascus before he went to Jerusalem. It was at this return visit that he is taken out of the city in a basket, because the Jews tried to kill him. He then went to Jerusalem, and tried to join the disciples.

¹ Also c/f 1 Cor 15:7-8; 1 Cor 9:1

This occurred when Aretas was King of Damascus. He became King about AD 37, near the time of Tiberius' death. This places the time of Saul / Paul's second visit at no earlier than AD 37, and is consistent with his conversion in AD 34, and the three intervening years spent in Arabia.

The Christians in Jerusalem did not believe that he was in fact a disciple, and were thinking that he was trying to infiltrate the church to persecute and have them put to death, even though he had been absent for three years. Barnabas mediated on his behalf, and brought him to the apostles (Peter and James (Gal 1:18-19)). He explained the circumstances of his conversion, and his stay in Jerusalem was brief – only 15 days.

Saul preached boldly in Jerusalem, and the Jews there tried to kill him. Whilst praying in the Temple the Lord appeared to him in a vision (Acts 22:17-21) and told him to get out of Jerusalem quickly, and go to the Gentiles. So he escaped to Caesarea, and then returned home to Tarsus.

Peter was called to bring Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) back from the dead, and came to Dorcas' house in Joppa. The miracle became known all over Joppa, “...and many believed on the Lord...” (9:42). He stayed with Simon the tanner, an occupation avoided by stricter Jews, as they would be ceremonially unclean. Peter is being prepared for his encounter with Gentiles.

Chapter 10 – Caesarea, Joppa, AD 37

Cornelius was a Gentile. It was the 9th hour of the day (3 PM). Whilst praying, Cornelius “...saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in ... to him...” (10:3 NJKV). He was told to “...send men to Joppa...send for Peter...” (10:5). The distance of 50 km (30 miles), would have taken probably 10 or 12 hours at a fast walk. The men arrived in Joppa at midday the next day (vs 9), and must have journeyed for most of the night, and been sent by Cornelius almost straight away.

Peter had gone up onto the (flat roof) housetop at midday (the sixth hour) to pray. It was lunchtime, and Peter was getting hungry, and thinking about food (smells good, eh?). He fell into a trance, and saw heaven opened and all sorts of animals descending. A voice told him to “...rise and eat, Peter...” (10:13), but he refused because the animals were unclean. He was told “...you must not call common (unclean) the things that God has cleansed...” (10:15). This event occurred three times, and Peter was perplexed as to what it meant. Whilst wondering about it, he was told to get down and go with the three men who were downstairs waiting for him “...doubting nothing...”. The men had arrived at the place where Peter was staying at *precisely* the time when the vision had been revealed to Peter.

The next day, Peter and the three men headed back to Caesarea, and took some brethren from Joppa with them. A total of 10 people made the return trip back to Caesarea, which would have taken all of the day, and part of the next (10:23-24).

Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together those of his household, and also his relatives and close friends. He had several days to contemplate the situation, was in no doubt about the revelation, and was absolutely certain that this was the answer to his prayers.

After the preliminaries, Peter asked why Cornelius had sent for him? (10:29). God's revelation did not tell Peter *why* it was that he was to go, but only that he should go without doubting. Peter came to the understanding that he should now mix with the Gentiles, but had not quite understood that they also should be part of the church. Had he not had the vision & revelation from God, he probably would not have even mixed with them, as that would make him unclean for the day.

Peter preached the gospel, and he then understood that God does not regard people, and that all men are equal whether Jew or Gentile. He outlined a similar sermon to chapter 2, and was about to tell them that they needed to repent and be immersed for the forgiveness of their sins (as he said on the day of Pentecost), but he is interrupted by the Holy Spirit falling on them in exactly the same way He had fallen on the apostles at Pentecost.

This event was for the benefit of Peter and the other apostles, more than for those who received the blessing. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit removed all doubt from his mind, and from the other apostles (chapter 11). Peter then understood exactly what God had in mind, and said that these people had just as much right to be baptised (immersed) in water so that they might have their sins forgiven, as the Jews did, and he then commanded them to be baptised *in the name of* (with the authority of) the Lord.

Chapter 11 – Jerusalem, Antioch, AD 37-43

The news of the conversion of the Gentiles had spread like wildfire, and the apostles had “heard” the news, but did not know what to make of it. Peter reports back and we see how the apostles dealt with new issues and hearsay and established the facts of the matter.

Peter is accused of going into the houses of Gentiles, and eating with them. This is certainly what he did do – because he stayed in the house of Cornelius (10:48). The Jewish brethren did not appear to be as concerned with the fact that Peter had *taught* the Gentiles, nor that he had baptised them. They seemed more concerned with the breaking of the Jewish law by *eating* with them.

The prevailing view at the time was that the new religion was just another Jewish sect, and at that time even the apostles themselves appeared not understand that the Jewish religion had ended at the cross. These truths were progressively revealed to them. It took the dramatic revelation of the unclean animals to Peter, and the full and complete imparting of the Holy Spirit to the household of Cornelius to make Peter realise that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Whilst Peter had said on the day of Pentecost that the gospel was for *all men* (both Jews and Gentiles), the full import of that statement had not reached home!

Until the conversion of Cornelius, the preaching and conversions were *to Jews only*. There were some believers of Greek background, who were either Proselytes or Jews who had left Palestine and were now living abroad (they may have even been born abroad) *but they were still Jews*. It was only with Cornelius’ conversion that Gentiles entered the church. Even those present on the day of Pentecost were “...Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven...” (2:5)

Antioch features very strongly in the Acts narrative as one of the first strongholds of the Gentile Christians. It was the church that sent Paul out on his three missionary journeys, and it was also the home of Nicolas the Proselyte who was one of the seven deacons (6:5). It may have been Luke’s home, and he may have been there at the time, and became acquainted with Saul (Paul).

Barnabas was sent to work with the church in Antioch. In fact, he was sent “...to go as far as Antioch...” (11:22), which implies that on his journey he was to help as many churches as he could along the way. Saul and Barnabas were “old friends” from the time of Saul’s conversion (about 7 or 8 years earlier), and he was “...chosen to be the apostle to the Gentiles...” and Barnabas is sent to Tarsus to find him and bring him back to Antioch.

The “...disciples were called Christians first in Antioch...” (11:26 KJV). At that time, a great famine was prophesied. One of the prophets was named Agabus, who will appear again in chapter 21. Some of the manuscripts in 11:28 read “...and when we had gathered around, he began to indicate...”. This is the first use of the first-person by Luke in the narrative, and indicates that Luke was there at the time. This “...came to pass during the reign of Claudius...” (11:28), who reigned as Roman Emperor from 41 to 54 AD, and during his reign 4 famines occurred.

Relief was sent to the elders in Jerusalem, and this is the first mention of elders having been appointed in Jerusalem, and the first mention of elders in the New Testament church. It was Saul’s second visit to Jerusalem, and a brief one, since he returns back to Antioch in 12:25. It is a visit that he does not recount in the Galatian letter (as he did not see any of the apostles – the important issue that he is discussing in Galatians). Luke uses “...Barnabas and Saul...” (11:30), as the perspective at that time was that Barnabas was the more prominent of the two.

Chapter 12 – Jerusalem, Caesarea, AD 43-44

Herod Agrippa 1st was a grandson of Herod the Great, and the son of Aristobulus and Bernice. He was a brother of Herodius who asked for the head of John the Baptist, and was born around AD 10. This is the only place he appears in the New Testament. The whole family of Herod's were cruel and brutal. Herod Agrippa's arrival in Jerusalem in AD 41 would undoubtedly have been in the middle of the "religious battle" that was still going on between the Jews and the Christians. He was in a position to "do the Jews a favour" by ridding them of the troublesome leaders of the "new sect", and by doing so he would achieve his aim of aligning himself with the Jews. "...Herod tried to harass some of the church..." (12:1) "...And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he also seized Peter..." (12:3).

Several years (8) had passed since the death of Stephen, and there had been a time of relative peace since the dispersion and the conversion of Saul. Most notable about the death of James is that he was the first of the apostles to die – and the only one for which there is a record in scripture. His brother John was the last (around 100 AD at Ephesus).

Peter was put into prison and guarded by four squads of soldiers – each of four men. These 16 soldiers would guard the prisoner around the clock. Two of them would be within the prison cell and chained to Peter, and two of them would be outside the prison door. Herod's intention was to deal with Peter in probably the same manner as James, but not until the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread had passed. A public trial and execution would bring much rejoicing from the Jewish people, and do much good to Herod's reputation. Peter was about to be executed the next day (12:6).

Suddenly an angel *appeared* and materialised in the room, and filled the prison with light. The angel awakened Peter, released him from his chains, and then told him to get dressed. Peter followed the angel out of the prison, past the first and second doors (and past the second lot of soldiers). The iron gate that led into the city opened by itself, and Peter was led into the street of the city before the angel departed. He then came to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark, where the Christians had gathered together to pray for him. He made a fast exit out of the city, as his escape would be noticed at the change of guard at daybreak. We do not know where he went, nor when he returned – but he was present in Jerusalem for the meeting between Paul and the rest of the apostles in chapter 15 (about 7 years later). The soldiers had a lot of explaining to do "...there was no small disturbance... as to what might have become of him..." (12:18) since the Roman soldiers were charged with the same penalty that the escaped prisoner would have received (in this case, the death sentence). Herod "...examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death..." (12:19 NKJV).

Herod went down to Caesarea. Josephus relates this journey (Antiq 19:8:2), which occurred after He had reigned over all of Judea for a period of three years, dating it at AD 44. A set day arrived, and Herod made an oration to the people, in his royal clothing. Josephus tells us that this was the second day of the sport and games festival, which was held in Caesarea every fifth year in honour of Claudius – and at Herod's insistence. Herod's apparel was of woven silver which would have glittered with great brightness in the sun as He appeared and spoke to the people. The people saw Herod, and the bright array of his garments they shouted that this was "...the voice of a god, and not of a man..." (12:22 NKJV). Herod was receiving the accolades that he longed to hear. As a professing Jew, he knew better. Immediately, the angel of God struck him for accepting the accolades and not giving the credit to God. Josephus tells us that he died five days later. He was in the 54th year of his life, and the 7th year of his reign, making it the year AD 44. This places the death of James at just before Passover in the year AD 44. The *appointed day* during the feast is generally placed at March 5th in the year of AD 44, although a date probably around late May is more likely.