

BIBLE CHALLENGE

A 3 ½ week study of the book of Acts

The story so far: For forty days following the resurrection Jesus has been appearing at various times to his disciples. With one exception, recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:6, his appearances have been private affairs to small groups of his followers. He has taught them, eaten with them, given them assurances that he is alive. As we begin the book of Acts, Jesus is preparing to return to heaven, having promised the coming of the Holy Spirit. Acts then goes on to tell the story of what happened after Jesus' departure

Monday:

Read: Acts 1

What to look for:

- The book of Acts picks up the story where the Gospels, especially Luke, leave off. Specifically, Acts is a continuation of Luke, a sequel. The clue is in verse 1 in which the author indicates he has written a previous book, and once again names the person to whom he is writing – Theophilus – who is also named in Luke 1:3.
- Perhaps these disciples will never fully understand what Jesus has been trying to teach them. Once again in vs. 6, even after the events of Good Friday, they seem to think that God's kingdom will come in power and might in the form of a restored earthly kingdom.
- The theme of the book is spelled out in vs. 7 and 8. The rest of the book will tell how these words of Jesus will be fulfilled.
- Following Jesus' arrest Judas took his own life (Matthew 27:1-10), meaning that he needed to be replaced as one of the twelve apostles.

Tuesday:

Read: Acts 2:1-24, 29, 34-41

What to look for:

- Vs. 1 – Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival, one of the pilgrim festivals from the Old Testament for which people were supposed to go to Jerusalem when the first fruits of the harvest were gathered in. That's why there were already so many people present from such a wide variety of backgrounds to witness the coming of the Spirit.
- The theme that we have been tracing from Genesis up through the book of Luke, namely God's promise that the whole world would be blessed through Abraham's descendants, is now taking place. Salvation has come from Israel and it is for all people.
- Vs 34-35 is a quote from Psalm 110, the most quoted verse in the New Testament.
- Need a Biblical text that supports infant baptism? Here you go – vs. 38-39. A couple of things jump out:

- 1) Peter clearly states in regard to his urging people to be baptized that the promise, which comes to us in baptism, is “for you and your children”. Indeed it is for everyone whom the Lord *will* call, not *has already* called.
- 2) The promise is “for all who are far off”, not “for all who are committing their life to Christ”.
- 3) The baptism is for forgiveness of sin. Peter *does not* say it is a means to commit your life to Christ, he says it is *for the forgiveness of sin*. Children are included in that promise of forgiveness. If we believe children are victims of sin then they need to be baptized for forgiveness. If we say they are innocent and not in need of baptism for forgiveness then we reject the entire teaching of original sin.

Wednesday:

Read: Acts 2:42-3:16

What to look for:

- Verses 42-47 are key verses. Note them carefully for the model they provide of how the earliest church functioned. Compare these verses to the habits of discipleship that help us to grow deeper as followers of Jesus. The early Christians...
 - Were devoted to the apostles’ teaching – the habit of Bible study;
 - Were devoted to fellowship – the habit of building meaningful relationships;
 - Were devoted to prayer – the habit of prayer;
 - They gave to anyone in need – the habit of stewardship and giving;
 - They praised God – the habit of worship
 - They enjoyed the favor of the people – the habit of evangelism.

Note the results in the second half of verse 47. Note also the pattern this early church established in that they “continued to meet together in the temple courts” as a large group, but were also committed to “break bread in their homes together” in small groups. What does all of this suggest for the pattern of ministry our church should be following, and to which you as an individual might commit yourself? Which of the habits of discipleship do you feel you most need to work on?

- Peter uses the healing of the crippled beggar as an occasion to point out that just as the man had been paralyzed and was now lifted up to a new life, so Jesus who was laid down in death, was also raised up by God. In healing the man Peter is giving a visible demonstration of resurrection power.

Thursday:

Read: Acts 6:1-7:2a, 7:51-8:1a

What to look for:

- This is the first indication, in 6:1, of the divisions that would plague the early church throughout the rest of Acts and be reflected in much of the remainder of the New Testament, namely, the struggle between Christians who had come from a Jewish background and those who came into the church from a non-Jewish (gentile) background. You will see much more of this division in the readings to come.
- Stephen's response to the accusations of the high priest come in the form of a sermon (the longest in Acts) beginning at 7:2 and concluding at 7:53 in which he recounts the whole history of Israel. Stephen's sermon theme is that throughout Israel's history the one the people rejected became the deliverer. In the same way that pattern repeated itself in Jesus.
- Stephen becomes the first martyr for his faith in Jesus, and Saul who is present at his death will eventually become Paul, the author of so many of the New Testament letters.

Friday:

Read: Acts 8:1b-7, 26-40

What to look for:

- The message about Jesus is beginning to spread to the broader world. The irony is that it spreads precisely because it is rejected. 8:1-3 tells of the first persecution of the church in which the followers of Jesus are scattered. The persecution leads to the word spreading by means of those who have been forced out of Jerusalem.
- One of those people who have been pushed out is Philip, one of the men, along with Stephen, who had been selected back at the beginning of chapter 6 to help with food distribution. Through Philip's ministry to the Ethiopian official (8:26) the gospel will be taken to Africa.

Acts and the Beginnings of the Church, continued

The story so far: With the coming of Pentecost the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit has taken place, emboldening the disciples in their witness and ministry and forming the followers of Jesus into the church. The message of Jesus is beginning to spread out from Jerusalem to Samaria and onward into the world. A Pharisee named Saul is present at the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr for the faith, and it is Saul's story that the book of Acts will increasingly follow. To read more of Paul's story you might be interested in the book *Paul: A Novel* by Walter Wangerin which puts the biblical story of Paul into novel form.

Monday:

Read: Acts 9:1-31

What to look for:

- Note in vs. 10-17 that Annanias' big challenge is to go to the very person he likes and trusts the least (Saul) and minister to him. Where Saul will eventually become a missionary to farthest flung places of the known world, Annanias is called to minister to the person across the street with whom he really doesn't want to be involved. But Annanias does what God tells him to do. Sometimes ministering to the person you don't like is as significant as ministering to someone you have never met. The manner in which God can use us to touch the lives of people who are close to home can be as compelling as the great and dramatic evangelists the likes of which Saul is about to become.
- Vs 15-16 are a clear statement of what Saul's new job description will be.
- Saul immediately begins preaching the message of the Christ he met along the Damascus road, but as will be the case throughout his career, some people don't like what he has to say and plot to kill him (vs. 23). From there he goes to see the Apostles who suggest that he go home to Tarsus where he will be out of the picture for awhile.

Tuesday:

Read: Acts 10:1-35

What to look for:

- So far the gospel has gone to Samaria, to an Ethiopian Jew, and now it goes even to a total gentile in the form of Cornelius.
- Jews are not supposed to eat with gentiles because they eat foods that are considered, by Old Testament law, to be unclean. But, according to the dream Peter has, what God has made clean must not be called unclean. Vs. 34 is where Peter shows that he understands the meaning behind his dream. God's people will no longer be identified by their Jewish ethnic origin but by faith. Anyone of faith will now be an accepted part of the community regardless of their family heritage.

Wednesday:

Read: Acts 11:1-4, 18-26

What to look for:

- Antioch is north of Jerusalem, and the growth of the church is shifting from being centered in Jerusalem to being centered in Antioch.
- Note that there is already some concern and apprehension on the part of the circumcised believers (those Jews who believe in Jesus but come out of an Old Testament background and continue to observe the law) over what role gentile believers (those who do not come from a law observing, ethnically Jewish background) will have in the church and what will be required of

them. This will be the central issue of the early church which we will continue to see developed in the rest of Acts.

- Vs. 26 – the first reference to the followers of Jesus being called Christian.

Thursday:

Read: Acts 13: 1-15, 42-52

What to look for:

- The church at Antioch sponsors a new missionary outreach, not just to their community but beyond it. This is a new development: None of the Apostles nor the church in Jerusalem are involved in this mission. It is the result of a local congregation becoming the catalyst for mission.
- From now Saul will be referred to as Paul
- Paul and Barnabas set out for a number of locations in what will come to be thought of as Paul's first missionary journey. After leaving Cyprus they travel through what is now central Turkey.
- Paul's sermon (vs 16-41) recounts again the history of Israel. Note that Paul goes first to the synagogue to speak to the Jewish people, but when they reject the message, that's when he goes to the gentiles.

Friday:

Read: Acts 14:1-28

What to look for:

- Paul and Barnabas are running into opposition in most locations they preach. But God continues to confirm their message through miracles.
- The people are clearly "spiritual" but their spirituality is misdirected. Sound like any other contemporary culture you know?
- This completes Paul's first missionary journey, bringing him back to the community of believers that first sent him out. What example does the church at Antioch provide for congregations today?

Acts and the Beginnings of the Church (continued)

The story so far: Last time we completed Paul's first missionary journey in which he was sent out by the church in Antioch. Before leaving he ran into some tensions between the circumcised believers (those Jews who believe in Jesus but come out of an Old Testament background and continue to observe the law) and the gentile believers (those who do not come from a law observing, ethnically Jewish background). Those tensions are about to flare into a major dispute.

Monday:

Read: Acts 15:1-21, 36-41

What to look for:

- This is a major turning point for the early, developing church. They need to decide what to do with all the gentiles, who had never followed the Law of Moses, who are now believing in Jesus and coming into the church. In 15:1 the issue presents itself in terms of men who are claiming that following the Law of Moses, especially as it is symbolized by circumcision, is an indispensable part of what it means to be a believer. Anyone who does not observe the sign of the covenant, in use since the time of Abraham, can not be a part of the community. Faith is good but circumcision, i.e. following the Law, is required.
- This leads to the meeting that takes place in vs. 6. The central issue of the meeting is whether circumcision is required for gentiles, or whether faith alone is enough. Peter argues that the proof that God accepts the gentiles on the basis of faith without the requirement of circumcision is that God has clearly given them the Holy Spirit, just as he has those who are circumcised. Paul follows with much the same argument. Finally James, who is the leader in Jerusalem and represents the “old guard” decides that the gentiles should follow the Old Testament dietary laws, in addition to abstaining from idolatry and sexual immorality (vs. 20).
- Gentiles have been accepted fully into the people of God without a requirement of circumcision. Faith and baptism will be the marks of those who are a part of God’s family. But the issue of whether gentiles need to follow dietary laws remains, which is still a part of the larger issue as to what shape the Christian life ought to take. This will still have to be worked out.

Tuesday:

Read: Acts 16:6-40

What to look for:

- Paul now sets out on his second missionary journey. Paul’s standing as a Roman citizen made it possible for him to easily travel anywhere in the known world.
- Note the pattern for what takes place in this passage, for it reflects the typical outline of Paul’s missionary experiences. At first he is accepted, but soon opposition (often violent) develops. The opposition, as in this case, is often because of concerns that Paul’s preaching and message will create a financial loss, though the excuse for putting Paul in prison is that he is a threat to custom and order (though note that it is in fact those who are doing the accusing and wishing to maintain the status quo who are the real threat). Finally God delivers Paul from danger, and in

the process and as a result of Paul's integrity, even the jailer and his family become believers.

Wednesday:

Read: Acts 17:1-23, 30-34

What to look for:

- Note the variety of responses Paul receives to his preaching. In Thessalonica he is run out of town by an angry mob who accuses him of causing trouble all over the world. In Berea the people are far more receptive and many become believers, though the angry crowd from Thessalonica followed him and again stir up trouble. In Athens Paul finds he has to compete with the long established tradition of philosophers and religious ideas which he does by trying to move his listeners from a generic spirituality to a more specific focus on God who makes himself known in Jesus. (vs. 23) Paul's argument here is that the Greeks, notorious for praying to any god they might receive help from – even going so far as to erect an altar to an unknown god, i.e. “to whom it may concern” – don't have to shop around for God when in fact God has come to them in the person of Jesus.

This would be a good time to study Paul's letters 1 Thessalonians and Galatians

Thursday:

Read Acts 18:1-11, 18-22, 24-28

What to look for:

- Next week we'll look at Paul's letters to the Corinthians, so today's reading sets up the context. This takes place during his second missionary journey, which we read about last week. Once again those in the synagogue reject Paul's preaching and so he turns to the gentiles to begin his congregation. Paul stayed in Corinth for quite some time and devoted a great deal of energy to beginning this congregation.
- The second missionary journey ends at 18:22. Paul's next, third, missionary journey begins at 18:23.
- Priscilla and Aquila played a vital role in Paul's ministry, offering him support, encouragement, and partnership in ministry. Who has encouraged you in ministry? How might you be a Priscilla or Aquila for someone else?

This would be a good time to study the books 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans.

The story so far: Paul has been in prison now for two years. In the meantime the Roman governor has changed, with Felix being replaced by a man named Festus. In chapter 25 Paul testifies numerous times before him as well as before King Agrippa.

Because Paul had earlier appealed to Rome as a citizen he would need to go to Rome for trial.

Upon arriving in Rome, Paul is placed under house arrest and it is from here that he writes many of his final letters.

Friday:

Read: Acts 21:17-21, 27-36, 22:23-30, 23:6-14

What to look for:

- Having written his letter to the Romans, Paul returns to Jerusalem, where he gets into more trouble. The accusations raised against Paul (21:21) is that Paul is a lawbreaker and encourages others to ignore and break the law of Moses as well.
- In claiming his Roman citizenship, Paul has certain rights that non-citizens would not have (22:25).
- Note what will be the end result of this turmoil (23:11). Paul will get to go to Rome, as he had wished when he wrote his letter to the Romans; however it will be as a prisoner. God will make sure Paul gets there to do his work. God's will works itself out, sometimes in ways that surprise us.

Monday:

Read Acts 23:23-24, 24:1-16, 22-27

What to look for:

- Vs. 23 – Paul's enemies are so stirred up against him that the Roman commander who has Paul in custody decides to transfer him under cover of darkness to the Governor.
- Vs. 27 – after hearing Paul's defense, Governor Felix keeps Paul in prison for two more years.

Tuesday:

Read: Acts 26:32-28:10

What to look for:

- Notice Paul's courage and certainty in the face of trials and storms.
- 27:9 – the Fast is the Day of Atonement, meaning it is October and the winds will be picking up making it dangerous to cross the Mediterranean.

Wednesday:

Read: Acts 28:11-31

What to look for:

- vs. 26 – This is a quote from the call of Isaiah.

- Vs. 30 – Despite all that Paul has suffered over the years, and the repeated rejections of his message, he continued, at his own expense, to proclaim the kingdom of God to any who would come to him and listen.