

Today I'll be presenting part four of our Lenten journey through the Bible. In the first three parts we barely covered the Old Testament, and today we'll get into the New Testament. Now even if you know just a little bit about the Bible, you probably know the New Testament starts with the Gospels. However I'm going to skip over the Gospels this week and start with book of Acts. Why? Well, the Gospels are the foundation of our Christian faith, and I'd rather wait until Holy Week, where they will be most appropriate and have more meaning. So then, today the book of Acts. Next week the Epistles, meaning letters, of the various Apostles and other prominent believers. Then the Gospels. And on Easter Sunday the Resurrection and some Revelation. So let's begin.

First, with some basics about the chronology of the New Testament. Jesus died around 30 AD, Anno Domini, meaning “in the year of our Lord.” (And just an FYI, some non-Christians prefer instead to use the abbreviation CE., for Common Era when referring to the calendar. Both are accepted and it's really your personal preference as to what to use.) The book of Acts was written perhaps as early as the decade 60 AD by St. Luke – yes, the very same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke. He was a physician, and a companion of St. Paul, and the only Gentile - meaning a non-Jew - of the New Testament writers. The book of Acts is more formally known as The Acts of the Apostles, because it's an historical account of how some of the apostles began to form the church, from the time of Jesus' death and resurrection, to the time of Paul's imprisonment in Rome, around 62. This could likely be the same timeframe that Luke may have written his gospel. However, his was not the first gospel. It's believed that the Gospel of St. Mark, written by John Mark, another traveling companion of Paul, and also Peter, was a little bit earlier than Luke's gospel. Then the gospels of St. Matthew and St. John come later. And, it should be noted, that the letters of St. Paul come before all these, likely between 50 – 65, since he wrote them as he traveled and evangelized across the Mediterranean world.

So now some highlights about Acts. It begins by Luke acknowledging an individual named Theophilus. It's the same way he starts his gospel. The fact is, we really don't know who Theophilus was, since the Bible doesn't identify him. Which is why there are several different theories as to who he might be. Some believe Theophilus was a person of honor and rank, such as a Roman official or a wealthy, influential benefactor. Now the name Theophilus literally means, “loved by God.” Which implies being

a friend of God, in relationship with God, and has led some to believe that this ‘Theophilus’ Luke is writing to, is just a generic title that applies to all those who are, indeed a friend and follower of the Lord, like you and me, loved by the God. The Book of Acts covers a period of approximately 38 years. And the action involves two great crusades. The greater Jerusalem crusade, in Acts 1-12, headed up by the apostle Peter, and the more global crusade, in Acts 13-28, led by Paul. The stories also involve other church fathers like John, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, and Luke himself. Now let me say here that Acts details the rise of a new religious movement that centered on Jesus Christ. On his being the Son of God, on his death, his resurrection, and his promise of eternal life. And remember – during this time, some of the very same people who condemned Jesus and put him on the cross were still alive. So you can imagine the controversy and the tensions that still existed. We read how the church starts to expand, and in the beginning, believers in Jesus Christ were called followers of “the Way,” but in Acts, we learn where and when they are called Christians for the first time. We also find three noteworthy conversions to the faith in Acts, which I’ll get to in detail shortly. Acts is a book that effectively opens with an upper room prayer meeting led by St. Peter, and, we find out later, closes with St. Paul chained in a Roman prison cell, saying goodbye to his protégée Timothy, where he pens those famous words: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and now the prize awaits me, the crown of righteousness.”

Now Rev. Kalas says, that anyone who professes to be a Christian should spend a lot of time in the book of Acts. Why so? Well, first, because it emphasizes that Christianity is a community affair. Like it or not, we become part of a community when we take on Jesus Christ as our Lord. So if we absent ourselves from this community, we do so in violation of what it means to be part of the body of Christ. And second, because many of us have an unrealistic view of the church: that it should be perfect. But a study of Acts and the early church shows that the first believers were a wonderfully imperfect human lot. And both community and imperfection describe the church today. So basically, it comes down to this. The better we are, the more our church needs us. The worse we are, the more we need church. So, then, let’s look at how our amazing, albeit imperfect, church started in the first place.

It started in Jerusalem. Now going back a bit, when Jesus walked the land, thousands came to hear him teach and preach and observe his miracles. Probably that many were there waving their palms when he entered Jerusalem that final week. But when he was put on trial and then crucified, most people deserted him. So now, here we are, after the resurrection, and a band of followers gather to determine their next

steps. According to Acts, “Peter stood among the believers, and together they numbered about 120 persons.” That's all - just 120. Well, it appears the first order of business for the disciples was to nominate a new disciple to take the place of Judas who betrayed Jesus. So a certain Matthias was added to the eleven apostles. His appointment restored Jesus’ apostles to the original number of twelve. Why twelve? Why replace Judas anyway? Well as you remember, various numbers in ancient times had symbolic significance. The number twelve was one of them. Remember the “12 tribes” of Israel. During the Last Supper, Jesus said he was granting the kingdom to the disciples telling them that, they “would be sitting on thrones, judging the ‘12 tribes’ of Israel.” The disciples had not forgotten what Jesus said, and apparently wanted to dot all their “i’s” and cross all their “t’s” when it came to the number twelve.

Then, on the day of Pentecost, Peter and the disciples were gathered together in their upper room meeting place. Pentecost was the Greek name for a Jewish festival called Shavuot, primarily a “thanksgiving” for the spring wheat harvest, but it was also associated with a celebration of the Law that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. And thousands of Jews from many different nations – Africa, Asia, Egypt were in Jerusalem to celebrate. Now remember, I said the book of Acts was also called Acts of the Apostles. But some have even gone so far as to call it, Acts of the Holy Spirit. Because when the disciples were with Jesus at his ascension into heaven, also told in the Book of Acts, he told them to be prepared for the gift the Father would send them. Jesus said that John baptized with water, but in a few days they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And sure enough, that day came and the gift fell upon them; it was like a fierce wind blowing through the whole house, and then tongues as of fire came to rest on each one of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak other tongues. Well, when this happened, a big crowd gathered to investigate the commotion. When they did, they heard Jesus' disciples speaking to them in their own native languages. The description of their amazement to what was going on and what they were hearing, goes on for a full nine verses. Then Luke adds this one verse, almost as an afterthought, but one which lends such credibility to the whole incident. He says, “Some, however made fun of them, saying they were drunk on too much wine.” These people were mocking the disciples, in much the same way our Savior himself was mocked on the cross.

What happens next gives us insight to the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit. A once frightened Peter – after all he thought the Jewish leaders were going to come after him and the other disciples like they did Jesus – suddenly attains such boldness that he preaches his first sermon. And within hours, 3000 people - that's right 3,000, joined the company of the original 120. I wish I could preach like that!

Yes, God had let loose a power that would change the course of history from that point on. A force that would be the crucial deterrent against all that is evil and destructive in this world. With their newly found courage and power, they urgently and relentlessly went about proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. And their claim was substantiated by the various miracles they performed in the name of Jesus. This emerging community of followers, the church, grew in their spiritual depth and vitality. They were earnest in their faith and their prayers, and the sharing of all their possessions. People would say about them, “See how they love one another!” In one instance, a devout Jew named Barnabas, who later became a companion to Paul, was so generous that he sold a field he owned, and laid all the money at the Apostles' feet. But all their witnessing and challenging of Jewish thought and tradition, plus the particular healing of a lame man, brought them into conflict with the Jewish authorities. And, there was even some conflict among the apostles themselves. So, there were problems.

But here again is shown the power of the Holy Spirit. Not that there are never any problems in the church, of course there are, but with the Holy Spirit, problems can be transformed into new opportunities for progress through trust and faith in God. Because let me share with you some of what happens. First, Peter and the apostles go about healing and preaching, and are ultimately thrown in jail by the High Priest and his associates. During the night though, an angel of the Lord opens the doors of the jail and tells the apostles to go on doing their work. Which they did. And once again they're arrested, and in the ensuing trial Peter takes control and directly accuses the Sanhedrin of killing Jesus. When they heard this, they become so furious that they want to put the apostles to death. But one Pharisee named Gamaliel, sets their fate by solving the problem. “Leave these men alone. Let them go. For if their purpose is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them, you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” This effectively gives the Apostles nearly free reign in Jerusalem, though not without first being flogged with a whip for good measure. Then there is the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, and the issue of stewardship. They had some land which they sold, but unlike Barnabas, they didn't share all the money they received for the land with the community. Peter reprimands them for conspiring against what the Holy Spirit intended for them to do, and then lying about it, and they immediately fall dead. Eeks! So, clearly a new procedure has to be put into effect for the sharing and distribution of goods and food. Which leads to the appointment of “Seven men who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.” Deacons - lay persons, so to speak, who were given the responsibility of working for God's purpose. Just as you are –capable of doing so much good for the church - but only if you listen to and follow the Spirit! Among those men appointed, were two in particular, Stephen and Philip.

Now Acts tells us says that first individual, Stephen, was a man ‘full of God's grace and power,’ and he performed great wonders and signs among the people. But again, opposition arose and those against him persuaded some men to bear false witness against Stephen as to a charge of blasphemy. So they seize Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. Stephen goes on to give the longest “come to Jesus” sermon in the book of Acts. And he ends his speech by pointing up to heaven saying, “Look, I see heaven open and the ‘Son of Man’ (we heard the importance of that name last week)... the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this, the Sanhedrin and their associates became so upset that they dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death. Stephen becomes the very first martyr of the faith. And by the way, there among the individuals stoning Stephen, was a young, influential Pharisee named Saul, who approved of the killing.

Well, on that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. This nasty fellow Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, almost single-handedly destroys the church, going from house to house, dragging off both men and woman, and putting them in prison. So, many of the followers of “the Way,” this new faith, left Jerusalem. Now the second person I mentioned, Philip, was directed by the Holy Spirit to go to Samaria of all places. As we know, the Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Yet guess what? The first non-Jews to be converted by the early church, to follow Jesus and, to be baptized, were the... Samaritans. God’s sense of humor never ceases to amaze me. Then an angel of the Lord leads Philip down a desert road where he meets an Ethiopian eunuch, an official in charge of the treasury of the Queen of Ethiopia. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and was on his way back home. He was reading the Scriptures, but he did not fully understand, because, according to their laws, the Jews would not allow a eunuch, someone with that kind of sexual identity to participate in Jewish life. But what does the Spirit lead Philip to do? To fully accept him, by baptizing him – right then and there. Now, a person of color who is also a eunuch, has been baptized. And there's even more craziness. Peter has a vision where he sees the heavens open and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice tells Peter to get up and eat. Now Peter, being a devout Jew, has never eaten anything unclean by Jewish Law. But then the voice speaks to him again, saying, “How can you call anything impure that God has made clean?” And this dream is the precursor to Peter meeting a Roman centurion Cornelius, where Cornelius and other Gentiles are baptized. It now becomes clear by those three baptisms, that God shows no favoritism. Anyone who follows him and does what is right is more than acceptable to him. Jesus Christ is indeed... Lord of all! Can I have a real and virtual Amen!

Just two more quick stories before we move on to Paul. First, regarding the church in Antioch. Remember, at first this new religious movement was called “the Way,” a name that likely came from Jesus saying “I am the way, the truth and the life,” – the way of salvation. But after Stephen was killed, as I mentioned, many of the followers of “the Way” scattered themselves throughout the region northward: to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and as far as Antioch in Syria, which is 300 miles from Jerusalem. There they continued spreading the word to other gentiles. And it was in Antioch where the new disciples were first called Christians. Now the second story goes back to Jerusalem, to when Peter was arrested once again, this time by King Herod. Herod had already killed Jesus' disciple James, and now had Peter in prison. Peter was sleeping one night between two soldiers, bound with chains, while sentries stood guard at the entrance of the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and struck Peter on his side waking him up. “Quick get up,” and the chains fell off Peter's wrist. Peter followed the angel out of prison having no idea what was happening. He thought he was dreaming. An iron gate leading to the city opened by itself and they went through. Suddenly the angel left and Peter came to himself. He realized what had happened and made his way to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, where many of the followers had gathered together to pray for Peter. Now this very intense scene suddenly turns comical. Peter knocks at the door and a servant girl named Rhoda answers. When she looks out and sees it's Peter, she becomes so overjoyed and excited that she turns and runs back to tell everyone. And there stands Peter outside, still banging on the door. Those praying for Peter didn't believe what Rhoda was saying. They didn't believe their prayers had been answered. Now you've heard Jesus' phrase, "O ye of little faith." It's not always easy to trust, is it? And that was the case here. “You're out of your mind,” they tell her. But Rhoda persists, until they finally get up and see that it's true and let Peter in the house. It's wonderful, don't you think, that St. Luke records in Acts the faithful actions of a slave girl, one of the “least of these,” to be remembered forever in the Bible.

Okay, now let's go on. I mentioned a few minutes ago an individual named Saul. He was the young Pharisee who approved of the killing of Stephen, the first martyr. This was Acts' introduction for us to the person who will eventually be known as the apostle, St. Paul. So what happened? How did this man make a 180 degree turnaround? Well, as you know, at first, Saul is driven to destroy the followers of “the Way” and their new church, because it stands in direct conflict with the Jews who didn't believe in Jesus as the Messiah. And so driven was his hate, that his reach of persecution stretches far and wide. He goes on a business trip of sorts to Damascus, about two hundred miles north, back then, a five day journey, where his intent is to hunt down the followers of Christ and bring them back, “bound up,” to

Jerusalem. But this is when Saul has his Damascus Road experience, his “come to Jesus meeting.” While on the road, suddenly a bright light from heaven shone down on him, and the light was so intense, it blinded him. And he heard the voice of Jesus. Jesus pleading with him, “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me? Get up, and go to Damascus and you will be told what to do.” Which he does, and after three days, his eyesight is restored. Here is where Jesus gives Saul his marching orders. “Saul will be an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name to the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.” So, after that experience, as you might imagine, Saul becomes driven to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. Of course, what had happened to him on the Damascus Road is so mind-boggling... that the most vehement persecutor of the followers of Christ has suddenly now become Christ's greatest advocate... creates both unbelief and fear in the minds of the disciples. They think it's a trick. It takes Barnabas to convince them that Saul is sincere. And from this time on, Saul would be known by his Greek name, Paulos, or Paul.

Now as I alluded to earlier, there will always be problems in the church, but those problems can be transformed into new opportunities for progress through trust and faith in God. And so it was with Paul and Peter and the pillars of the Jerusalem church. Disagreements existed between them. Simply put, Paul saw himself called to witness primarily to the Gentiles, the non-Jews. And he felt that salvation was based on faith alone in Jesus Christ, therefore, circumcision need not be a requirement to be a follower. And he wanted this to be the doctrine of the church. Thus his statement, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Many in the Jerusalem church, particularly James the brother of Jesus, felt justification came not only through faith, but also through the adherence to certain Jewish laws and traditions. In effect, you might say it boiled down to some types of bureaucratic red tape. And here is where we could learn from the early church. For how did they resolve their conflicts? Well, first they decided to all get together, face-to-face, to talk about it. And when they met, the first thing they did was welcome each other. You can imagine – the hospitality, warm greetings, embracing one another. And then, rather than go right into addressing the conflict, they instead shared their good news with each other – all that God had done – how the churches were growing, how more people were becoming believers, how the Holy Spirit was at work. Reading this, you can sense a joy and excitement over all that was happening. And so now they are ready for their discussion. And when Paul and Barnabas got up to speak, we’re told, “Everyone listened quietly.” What a model for us! This is the way our leaders should conduct themselves. But more importantly, we, husbands, wives, parents, children, neighbors, co-workers need to learn from this

as well. This is how we should conduct ourselves when dealing with people with whom we disagree. Eventually, all does gets resolved and Paul gets his approval and goes on his way throughout the Mediterranean planting churches and preaching the good news. First with Barnabas, then with Silas, later with several others including Mark and Luke, and then, especially with Timothy. The rest of the Book of Acts chronicles Paul's three missionary journeys to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's estimated that Paul traveled over 10,000 miles and during that time he endured being shipwrecked three times, beaten, and arrested; he suffered hardships and hunger and thirst and cold and exposure. But he almost single-handedly is responsible for the initial spread of Christianity. We'll get into more of this next week when I talk about the letters he wrote to the various churches he started throughout the world.

Some quick final thoughts on Paul. Let me say that for as much good as he has done, Paul has always been controversial. Most great leaders are. Not only back then among his associates, but throughout the years. If you remember, back when I was talking about how Moses freed the Jews from slavery in Egypt, I made mention of how the American slaves loved Moses, and loved Christ Jesus. But they didn't love Paul that much. You see, Paul once said that, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." Proponents of slavery back then used that scripture to justify their racist thinking. Even today, many in the church have issues with Paul. When I was in seminary, Paul's comment, "Woman should keep silent in churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission," didn't sit too well with many women. But here's what I think when it comes to Paul. We may never hear about anyone who takes Jesus so seriously as St. Paul. He thought that if you are going to be a Christian, then you should be like Jesus. You put away your own agenda. You put away your self-righteousness. You put away your pride. You even put away your independence. To be like Jesus means you love, you care, you give, you serve, you suffer, you sacrifice, just like Jesus. What Paul is saying is that we should constantly be in revolt against the world's efforts to brainwash us. And he even admitted he, himself, hadn't yet reached that point. So today, I want to leave you with words from his letter to the Ephesians, encouraging you to think about your own "Acts" for Jesus Christ. "I do not claim to be perfect. But this one thing I do. Forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on... I press on... toward the goal... sweating, straining, heart pounding, muscles aching... toward the prize... the prize of that upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Like I said last week - watch out. Because there's more great stuff to come! Amen.