



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Missiology

Lesson 5 – The Spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem

Even though the early Christians were severely persecuted after the death of Stephen, the Lord turned the evil of persecution into the good of spreading the Gospel. When severe persecution broke out in Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians were scattered **“throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria”** (Acts 8:1). What did they do in Judea and Samaria? **“Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word”** (Acts 8:4). The result of the Jerusalem persecution was the preaching of the Gospel of Christ in many other places, and when the Word is preached, God works through it to create faith in Christ, and every believer in Christ becomes a spokesman for Christ to bring the Gospel to others in other places.

The next thing we read in Acts is that one of the seven deacons, Philip, **“went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them”** (Acts 8:5). **“And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip”** (Acts 8:6). When the apostles in Jerusalem heard what was going on in Samaria, **“they sent Peter and John to them”** (Acts 8:14) to further establish the Gospel work in that city and to cement the relationship between the Jerusalem Christians and the Samaritan Christians. There is only one Church of Jesus Christ, made up of all true believers in Christ everywhere, and this one Church is made up of sheep who listen to the voice of their Shepherd Jesus and voice of the apostles Jesus chose to teach His Church. On their way back to Jerusalem Peter and John preached **“the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans”** (Acts 8:25). The Gospel of Christ was moving through the land, and it was the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem that led to these new mission efforts.

Meanwhile the Lord sent the deacon Philip on a visit unrelated to the persecution. The Holy Spirit wanted the spread of the Gospel to Ethiopia in Africa, and He knew how He could do that. There was a man from Ethiopia who either was a Jew himself or was a Gentile who had become familiar with the faith and worship of the Jews. He had risen to a high office in Ethiopia, being **“a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury”** (Acts 8:27). This man had come all the way to Jerusalem to participate in Jewish worship and was now returning home. This man had been able to obtain a precious scroll of the prophet Isaiah in Jerusalem and was now reading it out loud while sitting in his chariot.

“Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go near and overtake this chariot’” (Acts 8:29). It so happened (by God’s design) that the man was reading the chapter in Isaiah (chapter 53) that described the Servant’s sufferings and the reason for them: the Servant was being punished

for the sin of the people. When the eunuch asked Philip to explain this passage to them, **“Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him”** (Acts 8:35). Through this Gospel preaching the Holy Spirit led this eunuch to faith in Christ, to baptism, and to a joyful heart. Surely this official must have shared the Good News of Jesus with the people in his country of Ethiopia. Philip went on and **“preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea”** (Acts 8:40).

Next we read that there were believers in Christ in far-off Damascus in Syria. The Pharisee Saul followed them there to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. But Jesus Himself appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus and convinced him that He was indeed the promised Messiah, the very Son of God. After this, Saul himself testified concerning Christ. **“Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God”** (Acts 9:20). Again, the Lord turned the evil of persecution into the triumph of the Gospel because it is the will of the Lord Jesus to seek and save lost sinners, no matter what evils they may have committed in the past. The believers in Damascus had the privilege of seeing that their worst enemy, Saul, had been changed from a rabid Pharisee into a zealous preacher of the Gospel. The Lord Jesus had great plans for Saul. He would become Paul, the great missionary to the Gentile world, as we shall discuss in later lessons.

At this point in time the book of Acts reports that **“the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied”** (Acts 9:31). Meanwhile the apostle Peter was also making mission trips to the Jewish communities throughout the region. **“Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda”** (Acts 9:32). Other towns mentioned include Sharon and Joppa. The Word of God was going out among the people and doing its work, as it always does. The book of Acts summarizes this activity: **“Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only”** (Acts 11:19).

Up to this point the Christians had confined their Gospel preaching to the Jewish people or those Gentiles who had become thoroughly Judaized. Even though Jesus had told them to go out to all peoples and nations, their Jewish habits and customs were so ingrained in them that they were slow to carry out their Master’s instructions to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to everyone. So the Holy Spirit chose to give the apostle Peter, who was a leader among the Jewish Christians, a very specific command to go to a very specific Gentile home and bring the Gospel of Christ to one specific man and his family, friends, and associates. This man was Cornelius of Caesarea, **“a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always”** (Acts 10:1-2).

Notice that this man was not a Gentile unbeliever, but a Gentile who worshiped the God of the Jews. In other words, he was a Gentile believer in the Messianic promises. Somehow he

had been brought to faith in the coming Messiah through contact with Jewish believers. But he did not know that the Messiah had already arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, nor was he acquainted with everything Jesus had done as the Messiah. Therefore, God sent this man an angel by means of a vision, giving him a specific command: **“Send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do”** (Acts 10:5-6). Cornelius obeyed this order and at once sent three men to Joppa to locate Simon Peter.

The Lord prepared Peter for their visit by putting him into a trance when he was praying on the rooftop. He was hungry and they were preparing a meal downstairs, but while he was waiting, Peter **“saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat’”** (Acts 10:11-13).

We need to understand that God Himself had separated the Jews from the Gentiles in the days of Moses by giving the Jews various laws concerning unclean food that effectively prevented them from eating with Gentiles and sharing their food. Yet the animals in the vision from heaven were the unclean animals that the Jews were forbidden to eat. But now the voice of God was telling Peter to kill these unclean animals and eat them. That is why Peter answered: **“Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean”** (Acts 10:14). God was asking Peter to do something that God Himself had forbidden. How could he obey?

But **“the voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again”** (Acts 10:15-16). Through this vision God was telling Peter that the old food laws were no longer in force. God had wanted His people in Old Testament times to keep themselves separate from the Gentiles until the coming of the Messiah. But now that was no longer the case. Jews could now freely associate with Gentiles. But it took a while for Peter to understand the meaning of this vision because the old Jewish ways were so ingrained in him.

The Holy Spirit made this lesson very clear. Just as Peter was struggling to understand and accept this message, the three men from Cornelius come at the door, asking for Peter. **“The Spirit said to him, ‘Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them’”** (Acts 10:19-20). Peter listened to the Holy Spirit and met the men, and they stayed there that evening. **“On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him”** (Acts 10:23). This was a major event in the history of Christian missions; it is good that there were witnesses with Peter who could testify as to what took place in the home of Cornelius.

After introductions had taken place, Peter explained to Cornelius and the **“many who had come together”** the importance of the vision he had seen on the rooftop. He said: **“You**

know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean” (Acts 10:27-28). After Cornelius explained how God Himself had instructed him to summon Peter from Joppa, Peter began his message: **“In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him”** (Acts 10:34-35). This is a very important statement regarding Christian missions. There is no race or people or tribe that is off-limits for the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel of Christ and the Christian mission allow no racism of any kind.

After announcing the work of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world, Peter offered the benefits of that salvation freely to his Gentile listeners. He said: **“To Him (Christ) all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins”** (Acts 10:43). Through this Gospel message the Holy Spirit created faith in Christ in the hearts of Peter’s Gentile hearers. God saw fit to make this abundantly evident to all in the room, including the six Jewish Christians that Peter had brought along from Joppa. The Jewish Pentecost in Jerusalem was repeated, only this time it was a Gentile Pentecost: **“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision (the Jewish Christians from Joppa) who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God”** (Acts 10:44-46). God would not have poured out His Spirit on unbelievers, so Peter drew the obvious conclusion: **“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we (Jewish Christians) have?” “And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord”** (Acts 10:47-48). This was a very important moment in the history of the Christian Church. It was a very important step in the march of the Gospel of Christ throughout the world.

There were some Jewish Christians who objected strongly to what Peter had done. In their mind such an action was revolutionary; it was contrary to their upbringing and their understanding of God’s ways. But Peter defended his actions, and the six men from Joppa who witnessed what had happened in Caesarea gave their corroborating testimony. After reporting on everything that had happened in the home of Cornelius, Peter concluded: **“If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?”** (Acts 11:17). His objectors were then silent, and the Christians who heard Peter’s account **“glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life”** (Acts 11:18).

A new era in mission work had begun. Almost immediately there was a change in attitude and method with respect to the preaching of the Gospel. We read: **“Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the**

Hellenists (Greeks), **preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number** (of Hellenists) **believed and turned to the Lord”** (Acts 11:19-21).

Antioch became the center of Gentile mission work, just as Jerusalem was the center of mission work among the Jews.

Peter continued to be in the forefront preaching the Gospel among the Jewish people. At this point, however, the book of Acts shifts its attention from the work of Peter to the work of Paul, whom the Lord Jesus had chosen as His special apostle to the Gentiles. The two letters of Peter in the New Testament indicate that Peter continued his work for some time until he was put to death by direction from Emperor Nero, most likely in Rome. In both of his letters Peter addressed Christians scattered in the Roman provinces of **“Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia”** (1 Peter 1:1). He now spoke of the Christian Church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, as God’s **“chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, ... who once were not a people but are now the people of God”** (1 Peter 2:9-10). Peter did not forget what God had taught him through his visit to Caesarea to meet Cornelius, for he wrote: **“The Lord is ... not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9).

When Jewish Christians experienced persecution, they were tempted to abandon Christ and return to their former Judaism without Jesus. At that time the Roman authorities did not persecute Jews unless they were Christian Jews. The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish believers to make them realize that a return to Judaism would be a fatal mistake. In every respect Christianity was the fulfillment of genuine Judaism, for Jesus was far superior to Moses, and Christian worship was far superior to Jewish worship, even as substance is superior to its shadow.

The letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that mission work includes not only the bringing of the Gospel to those who do not know it, but also the teaching and training of those who have been brought to faith in Christ. Converts are always tempted to revert to the kind of life they had before they became Christians, for that life was more free of persecutions and other troubles, as their confession of Christ often brought persecution. One Lutheran missionary, Ernest Wendland, has written: “In times of stress and under pressure from former associates the temptations to revert to the old ways of life are enormous” (*Missiological Perspectives*, E. Wendland, p. 65).

The other books in the New Testament, such as the letters of James, John, and Jude stress the production of the fruits of faith among Christians. In many areas of the world where Christian mission work has been done, the Christianity exhibited by the Christian life has been shallow and superficial, rather than solid and deep. John’s first letter teaches us how we can test ourselves in three ways: truth, righteousness, and love. James, the brother of the Lord, wrote: **“I will show you my faith by my works”** (James 2:18).

Finally, the book of Revelation describes the final victory of Jesus and His people over all the forces of evil arrayed against Him and against us in this world. What a great day it will be when the words of Revelation 7:9-10 will be fulfilled before our very eyes: **“I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with**

palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

Questions

1. How did God use the persecution of Christians to spread the Gospel of Christ?
2. How did God bless the preaching of Philip in Samaria?
3. Why was it important that Peter and John also go to Samaria?
4. What was the eunuch of Ethiopia doing when Philip met him?
5. How did Philip explain the meaning of Isaiah 53?
6. Name the towns and regions that the Gospel of Christ reached first.
7. Why were Jesus' apostles slow to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles?
8. Why was Peter's visit to Cornelius' home significant?
9. What was God teaching Peter through the vision of the unclean animals?
10. How did God show His approval of what happened in Cornelius' home?
11. Why it is important that there were six Jewish Christians present?
12. How did Peter defend his actions in the home of Cornelius?
13. Which city became the center for mission work among the Gentiles?
14. Why was the letter to the Hebrews written?
15. What will heaven reveal about the membership of the Holy Christian Church?