Conversion Stories in the Book of Acts

An Adult Bible Class by Don Hooton

After His death and before He ascended into heaven itself, Jesus Christ gave disciples a charge that is designated commonly as "the great commission." Matthew's gospel contains the admonition to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (28:18-20). Mark's gospel ends: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved" (16:15-16). And Luke's gospel ends, "repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (24:47). And Luke tells Theophilus that he had recorded this "account of the things accomplished among us" (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2) so that he would know the exact truth about Jesus and His way. This series of lessons explores what the Bible shows are real life conversion stories in what was accomplished among the Apostles.

Each Lesson will focus on aspects of the conversions as recorded in Scripture.

1. [3/7] The OverView and Objective
2. [3/14] The Conversion of some Jews on Pentecost (2:1-41)
3. [3/21] The Conversion of more Jews in Jerusalem (3:1-4:31)
4. [3/28] The Conversions of an Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40)
5. [4/4] The Conversion of those Samaritans and Simon the Sorcerer (8:4-25)
   [ ] The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus (9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18)
6. [4/11] The Conversion of Cornelius and his household (10:1-48; 11:1-18)
7. [4/18] The Conversion of some Philippians (16:14-15, 25-34)
8. [4/25] The Conversion of some Thessalonians and Bereans (17:1-4; 10-12) and a Proconsul in Paphos (13:6-12).
9. [5/2] The Conversion of some Athenians (17:16-34)
10. [5/9] The Conversion of some Corinthians (18:1-11)
11. [5/16] The Conversion of some Ephesians (18:24-19:10)
12. [5/23] The Failed Conversions: Felix (Acts 23:10-25) and Agrippa (26:1-29)
13. [5/30] People in Roman (28:16-31) and The Way Ahead (28:30-31)

Conversion Stories in the Book of Acts

Lesson 1 (3/7/2021)

The OverView and Objective

After His death and before He ascended into heaven itself, Jesus Christ gave disciples a charge that is designated commonly as "the great commission." Matthew's gospel contains the admonition to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (28:18-20). Mark's gospel ends: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved" (16:15-16). And Luke's gospel ends, "repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (24:47). And Luke tells Theophilus that he had recorded this "account of the things accomplished among us" (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2) so that he would know the exact truth about Jesus and His way.

This series of lessons explores what the Bible shows are real life conversion stories in what was accomplished among the Apostles. The actual term for "conversion" (Gr. epistrephei) and its more common verb "to turn" (Gr. epistrepho) appears a total of twelve times in the Book of Acts (3.19, 9.35, 40, 11.21, 14.15, 15.3 [noun], 19, 36, 16.18, 26.18, 20, 28.27). Except for three instances (9.40, 15.36, and 16.18), the terms are exclusively used with reference to people turning to God in response to the Gospel. These verses show that people who were converted were repenting and turning (3.19; 14.15; 26.20), "turn[ing] to the Lord" (11.21), were seeking redemption (9.35; 15.3, 19; 26.18; 28.27) and had faith in Christ (26.18). Conversion is, therefore, a process where belief leads you to something God has presented in the message of the gospel. And in these lessons, we will learn what that really is.

Each lesson will also try to understand the people, their backgrounds and the reason the gospel was believed by them. It is true to say that they believed, they repented and they were baptized and this is precisely what was being accomplished among the disciples just as Luke wrote to Theophilus. However, the succeeding lessons will cover not merely what all of them had in common – but rather what made each of them different and compelling. It seems to me that the story Luke tells was intended to make the reader think about these unique aspects.

Still, it is important – even critical – in today's pluralism in "Christianity" to see the consistency in the record that Luke wrote to Theophilus. It was, he said, the "exact truth" (Luke 1:4, NASB) that had been taught "so that you may have certainty" (ESV) or "know the certainty" (NKJV, CSB, NIV, HCSB). So Luke's record of not merely the life of Jesus in the gospel – but his continued work to Theophilus in Acts was to help him know not just what he had been taught but that what he was taught was accurate.

The people were all different. Some were Jews; some were Jewish leaders; Some were followers of John; Some were soldiers; Some were businesswomen; Some were leaders in synagogues and others were pagan worshippers or idols. Yet all of them heard the same message and responded to the gospel with extraordinary consistency.

Further, the book of Acts also shows failures in the efforts of sharing the gospel. There was the failed attempt to convert Felix (Acts 23:10-25) and Agrippa (26:1-29) but as the gospel messages keeps being spoke, people keep believing.

In this lesson we want to trace with the chart on the next page what either was said by proclaimers or what was done by listeners (in Luke's own words) in order for them to be saved by the gospel of Jesus.

Read through each of the Scripture Narratives and check the appropriate box for what either the presenter of the message said *should be done* or what is said *that the listener did* in order to be saved.

	Hear	Repent	Confess	Be Baptized	Significant Beliefs or Backgrounds	Approaches the Teacher Used
conversions						
Jews on Pentecost (2:1-41)						
Jews on Solomon's Porch (3:1-4:4)						
Samaritans (8:4-25)						
Ethiopian (8:26-40)						
Saul of Tarsus (9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18)						
Lydia (16:14-15)						
The Jailor (16:25-34)						
Thessalonians (17:1-4)						
The Bereans (17:10-12)						
ProCounsul Sergius Paulus (13:6-12)						
The Athenians (17:16-34)						
The Corinthians (18:1-11)						
Apollos and the Ephesians (18:24-19:10)						
Jews and Greeks in Rome (28:16-31)						
non-conversions						
Felix (Acts 23:10-25)						
Agrippa (26:1-29)						

Conversion Stories in the Book of Acts
Lesson 2 (3/14/2021)

The Conversion of some Jews on Pentecost (2:1-41)

Ten days after the ascension of Jesus, the twelve apostles were immersed with the Holy Spirit as promised by the Lord (Acts 1.5; John 14.1-31, 15.18-16.24). They spoke in the languages of the Jews visiting Jerusalem for Pentecost and preached the good news of the risen Lord for the first time (2.14-36). The message deeply troubled the Jews in the city (2.37). They responded with a question on how they could be saved from God's wrath for their sins – including the rejection and execution of Jesus. Luke records Peter's response who says clearly to those who now believe who Jesus was indeed: "repent and be baptized" (2:38).

The day called "Pentecost" is named after the Greek word *pentekostos*, which means "fiftieth." On the day after the Sabbath after Passover, Israelites chose a sheaf of the first grain harvested that spring which became an offering, waved it "before the Lord" (Lev 23:11-12). Pentecost was observed in ancient Israel on the 50th day after this (verse 15). Since seven weeks elapsed between the day of the first grain offering and the beginning of Pentecost, this holy day was sometimes called the Feast of Weeks. [Exo 34:22; Lev 23:15; Num 28:26; Deut 16:9-12.] By the time of Jesus, most Jews regarded Pentecost also as an anniversary of the giving of the Mosaic covenant at Mount Sinai (Exo 20–24).

WHO WERE ALL THESE PEOPLE WHO GATHERED IN JERUSALEM? They were **devout** Jewish men from "every nation under heaven" and some proselytes, who were visiting Jerusalem for Pentecost. And on that day 3,000 men obeyed the gospel (2:38). Through this response to the Gospel, they were added to the group of the saved – the church (2.47). This is how they turned to God. Should we expect God to change His mind?

Consider this first group of people in Acts 2:14-38. Read the text and answer the questions below. And as you do, go back to the chart in lesson 1 and fill in the right two columns from what you learn in this lesson.

1. Describe the majority of the audience, beliefs, background, home location, language.

2. What would have been the thing they all shared in common at that moment? In their religion? In what they had experienced the last several weeks?

4. What was unique about the scene they were now witnessing?

5. What was Peter's approach? (Was it subtle, harsh, truthful, sarcastic, condescending, heartfelt?)

6. Did he excuse their behavior? What are other ways he could have "said it"

7. Describe some of the different thoughts that might have been going through the minds of the people who were listening:

8. Did Peter get their attention? If so, how?

9. What was the recorded reaction of many?

10. Who brought up the need for them to do something?

11. What did Peter tell them they should do (2:37-38)? What would be the results (2:38)?

12. From what is recorded in Acts 2, what was the reason for their obedience to the words of Peter?

13.What was the result of their actions (2:47)?

The Conversion of more Jews in Jerusalem (3:1-4:31).

After Pentecost, the Apostles continued to work in Jerusalem and in Acts 3 and 4, it is the story of Peter and John who had been friends in their youth and business partners in fishing (Lk 5:10), sharers in the hope of Israel (Jn 1:41) and who would be the first to run to the empty tomb among the 12 (Jn 20:3). First, we are told that they "were going up to the Temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer." Perhaps they were praying with their fellow Jews, but the result of their presence there was surely to speak the word of Lord to them (Acts 3:12; 4:20) and they will at the end of the narrative, praise and pray to God that they would speak the word "with boldness" (4:31).

The people they spoke to are different than the audience on Pentecost, but still the same ethnically. In chapter three, the audience is people who are described as filled with wonder and amazement at the healing of the lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate of Jerusalem. They are excited to understand how this lame man now walks. And Peter begins his conversation with them at their amazement. He starts where they are. Another two thousand men will be added to the number at Pentecost of three thousand (Acts 4:4). And the Bible says **they believed** the message Peter shared with them – which is a message they heard, not felt.

Who were these people?

1. People who had had interest in prayer. It was customary among Jews to denote the 3rd, 6th and 9th hours for private prayer (compare Dan 6:10; Psa 55:17).
2. People who were deeply religious. Luke reminds us it was the ninth hour which would have been the time of the evening sacrifices (c.f. Exo 29:41; Num 28:3,4) and the Temple would have been full of people (Reese, 152).
3. The healed man was a beggar. Such poverty was commonplace (Lk 16:20; Mk 10:46; Le 18:35; Jn 9:1-8).

What did Peter do? He looked at him and he saved him from his physical infirmity to introduce him to his spiritual healing in Christ. The man thanked God for the healing – and it's natural to presume became a follower of the Christ in whose name he was healed. And then to the people, Peter "answered them" – he responds to questions he sees in their expressions. And he preached that the miracle was God's work to glorify Jesus. And in stubborn ignorance, the Israelite nation rejected Him. But Jesus fulfilled the promise made to Moses and God has sent Him to bring times of refreshing if they would repent and turn from their wicked ways and be saved by the Gospel.

But the arrest of Peter and John, orchestrated by Jewish leaders, gave them another group of Jews to speak to – but different than the ones in chapter three. The Jewish leaders in chapter four had been accusing Peter and John and will ultimately command them to not speak or teach in the name of Jesus (4:18). With John, Peter defies their demands and says they will keep on teaching. And they return to their fellow Christians and together they rejoice.

QUESTIONS:

1. What was similar in this to his lesson on Pentecost? (3:11-26)

2. What was different from Pentecost?

3. What is different about the two groups of people Peter and John speak to in chapters 3 and 4?

4. What was it that caused "many of those" to believe (4:4)?

5. For the people, was this conversion experience because of a miracle or because of words? How does that affect the way you think about evangelism today?

6. Describe the "two thousand more" who would have been converted. What was their background? What can we presume about their beliefs?

7. When Peter and John had just been admonished to "not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:17-18), what was their answer (4:19-20)?

8. When they gathered again together, how does Luke describe them (4:23,31).

9. In both of these attempts to teach the message of Jesus, was one weak and one strong? Why would some believe – and others reject? Why would they not want to follow along in the steps the Apostles were living?

10. Can the religiously sincere be converted?

Conversion Stories in the Book of Acts

Lesson 4 (4/4/2021)

The Conversion of those Samaritans and Simon the Sorcerer

(8:4-25)

During the ministry of Jesus there was contact with a group of people known as the Samaritans and continued in the expansion of the gospel in Acts. Their history, which is hardly present in records outside of Scripture is succinctly related by John: "Jews do not associate with Samaritans" (4:9). When Assyria captured Israel with some 27,290 of Israel's population were deported (these figures are taken from Sargon's record of the conquest), the city Samaria was in the tribal land of Manasseh (721 B.C.). In 2Kings 17:24, the first inspired record of their history is when Assyria, after the conquest, brought foreigners to colonize and to overtake the landscape. The scribe called them Samaritans, the only usage in the OT (17:29). Ultimately, they intermarried with those Israelites who remained in the land. Some remained Jews still, evidenced after the Assyrian conquest of Samaria, when men from Manasseh as well as Zebulun, and Asher went to King Hezekiah's great Passover in Jerusalem (2Chr 30:10, 11). Even as late Josiah, Manasseh and Ephraim contributed to the repairs on the Jerusalem Temple (34:9). Even during the post-exilic events and rebuilding of the temple with Zerubbabel and Ezra, nothing was ever said regarding Samaritans blockading the work. The objection was raised by foreigners working together as a political block against Jerusalem. Yet, by the intertestamental period, Samaritans were rejected by Jews. Ecclesiasticus 50:25, 26 speaks of them as "no nation" and as "the foolish people that dwell in Shechem." The Testament of Levi also calls Shechem "a city of fools." The Jews' major theological indictment against the Samaritans was their insistence upon Mt. Gerizim as the true place of worship instead of Jerusalem. It grew to a clear hatred as shown in John 8:48 when Jews called Jesus a Samaritan. Still, Jesus was rejected at different villages of the Samaritans (Luke 9:52, 53) yet still some were illustrated as "Good" (Lk 10:29-37) and shown to be grateful for healing (17:11-19). At His Ascension Jesus commanded that world evangelism begin at Jerusalem, then reach out into Judea*, then to Samaria,* and finally to the uttermost parts of the earth. Not only is it distinguishable from Judea there, they were clearly a mission of the gospel.

To fulfill that mission, the Apostles sent an evangelist named Philip. He is first mentioned in Acts 6 as one of the deacons, a Jew with Greek backgrounds, appointed to superintend the daily distribution of food to remove all suspicion of partiality. He is the precursor to Paul's work among the Gentiles. The scene which brings Philip and Simon the sorcerer together (8:9-13) occurs when the magician has to acknowledge a power over nature greater than his own. Later, he will baptize a Eunuch of Ethiopia (8:26). At the end of the chapter, Luke said Philip continued to preach at Azotus (Ashdod) and among other cities that formerly belonged to Philistines, and came down to Caesarea. The last glimpse of him in the New Testament is in his house when Paul and his companions turn to him for shelter with his four daughters, who possess the gift of prophetic utterance (21:8-9).

In Acts, Luke introduces one specific man, Simon, who "amazed all the people of Samaria" (8:9), but the account does not identify him as a Samaritan himself. Justin Martyr suggested that Simon was a Samaritan from the city of Gitta. The Jew called Simon who "pretended to be a magician" is referred to by the historian Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews, book 20, chapter 7), but most think he is a different historical figure, born in Cyprus. But Simon is a sorcerer. Sorcery, strongly condemned by God (Deut 18:9–13), was common in the ancient world, and, while some acts and demonstrations were no more than illusions of the mind, others were empowered by Satan in an attempt to discredit the power of God (Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9). It appears Simon was the latter, as Luke states that he had amazed the Samaritans "for a long time with his sorcery" (Acts 8:11), some even declaring that he was "the great Power of God" (Acts 8:10), a messianic title. Interestingly, however, Simon's empowerment by Satan did not include loyalty. In the wake of hearing and seeing the disciple Philip "as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12), Simon "*also* believed" and was baptized (8:12) just like the other Samaritans but he "followed Philip everywhere" (Acts 8:13).

The Bible says that "the Holy Spirit had not yet come" upon the Samaritans (Acts 8:16). Later, the apostles Peter and John arrived, at which time the Spirit came upon the believers. Simon witnessed this event and "offered them money and said, 'Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 8:19–20). At this point, Peter strongly reprimands Simon for his greed and states that he needs to "repent of

this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart" (Acts 8:22). Fearful of the apostle's words, Simon pleads with Peter to pray to the Lord on his behalf.

Some say Simon was never saved. Yet, Peter reacts not to Simon's sin of deception but of avarice from jealousy for the apostolic power (20). When Peter says, "You have neither part nor portion in this" (21), the most obvious matter is not illegitimate salvation but Simon's *illegitimate* privilege to the power they had. Then Peter says that Simon's heart is not right with God (21) which would be an odd way to describe an unbeliever. He then tells Simon to repent "of your wickedness" and find God's forgiveness (22), again, an odd way to address an unbeliever. Peter says that he has been "poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity" to which all Christians are warned they can succumb (Eph 4:32; Heb 12:15). We will never hear of Simon the Sorcerer. Some consider that *he was repentant* and continued to be faithful. However, Justin Martyr and other Christian apologists like Irenaeus insist he was an antichrist and continued his sorcery. **His legacy, however, is his greed** in even our modern word simony, "using religion as a means of profit."

Questions (Refer to the chart on page 3 and complete):

1. To what ends would Samaritans have to go to hear the gospel and believe? What prejudices would they have to abandon?

2. What are "modern" Samaritans to you?

3. What does the record say that they did when hearing the preaching of Philip?

4. What does the occupation of a sorcerer at least imply about Simon?

5. Does Luke say the actions of Simon to be saved were the same or different from the Samaritans? Explain:

6. Where was Simon when he askd to purchase the power of the apostles? Do we know why he followed the apostles? List some possible reasons:

7. Why was Simon told he could not purchase the power?

8. Are there Simon's today who obey then fall away? List some reasons (Matthew 13:1-23).

Conversion Stories in the Book of Acts

Lesson 6 (4/11/2021)

The Conversion of Cornelius and his household (10:1-48; 11:1-18)

We intentionally skipped the Conversion of Saul of Tarsus because his conversion was the complete study of Seeing The Light in our last quarter. In this lesson, we study an equally significant character who was converted to Jesus Christ, the man Cornelius. In fact, one would have never imagined that a man like him would beling to the early church, even the followers in that early church. He was more than just a foreigner, an outsider. He was a foreign soldier, sworn to obediently advance the interests of the Roman Empire who had occupied Israel. But God used Cornelius to show those followers of Jesus, and us, what it means that the good news is for everyone. He is a bit of a mystery as a man since he appears in chapter 10 and then disappeared; But, it would stand to reason that his conversion was real and his life afterward was to serve the Lord all of his days.

Cornelius is “a certain man at Caesarea, a centurion of what called the Italian Cohort ” (10:1). In ancient Rome the "centurion" meant "captain of 100" which in this case, he was captain over 100 foot-soldiers (a century) within a legion. Typically, they were loyal and courageous and worked their way up the ranks, noticed by generals in battle and then made officers. In Rome’s Army, there were: 1) The Praetorian Guard (Caesar's bodyguard), 2) The Legionaries (infantry soldiers and officers made up of citizens), and 3) The Auxiliaries (non-citizen troops). Centurions were Legionaries and the Army’s backbone. They wore a special helmet, a more ornate harness of much better quality and a short vine-wood staff as a symbol of rank. They were paid over 15-20x as much as ordinary soldiers (about 5000 denarii per year). There were some 60 centuries in a legion each under the command of a centurion. During the time of Augustus there were 28 legions. Also, there five *senior* centurions in a legion who received 10,000 denarii per year, and the *chief* centurion (the first javelin) received 20,000 denarii in pay annually. Hence, we understand how this man could be generous. In that time, Caesarea was the headquarters of the Roman army in Judea which is, of course, where Peter went.

Fausset said that centurions’ “truthful straightforwardness would make them open to conviction. For instance, the one whose faith Jesus so commends in Matthew 8; Cornelius, whom Peter was by vision sent to, and who is described as "devout, fearing God with all his house, giving much alms to the people, and praying to God always" (Acts 10); Julius, the centurion of Augustus' band, who entreated Paul courteously and saved his life when threatened by the soldiers (Acts 27:1; Acts 27:3-42; Acts 27:43).” Even the Emperor Vespasian's (69-79 AD or CE) father and grandfather had also served as centurions. Still, according to www.ancient.eu, “centurions were responsible for training legionaries, assigning duties, and maintaining discipline amongst the ranks. They themselves were expected to display valour in battle and stand resolute when things were not going so well, and if they did not, they could face execution. Accordingly, most centurions commanded respect from the troops in their charge through leading by example. Centurions were, though, also noted for their sometimes, brutal physical discipline. When in camp they supervised the building of the camp fortifications, the digging of trenches, roll calls, and the issuing of passwords to enter camp. They could also be responsible for escorting prisoners, erecting dedicatory monuments, and involved in logistics such as procuring a supply of provisions when on campaign.”

The Italian Cohort to which he belonged little is known. Extrabiblical evidence exists for the presence in Caesarea of a unit called *Cohors II Italica* after A.D. 69, too late for the events recorded in Acts 10. However, archaeologist William Ramsay (1851-1939) claimed the presence of such a unit in Syria in 69, which he maintains heightens the probability of one in Caesarea in 41-44. Perhaps the Cohors II actually was in Caesarea prior to A.D. 69. Or perhaps the Italian Cohort to which Cornelius belonged was a different unit.

But look at Luke describes him: “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and made many charitable contributions to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually” (10:2). Even before his conversion to Christ, he is believer in God and a non-Jewish man committed to helping others, even Jews, and he was a man of prayer. His moral character, noble influence, even among Jews (10:22), is clear. He was a worshipper of the one,

true God. His life was characterized by piety. Aside from this, we can read in the Acts 10 narrative what kind of man he was:

1. He was a non-Jew who spoke of one "God," not gods (10:4,33). Gentiles were typically polytheists (cf. 1Cor. 8:5-6). Even before he heard the gospel, Cornelius already had turned from idols to reverence a living God (Acts 14:15; 1Thes 1:9).
2. He expected truth, an objective revelation, from Peter. He expected to "hear" the things, i.e., "words," (11:14) to be spoken by Peter. Even with the angelic message to send for Peter, he was seeking the message to which the angel referred that would teach him regarding salvation (11:14). He did not follow his heart; he listened to truth and conceded the authority of Peter, an apostle, as a spokesman for deity.
3. He recognized that not only could he not selectively obey the Lord, he conceded the authority of Peter, an apostle, as a spokesman for deity who would tell him "all things" the Lord had commanded.

While Cornelius was a God-fearer (not a convert as a Jew), he would have to submit to a subordinate. When the angel replied in his dream, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God," the angel sent him to Peter in Joppa. The messenger would not matter in terms of the gospel – but in the world of Rome in which he had been raised – that would be an obstacle.

Further, as we know, it would be an obstacle for Peter (and other believing Jews) that a gentile would be granted access to the blessing of Messiah. God would send a vision of unclean animals three times that would bring Peter to the conclusion that God would call no man unclean – anymore (10:15). It would astound and shock Jewish Christians. Anticipating that, God would send the Spirit to Cornelius and his household "just as He did on [the Apostles] in the beginning" (11:15) and Peter connected the revelation of that unique outpouring to the message of that Jesus would immerse them with the Spirit (11:16). It is my belief that this was a miraculous event for those who witnessed it – just as it was in Pentecost. It was not a sign to the Apostles that they could speak – it was a sign to the audience on Pentecost that they should listen (2:12). And in Acts 10, it is not a sign to Cornelius and his family, it was a sign to the "circumcised believers" who were there so Peter could say to them, "surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized" and to those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who questioned Peter's action and Peter said, "Who was I to stand in God's way?" The baptism of the Holy Spirit was a revelation of God's message: The Gospel is Here for you to accept – to the Jew first and then also to the Greek.

Questions

1. Why was the conversion of Cornelius and his family significant (10:9-16; 30-33)?

2. What was Cornelius' religious background (10:22)?

3. After gathering family and friends together (10:24), what did Cornelius want (10:33)?

4. What did Peter teach them (10:38-43)?

5. What did God do during the lesson (10:44)?

6. What did Peter command them to do (10:47-48)?

7. Have you ever spoken to someone like Cornelius?

The Conversion of some Philippians (16:14-15, 25-34).

After leaving Galatia, Paul had plans to continue east into the cites of Asia, but the text says the Holy Spirit "did not permit them". So it seems they went to plan B and headed north to Mysia, with the intention of taking the gospel to Bithynia. But again the Spirit "did not permit them." Then, Paul received a vision in Troas of a man from Macedonia asking them to "come and help us". Leaving a territory that had been productive and well populated with Jewish synagogues, they headed to leading city of Macedonia, Philippi, which opens up the continent of Europe to the gospel. While Cornelius was the first Gentile, he worshiped and prayed to God and was friendly with Jews. The Gentiles in Asia Minor and now Europe, will not be the same.

The city of Philippi was named after King Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. It was a prosperous Roman colony, which meant that the citizens of Philippi were also citizens of the city of Rome itself. They prided themselves on being Romans (see Ac 16:21), dressed like Romans and often spoke Latin. No doubt this was the background for Paul's reference to the believer's heavenly citizenship (Phil 3:20–21).

Philippi also rested on a major east-west highway (called the Via Egnatia), which crossed northern Greece. In 42 BC, Octavian and Mark Antony defeated Brutus and Cassius (Julius Caesar's assassins) in Philippi. Fee notes, "Octavian honored Philippi by 'refounding' it as a Roman military colony, thus endowing its populace with Roman citizenship… Octavian populated the town and its surrounding agricultural area with discharged veterans from the war" (Fee, Gordon. Philippians (11). Downers Grove, IL: IVP. 1999. 30).

So when Paul and his evangelism team (Silas, 15:40; Timothy, 16:3, and Luke, "we" in 16:10) arrive in the city, Luke says that they spent a few days until the Sabbath day (16:13) when they went to the river where they had apparently learned Jewish believers would have come to pray. The first converts are Jewish (we presume since they were at the riverside to pray on Sabbath).

Then, on another occasion as they were "going to a place of prayer" (16:16). Evidently, Paul and company made daily visits to this place of prayer which caught the attention of a demoniac girl. As she was following them, she endorsed their message "for many days" (18). Yet Paul was annoyed, like by the demon. So, he cast out the unclean spirit from her and as a result, Paul and Silas encountered a new type of persecution. Previous opposition came from the jealousy and hatred of the Jewish leaders. They followed them around in their first journey, stirring up the crowds against them for religious reasons. At Antioch, when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul (Acts 13:41). At Iconium the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds (Acts 14:2). But the issue at Philippi was economic. The gospel preaching of the apostle conflicted with the ability of the girl's handlers to make money. And it landed them in prison – and gave them opportunity to preach to a Gentile jailor.

Many Bible scholars believe that the Jailor was a retired veteran Roman soldier. As a major city that had been chartered as a Roman Colonial City, Old soldiers sought retirement in these cities. The position of Jailer was most suitable for a veteran, and a fit soldier would have been the likely choice of the Roman officials. I suspect that this was not an elected position, but an appointed one. Who would have been better suited for the job than a man who had commanded in combat and proved his ability with men and the sword in the face of Rome's enemies, and lived to tell of it?

They were beaten and fastened with feet in the stocks. After such a bad beating, the discomfort of the feet in stocks in the inner prison would have hardly emitted a condition for joy. "These stocks had more than two holes for legs, which could thus be forced apart in a such a way as to cause the utmost discomfort and cramping pain." (FF Bruce). But to Paul and Silas, as Tertullian said, "The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven."

The jailer's reaction after the earthquake when he tried to kill himself had good reason behind it. Guards who allowed their prisoners to escape had to bear the penalty of their escaped prisoners. But as we know, Paul and Silas manifested grace and compassion for him, stopped him and taught the gospel to him. And he brought

together his household to hear. And in the same of hour of the night, the jailer took them and washed their wounds and was baptized – along with his whole family.

Questions:

1. What does the expression "who met there" likely suggest about the women (16:13)?

2. From Acts 16:14-15, "A certain woman named _____ ….; a _____ of God; She _____ to the things _____ by Paul. Her and her household were _____ . What does this tell us about her and about how the gospel converts people?

3. Why were Paul and Silas in Jail? (16-24)

4. What were they doing at midnight? (29) How did this become the "right place at the right time to the right people"? Is it out of place for two friends to offer a prayer at a meal in a public restaurant?

5. What caused the Jailer to be frightened and want to kill himself?

6. When told they were all there, what did he want know? (30)

7. What did they tell him? (31). Was he saved yet? What was missing for him and his family? (32)

8. What happened the same hour of the night? (33)

9. What evidence do we have that they were sincerely converted? (34)

The Conversion of a Proconsul in Paphos (13:6-12) and some Thessalonians and Bereans (17:1-4; 10-12).

In the first journey at the island of Cypress, Barnabas and Saul cross the island (about 150 miles) and stop at every synagogue where they preached the Word of God. The Apostles preached to Jews first but also when they came in contact with Gentile proselytes and God-fearers (Acts 13:46; 17:2; 18:4, 19; 19:8). In this trip, Barnabas and Saul met Bar-Jesus (or Elymas, by translation), a Jewish false prophet, who was in the company of proconsul Sergius Paulus. This proconsul, Luke says, was an "intelligent man" (17:7). This does not refer to I.Q. but instead, that he had a ready, inquiring mind that was interested and knowledgeable, especially about religions. While not called a proselyte, he is interested in the *Jewish* religion, evidenced by the company he had with the Jew Elymas.

Elymas will reject the teaching of Paul and is in no way a believer. Many orthodox Jews opposed both Jesus and His disciples too because they saw Him as a false Christ and heretic (cf. Acts 13:44-52; 17:13; 22:21-23). But Elymas was certainly a "non-orthodox" Jew, who, like many others scattered in the Roman Empire, opposed the church from outside forces while others aimed to distort from within (c.f. 1Tim 1:3-11; Titus 1:10-16 - in both references the error is "Jewish" and the subject is the "Law"). Sergius is attracted to Elymas' Judaism and his powers. When Barnabas and Saul appear, the proconsul saw an opportunity to learn more of the Jewish faith from them and invited them to share. Elymas saw this as a threat to his position and aggressively opposed them. Finally, it was too much for Saul, who, filled with the Spirit, strongly rebuked Elymas, exposed him as a fraud, and demonstrated the power of God and of the gospel by blinding this "magician."

Just as Paul was blinded in his own misguided pursuits, though temporary, we can only hope Elymas would believe but the story is about the Proconsul, who did (17:12); And Luke said it was the "teaching" that influenced his belief, a "belief" which is the same Greek word used throughout the NT for faith. In this story, one man's eyes were closed (literally); one man's eyes were opened (metaphorically) but *the teaching was the same*. This is the mystery of belief and unbelief when different people are confronted with the same truth (cf. John 9).

In Acts 17, the evangelistic efforts of Paul, Silas and Timothy are now in Thessalonica (17:1-10a), Berea (17:10b-15), and Athens (17:16-34). We'll look at the first two cities which are strongly Jewish, while the focus in the last city is Gentile. Luke says that Paul was *speaking in the synagogue*, and it led to belief in some, and strong opposition in others. But why is he still in synagogues? 1) That was his Divine calling (c.f. Acts 9:15, 26:19-20). 2) Nearly every synagogue still had Gentile "God-seekers" or "proselytes" of one kind or another (Acts 17:4). 3) Like the twelve apostles, Paul followed the pattern set by the Lord (Acts 1:8). Paul even captured the principle, "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

The preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica was "according to his custom" (17:2), a custom that found cities with synagogues where he would teach on the Sabbath when he was granted

the opportunity. He preached: (1) The Old Testament prophets spoke of Messiah. (2) This Messiah must be rejected by His people, Israel, and be put to death for the sins of men. (3) This crucified Christ must, according to the Old Testament prophets, be raised from the dead. (4) Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, having fulfilled all of these prophecies. (5) Everyone must choose to accept Jesus as their Messiah, or to reject Him.

As always, the response was mixed (17:4). Some who heard (Jews, 17:4) believed, joining Paul and Silas plus an even greater number of Gentiles, including a number of leading women. But there were many who not only rejected Paul's message, but disliked it—*and him*. Luke says it was jealousy. Like Jonah, people of Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff.), and later Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 22:21-22), they were mad that a "salvation of the Jews" was being offered to Gentiles. It was not truth that maddened them; it was the threat to their position and power. In Thessalonica, they tried to "overpower" Paul and the others by manipulating the crowds and setting the city into an uproar. The mob stormed the house of Jason (17:5) who was a believer, and, finding only him, they drug him out before city authorities and charged him. To ensure that no further violence would occur, a pledge or bond was secured from him, and Paul and Silas left by night for Berea. Still, these same Jews will pursue him and the Berean church will also send Paul to the coast (17:14).

While Thessalonica would have been a busy metropolis, Berea was a small, "sleepy town," an out of the way place. But the contrast Luke draws is that they were more "noble-minded" than Thessalonica. It is important to note that this trait is observed *before* the Berean Jews believe. These noble-minded *loved the Word of God* and sought truth in it. When Paul came, speaking to them from the Scriptures, **they eagerly listened**. This shows that Scriptures speak clearly and sufficiently about the Messiah and that it can be understood (Eph 3:1-4). Also, these noble Bereans handled those with whom they differed *very differently* than Thessalonica. They listened and reasoned instead of resorting to political manipulation and mob violence.

Questions:

1. What did the proconsul want from Barnabas and Saul? (13:7)

2. What was Elymas trying to do? (Vs 8) Are there any people like this today?

3. What will be the fate of those today who try to prevent people from hearing the word?

4. In Thessalonica, what was Paul's basic message? (17:3)

5. What was Luke's praise of the Bereans? (17:11)

6. Why does it say that some were "baptized," and also say that some "believed?"

The Conversion of some Athenians (17:16-34).

Luke tells us in Acts 17 that a group of philosophers began to argue with Paul. They took him to the Areopagus (Mars Hill), where some of their leaders asked Paul to explain his beliefs.

Here we have a chance to see the rhetorical and oratorical skills Paul had learned as a young man in Tarsus even though the immediate results of his work seem small (17:34).
All appearances are that Paul had no plan to evangelize Athens, at least not until he was joined by his companions and colleagues. He had been "escorted" to Athens by some of the saints from Berea, for his own protection. Paul gave instructions to Silas and Timothy through those from Berea who had escorted him to Athens that they were to rejoin him as soon as possible. And so it seems that Paul had some "time to kill" in Athens. He probably felt that his time in that city would have been too short to begin supporting himself by tent-making. As much as anything, Paul was a tourist, going about this city, soaking up its history and culture, and visiting its many magnificent sights and attractions.

Of all the things Paul saw, one seemed to make the greatest impression on him. It was not that this city was beautiful, or one of the great cultural and intellectual centers of the world. It was not that great men, like Plato and Aristotle once walked these streets and taught there. It was that this great city was filled with heathen idols.397 Like Lot in ancient times, Paul's "righteous soul was vexed" (compare 2 Peter 2:7) by what he saw about him in this heathen city.

What is extraordinary about this sermon is the approach Paul makes with the message of the gospel. And I'd suggest it is about the people. While it should not be overlooked that Paul began with affirming, rather than criticizing: "I see that you are very religious." Paul's positive way of setting up the "case" for Christ should model for us how to approach those whose beliefs are wrong – even pagan – when we are trying to win souls. He found a point of connection between their faith and his own; He said that he had seen an altar "to an unknown God" in which he saw an opportunity to connect the God he proclaimed to a god they already admitted might exist. And he affirmed something central to Judaism and Christianity: God is the maker of all things and, as such, does not live in temples made by human hands; and as such, he said that the entire human race derives its existence from God who "gives life, breath, and everything else" to us. Then Paul said, "God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any." In other words, the unknown God actually hopes to be found while pagan gods might live on Mount Olympus, the God proclaimed by Paul was very near.

Paul then offered two quotations from the Greek poets: "In God we live, move, and exist" and "As some of your own poets said, 'We are his offspring.'" The first quotation may have come from the Greek poet Epimenides, who died in the sixth century BC, and the second quotation from the Greek poet Aratus, who died in 240 BC. Once more Paul was making the case for his faith by anchoring its truths in things the Athenian philosophers already accepted and believed. Only then, it appears, did Paul move to a gentle critique of the Athenians' worship of deities made of gold, silver, and stone. Worshiping such gods in the past was a mistake they made that Paul said God would overlook, an attribute of God's patience and mercy. The quotations from Aratus and Epimenides originally referred to Zeus, yet Paul adapted Greek references that were originally written of Zeus and applied them to Yahweh. Paul was not saying that Zeus was the same as God, only that Paul's God was the superior God of all.

And when the coming of Christ is mentioned, Paul says that God calls the human race to repent (17:30) [Gr., metanoia] which literally means "to think differently afterward," that is, to change one's mind

resulting in a change of heart and behavior. Most listeners sneered at Paul's words, but a few became believers, including a member of the Areopagus and a woman named Damaris. In Athens there is a street named in honor of Damaris. Tradition holds that she was martyred for her faith.

Because of the small response, some have said that this address, while true to God, was not a method Paul used again. Instead, at Corinth, Paul 'determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2) in that culturally sophisticated city of Corinth. Hence, some conclude that Acts 17 provides no paradigm today for Christian apologetics which are an essential prerequisite to evangelism. However, such assumes that the Apostles approached everyone the same. Except, not everyone is the same.

Who were the Athenians and what happened on the Aeropogus? In short, the story begins sometime in the sixth century before Christ, with the city of Athens was being devastated and decimated by a mysterious plague. When no explanation for the plague could be found, and no cure was in sight, the approach was to assume that one of the city's many gods had been offended. The leaders of the city sought to determine which of the gods it was and then determine a way of appeasing that god. This was no easy task, since the city of Athens had literally hundreds of gods, which Richardson refers to as the "god capital of the world," a place so full of gods that the Athenians "must have needed something equivalent to the Yellow Pages just to keep tabs on the many deities already represented in their city" (Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, p.20).

When all efforts failed to discern which god had been offended, and which had brought the plague upon the city, an outside "consultant" was brought in from the Island of Cyprus, whose name was Epimenides. Epimenides concluded that it was none of the known gods of Athens which had been offended, but some, as yet, unknown god. He proposed a course of action which, if it worked, would at least provide a possible remedy for the plague. He had a flock of choice sheep, of various colors, kept from food until they were hungry. On the given day, he had these sheep turned loose on Mars Hill, on what was a very succulent pasture. For any sheep not to have eaten his fill would have been unexplainable. He had the sheep turned loose and watched carefully, to see if any sheep would lie down and not eat, even though hungry and in prime grazing. Several sheep, to the amazement of those watching, did lie down. Altars were erected at each spot where a sheep lay down, dedicated to an "unknown god." On those altars, the sheep which lay in that spot was sacrificed. Almost immediately, we are told, the plague began to subside.

Over a period of time, the altars were forgotten, and began to deteriorate. One altar, it seems, was restored and preserved, in commemoration of the removal of the plague by calling upon the "unknown god." Who would have thought that centuries later, a foreigner named Paul would refer to this altar as the starting point for his sermon on Mars Hill? And who would have known that it may have been this very poet, Epimenides, whom Paul would later quote in his sermon?

The strategies Paul adopted in Acts 17 provide the paradigm for contemporary Christian interactions with the minds of non-Christians. Connecting with the hearers, correcting their misconceptions, conversing with their theological or ideological framework, and convicting them of their compromises with their own consciences. It is also necessary to confront them with their need of repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because of the coming day of judgment. These are all essential features of an apologetic that is distinctly Christian and biblical.

No questions.

Conversion Stories in the Book of Acts
Lesson 10 (5/9/2021)

The Conversion of some Corinthians (18:1-11).

In Acts 18:1-17, Paul comes to Corinth for the first time. In spite of the invitation of some Gentiles in Athens to stay longer (Acts 17:32), Paul seemed satisfied that his work in Athens was done, and that it was time to move on. Corinth was his next stop, about forty miles west of Athens.

Luke shows the early ministry of Paul in Corinth, living and working with Aquila and Priscilla, and ministering on the Sabbath at the synagogue (1-4); Then, after working to sustain him with the trade of tentmaking (c.f. Acts 20:32-35), financial support from other churches arrived (Phil 4:15-16), Paul devotes all his time to preaching which leads to a tense situation (5-11) that leads Paul to demonstratively show his ministry refocuses on Gentiles (6). Then, Luke reminds the reader of Gallio (12-17) whose reticence to listen to the Jews' charge against Paul makes a landmark decision that created a precedent that provided protection for Paul's promotion of the gospel.

Making connection, Paul "found" (18:2) Aquila and Priscilla because *he was looking* - either because they were Jews, as they were both in a new city, or because they were Christians. Like Paul, they were tentmakers by trade and just arrived in Corinth. But they had come from Rome, from which city the Emperor Claudius had recently expelled the Jewish community. The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because they were rioting on account of someone named Chrestus -- presumably referring to disputes between Christian and non-Christian Jews. It is not clear whether Aquila and Priscilla were already Christians before meeting Paul or were converted by his preaching. Yet, the three would prove to become steadfast friends, traveling companions, and ministry coworkers.

Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned by name six times in the New Testament, always together as a couple (Acts 18:2-3, Acts 18-19, Acts 26; Rom 16:3-5; 1Cor 16:19; 2Tim 4:19). They were leading members among different churches and were held in high esteem, especially by Paul. Paul calls them his "coworkers" in preaching the gospel, praises their willingness to risk their necks to help him (Rom 16:3-4), and twice notes that churches meet in their homes (Rom 16:5; 1Cor 16:19).

During his stay, God shows a vision to Paul. The first he received on the road to Damascus (26:19); the second was the man from Macedonia (16:9); and this the third recorded one is God's message to not be afraid (8-9). Based on what Paul's later writes to Corinth (1Cor 2:1-3; 2Cro 1:8-11), his fear for his life and safety was no phobia, it was a fear based upon hard facts and upon much previous danger, including numerous attempts on his life (Acts 9:23-24, 29; 14:5; 14:19; 17:1-9; 17:13).

And in Corinth, the Jews did nothing new. They merely used the time-proven method other Jews had used against Paul before— accusing Paul of anti-Roman activity. If the Jews could succeed in convincing Gallio that Paul was a revolutionary, and that his religion was distinct from Judaism, even opposed to it, they would have been able to silence him but it would not succeed: first, God said He would protect him. Second, Gallio was too well aware of what the Jews were like, and that they were the real trouble-makers, not Paul. And third, Gallio did not like the Jews, and not only did he care less about their welfare, he may have found some satisfaction in refusing to give in to their demands.

So Paul turned to these Gentiles in Corinth. What were they like? Because of its location on the four mile wide isthmus separating the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea, Corinth became an important

transit point for trade between Europe and Asia which brought great wealth to the city in commerce. In addition to their wealth, Corinthians worshiped Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure and procreation. The worship of Aphrodite is believed to have started around the 8th century B.C. and fully developed by the time of classical Greece (510 B.C. – 323 B.C.) with the temple of Aphrodite atop the Acrocorinthus, the mountain overlooking Corinth. Strabo writes what the culture was reputedly like:

> And the temple of Aphrodite was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple slaves, courtesans, whom both men and women had dedicated to the goddess. And therefore it was also on account of these women that the city was crowded with people and grew rich; for instance, the ship captains freely squandered their money, and hence the proverb, "Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth." Moreover, it is recorded that a certain courtesan said to the woman who reproached her with the charge that she did not like to work or touch wool: "Yet, such as I am, in this short time I have taken down three pieces."

Another important aspect to Corinth culture was the Isthmus Games which it began to host around 580 B.C. This huge international athletic festival, second only to the Olympics and dedicated to the Greek god Poseidon, took place every two years. After a fire that torched the city in 146 B.C., these games continued in nearby cities until 44 B.C. when Julius Caesar colonized the desolated city and rebuilt it as a Roman city. By 27 B.C., became the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. By the time the apostle Paul arrives, Corinth had the largest population in Greece with Greeks, Jews and Romans. While the majority of Corinth was Greek, the Latin names mentioned in Paul's letter attest to its Roman influence. For example, Jews had Roman names: Aquila (1 Cor 16:19) and Crispus (1 Cor 1:14). Gaius (1 Cor 1:14) and Fortunatus (1 Cor 16:17) appear to be Roman. Only Achaicus (1 Cor 16:17) is a Greek name.

Corinth was, historically, an especially licentious. One of the Greek verbs for fornicate was *korinthiazomai*, a word derived from the city's name. And the oft heard, "to live as a Corinthian," was the byword of the city's promiscuity. It certainly matches some of what Paul saw the church engage (c.f. 1Cor 5:6-13). Herodotus, writing about the 5th century culture *around Aphrodite* in Cyprus, said, "The foulest Babylonian custom is that which compels every woman of the land to sit in the temple of Aphrodite and have intercourse with some stranger at least once in her life." Strabo would write that in *Greek* Corinth before 146 B.C., there were "1,000 sacred prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite." Whether or not there actually was the same cultic prostitution in Paul's *Roman* Corinth or not (and most now doubt it), there still was a large collection of prostitutes who "were regularly regarded as devotees of Aphrodite in Greek literature" (Baugh, JETS, 42.3, 1999: 443-460).

But that is what Corinth was when Paul preached to them. **Wealthy. Worldly. And Licentious.** These people needed the message of the Cross Paul brought to them. One believer was Titius (Titus) Justice, a worshiper of God (18:7). He was likely a Gentile who had been brought under the influence of the Jewish synagogue as a proselyte. Titus offered him the use of his house (which was practically next door to the synagogue) as a meeting-place. Some have connected him to Titus (the evangelist) or perhaps more likely, the Gaius who was an early convert in Corinth (1Cors 1:14); Paul refers to him in Romans 16:23 as 'my host and of the whole church.' Then there was Crispus, the leader of synagogue who became a Christian – along with other Corinthians who like him believed and were baptized. Later, likely because Crispus had become a Christian, Sosthenes was elected chief ruler of the synagogue. And it is possible as well that he too became a Christian (1Cor. 1:1).