

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 5

Monday, March 30th

Mark 11:12-26

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

19 When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

22 "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. 23 "Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will happen, it will be done for you. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25-26 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Points of interest:

- 'as they were leaving Bethany'—Bethany was a suburb of Jerusalem. Jesus has come to Jerusalem for the Passover holiday, and he's staying with friends in Bethany.
- 'those who were buying and selling there'—the outer courts of the temple had become something of a bazaar. One of the major things that happened at the temple was the sacrifice of animals, as a form of gratitude to God for provision or for answered prayer. To facilitate these offerings, authorized dealers sold 'pre-approved' sacrifices in the outer courts. It made it easier for people who had travelled a long way, plus there was no fear the priests would reject your sacrifice as blemished. The money-changers were exchanging normal currency for the special temple currency. Normal currencies weren't accepted at the temple because they were stamped with the images of kings or gods, which was a violation of one of the Ten Commandments.
- 'a house of prayer for all nations'—Jesus is quoting Isaiah 56, our passage from March 20th.
- 'a den of robbers'—Jesus finds a thieves' den instead of a house of prayer. There are multiple layers of likely robbery here:
 1. Since these temple merchants have what amounts to a monopoly on sacrifices and offerings, they are charging the worshippers exorbitant prices.

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2. All of this commerce is happening in the only part of the temple foreigners were allowed. So, foreigners are essentially being robbed of a place to pray. Their part of the temple has been transformed into a market place.
3. God is being robbed of the foreigners' prayers and of the full value of the Jewish sacrifices.

By the way, Jesus is quoting another prophet, Jeremiah (7:11). Jeremiah's listeners are somehow under the impression that being in the temple gives them immunity from punishment for all sorts of bad behavior, including mistreating foreigners. Jeremiah tells them that it instead adds to their offense: besides behaving badly in other ways, they are ruining the reputation of God's house.

- 'chief priests and the teachers of the law'—these are the religious professionals of Jesus' day. The chief priests are specifically responsible for the temple, and would have been the ones to approve of the mercantile activities in the outer courts. They don't take kindly to what they would see as Jesus' meddling in their affairs.
- 'The fig tree you cursed has withered!'—Peter probably thought that Jesus was just venting his frustration the day before, but the tree actually dies. It doesn't seem quite fair of Jesus to curse the tree when the fruit isn't even in season. I think he does so to illustrate a point. With the tree, he was looking for fruit, but found only leaves. With the temple, he is looking for prayer, but finds only business. This prayerless temple is as dispensable to him as a fruitless tree.
- 'if you say to this mountain'—'this mountain' would be Mount Zion, the holy mountain so revered by David and Isaiah. Isaiah spoke of Zion as the place from which universal peace would emanate (Isaiah 2, March 15th). Now, Jesus speaks cavalierly of pitching it into the sea. Faith is more powerful and more valuable to Jesus than the temple. Despite all the prophecies about the temple's importance, Jesus can do without it if he has faith.
- 'so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins'—the temple was the place Jews went to receive forgiveness. If it were thrown into the sea, how could they be forgiven? Jesus offers a new way: if we offer forgiveness, we receive forgiveness.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Jesus once again tells us that amazing things are possible for anyone with faith. Ask God to give you an extra boost of faith today, and then try it out on something you might not normally pray for.
- *For your six:* Have you had conflicts with any of your six recently? Consider using that conflict as an opportunity to offer and experience forgiveness. Tell God that you forgive your friend for whatever wrong they've done, and ask God's forgiveness for ways you've mistreated your friend. Then, pay attention to your interactions with that friend. Can you feel any difference in how you relate?
- *For America:* Pray against the power of corruption in our country. Ask God to expose corruption in religious institutions, government, and business and to minimize the damage corruption causes innocent or defenseless people.

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Tuesday, March 31st

Matthew 28:18-20

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Acts 1:1-9

1 In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

6 So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

Points of interest:

- 'Then Jesus came to them'—these are the last words of Jesus in Matthew's story. The following passage is the beginning of the book of Acts, which tells the story of Jesus' disciples after his ascension to heaven. In both passages, Jesus is passing the baton to his followers. He has done his work: he has died and risen from the dead. Now, he has a mission for his friends and followers.
- 'make disciples of all nations'—'disciples' are followers or students. Once again, like with Abraham before (Genesis 12, March 4th) we have an instance when things are starting small, but are meant to get very big. During his earthly career, Jesus spent almost all of his time with twelve people. But that's not because he only cares about those twelve people, or because they are somehow more worthy of his attention. Jesus wants absolutely everyone to get exactly what the disciples have gotten, by the disciples passing it on freely and widely.
- 'baptizing them'—circumcision was the sign of participation in Abraham's covenant. Baptism is the sign of participation in this new covenant Jesus is establishing.
- 'in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'—Jesus' predecessor John the Baptist immersed people in water as a symbol of spiritual purification. Jesus carries on the tradition, but he has a much more powerful baptism in mind. He wants to immerse people, not in water, but in the very presence and power of God.

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- 'going to restore the kingdom to Israel'—God had told Isaiah, 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob' (Isaiah 49, March 19th). Small part of God's purposes or not, it's the part that continued to capture the attention and the imagination of the Jews. The disciples aren't an exception.
- 'It is not for you to know'—the disciples would have expected the restoration of Israel to happen in 'the last days.' So, along with yearning for Israel's restoration they're wondering, 'Is this the end of the world?' Jesus essentially answers, 'None of your business.'
- 'in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'—this is an expanding circle. It starts in Jerusalem, the center of everything Jewish. It moves on to anywhere descendants of Jacob live, and then takes a giant leap to everyone. It's interesting that Judea and Samaria are lumped together; they would have thought of themselves as very different.
- 'he was taken up before their very eyes'—Jesus completely disappears, very obviously leaving the work in the disciples' hands.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Jesus told his followers not to leave Jerusalem without the Holy Spirit. Before you go any further in your day, ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit.
- *For your six:* Jesus was willing to do whatever it took to show the disciples that he was alive and to explain the kingdom of God to them. I think he's also willing to reveal himself to your six. If any of your six are looking for something from Jesus, pray that he would give them the 'convincing proofs' they need of his presence, his power, and his love.
- *For America:* I don't think the Jews of Jesus' day are alone in sometimes confusing their national interests with God's priorities. Pray that God would forgive our nation for the times we present our own agenda as his.

Wednesday, April 1st

Acts 8:26-39

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

32 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,

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and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth. "

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

36-37 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Points of interest:

- 'an angel of the Lord said to Philip'—Philip starts out in Jerusalem, overseeing the charitable work of Jesus' followers there. But when the angel finds Philip he is in Samaria, where huge crowds of people have been listening to him talk about Jesus and watching him perform miracles. The angel instructs him to leave those crowds and go to a desert road instead.
- 'he met an Ethiopian eunuch'—here is one of those foreign eunuchs of whom Isaiah spoke (Isaiah 56, March 20th). From the disciples' perspective, Ethiopia would have been 'the ends of the earth.' In two quick jumps, Philip goes from Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus had instructed.
- 'How can I unless someone explains it to me?'—I wonder if the eunuch was praying for someone to explain the passage; then all of a sudden there's a guy running alongside his chariot in the middle of the desert, asking him what he's reading.
- 'This is the passage of Scripture'—this is Isaiah 53. It's another prophecy about the mysterious servant of the LORD. His suffering is so intense that people assume he must be hated by God. But it turns out that he is willingly sacrificing himself as part of God's mysterious plan to rescue people from their errors and problems. He dies, but then, 'After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied' (v.11). It seems that before Jesus' crucifixion people didn't know what to do with this prophecy; it seemed to be about the Messiah, but the idea that the Messiah would suffer and die was completely alien. In retrospect, it was the clearest possible description of what Jesus would do and why. And this is the passage that the eunuch just happens to be reading.
- 'What can stand in the way of my being baptized?'—I love the eagerness of this eunuch. Apparently, Philip tells him that they have been commissioned to baptize people from all nations; and he responds, 'Sign me up!'
- 'the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away'—I think the point of whisking Philip away like this is to let the eunuch know that Philip was brought there just for him. Now that the eunuch has heard the message, Philip is no longer needed.

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Taking it home:

- *For you:* Think of a country. It could be one that has always been a favorite, or it could have randomly popped into your mind just now. Spend the day praying for that country. Ask God to bring blessing to it. If you know anything about the country, pray for its current situation. If you don't know anything about the country, ask God to guide your prayers.
- *For your six:* Are any of your six trying to read the Bible? Ask God to give them the help they need to make sense of what they're reading.
- *For America:* Pray for our treasury officials. Ask God to give them wisdom and peace during the current economic crisis. Pray that they would have unexpected joy in their work and in their lives.

Thursday, April 2nd

Acts 10

1 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. 2 He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 3 One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. 6 He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

7 When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. 8 He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

9 About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. 12 It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. 13 Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

14 "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

15 The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

17 While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. 18 They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

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19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. 20 So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

21 Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

22 The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." 23 Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. 24 The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. 26 But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only human myself."

27 While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. 28 He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

30 Cornelius answered: "Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me 31 and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. 32 Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' 33 So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right. 36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

39 "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of

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the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, 47 "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." 48 So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Points of interest:

- 'At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius'—here we have another Roman officer. Caesarea is in the Province of Syria. As the story indicates, it's about a day's journey from Joppa, the Jewish port city where Peter is staying.
- 'devout and God-fearing'—'God-fearing' is something of a technical term. It means a Gentile who believes in the God of Israel, but hasn't converted to Judaism.
- 'He distinctly saw an angel of God'—this is no hazy dream. He **distinctly** saw an angel in the middle of the afternoon.
- 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial'—Cornelius loves God, and he loves people; and it has gotten God's attention.
- 'a devout soldier who was one of his attendants'—Cornelius seems to surround himself with other people who are interested in God.
- 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean'—apparently the animals in this vision are non-kosher. It will take more than a little hunger to get him to betray his principles. In fact, hungry though he is, it's hard to imagine Peter would be tempted by this collection of animals he's never eaten before. He's more likely horrified than tempted.
- 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean'—of course, it's God who first called these foods impure. Apparently, though, he's in the middle of changing the rules.
- 'This happened three times'—both God and Peter are determined not to back down here.
- 'Do not hesitate to go with them'—Peter has been with Jesus during a handful of interactions with Gentiles, and perhaps he has heard of what happened with Philip and the eunuch. But he might still think of these few instances as weird anomalies. He'd heard Jesus' instructions to take the message to the ends of the earth, but maybe he thought Jesus was just being hyperbolic. As a rule, Jews and Gentiles had as little to do with one another as possible; crossing this cultural boundary would be strange and awkward. So, without God's specific instruction, he might very well hesitate to take a day's journey out of the way at the request of a Roman soldier.
- 'Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests'—this is already a big step on Peter's part. In general, Jews neither offered hospitality to Gentiles nor accepted it from them. Of course, God has spent the afternoon preparing Peter for this interaction.
- 'had called together his relatives and close friends'—Cornelius hasn't even heard what Peter has to say yet, but he's already gathering others to hear the good news, just like Isaiah said (66: 19-20, March 21st).
- 'fell at his feet in reverence'—this would be a lavish, but appropriate, honor within Cornelius' culture. For Peter, though, it would be very uncomfortable.

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- 'I came without raising any objection'—technically, this is true. Reading between the lines, though, you can tell that Peter is pretty uncomfortable.
- 'May I ask why you sent for me?'—each of them thinks the other knows what's supposed to happen next.
- 'to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us'—God hasn't given Peter any specific commands about what to say on this occasion. Nonetheless, Cornelius is right. God did, in fact, command Peter in the Matthew 28 and Acts 1 passages (Tuesday) to pass along everything he'd seen and heard to everyone, of all nations, to the ends of the earth.
- 'how true it is that God does not show favoritism'—Peter finally understands what the vision of the animals being lowered in the sheet was all about.
- 'You know the message God sent to the people of Israel'—if I understand the story correctly, Cornelius does not, in fact, know the message. That's why God has arranged for Peter to come and speak with him.
- 'speaking in tongues and praising God'—speaking in tongues is the phenomenon of speaking words in a language you don't know. For some reason, it's a pretty common first response to the Holy Spirit falling on someone. In fact, when the disciples themselves were baptized in the Spirit, as Jesus had predicted in Acts 1, they responded in pretty much exactly the same way as Cornelius and his friends—with the extra twist that the disciples were speaking in recognized human languages that they had never learned.
- 'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water'—despite all of this, Peter remains a little uncomfortable with what's happening. It doesn't seem quite right to him that a Gentile, a Roman soldier, could be baptized into the community of faith. But he can't deny the facts. If God has chosen to baptize Cornelius with the Holy Spirit, who is Peter to resist baptizing him with water?

Taking it home:

- *For you:* In this passage, God speaks to both Cornelius and Peter through visions. How does God speak to you? Ask God to add a new way of speaking to his repertoire of conversation with you. If you don't often—or ever, as far as you know—hear from God, but you'd like to, ask God to speak to you particularly clearly sometime today.
- *For your six:* Cornelius treated others well, and it got God's notice. Pray that God would see, remember, and reward the things your six do to serve others.
- *For America:* Ask God for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our country. Particularly pray that God would take the lead in giving his Spirit liberally to a group of people we might not expect.

Friday, April 3rd

Acts 11: 1-26

1 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him 3 and said, "You went into the house of the uncircumcised and ate with them."

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4 Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. 6 I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. 7 Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

8 "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

9 "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' 10 This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

11 "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. 12 The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. 14 He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

15 "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

22 News of this reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Points of interest:

- 'heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God'—it's interesting that it says 'the Gentiles' not 'some Gentiles.' At least from a Jewish point of view, something momentous has happened here. Something has categorically changed.
- 'the circumcised believers criticized him'—this is something of an unpleasant surprise turn in the sentence. I suppose I shouldn't be completely surprised that the Jewish believers would take it as bad news. After all, it takes Peter a thrice-repeated vision, a word from God, and the Holy Spirit falling on them of its own accord before he really accepts what's happening. But I

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was still hoping for something like, 'So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem . . . they asked him to explain what happened.' I'm disappointed that they went straight to criticism.

- 'You went into the house of the uncircumcised'—apparently, what most concerns the Jewish believers is Peter's lack of conviction. Perhaps it's okay with them if the Gentiles received the word of God; they just don't like how it happened in this case. From their point of view, Peter watered down his principles. I suppose that would mean that the message he preached was tainted or compromised; in the Pharisees' eyes, by eating with these Gentiles in their house, Peter gave them the wrong impression about the gospel.
- 'I replied, "Surely not, Lord!"'—in other words, this was not Peter's idea.
- 'who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?'—Peter didn't do it; God did.
- 'even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life'—I'm encouraged that Peter's story convinces them that this is God's doing. God is stretching their imagination of what he would like to accomplish, and they're doing their best to go with him.
- 'repentance that leads to life'—I like this phrase as a description of what God is about. *Repentance* means 'turning around' or 'recalibrating.' They'd been going in the wrong direction, one that was heading straight over a cliff. But, with God's help, they are turned around and pointed toward life. That's what God is trying to do, point people away from death and towards life.
- 'when Stephen was killed'—Stephen worked with Philip in Jerusalem, but he was killed by the religious leaders because he made a speech critical of the temple. Stephen's murder was followed by a general persecution of the community of Jesus' followers, and many of them scattered to avoid being killed or imprisoned. That's how Philip ended up in Samaria.
- 'as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch'—these places aren't terribly far, but they're out of the immediate neighborhood. Phoenicia is modern Lebanon. Cyprus is an island in the eastern Mediterranean, just south of Turkey. And Antioch is in southern Turkey. Cyrene, mentioned a bit later in the passage, is in Libya.
- 'spreading the word only among Jews'—though scattered geographically, for a while they stayed within their own culture.
- 'men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also'—this reminds me of a tag team or a relay race. The believers from Jerusalem scatter around the eastern Mediterranean, sharing the message with their fellow Jews. Then, these new, non-Judean believers get the idea of passing the word on to Greeks also.
- 'and they sent Barnabas'—this time around, instead of criticizing, they send someone to help.
- 'Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul'—Saul, who is later re-named Paul, started out as an agent of the religious authorities in Jerusalem; ironically, he played a key role in the murder of Stephen which started this whole spread of the message. But while he was on his way to Damascus to chase down some of the scattered believers, he saw a vision of the resurrected Jesus. Saul repented, just as we discussed in the comment above; and Jesus told Saul that he planned to use him to introduce the Gentiles to God. For a while, though, Saul instead debated about Jesus in Jerusalem, provoking threats on his own life. The Jerusalem believers sent him to his hometown of Tarsus, which is fairly near Antioch, to let things cool

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down. Maybe Barnabas goes to get Saul because Tarsus is nearby. Maybe he knows something of Saul's destiny regarding the Gentiles. Maybe both.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Have you been given some sort of mission or assignment that seems a bit over your head? Ask God to give you a partner in the endeavor. Take a few seconds to listen; and if anyone comes to mind, consider asking them to join you, as Barnabas did with Saul.
- *For your six:* Pray that your six would experience abundant life. In any way that they're pointed more toward death—whether it be toward actual unnecessary physical danger or toward a sort of living death, a joyless existence—ask God to help them turn toward well-being, fulfillment, and joy.
- *For America:* When this passage begins, the most important thing to the Jerusalem believers is maintaining their practice of not eating with Gentiles. This practice, by the way, was not a command from God; it was a human tradition, developed out of a good intention to take purity seriously, but unfortunately in contradiction to God's often-repeated command to welcome foreigners and strangers. Because this tradition had become so important to them, they almost missed a very big thing God was doing. Pray for the churches of our country, that our traditions would not get in the way of us seeing and celebrating God's work. Pray that we would have the wisdom and courage to get rid of traditions that have become unhelpful—or at least the grace not to criticize those who do. Pray also that whatever is good in our church's traditions would not be lost.

Saturday, April 4th

Acts 13:1-3, 13-48

1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off . . .

. . . 13 From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. 14 From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. 15 After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak."

16 Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "People of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! 17 The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country; 18 for about forty years he endured their conduct in the wilderness; 19 and he overthrew seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. 20 All this took about 450 years.

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"After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. 21 Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. 22 After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'

23 "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. 24 Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. 25 As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is someone coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

26 "Brothers and sisters from the children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. 27 The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. 28 Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. 30 But God raised him from the dead, 31 and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

32 "We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors 33 he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

" 'You are my son;
today I have become your father.'

34 God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said,
" 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.'

35 So it is also stated elsewhere:

" 'You will not let your holy one see decay.'

36 "Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. 37 But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

38 "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. 40 Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

41 " 'Look, you scoffers,
wonder and perish,
for I am going to do something in your days
that you would never believe,
even if someone told you.' "

42 As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. 43 When the congregation was dismissed, many of the

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Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. 45 When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.

46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

" 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' "

48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Points of interest:

- 'for the work to which I have called them'—apparently, what they're doing in Antioch is just the preamble to God's true plans for them.
- 'they placed their hands on them and sent them off'—laying on of hands is a sign of blessing and commissioning.
- 'Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia'—Paphos is on Cyprus. Perga and Pisidian Antioch (not the same city as just plain Antioch) are in modern-day Turkey.
- 'On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue'—while sacrifices and certain rituals were only performed at the temple in Jerusalem, any city with a sizable Jewish population (including Jerusalem) would have at least one synagogue, a place where Jews would gather to hear the scripture and pray. Jesus began his ministry by speaking in the synagogues of Galilee and Judea. Paul and Barnabas are farther afield, but they follow the same strategy. Since they've been sent out particularly to share news about Jesus with Gentiles, this is perhaps a little surprising. There could be several reasons why they would start out at the synagogues:
 - They're working with what they know. They couldn't come up with a better idea for how to get started;
 - While they're concerned that other people hear about Jesus too, it's not to the exclusion of the Jews. It would be cruel of them to go to a new city without telling the Jewish community there that the long-awaited Messiah has come.
 - The synagogue wouldn't be a bad place to start, even in finding sympathetic Gentile listeners. As is the case here in Pisidian Antioch, God-fearing Gentiles could be found gathered at the synagogue with the Jews.
- 'if you have a word of exhortation'—it was apparently common practice to invite visitors to speak a few words, although Paul might take it a little farther than would have been expected.
- 'The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors'—Paul starts with a rather straightforward rehearsal of Jewish history. I guess Paul wants them to know that he's no crackpot. He believes the same things they do.

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- 'From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus'—this is the new development. The shoot from Jesse's stump (Isaiah 11, March 16th) has arrived.
- 'they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath'—it would be surprising enough to hear that, after hundreds of years of waiting, the Messiah had finally arrived. It would be an even bigger surprise, of a different sort, to hear that the people of Jerusalem had rejected him and killed him. That's not how they imagined it happening at all. And yet, as Saul points out, it's right there in the prophets for anyone to see. Isaiah 53 (the passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading) and Psalm 22 (our passage from March 8th) are prime examples.
- 'We tell you the good news'—they have just learned that the people of Jerusalem killed the Messiah, which seems like pretty bad news. But the surprises keep coming. God raised Jesus from the dead (again, just as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 indicate); and Jesus now offers forgiveness, even to the people who killed him.
- 'the holy and sure blessings promised to David'—this is Isaiah 55:3. The next quote is from Psalm 16:10. This string of quotes shows that the Messiah is not just a descendant of David, or the return of David; he is better than David. David conquered the Philistines and other human enemies, but Jesus defeats the true enemies of all humankind, sin and death.
- 'Take care that what the prophets have said'—this is Habakkuk 1:5. Even in this, the prophets have prepared the way. They said that what God was preparing would be hard to believe.
- 'almost the whole city gathered'—this is no longer the Jewish community and a handful of interested Gentiles. Everybody wants to hear this message.
- 'they were filled with jealousy'—the week before, they were so excited about Paul's message that they stayed around after service was over to keep talking. Now, they're abusing him and contradicting him. What happened? Apparently, they're angry that such large crowds have come to hear. They wanted it to be their own little thing.
- 'Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life'—actually, they more likely consider the Gentiles unworthy. But that's not an option. Paul says that the message will continue to be spread, whether they like it or not. The only question is whether they will accept it for themselves or not.
- 'a light for the Gentiles'—Isaiah 49:6, our passage from March 19th.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Jealousy is an ugly and destructive emotion. In this passage, it leads the people of the synagogue to try to tear apart a message they'd been eager to hear just one week before. Pray that God would protect you from jealousy. If you know you're currently experiencing some jealousy, ask God to forgive you and to give you the strength to set that jealousy aside.
- *For your six:* Pray that God would increase the faith of your six. By 'faith' I don't necessarily mean adherence to a certain set of beliefs, but instead a capacity to believe for things that might, naturally speaking, be impossible. Pray that God would expand their imagination of what is possible.
- *For America:* People often seem to have a yearning for the good, old days. For the Jews of Jesus' time, those were the times of David. It seems like some favorite 'good, old days' for many Americans (but certainly not all) are the 1950s or even the time of the American

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Revolution. You probably have your own favorite 'good, old days.' It's worth remembering the past fondly, but it's also easy to get stuck there. Again and again in our passages, God promises that he has something even better planned for the future than he did in the past. Pray that our country would have the hope and the imagination to look to a better future.

Sunday, April 5th

Acts 15:1-19

1 Certain individuals came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. 13 When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. 14 Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

16 " 'After this I will return
and rebuild David's fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,

17 that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things'—

18 things known from long ago.

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19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."

Points of interest:

- 'down from Judea to Antioch'—the people of Jerusalem referred to anywhere else as 'down.'
- 'Unless you are circumcised'—as I've mentioned before, circumcision was the sign of acceptance of Abraham's covenant. God himself told Abraham to have everyone in his household circumcised, and he told Moses that only the circumcised could participate in the Passover.
- 'This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute'—these visitors from Judea are saying that anyone can be a follower of Jesus, as long as they become a Jew first. This is not how Paul and Barnabas understand the situation. Jesus did not merely enhance the old covenant. He offers a new covenant, available to Jews and Gentiles alike.
- 'who belonged to the party of the Pharisees'—the Pharisees were the Jewish group most concerned with rules of ritual purity. This often brought them into conflict with Jesus, but apparently some of them have become followers of Jesus.
- 'After much discussion'—this could not have been an easy discussion. Hundreds of years of tradition, adhered to not just by the Pharisees but by all Jews, backed the Pharisees' argument. There were also very strong biblical reasons to side with the Pharisees. The passages about circumcision mentioned above are pretty compelling: the way for foreigners to participate is through circumcision. Even in passages like the ones we've been studying, incorporation into the Jewish community is a common way of describing inclusion of the Gentiles: for example, 'The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: "This one was born in Zion"' (Psalm 87, March 12th).
- 'God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them'—this is a pretty radical statement on Peter's part. He's saying that circumcision is, after all, just something that is done to the body. What's important is not these outward signs, but the heart.
- 'by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us'—in the end, they can't argue away the fact that God already made the decision to give out the Holy Spirit liberally and impartially. The horse has already left the barn, as they say.
- 'putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?'—the whole point of Jesus' message is that the Holy Spirit is now available, to make it easier for everyone to live a life worth living. These Pharisees are turning that message on its head, actually making it harder for the Gentiles, by trying to make them take on a whole new set of rules first—a set of rules that the Jews themselves have been unsuccessful in following.
- 'it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved'—circumcision doesn't save them. Jesus' forgiveness and resurrection power do.
- 'James spoke up'—James is the brother of Jesus and the pastor of the Jerusalem church.
- 'The words of the prophets are in agreement with this'—this is Amos 9:11, 12.
- 'even all the Gentiles who bear my name'—they remain Gentiles, but they bear his name.
- 'It is my judgment'—it's hard to know exactly what the authority structure of the early church was, but my best guess is that Peter would outrank James. And Barnabas and Paul seem to

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have authority independent of James. So, it's not exactly James' decision to make. Perhaps what's going on here is that each of the top leaders is expressing their opinion on the matter. Paul and Barnabas clearly stand against Gentiles being circumcised. Peter then agrees with them. James is the last to go, and he also agrees. They're unanimous that the Pharisees are mistaken here.

- 'we should not make it difficult'—the leaders, at least, are unanimous that no unnecessary barriers should be placed between the Gentiles and the good news about Jesus—and that circumcision is an unnecessary barrier.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Do you find yourself in a situation where your experience has outstripped your theology? Where what's happening to you right now doesn't seem to fit with how you understand God, life, or the world ought to work. Ask God to give you new wisdom and insight to match your current situation. Where your previous theology or worldview has been too small, ask God to expand it.
- *For your six:* Ask God to protect your six from being harmed or misled by any, perhaps well-meaning, but misinformed representatives of God, faith, or church. Pray that you would not be one of those people, but that whatever you say about spiritual things would be both true and helpful.
- *For America:* Once again, pray for the churches of America. Pray that we would not make it difficult for people—particularly people from outside of church culture—to come to God.