
ACTS 9-18: A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY

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Acts 9:1-9 **Surprising to everybody**

After the conversion of the Ethiopian, Acts turns further towards the Gentiles, beginning with a surprising choice for the key person for that mission.

Saul's enthusiasm for God led to persecution of God's people. The hardest enemies to pray for are those in the Christian family, those you know and those you fear. In the light of what follows one wonders if there were "followers of the Way" praying for Saul?

God was at work in him before, during and after the time Saul had this encounter. There are conversions and conversions. Conversion happens to people we may have given up on, but God has not. Converts are not always easy to live with and the older generation of believers need help as well (see 10-19).

Different people have different experiences turning to Christ, but a "Damascus Road" is still the experience of some. Churches need to expect and welcome those who come to faith in various ways.

Saul's conversion was a recognition of who Jesus was and marked his call to mission. There are many things we need to be converted from and converted to. Whenever and however we came to Christ, God probably some changes of heart and mind we still need to face.

Pray for someone who is making life difficult for you.

Ask What God is wanting you to see differently. Think how your church can be helpful to people with different spiritual experiences.

Acts 9:19-31 **Hot witness**

Saul had a powerful testimony, but not everyone knew what to make of his sudden turn around. Could he be trusted? Would it last? Was he safe? Perhaps it was for everybody's sake he was sent home to sort himself out. Verses 31-32 are one of a series of summary interludes Luke uses between sections of his story, but one wonders how much the "time of peace" in 31 is the calm after the disturbance of someone who saw the truth about Jesus uncomfortably clearly.

New converts often have the strengths of their weaknesses. Uninhibited boldness. A fresh experience. A new story. It is a pity if growth in sensitivity and tact and a growing awareness of the complexities in life and faith dull clear testimony. It does not have to be. Saul was not an instantly mature Christian, nevermind a leader. He knew a lot, but had to discover what it meant to be a disciple. Over a long period he learnt how to be more relevant and less abrasive, when to speak and when to keep quiet and what to say; but if he grew in wisdom he did not fail in courage and neither need we.

There is reckless witness which is careless of the risks to others, and in effect uncaring about effectiveness. There is also a living and speaking for Christ which is both bold and sensitive and which knows what can be done and what risks to run.

Again we need grace to grow as Saul did, and wisdom to handle the Saul's God is sending to stir up our sleepy fellowships. Thank God for people like Barnabas. Pray for those who may be brash young disciples today, but who will be our church and mission leaders tomorrow.

Acts 9:32-43 Jesus Christ makes you well

The mission of Jesus breaks down barriers of habit and race, health and death. Saul was called particularly to cross the barrier of culture and race, but it was Peter who was the pioneer - despite doubts and loss of nerve. The healings in Joppa showed God's power to Peter not just to those healed.

It was an ordinary world of life and death, of poverty, bed-ridden sickness, sewing, the art and grace of charity. It all matters to God, and the presence of Jesus still makes a difference. Fear of self-justification should not make us hesitant about the value of good works. In these chapters there are a number of people commended for their neighbourly love and lifestyle.

The word gets round when God does things. Some claim too much, some too little. Miracles don't have to be unnatural to be supernatural. Let us give thanks for health and healing, pray for those sick at home and in hospital, and believe God for resurrection. Pray also to be able to speak naturally about the things God does through Jesus.

Acts 10:1-23 Strange revelations

This dramatic story is a bit rough on tidy theology. Cornelius might have been more acceptable because of his religious life-style and charity, but he was still an alien. God is shown at work outside the system. As a result it is Peter who takes more convincing about what God is doing than this Roman soldier.

We do not have to throw away "justification by faith" to take seriously the words of the angel about God being pleased with prayers and works of charity (4); neither we do not have to compromise "there is no other name given under heaven whereby we might be saved" to accept the work of God's Spirit among those who have never or not yet heard.

But there is another challenge here. Peter's dream was an invitation to go beyond what he had understood about revealed regulations. His dilemma was not to do with right and wrong, but between two things which could be seen to be God's will. We also need to know the difference between a personal whim and the will of God, and when to go and see if the people at the door are the ones God has been telling us about.

Pray for wisdom and courage not only to choose right from wrong, but also to evaluate things which are good, to be able to know when God's Spirit is leading us into new patterns of faithfulness.

Acts 10:23-48 "I now realise it is true"

If what had seemed to be God's rules were going to be broken, then it needed a clear word from God so people would be sure. The repetition of the dream about eating prohibited food (with what that meant about mixing with Gentiles) and the story how Peter got to Cornelius and his crossing the bridge of race in obedience to that dream, convey the drama for those involved. There is also excitement in the story of Jesus, something they knew but were yet to understand, and the coming of the Spirit on people whom God was not expected to deal with. It is heart-warming stuff. What do we make of it?

We should be stirred. Peter's summary of the Gospel is something to remember. Here is the simplicity and power of the message about Jesus - and it can still happen. In Acts it is part of a tremendous

move out of one way of life into another. The missionary challenge of every age sees similar surprises from God's Spirit.

Questions. Which cultures are bringing the Gospel to secular New Zealanders today? Who are the people God is speaking through? How do you know?

Acts 11:1-18 Immersed in the Holy Spirit

It is amazing how many phrases from this chapter have come alive in recent years "The Spirit bade me go" "As at the beginning" "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Perhaps verse 18 also speaks with fresh relevance. In relation to gifts of the Spirit many have "stopped their criticism and praised God."

This passage can be seen as a unique event in the history of the early church, or as testimony to a universal proof of how God works. It may be we cannot fully know what it is all about. Perhaps we should see some lessons about how Christians of different cultures learn to recognize and accept one another. Maybe we should ask God to do it again and let him answer how he wants.

Readers will have different responses to these possibilities and to the question "What has your church learnt from reports and experiences like these in the last few decades?" We may note that what the bible describes, it does not always teach; that what is the work of the Spirit in one person is not quite the same in another; that trying to tidy up the Holy Spirit's is dangerous. He always seems to get away on us.

We may however also say that there are more possibilities in what God is willing to do than we usually allow. God's Word still teaches things people have forgotten. If gifts are abused, they are also neglected. Spiritual gifts do not prove everything, but they make a difference. We do not have to believe every testimony anymore than we have to fear every horror story.

If we have faith God is capable of doing what is best in different times, places, and people we might pray that the Holy Spirit of Jesus may come upon us all again. As at Pentecost it is the unlikely people who experience God's gift.

Acts 11:19-30 The last word

Persecution led to scattering and scattering led to growth. Expatriate "tent-maker" Christians witnessed to other "xpats" and to local people. It was not an official mission, and Jerusalem sent Barnabas to check it out, but it was effective. Tentmaking still is.

Barnabas was not an apostle, but he was a great trouble-shooter. He remembered Saul's potential and travelled some distance to find this convert and give him ministry experience in a situation where he could have some supervision and yet be away from some of the sensitivities of Jerusalem.

At Antioch this growing group were given a name, "Christian," still uncomplicated by the things Christians were to do in history, and still defined largely by Jesus, the Messiah. Christians have many names, many denominations, but it is Jesus' identity which should brand us all.

I do not feel comfortable saying God intends suffering to happen, but I do work at believing there is no situation he will not have the last word for, nothing he cannot redeem. Here persecution helped spread the Gospel. At the end of this section, famine becomes an opportunity for prophecy, for charity, and for Gentile Christians to further prove themselves to Jewish.

Persecution should not be wished on anyone, and the idea that it sorts out the nominal is a high price for discouraging the weak and leaving untouched the corrupt. We should expect it, but not invite it. Seeing the opportunities it creates, does not mean we feel the need to thank God for sending it as much as thanking him for being with us. However we see it, we should pray for those who "suffer for righteousness sake."

Acts 12:1-25 More drama

It is hard to remember which Herod is which through the New Testament, but their character is pretty much the same. Herod killed the guards. This time he himself was not to live (an incident also found in the Jewish historian, Josephus). Peter had been imprisoned because it was politically useful. Again God had the last word, whatever other words and deeds took place in the meantime.

Peter's life was full of discoveries about what God can do. Even Pentecost was not the end. Prisons cannot hold back what God is working out.

It's a great drama (our youth group did it recently). In verse 25 there is a person for whom these events became extremely important. It is quite possible that the house of John Mark's mother where people prayed for Peter's release and would not open the door when their prayers were answered because they could not believe it, was also the house of the Last Supper and where they had gathered on the day of Pentecost.

These unbelievable events took place among ordinary people who had to trust and pray whatever happened. Question If nothing much seems to be happening is that because it really isn't, or is it that we do not see what God is up to.

Acts 13:1-12 Whose missionary journey?

It is still fun tracing these journeys on a map. It is also worth thinking whose mission it really is. Acts could be "Acts of the Holy Spirit" not just of the "Apostles." It is also the "Acts of the Church." The daughter church in Antioch is now sending out its own missionaries. The Holy Spirit spoke, the church recognized what was going on. Paul, Barnabas and Mark still had to go.

All these elements remain important in mission today. Missionary engagement being not a matter of the church deciding on its own, or the individual deciding on his or her own; but acting together. A sense that these visions are not just the ideas of individuals, but the prompting of the Spirit. This sort of missionary partnership cannot be taken for granted.

In Cyprus there was preaching in the synagogue, a journey across the island, encounters with a magician and the governor of Paphos who becomes one of Paul's first converts. These are all significant - this first mission is shows power over the powers, and receives sympathetic interest from Roman authorities. From this time Saul's change of name to Paul takes effect.

Prayer: For wisdom to discern together what God is saying about mission from your church

Acts 13:13-41 Greater than the greatest

This model sermon illustrates the sort of thing Luke heard Paul say in many places. It is superb preaching, brilliantly argued and a good summary of the Gospel. Paul does not just put down the old faith. He speaks in terms of respect. Moses and David were great leaders. However God did things in Jesus which he did not do through Moses and David. We find things in Jesus not found anywhere else - and the message about Jesus is the message we must respond to.

Some people turn away from what they know of God. Others seek him in places where he cannot be known as he has revealed himself in Jesus. There is a difference. There are those for whom coming to Christ means a rejection of where they have been; there are others for whom it means a completion and fulfillment of their seeking. Both are called to Christ. In Jesus (39) there is freedom from sin which cannot be found elsewhere.

The departure of John Mark is simply noted. Later we will discover it was not straightforward.

Thought. Teaching preaching is a strategic ministry for the future of the church. You probably know a preacher to pray for who could be more like Paul than they are. You might like to pray for us at College as we seek to develop these sorts of gifts.

Acts 13:42-14:7 Divided Response

Part of the tension running through Acts and a fair amount of the New Testament is the progress of Christian faith from Jewish sect to universal religion. Luke here begins to highlight a theme of rejection by the Jews and acceptance by Gentiles. A result is that the followers of Jesus are now from all races and have to learn to live together. They also have to cope with those who do not accept the gospel.

It was never going to be easy, but if you are going to be missionary the problems involved with understanding different cultures have to be faced. It may be that some of the conflict that results is due to misunderstanding or to the fault of the missionary, but the gospel itself requires choice and not everyone is going to accept it however politically correct or culturally sensitive its presentation.

Verse 44 is not meant to make us ask whether the synagogue was big enough to hold the whole town; it is meant to contrast the popular enthusiasm for the Gospel compared with the attitude of those who normally came to the synagogue. Even after persecution broke out and Paul and his friends had to get out, the local believers were "full of joy and the Holy Spirit" (52). As earlier in Acts an effect of persecution in one place is the spreading of the gospel to other places. This pattern seen in Antioch in Pisidia is repeated in Iconium.

Prayer For joy despite opposition. For a sense of God's overruling in new places when we have to move on.

From rejection to flattery and worse. It is not much easier to cope with praise that is over the top than it is rejection. A healing led to the healers being treated like gods. If the temptation of persecution is to give up, the temptation from adulation is to accept it.

Paul has some important things to say. The difference between idolatry and truth is the difference between "worthless things" and "the living God." There are signs of the reality of God available for all people. There was a time when "he allowed all people to go their own way." We may argue whether that time is "BC" compare with "AD" or whether it relates to a moment of choice for all people. We should recognize God's address to every single person, something that is going on however inappropriate their response.

Luke gives a quick summary of the return journey, the appointment of leaders, and the reporting back in Antioch. Perhaps it is not surprising that the summary of the message to those who had become believers was about passing through "many troubles."

Prayer: Help me to cope when people reject me or else make me into something I am not. Show me how to do the right thing in a way which will point people to you. Give me the words and the deeds which enable others to make a decision about you rather than about me.

Acts 15:1-11 "But they have to do it our way"

Church meetings and debates don't always bring out the best in people, and it is not always encouraging to be part of argument and discussion working out what has to be done together. This famous Jerusalem Council is a turning point in Acts and in the early church. There had already been a decision (11:18), but the issue remained alive. Now the formal decision of the mother church and its leaders confirmed the policy of Peter (despite some wavering at times), Barnabas and Paul which made it possible for salvation in Jesus to be truly portable across cultures. Since then most have got the message you don't have to be Jewish to be Christian, but have we got the general principle that no culture or race has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit?

It is still common for one generation in the church to say we want others to come in, but if they do, they do it our way. It's true culturally and generationally. New Zealanders are still discovering what this means for Maori Christianity. The same is true for Pacific Island and Asian Churches. But the time will come when the freedom to follow Christ they may or may not have received is something they will have to offer to their own young people and eventually to Europeans who will want to join their congregations.

Question: How can debate in the church be more Christian? Pray for churches where different cultures and different generations worship together.

Acts 15:12-21 "If Christ is Lord of all what do you eat?"

James "the brother of the Lord" (Galatians 1:19, Acts 21:18). There are four James associated with Jesus; two of the 12 disciples, the father of Judas not Iscariot, and the (half) brother of Jesus who along with other brothers (Joses, Simon and Judas) did not really believe in Jesus until after the Resurrection.

This may something about the family dynamics as Jesus grew up, but James eventually became a believer (I Cor 15:7), the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church and the letter of a very practical epistle. We know from Josephus that he was martyred about 61.

Here we see his wisdom in handling a difficult situation. Dietary habits of a lifetime may not need to be given up to become a Christian, but neither do they need to be imposed on others. Alcohol is one area where care is needed, not only in responsible use or abstinence, but in how one's own standards may or may not be applicable to others. It seems every generation of adults, not just children, need to learn how to eat and drink properly.

We might also think about Muslims and Jews today for whom dietary restrictions are a sign of devotion. If they convert they don't have to eat pork - breaking sincerely held practices which do no harm does not make people Christian. Either way it can be a sign of faith and not a "work." At College we often use I Corinthians 10:31 as a prayer before lunch "Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do it all for God's glory."

Pray for wisdom not only how to eat and drink appropriately, but how to relate to those whose tastes and habits are different.

Acts 15:22-35

Diplomacy

I have always admired those who somehow manage to gather up the concerns of different people, identify the things that really matter, and tactfully present a solution which takes everyone seriously and provides a positive way forward.

Accompanied by those who could explain it fully in person, this is such a letter. It is carefully worded, sensitive to Jewish tradition (Leviticus 17-18), true to the Gospel of Jesus and encouraging to the non-Jews who were now part of the People of God. Not only did it need to say that diet would not get you to heaven, but ways had to be found so that those seen as ritually unclean by one group of Christians could sit and eat with those seen as arrogant and patronizing by the others.

Although it would take many more discussions and letters to work all this through, this very early Christian epistle was an important statement for the future of the church. Like other aspects of the process we see in Acts of believers of vastly different backgrounds coming together, it shows the value not only of knowing the truth, but of sharing it with patience and tact.

Acts 15:36-16:5

Bless this mess

Even good decisions do not always prevent arguments. Paul and Barnabas had been through a lot together. Barnabas had gone out of his way to see Paul brought into the ministry for which he was gifted and called. Together they had succeeded in getting support from the Jewish mother church for the gentile mission. Now, about to set off to revisit the churches they had founded, they argue and split. What we have here may not be the only debate which suddenly arose just when things seem settled. It is possible that Peter's confusion over eating with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-14) and Paul's public attack on Peter also took place round this time.

No doubt God overruled. The Gospel may have been clearer for public debate, even with Peter. It could be said to be better that two teams went to different places so that more heard the Gospel as a result. Paul and Silas went on into new territory and Timothy was recruited to join them. Mark, Paul and Barnabas were eventually reconciled. Mark looked to Peter for help in writing the first missionary document of the New Testament, the Good News about Jesus.

However all of this should be seen as redeeming these situations, not as justifying them. None of the good things really needed the bad to make them happen. God may turn some of our failures into blessings, but we are not to "sin more that grace may abound."

The circumcision of Timothy seems a bit odd, especially as Paul was sharing the decision of the Jerusalem Council as he went. The explanation is that since Timothy's mother was Jewish, he was regarded as a Jew despite having a Greek father. This would be the more so since his father had died. It was Gentile believers who did not have to be circumcised. In terms of salvation Timothy didn't either, but it was advisable to remove one element of controversy especially as they sought to work among Jews.

Thank God for his goodness in redeeming things which have gone wrong. Pray for courage to do the things which need to be done so that people can think about Jesus more than about us.

Acts 16:6-18

Planning and the Holy Spirit

It is possible to gain of sense of Paul's missionary strategy from his journeys and letters - going to places which were regional centres, preaching first to Jews, to Gentiles attracted to Judaism and then to others. Here the Holy Spirit overrules - holding back the group from getting involved in one area and then through

a dream leading them to another. A teacher of mine said recently "If you want to make God laugh, try telling him your plans!" - but I think both he and Paul would say make plans, but don't be surprised if things change. Prayer and the leading of the Spirit go with thinking and planning. They are not alternatives.

Philippi had a turbulent history and Paul had some painful experiences there himself. But we know from his letter that the church which grew out of this visit was one with which he enjoyed a good relationship. It was a Roman colony. The Jews there did not have a synagogue. Perhaps they did not have the minimum ten men to start one or the Romans would only permit them to meet outside the city on a river-bank. It is also a place where it seems that Luke joined Paul's party. Acts 16:10-17 is one of three "we" sections in Acts (the others are 20:5-21:18, 27:1-28:16) where the writer indicates he is part of the story.

In a Roman context the conflicts are different from the Jewish situation, but as in the Gospel it is the spiritual enemies of the Gospel who most clearly recognise its authority.

Thoughts: There are questions here about guidance, exorcism and household baptism we would probably like to know more about. There is also evidence of God's power in ordinary people, the leadership of women, and the gift of hospitality. Let us think about those things as well.

Acts 16:19-40 Saved

The call in Paul's dream "Come over and help us!" did not say what sort of help. When the jailer cried out "What must I do to be saved?" it was not just fear of the responsibility of having lost all his prisoners, like the slave-girl he recognized the salvation Paul offered was to do with lostness before the Most High God. Salvation did not stop there, but it started there. In the event the jailer saved his prisoners, his life and his soul.

We must not despise all the forms of lostness and therefore of salvation needed around us. I do not think there is a lot of future trying to rank them in importance, though it can be done. It is belief in Jesus Christ which is at the heart of working at any of them.

Don't miss some of the detail in this vivid story. The missionaries explain the gospel before getting their wounds washed. The jailer ministers to them before being baptized. They go to his home for a meal before going back to jail. Sometime the other prisoners got tied up again. It was quite a night.

It must have also taken a lot of faith on Paul's part to believe that despite their terrible treatment God could make something of the situation. It is not easy to cope when things go just a little wrong, never mind sing praises when you have been beaten up. In this case not only were the jailer and his family converted, but embarrassed public recognition of the injustice of Paul's imprisonment led to the admission that preaching the Gospel was not against Roman law.

Pray for jailers and their families, the effect their job has on their lives, the effect faith in Christ may have on their jobs.

Acts 17:1-15 Success and opposition

It seems Luke stayed behind in Philippi. Paul and Silas travel on making use of the Roman Roads to go from centre to centre, staying as long as necessary or as circumstances would allow.

Thessalonica was to be the recipient of one of Paul's earliest letters. It was also a place where he saw significant response from a range of classes of society. Since this included the upper classes, the opponents had to resort to "rent-a-mob" to create the incidents which would get rid of him. Proclamation

of the Kingdom of God and the Lordship of Christ could easily be presented as disloyalty to the emperor, but the authorities went no further than requiring a bond.

Nevertheless the missionaries were forced to travel on. At Berea there was a considered response, based on study of the scriptures and reflection, but soon the Jews from Thessalonica caught up with them and Paul and Silas were on the road again.

Thought: Paul had to deal with reasonable questions and irrational responses. As Christians we still do.

Acts 17:16-34

Dialogue in Athens

This fascinating account of Paul's almost formal dialogue in the city of philosophers is of increasing relevance as Christians again have to learn to both understand and witness to those of other philosophies and religions around them. There are some important principles here. Theologically it is a reminder that God is striving with all people and not far away. In terms of attitudes to other religions it indicates Paul's understanding and respect for those he is preaching to. There is nothing superficial here despite Paul's distaste for all idols around him.

However although there is some response there is not much. When he goes to Corinth he focuses more on the Cross of Christ and despairs of the wisdom of the wise (I Corinthians 1:18-25). What does this say to our situation?

It is rather easy to present dialogue (more his approach in Athens) as an alternative to proclamation, but this is not required or wise. Each emphasis has its time and its place. In Berea reason brought more results than Athens. From place to place we see Paul adjusting how he explains the significance of Jesus to match the background of his audience. It is impossible to do that unless you know that background. We all need to witness on the basis of what we know. We will always be more effective from knowing something of others.

Prayer: Help us to find ways of talking about other people's beliefs and our own.

Acts 18:1-17

Tentmaking in Corinth

Corinth became one of Paul's major successes, but it also produced the church which gave him the most trouble. He was not the first Christian to reach there and mention of the Jewish Christian couple expelled from Rome and of the provincial governor, Gallio, (whose dismissal of the charge of propagating an illegal religion gives Christianity the same status as Judaism) enable Paul's time here to be dated fairly accurately to early 51.

Paul's experience in Corinth has given its name to "tentmaking" as a "new" emphasis in missionary strategy. Paul had a trade and supported himself with it until funds were sent from other centres. Both ways of support are valid. One may enable people to get more of certain kinds of things done. The other enables Christians to be in places they could otherwise not get to.

A real question is whether or not all Christians should not see themselves as tentmakers and missionaries. Most Christians need more encouragement than they get to see the workplace as part of God's plan and purpose for their lives. In our global village the expatriate worker who is a Christian can learn from and contribute to Christian witness at levels of society and in countries where not many other Christians reach. The professional decisions they make and their potential contribution to God's mission in the world need quiet support and recognition from their home churches.

Pray: For expatriate Christians working in other countries that they may see God's purpose in what they are doing and where they are working.
