

Acts Bible Study
Zumbro Lutheran Church
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Acts 21-26

1. Read Jesus' prediction to his disciples in Luke 21:12-17:

...They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name....You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

How does this set the stage for the story that Luke tells in Acts?

Followers of Jesus know that the decisive victory has been won, but there are many battles still to be fought.

With the stoning of Stephen, persecution arises and believers are scattered.

Among the leaders, only the Twelve remain in Jerusalem.

Philip takes the good news to the Samaritans.

Peter shares the good news with a Gentile named Cornelius.

Paul preaches to both Jews and Gentiles, though he has more success among the Gentiles.

[Map]

2. In 21:1-16 Paul is on his way to Jerusalem despite the apparent danger. Why do you think Paul is going there? What answer does Paul give to those try to talk him out of it?

Paul is going there to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost (20:16).

Plus, he is remembering his ties to Judaism and the mother church.

In his farewell speech to the Ephesians, he also implies that the journey to Jerusalem is part of his destiny, a path laid out by God (20:17-24).

People are clearly worried about Paul's personal safety. Paul tells them that he is ready to be arrested and even to die for his faith (20:13)

3. What advice do the church leaders in Jerusalem have for Paul 21:17-26? What is the underlying point that Luke is trying to make about the early Christian movement?

The rumors about Paul have reached Jerusalem.

Jewish leaders are angry at what they think Paul is doing to their beloved tradition.

The apostles advise him to submit himself to the Nazarite vow (see Number 6:1-21).

This vow was a little like a lenten discipline, something done for a season to dedicate oneself to God.

Luke intends to show that Paul, by observing this vow, really is a faithful Jew.

4. Paul is arrested in Jerusalem (21:27-36). Paul makes a defense to the people in chapter 22. What is Luke trying to emphasize in 22:6-11?

In the story of the Damascus Road in chapter 9, Luke emphasizes Paul's conversation, he goes from being a persecutor of Jesus' followers to being a follower of Jesus himself.

In chapter 22, Luke emphasizes Paul call or vocation. God has laid it upon his heart to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

By the time Paul is finished, they are crying out for his death (v. 22). Why do you suppose they're so angry?

Because they believe Paul has turned their traditions upside down and encouraged Jew and Gentile converts alike to act contrary to Jewish law. It would be akin to a Christian preacher claiming that the cross and resurrection really have no meaning for Christian believers.

Do you think the crowd is driven more by tradition or traditionalism? What's the difference between the two?

Tradition is something done on an ongoing basis.

Traditionalism occurs when traditions become ossified and even dead.

These Jewish leaders seem stuck in their traditionalism, claiming a blind obedience to what has always been done. As such, they are not open to the new thing God is doing in Jesus.

5. Notice what Paul says about himself in 23:6, and then notice what comes next (vv. 7-10). Why is this significant to the story?

Paul says, “I *am* a Pharisee,” not “I *was* a Pharisee.”

Paul continues to see himself as a Jew, only his brand of Judaism is one that accepts Jesus as the messiah and is open to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

The Pharisees are open to a belief in angels, spirits, and resurrection.

The Sadducees are not, since these things did not occur in the first five books of the OT (their only Scripture). Because the Sadducees are not open to new revelations from God, they cannot possibly accept that Jesus was the messiah or that and that he rose from the dead.

Luke overall point is that early Christianity is in continuity with the best of Judaism, and more specifically, with Pharisaic Judaism.

6. Paul is taken to Caesarea. He has a hearing before the Roman governor Felix in 24:10-23. It quickly becomes apparent that the charges of political subversion against Paul are false. Paul again mentions the resurrection (24:15, 21; compare 23:6 and 26:6-7). How does the debate over the resurrection figure into story.

Paul is clearly not guilty of treason against either Judaism or Rome.

Luke wants to emphasize:

- a. the early Christian movement is a branch of faithful Judaism.
- b. the Christians can work within the Roman Empire, who act reasonably throughout this story.

7. Paul eventually has a hearing before King Agrippa . He again tells of his conversion along the Damascus Road (26:2-29). Luke has now shared the account of Paul’s conversion three times (Acts 9, 22, and 26). Why the repetition?

As was said above, each account of the Damascus Road experience emphasizes a different thing:

Chapter 9 – Paul’s conversion

Chapter 22 – Paul’s commission

Chapter 26 – Paul’s belief in the resurrection of Jesus, a belief that put him at odds with much of Judaism..

How do you understand God’s work in calling a person to conversion? What part does the person himself play?

As Lutherans, we believe that God takes the initiative and reaches out to us.

The gifts that God offers are forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Only through the help of the Holy Spirit can we reach out our hand and accept the gifts that God offers.

8. How is the story of Paul’s conversion and commissioning different than many of the stories we hear in contemporary Christianity?

A typical conversion story in evangelical circles in America goes something like this:

“I was miserable. Then I found Jesus. Now my life is happy and fulfilled.”

Paul’s story is much different.

- a. Luke goes to great lengths to show that we don’t find Jesus. Jesus finds us.
- b. Luke can’t conceive of a religion of self-fulfillment. God puts his hand on Paul and immediately gives him a job to do.

- c. Personal happiness isn't central to the story. Paul has deep-down joy, but he will spend the rest of his life suffering because of his calling.

9. Check out Acts 28:23-30. How does Luke finish his story?

We don't hear of Paul's death, though it is implied, especially as Paul follows in the footsteps of Christ. It could be that Paul is still alive when Acts is written, or that Luke doesn't know of his death, or more probably, that Luke deliberately wants to leave the story open-ended.

Because Acts is open-ended, we wonder how the gospel will make it to the ends of the earth (1:8). We also wonder if the Jews will become more open to the good news of Jesus. Luke wishes they would be more open and he continues to hold out hope for their repentance.

Why do you think he doesn't tell us anything about Paul's death?