

Key Theme

Jesus prepares his Apostles for world-wide witness by:
Proving he is alive - Resurrection vindicated his claim to be Messiah
Teaching them
Giving them the vision and strategy to accomplish his purpose for them

Outline

1:1-5 Prologue: Instructions to Apostles
1:6-8 Power for witness
1:9-11 Ascension
1:12-14 Corporate prayer

Verses 1-5

Let's start with the obvious . . .

What does Luke mean by "the first book?" What's the first book?

The Gospel of Luke.

What does this first book tell us?

It tells us about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day he was taken up into heaven. That is, the Gospel of Luke tells us about the earthly ministry of Jesus.

*The NRSV translates the Greek in v. 1 as "All that Jesus did and taught from the beginning." I think this translation obscures a key nuance of the Greek text. The RSV translates the same Greek clause as "All that Jesus **began** to do and teach." These translations highlight the nuance expressed by the Greek text.*

If Luke's first volume describes "All that Jesus **began** to do and teach until the day he was taken up into heaven, what is implied about Luke's second volume? What will that be about?

It will be about what Jesus continue to do and teach from heaven

How is Jesus going to continue to act and teach?

He will continue to act and teach through his Spirit-empowered disciples (vv. 4-5).

So what's the purpose of the first section of Acts? What is Luke trying to tell us? What is Jesus doing?

How does he spend those 40 days between his resurrection and ascension? With whom does he spend them? Is this the best use of his time? Why doesn't he make a lot of public appearances; why not appear on the Today Show or Letterman?

Jesus focuses on preparing his disciples. They/we are his strategy for saving the world. What do you think about that? Does it seem like a sound strategy to you? What determines the soundness or effectiveness of this strategy?

Luke tells us in v. 3 that Jesus gave "many convincing proofs" that he was alive. Why does Jesus do this? Why does he think it necessary to give **many** proofs?

People then were no more willing than people today to believe that dead people could rise from the dead.

What kind of proofs do you think Jesus gave?

He let them see him, touch him, talk to him. V. 4 in the NRSV says, "While 'staying' with them is "took salt together," an idiom for eating together. This act was the ultimate sign of physicality (in many Jewish traditions, angels could not eat human food) and intimacy.

What did the resurrection prove?

That God had vindicated Jesus' claims to be the Messiah. He was not "cursed" by God but rather vindicated and anointed by him (see Peter's sermon in Acts 2)

What did Jesus command his disciples to do?

Remain in Jerusalem and wait

What do you think the disciples might have been thinking when Jesus says, "do not leave Jerusalem?"

If you were one of the disciples would you have wanted to wait there?

What were they supposed to wait there for?

The promise of the Father

What might they have known about this promise?

A lot!

There were a lot of OT passages that spoke of the promise of the Father to pour out his Spirit (e.g. Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:25-28; 37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:28-31). But Jesus goes further. He doesn't just say, "Wait for the promise of the Father which you know about from your reading of the OT." Where did they hear about this from Jesus? The fullest recorded statement concerning the Holy Spirit comes in John 14-16. There Jesus says among other things, that the Spirit will be with them forever (Jn. 14:16), will teach them everything and remind them of everything Jesus said to them (Jn. 14:26), will testify on Jesus' behalf (15:26), will be sent by Jesus (Jn. 16:7), will prove the world wrong (or convict the world) about sin and righteousness and judgement (Jn. 16:8), will guide them into all truth (Jn. 16:13). Luke records in his first volume Jesus' words, "When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say" (Lk. 12:11-12).

So the disciples had heard a lot about the Holy Spirit but they hadn't yet experienced a lot of the Spirit. For this they had to remain in Jerusalem and wait.

Verses 6-8

What is the disciples' question in v. 6? Why did they ask this question? Where did it come from? What were the key things Jesus talked about in the previous section (vv. 105)?

The Kingdom of God and the promise of the Holy Spirit. In the OT the references to the KOG and the outpouring of the Spirit were all in the context of Israel's restoration.

What do the disciples assume, take for granted, in their question?

That the Kingdom would be restored to Israel.

Why?

Because Scripture predicted it. For example, Joel 2:28-32 (which Peter will quote in his Pentecost sermon) talks about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Joel continues in 3:1-21 by talking of the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord, when God would "restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem." visit the Gentile nations with judgement, break their oppression of Israel, and restore Jerusalem as the center of his divine presence.

The disciples must be thinking, "So many prophecies concerning the Messiah have been and are being fulfilled. When will the prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel be fulfilled?"

*Look again at their question. It's not, "Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel "Are you **at this time** going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"*

Why are the disciples so concerned about the restoration of Israel?

It may be that they are primarily concerned about the plight of their people who have been oppressed for so many years by foreign powers. It may also be, however, that they remember Jesus' promise to them, "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Lk. 22:28-30).

So it is possible the disciples are thinking, "Is this when we get our reward? We've experienced suffering, ridicule, hardship, frustration. Is this when we finally experience some of the perks of following Jesus?"

How does Jesus answer their question? (v. 7)

Jesus answers the precise question they asked. He doesn't deny that he's going to restore the Kingdom to Israel; he simply tells them that they can't be told the exact timing of it, since the father had reserved all such matters of times and dates to himself.

What does Jesus say next (v. 8)?

Instead of focusing on things they can't know about or do anything about, they are to focus on being witnesses. There may be a mild rebuke here in that Jesus seems to want to expand their vision beyond Israel.

*The disciples (like us) often tended to toward parochialism, but the OT was very clear that God was concerned for the whole world (cf. Gen. 12:3, "In you [Abraham,] all the families of the earth shall be blessed") In Isa.49:6, as Messianic passage, the Lord says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach **to the end of the earth**" (cf. Acts 1:8)*

How will the Messiah's salvation reach to the ends of the earth?

Through the Spirit-empowered witness of his disciples.

🍏 What did it mean for the disciples to be "witnesses?" To what were they supposed to witness? How had Jesus prepared them for this task? How has he prepared us? What prevents us from being effective witnesses? Do we, like the disciples, have concerns or perspectives or priorities that restrict us or distract us from effectively fulfilling our roles as witnesses?

Verses 9-12

Why does Luke include this section? What is its purpose? What does it tell us that we need to know? Why does Jesus ascend? Where is he going? To do what? What does the ascension prove? Why do the two "men" tell the disciples that Jesus is coming back? Why would that be important to the disciples?

🍏 If you were one of the disciples what would you be feeling as you see Jesus floating away from you? What would your tendency or temptation be?

🍏 Do you ever feel like Jesus is really far away or that life is just way too hard? How does the fact that Jesus will return affect you during those times?

How does the message of the two men (i.e. that Jesus is coming back) complete the answer to the disciples question of v. 6? Was Jesus going to restore the Kingdom to Israel now?

No

Why?

He was going away. But he would return. There would be no restoration of the Kingdom before the unknowable time of Jesus' second coming. But that coming was certain; the full restoration would come then. The purpose of this interval between Jesus' ascension and return was not the restoration of Israel, but world-wide witness to Jesus. That purpose continues to stand today.

What is the question the two men ask the disciples? What do you think they mean by that question?

John Stott writes, "There was something fundamentally anomalous about their gazing up into the sky when they had been commissioned to go to the ends of the earth. . . Their calling was to be witnesses, not stargazers."

🍏 What about us? What are we giving our attention to? Are we fulfilling our primary calling to know God, pay attention to him, obey him?

Verses 12-14

What do the disciples do when they return to Jerusalem? What could they have done instead?

🍏 What might you have been tempted to do? Why?

Why does Luke tell us who was present in Jerusalem? What is significant about this? What do we learn from it? How did the disciples pray? What do you think they prayed about?

Application

What did Jesus give his disciples before he ascended? How did he prepare them?

*Jesus gave them **teaching**, insight into the plan and purpose of God, a **vision** for their calling to be witnesses. A **strategy** — Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, etc., a **community** — each other, his **example** to follow, the promise of **power**, and **hope** — even the greatest enemy (death) has been conquered.*

🍏 What has Jesus given us? How has he prepared us? What will we do, individually and corporately, with Jesus' command to be his witnesses?

Key Theme

The Disciples prepare for world-wide witness by dealing with the problem presented by Judas' defection and betrayal of Jesus

Outline

- 1:15-20 Peter's theological reflection and apologetic
- 1:21-26 The criteria and process of choosing Judas' replacement

Verses 15-20

Why do you think Peter tells us how many believers were together? What is the significance of the number 120? And why does Judas need to be replaced?

The number 120 here is more than just a round number. This is the smallest number in Jewish tradition for a population that could have its own council, its own synagogue (M. Sanhedrin 1:6). There was also a tradition that each judge should rule or represent at least 10 members (1QS 6:3-4, 1Qsa 2:22, CD 13:1-2). So Luke may have been suggesting that this young church had already become a community in its own right and that a 12th leader was required.

The Twelve were to bear witness to Israel of Jesus' resurrection, which demonstrated God's vindication of Jesus. They were to present this "new evidence" (i.e. Jesus' resurrection and vindication) of who Jesus is in an effort to overcome the ignorance that produced Jesus' death (Acts 3:17), and to gain Jewish repentance (Acts 2:38). In order for their witness to be effective they must not only be empowered by the Spirit (Acts 1:8) but also their symbolic number must be complete. Prophetic symbolism demands 12 Witnesses for the 12 Tribes. So the reflection of a replacement for Judas is part of the preparation for the mission that's about to begin.

Further, the number 120 (10x12) may symbolically refer to the restored 12 Tribes of Israel. Couple this with the Jewish tradition (of uncertain date) that 120 elders first passed on the law in the time of Ezra. Luke may be saying that this new group of 120 will be confirming a new law of the Spirit (Acts 2) and that these 120 believers symbolize the restored or faithful remnant of Israel.

The 12 then, will, serve in the dual role of witnesses to Israel and of rulers (in the sense of leading the people unto faithfulness to Jesus) over the restored Israel (Lk. 22:28-30), within and under the rule of Jesus.

Let's look at Judas. How does Peter describe him?

Numbered among us, allotted his share in the ministry. "Judas was one of us, part of the team. We trusted him."

What happened to Judas? How do you think Judas might have felt when Jesus first called him? Do you think he was excited, glad, overjoyed?

Do you think the disciples had any clue that Judas was becoming a betrayer? Do you think Judas went to bed one night fully committed to Jesus and woke up the next morning and said to himself, "You know, I think I'll betray Jesus today?"

The process that led Judas to become a betrayer was probably long and slow. The other disciples were with him day and night for three years.

Why couldn't they see what was happening to Judas? If Judas had doubts, or was struggling with temptations why didn't he talk with his fellow disciples and ask for help? Why didn't he let people know what was going on in him so that they could help to hold him accountable?

🍏 What are the things or issues that tempt you to depart from Jesus? What would it mean for you to let others know you, to know what's going on inside you so that they can help to hold you accountable? Has God ever used others in your life in this way in the past? What are the factors that make openness and vulnerability difficult here? What is the specific lesson of Judas for you?

Let's look at Judas from another perspective. What problem did the betrayal by Judas present to the Apostles and to their preaching? They want to say that Jesus is the Messiah, right? Well, if Jesus is the Messiah, why didn't he know what kind of person Judas was? If he couldn't choose good disciples, what hope does he have of restoring Israel and bringing in the Kingdom of God? How does Peter answer these objections?

He asserts that the answer lies in the directives given by the Spirit in Ps. 69 and Ps. 109 (v. 16, the Scripture had to be fulfilled).

What are these Psalms about?

They are laments by righteous David who is being scorned, betrayed, caused to suffer.

The early Christians saw David, the righteous sufferer, as a type of Christ; David's enemies were anti-types. David, anointed by God and marked out as Israel's savior by his victory over Goliath and in many other battles with the Philistines, was none the less — or rather because of that — rejected, persecuted and sentenced to death by the establishment, and forced to flee to the Gentiles. There however, he was preserved by God until eventually he returned and was acknowledged King, first by Judah and then by Israel. And then again, during Absalom's rebellion, not only did the bulk of the people turn against him, most notably the elite in Judah, but his close friend and advisor Ahithophel proved a traitor, joined the conspirators and advised Absalom how David could best be tracked down and destroyed (2 Sam. 17:1-9) in the same way as Judas advised the high priest how Jesus could be found and arrested.

David's experiences, though not in themselves predictions, were prototypes that had to be fulfilled at the higher level of Messiah's sufferings and final vindication, just as Israel's Passover, though not in itself a prediction had to be fulfilled in his redeeming death and resurrection (Lk. 22:16). In addition, some of the experiences described in David's Psalms went far beyond anything that David ever experienced himself. They were not, then analogous to Messiah's experiences; they were direct predictions of them. (This is what Peter is saying in Acts 2:29-31 when he says David was a prophet speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit).

So what Peter is saying is that Judas' defection and betrayal, rather than bringing to question Jesus' claims to Messiahship, actually constitutes further evidence for that claim. Scripture had to be and was fulfilled.

Verses 21-26

Okay, the Scripture had to be fulfilled; Judas had to be replaced. But with whom? What were the *criteria* for their decision-making? How did they come to hold these criteria? Why were they important?

The qualifications make sense if the task was that of being a witness. A witness can only speak of what he or she has personally seen and experienced.

What was the *process* of their decision-making?

1. They established criteria
2. On the basis of these criteria, they proposed two persons as replacements
3. Then they prayed, asking God to choose between them
4. Finally they cast lots

🍏 Would this be a good process today?

This casting of lots was not evidence of any kind of superstition or reneging of responsibility. Prov. 16:33 endorsed such a way of prayerfully submitting the decision-making process to God's will. (Note this was before the giving of the Holy Spirit who now makes God's will known to us)

Application

There are two main characters in this passage, Peter and Judas. What do they have in common?
Both were trusted disciples of Jesus and both betrayed him.

What is different about them? How does each handle his spiritual failure? (See Acts 1:16-18; Mt. 27:3-10) What does Peter do?

Peter's initiative "Among the believers reflects his obedience to Jesus' commission (Lk. 22:32, "Once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers"). It marks, both his full repentance for denying Jesus and his full embrace of Jesus' restoration. Thus, Peter becomes a helpful model for us when we grapple with our own spiritual failure. He repents of his sin, receives the forgiveness offered, and forges on with deeper humility, dependence upon God, trust and joy.

How does Judas handle his failure?

He commits suicide. He is unable or unwilling to repent. And he is also unable to live with the enormity of his sin. If we do not give our sin to Jesus and receive his forgiveness it will eventually destroy us.

🍏 How do we deal with our spiritual failures? Do we repent, receive forgiveness and then let our failures go? Or do we pridefully hold onto our sin, wallow in it, beat ourselves with it (this is not deep remorse but deep pride) and refuse God's forgiveness?

🍏 **Remember the lesson of Judas**

1. Anyone can fall away — Don't be too proud
2. If you fall away, come back — Don't be too proud

Trust in the sovereignty of God

Judas' betrayal was very bitter and painful both to Jesus and to the Apostles. But what did God do with it? He worked out the redemption of the world. To adapt the declaration of Joseph (Gen. 50:20) "What Judas meant for evil, God meant for good." Suffering, hardship, betrayal, confusion will fall upon all of us. But God will not abandon us. His loving rule will not be threatened. Trust in him!

Key Theme

- The promised Holy Spirit is sent —
 - To empower the witness of the Apostles
 - To incorporate people in the new community
 - To give life and joy and grace to know God intimately

Outline

- 2:1-3 The promised gift is received
- 2:4-11 Speaking in other languages
- 2:12-13 Reaction of Pentecost crowd

Verses 1-3

What is the context of the Holy Spirit's coming? Who's there? (everyone - all) What are they doing? Where are they? Describe the scene.

They are all together, in one mind, waiting prayerfully, in Jerusalem. In other words, they are being obedient to what Jesus told them to do. And they are obedient "together" — they are united, committed to one another.

How long were they told to wait? How long were they waiting?

They were told to wait until they Holy Spirit came. So that's how long they waited.

How long did they have to wait? (10 days) Did they know the Holy Spirit would come on the 10th day? (no) What would have happened if they had despaired or had grown impatient and quit praying and waiting a day or two earlier? We don't know, but perhaps they would have missed out on what God was about to do.

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- 🍏 Have you ever begun something with the sense that God had called you to it and then gotten discouraged or impatient and then quit?
- 🍏 How do you know when you have prayed and waited long enough?
The answer to the prayer comes (not always the answer you want or in the form you expect)
- 🍏 Have you sensed that God has made some sort of promise to you? How long should you wait for it?
Until the promise is fulfilled — cf. Abraham, Moses, the Apostles, etc. . .
- 🍏 What if it's been a really long time?
Keep waiting, keep praying, keep listening, pay attention to what God is saying and doing in the present, obey/act on what you can.

Let me hammer on the issue of prayer for a moment. In the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts virtually no significant initiative of God happens outside the context of prayer. Luke wants to make it absolutely clear that prayer is the lifeblood of our spiritual lives and fundamental to our experience of God.

Look at Lk. 3:21-23. What's going on? What is Jesus doing? (*He is praying*) Then what happens? (*The Holy Spirit descends upon him*) Then what happens next? (*Jesus begins his earthly ministry*)

When did Jesus begin his earthly ministry? (*After the Holy Spirit descended upon him*) What was the context of the Holy Spirit's coming to Jesus? (*Jesus was praying*)

What did Jesus tell his disciples to do in Acts 1:4? (*Wait for the promised Holy Spirit*) How did the disciples understand this command to "wait?" (*It meant to pray — a lot — and to be attentive to God, to listen as you pray*)

What happens in the context of the disciples' prayer? (*Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit upon them*)

What about us? Can we experience the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the same way that Jesus and the Apostles did? (Perhaps not in the exact same way — raising the dead, speaking in unknown languages — but we can experience the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in ways which are appropriate to us and our circumstances.

Look at Luke 11:1-3. What's going on here? (*Jesus is teaching his disciples about prayer*) What does Jesus say or imply about prayer? (*It's not a casual, easy, leisurely thing*) It demands perseverance, desperation, asking, knocking, searching, courage and tenacity.

Look at the promise in v. 13. What is it?

🍏 Do we want more of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and in that of our Fellowships? What should we do? Let's ask and keep asking. Let's not be those "who have not because we ask not" (James 4:2). Jesus makes a promise, "...how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him." It's a promise. Jesus always, always, always keeps his promises. The only real question is, "Will we persevere in asking?"

Okay, let's talk about Pentecost. What was Pentecost? What is its significance to the Jews? Why did Jesus send the Spirit on Pentecost? Was it a haphazard choice on his part or was he intentional in choosing this day?

Historical:

Pentecost is the Greek name for a festival known in the OT as the Feast of Weeks (Lev. 23:15; Dt. 16:9). The Greek word means "50" and refers to the 50 days that elapsed since the wave offering at Passover.

What happened was that, before the grain was completely ripe and ready, a sheaf was cut and offered as firstfruits to God (Lev. 23:9-11). This was the Passover wave offering. 50 days later (i.e. on the day of Pentecost) two loaves, baked from the first flour to be milled from the newly reaped grain, were also offered as firstfruits to God (Lev. 23:15-17).

Harvest time, in any primitive, agricultural economy, was a big deal which occasioned joyful celebration. It marked the break of a cold, dismal winter with its scarcities. In Israel the joy was both natural and sacred. God, they believed, had given them Canaan as their inheritance, harvest was the reaping of the blessings of that God-given inheritance.

Now Israel had been celebrating these agricultural festivals (Passover wave offering and Pentecost) for centuries. But the year Jesus rose from the grave there were bigger things to celebrate. His resurrection was the first break in a more terrible winter than the one caused by the brutal scarcities of the seasons. His glorified body was the first fruits of a mightier harvest (1 Cor. 15:23). 50 days later, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came as the firstfruits of a greater inheritance, a foretaste and guarantee of Creation's final restoration (Rom. 8:18-23).

Typological:

Pentecost also had typological significance. What Do I mean by "Typology?" Biblical typology deals with the parallels between actual, historical (usually OT) figures or events in salvation history and their later, analogous fulfillment. Early Christians used typological writing frequently. For example, the reference in Mk. 1:6 to John the Baptist's wearing a garment of camel's hair and a leather girdle echoes the description in 2 Kgs. 1:8 of Elijah the Tishbite's distinctive appearance. In so doing, Mark makes the point that John the Baptist is the Elijah who was to return before the Messiah (cf. Mk. 9:11-13). The same thing is going on in Matthew's depiction of Jesus as the second Moses (echoing Deut. 18:15-19) and the Epistle to the Hebrews' depiction of the Christian life as wilderness wandering between exodus and promised land (Heb. 3-4).

So what's the typological significance of the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost? What past event does it echo and fulfill? And what might that mean?

Look at Ex. 19. What happened in Exodus 19? (if time is a factor, you may want to just summarize this)

This is where God established Covenant with the Israelites as a people, making them a nation, his Chosen People (Ex. 19: 5-7; Note: Peter echoes the language of Ex. 19 in talking about God's establishment of the church in (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

In establishing covenant with Israel, it was there, at Sinai, that God gave Israel the Law. What was the purpose of the Law? (*It was what identified Israel as set apart and in covenant-relationship with God*)

By, the second century BC, the day of Pentecost began to be observed by the Jews as the anniversary of the giving of the Law at Mt. Sanai (Jubilees 1:1), because this was recorded as having happened 50 days after the Exodus.

Look again at Exodus 19. Look at how the scene is described. Look at the language being used. Look at v. 2. Where are the Israelites? (*They are together, in one place, camping, waiting just as they were told to do in Ex.*) Does this remind you of anything in Acts 2? Look at Acts 2:1 What are the disciples doing?

They are all together, in one place, waiting just as they were told to do (Acts 1:4)

Now look at Ex. 19:16-19. Look at the phenomena described. What's going on?

There is a violent sound — thunder, lightening, trumpet blasts

There is smoke and fire

There is speech in "different tongues" — "As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and god would answer him in thunder." (v. 19)

Jewish tradition had it that when God spoke in thunder it was split up into 70 voices, in 70 languages, so all nations should understand (Exodus Rabbah 5:9, Tanhuma 26c)

Do you see how this points to the phenomena recorded in Acts 2:2-3? What's going on there?

Sound like the rush of a violent wind

Tongues of fire

Speaking in other languages

Okay, Jesus chooses to send the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and he does it in a way so as to highlight its connection with the Covenant-making and Law-giving at Sinai. So what's the point?

On the day of Pentecost the promise of the Father was fulfilled in these ways.

1. They were given power for witness.

On that day a great harvest (remember the agricultural symbolism of Pentecost) was gathered. 3000 souls were saved as the first-fruits of the Christian mission.

2. A new Covenant was made. Look at the promises of Jer. 31:31-34

*"The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my **law within them**, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be **their God**, and they shall be **my people**. **No longer** shall they **teach one another**, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall **all know me**, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for **I will forgive** their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

At Pentecost these promises are fulfilled!

What's new and better in this new Covenant Promise?

3. A new People of God, the Church, was inaugurated.

Look at Exek. 11:17-20, a passage which also speaks of the promise of a new covenant. Look at what it says about the people of this New Covenant.

*Therefore say: Thus says the Lord GOD: I will **gather you** from the peoples, and **assemble** you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. When they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. I will give them **one heart**, and put **a new spirit** within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them **a heart of flesh**, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be **my people**, and I will be **their God**.*

How do the events of Pentecost fulfill this prophecy in Ezekiel?

Gathered from the peoples

Given one heart

So what is Luke saying? It is no longer the Law that sets apart the covenant people of God, but rather the Holy Spirit who writes God's Law on each person's heart enabling him or her to obey and enjoy God. And the Covenant People of God are not limited to the Israelites but include all those who receive the Holy Spirit from every tribe and tongue and nation.

Biblical Associations with the coming of the Spirit

There are a lot of other biblical associations with the phenomena recorded in Acts 2:2-3. In both Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*), the word for "wind" or "breath" was also used for "spirit." So when Acts 2:2 says that they heard "a sound like the rush of a violent wind," "wind" also means "spirit." Now look at Gen. 1:1-2 when a "wind" or "spirit" from God hovered over the earth at creation. The suggestion is that here in Acts we have a new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17).

Look at Gen 2:7 where God breathes life into humanity. Pentecost is a life-breathing experience. Also, in Ezek. 37:1-4 (breathing life into dried bones) and John 3:5-8 (being born of the Spirit). So the coming of the Holy Spirit as a violent wind was meant to symbolize the coming of the creative power of God to inaugurate a new era in which men and women should be brought to spiritual life. One other biblical association is that fire is a symbol of God's powerful presence (Gen. 15:17; Ex. 3:2-5; 13:21-22) and also a source of light (spiritual illumination) and warmth.

What advantage do the New Covenant People of God have over the Old Covenant People of God?
Given a heart of flesh (i.e. the Holy Spirit indwells them) so that they may have the power to obey God (cf. Rom. 8:1-4)

As people filled with the Spirit's light and warmth we are to be a spreading flame, a people set ablaze who set others on fire. We are to bring light and truth to a world mired in darkness and falsehood. And we are to bring warmth to people who feel left out in the cold — unloved, lost, despairing, along

Verses 4-11

Okay, let's look at v. 4. What happened to the disciples? And what did they do? What did the disciples say? Does this tell us anything about what the Holy Spirit wants to produce in our lives?

The disciples were filled with the Spirit and begin to speak in other languages — languages they had not previously known.

Where do they do this?

In Jerusalem, in public, fearlessly

What are they saying?

They are speaking about God's deeds of power (v. 11)

Why do you think God enabled them to speak in other languages? Why not just have them speak in Aramaic or Greek, which most of the crowd would have understood?

Why do people care about their own language and culture? Have you ever been outside your own culture and then run into somebody from your home culture? What was that like? Why does God care about people's languages and cultures? What does this say about God? And what does it imply about us and our witness?

People have a "heart language," a language which connects them with their core identity and place in the world. Their heart language helps define who they are and how they see themselves. People may understand and be fluent in other languages but they resonate with their own.

What God demonstrates at pentecost is that he knows and cares about each person's heart language. he knows people at the very core of their selves, at the most fundamental level of their identity. And because He knows and cares, he speaks their language. (This is one reason Bible translation is such a huge deal — it speaks to people's core identities and demonstrates that God values them as they are) This also tells us that the people of God are not each meant to fit into one cookie-cutter mold. We are meant to be united, together, with one mind in ALL our diversity of race, language, culture, temperament, gifting.

If we care about our witness, we also must learn the "heart language" of our audience. We must learn to communicate biblical truth in language that resonates with them.

Oh another level, does this languages thing remind you of anything else in Scripture? Do you remember what happened at Babel in Gen 11?

The people in Gen 11 were trying to build their own tower to reach God on their own and make a name for themselves — to, in effect, dethrone God — so God confused their languages

Here at Pentecost, God reversed what happened at Babel by coming upon humble people and “unconfusing languages.”

This also was an indication of the kind of new community God was building. It was a foretaste of Rev. 5:9-10 where people from every tribe, language and nation worship Jesus.

Application

Okay, let's look at the Pentecost crowd. Who is there? What's the significance of this? What is already beginning to happen?

Jesus had said, “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. When the disciples first heard this they must have been flabbergasted. Going to Jerusalem from Galilee had been a stretch of their imaginations and expectations. Going to the ends of the earth!? This was way beyond anything they could even imagine. How was this going to happen? They didn't have a clue. Where are the ends of the earth anyway? Beats me. . . The thing they couldn't even imagine, God was already doing; Think about this the next time you sense God giving you a task that is over your head!

🍏 Is God showing you or calling you to something over your head?

What is the reaction of the Pentecost crowd? Why does Luke keep repeating himself?

They are bewildered (v. 6), amazed, astonished (v. 7), amazed and perplexed (v. 12). Luke is telling us that they were absolutely stunned. There was nothing in their experience that could have prepared them for this.

What is the question which some finally ask? What does this mean?

How does this relate to their calling to be Witnesses?

🍏 Are we so filled with the Holy Spirit, so radically committed to following Jesus that whenever people encounter us, “What does it mean?” is the question that jumps from them? How do some of the people answer the question? Why do you think they come up with such an obviously absurd explanation? Why are some people resistant to the work of God even when it is spectacularly right in front of them?

🍏 What might that look like here?

Why is it crucial to know and experience the Holy Spirit's indwelling and daily filling?

*Sets us apart as God's people and enables us to live in covenant-relationship with him
Helps us to know God and his Word and to obey him
Gives us power for witness and service*

🍏 How do we experience the daily on-going filling of the Spirit?

We ask and keep on asking

Key Theme: Jesus is Lord and Messiah

The pouring out of the Spirit means they are in the last days–

The last days were inaugurated by Jesus who, as Lord and Messiah, had authority to send the Spirit

The only proper response to Jesus is repentance and commitment

Verses 14-21

Peter stands up to address the crowd. How does he begin? What question does he answer? How?

Peter begins with the question his audience is asking, "What does this mean?" (I think this is a key to effective evangelism. We need to know the questions our audience is actually asking. Sometimes non-Christians' questions are different than what we expect)

Then Peter, almost kiddingly (he doesn't get defensive or frustrated) answers their explanation with a counter-explanation. "Let's get real guys. We're not drunk. It's only 9 AM. No! This is what Joel prophesied."

Why quote Joel to answer their question? He wants to speak out of their worldview, their way of thinking and making sense of the world. This both enables him to be understood and gives him credibility.

Let's look at Joel's prophecy. What point is Peter making with it? "How does it answer the crowd's question?

Peter says that the phenomena described in Acts 2:14 were a fulfillment of Prophecy. The Spirit had been poured out on all flesh. This meant they were in the last days.

Verses 22-36:

Why does Peter jump from Joel to Jesus? What's the connection between Joel's prophecy and Jesus?

The question Peter wants to answer is, "How did we get to the last days?" His answer is, "Because of Jesus." This leads to the key question of this passage, "Who is Jesus?"

What does Peter say about Jesus in v. 22?

Jesus was attested (affirmed or proven to be true) to them by God. How? God did deeds of power, wonders, and signs among the people through him

What problem would the crowd have with what Peter was saying?

Yes, we know that Jesus did wonders and signs. But was that really God working through him? Jesus couldn't have been God's chosen agent. Why? He failed; he was crucified. God's plans cannot fail, so Jesus couldn't have been God's Messiah.

How does Peter answer this objection? (See w. 23-24)

You're right. God's plans cannot fail. But Jesus did not fail. It was God's plan to put Jesus at people's disposal. The Messiah had to suffer. But God's verdict is not seen in the cross, but in the resurrection. You killed. . . . But God raised up.

The idea of a crucified Messiah was a huge stumbling block to the Jews, which had to be addressed repeatedly. We also need to know and address the gospel stumbling blocks of our audience.

Why does Peter move on to David's prophecy in Ps 16? How does it show that Jesus is Messiah? Who is speaking? To Whom? Who is the Holy One in v. 27? What does Ps 16 talk about?

Remember the big question Peter wants to answer, "Who is Jesus?" Ps 16 talks about not being abandoned to Hades and flesh not experiencing corruption. But they all knew that David had died, been buried and was still entombed. So, David couldn't have been talking about himself. The crowd also knew David was a prophet. Of whom was he prophesying? Of whom had they heard that death could not hold him (v 24)? Jesus! Jerusalem was rife with rumors that his tomb was empty.

In vv. 32-33, Peter anticipates another objection. "If Jesus is alive, produce him for all of us to see." How does Peter answer this question?

Jesus isn't here. He wasn't just raised up by God. He was exalted to the right hand of God. What's the evidence that Jesus is at God's right hand? Everything you see and hear! Jesus fulfilled Joel's prophecy. Jesus poured out the Spirit. You can doubt our testimony that we've seen Jesus raised up from the dead, but you can't doubt what you yourselves see and hear.

Why does Peter now bring in Ps 110? Again, who is speaking? To whom? About what?

David could not be speaking of himself. Why? He didn't ascend into heaven and he can't be his own "My Lord". So David must be speaking of Messiah. But the very fact that God had to invite David's Lord, i.e., Messiah, to come and sit at His right hand implies that there was a time when Messiah was not seated there and thus had to be elevated to that position. So, if Ps 16 wasn't enough to convince the crowd that David was prophesying about Messiah, then perhaps the added weight of Ps 110 would do the trick.

Peter's use of Ps 110 also answers another objection the crowd would have. "If Jesus is Messiah, where is the evidence of his Kingdom? Why hasn't he begun putting an end to evil and injustice? Ps 110 implies that it was never part of God's plan that the Messiah should proceed, immediately upon his evaluation, to usher in his kingdom. The invitation was, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." There was to be an interval between his exaltation and the subjugation of his enemies during which Messiah would be seated at God's right hand awaiting his Second Coming. Only then would his kingdom be fully consummated.

What's the climatic point Peter has been driving at from v. 14 on?

What does this mean? *Joel's prophecy has been fulfilled. Why now? Because of Jesus. Who is Jesus? Lord and Messiah- and by implication God incarnate.*

Verses 37-41

How does the crowd respond to Peter's sermon?

Cut to the heart. Brothers, what should we do? 3000 saved.

Verses 42-47

What do these 3000 converts do? What's the connection between who they know Jesus to be, the sending of the Spirit and their community life? What did it mean for them to devote themselves to the apostle's teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer? What's the difference between devoting yourself to something and merely adding something to your already busy lives?

Why did they share their possessions and goods? What enabled them to do that? Why don't people normally live this way?

What does it mean that they had "glad and generous hearts"? How did they enjoy the goodwill of all the people? What caused such favorable responses? Have you ever thought about how powerful gladness and joy and generosity can be in drawing people?

🍏 How does the life and purpose of our fellowships compare with that of the early church? Do we want to be like them? Could we be like them?

Key Applications

- 🍏 The Jesus you know determines the person you become and the life you lead.
- 🍏 Who is Jesus? Do we know and follow the real Jesus? The tender yet terrible Lord of the Universe who holds it destiny in his hands.

NOTE TO STUDY LEADERS: The following material is optional Use it only if you have the time and desire

Let's take a second look at Ps 16. Again, who is speaking here and what is he speaking about?

Peter asserts that David is prophesying about the Messiah. But the prophecy does not simply talk about the Messiah, but introduces the Messiah himself talking. It does not simply announce that upon his death and burial God would intervene to raise him from the dead.

What does the Ps. Do? It shows us Messiah, in confrontation with death, telling us the secret of his relationship with God that abolished death's power over him.

What is Messiah's secret? He "saw the Lord always before him" and was conscious that God was at his right hand," so that "he should not be moved." And he was conscious of who he was- God's Holy One, absolutely loyal to God and perfectly sinless. This gave him a rocklike stability that opposition, persecution, and even death's approach could not demolish. It was in unshaken confidence in the character of God that Jesus bowed his head in death, with a triumphant prayer (It is finished!) on his tongue. He was certain that God would open to him the "ways of life" and fill him with "gladness in His presence." (Cf. Heb 5:7).

And what did God do? How did he respond to Jesus' faith? He raised him from the dead. What's the point here? Humanity's ultimate stability doesn't depend merely and finally on the physical laws of the universe according to which the universe normally operates. Humanity's stability depends on the moral character of God. The resurrection, the fact that God did not abandon Jesus tells us that God is just, loyal, faithful. The moral universe is stable.

Okay, what can we apply from this? The God who was loyal and faithful to Jesus is the same God who is loyal to us. Will we be loyal to Him? Will we keep "The Lord always before us", i.e., nurture our intimacy with Him? Will we remember who we are- God's Holy Ones, His Saints- and, by God's grace, live accordingly?

Acts 1:1 tells us that the Gospel of Luke is a record of what Jesus began to do and teach. The book of Acts, by implication, is what Jesus continued to do and teach through his followers. How could his followers do what Jesus did? The same way Jesus did- by being empowered by the Holy Spirit and led and directed by the father, trusting in His goodness. Do we want to be part of what Jesus is continuing to do in this world? Then lets apply his secret, continue to be filled with his Spirit and press on in faith.

Acts 3:1-11 Study Notes and Questions

Key Themes

The Disciples are becoming more like Jesus as they grow in their understanding of who he is. They are becoming more compassionate and more full of faith.

Outline

- 3:1-3 The Problem
- 3:4-8 The Healing/Solution
- 3:9-11 The Reaction

Verses 1-3

What is going on in this passage? Where are Peter and John going? Why? What do they see as they are going into the temple?

What would it have been like physically, emotionally and spiritually for this man to have been lame for 40 years? What kind of reaction do you think he got from most people? Why? What might people have thought about him? What might he have thought of himself? Of God? Of religious people?

People might have thought he deserved it, that he must have some sort of heinous, hidden sin in his life (cf. Jn 9:1-2).

He might have been filled with self-doubt and self-hate. There must be something wrong with me. God must have seemed distant, uninvolved, may be even hateful. And my guess is he saw enough religious hypocrites each day that he would have been pretty cynical about them.

What does the man do? What does he ask for? Why? Was what he asked for what he really needed? What did he really need? Hope, healing, salvation. Why doesn't he ask for that?

🍏 How many people ask or seek for things not fundamental to their deepest needs? Why not ask for their deepest needs?

They are not aware of their deepest needs. Or, they've been disappointed too often in the past; they don't believe their deepest needs can be met so they settle for less. They suppress their hopes and longings; they mask their pain and emptiness.

🍏 What do people need in order to seek their deepest needs? What do we need?

Hope - which comes from seeing God's restoration of others

Truth and encouragement - which helps them believe God cares for them, too.

Opportunity and invitation - which enables them to take or experience the first step.

Verses 4-8

Why didn't Peter and John just ignore this guy? Whose example are they following? What about us? What do we do with "beggars" or needy people? Whose example are they following?

🍏 Who are the "needy" people- physically, emotionally, relationally or spiritually- in our lives? Will we look intently at them, make room for them in our lives?

Look at v. 6. What does Peter say to the man? What's the first thing he says?
I have no silver or gold.

What do people in our culture, people here at Harvard, think is important to have?
Money, resources, expertise, training, knowledge, skills, gifts, abilities, status, power, access, influence

How much of that stuff does Peter have? Zip! What does he have?
Compassion, faith in Jesus, spiritual power given to him and channeled through him by Jesus.

Would any of those things - money resources, etc.- have helped the lame man? *Not much.* What did the man really need? *What Peter had to give him - Jesus.*

To be faithful, fruitful followers of Jesus what is most important for us to have? Yet, what do we prize and pursue? What don't we prize and pursue? What's the evidence of this?

What do we (notice I keep saying we- I'm in the same boat with you) really need?
Intimacy with God, holy character and especially love, divine wisdom and insight, spiritual power and authority, the experience of God's wholeness. None of this can be earned, ordered, or manufactured. It must be received from our good and gracious God. And to receive it means we have to make space for God in our lives. It means we have to be patient, prayerful, attentive so that God can work this stuff in us.

What happens in v. 7? What does Peter do? *Takes the man by the right hand and pulls him up.* Who does the miracle? Is it Peter? *No!* But what if Peter hadn't extended his hand and raised up the lame man? Would the man have been healed? *I don't know.*

Risk of failure... What if he pulled the man up, but the man wasn't healed.
He'd look like a fool and Jesus' name would be dishonored.

Have you ever not done something because you were afraid that God might not show up? Because you were afraid that you or God would fail and be ridiculed? What's worse than failing?
Not trusting God and not trying. (Mt 25:14-30) Sometimes we will think that God said something to us, told us to do something and we will be wrong. But that's okay. God doesn't get uptight about our mistakes. Faithlessness, a basic distrust in God's character, is a much bigger problem.

🍏 Let's not be presumptuous, but let's be willing to take faith-risks, be willing to fail.

Let's summarize a bit. What did the man ask for?
Money - something Peter and John did not have

What does Peter give?
What he has- ultimately, access to, relationship with Jesus. How valuable is this? Supremely valuable.

🍏 Do you realize how incredibly valuable our relationship with Jesus is? Is there anything in our live, or even in the universe, more valuable than this?

In terms of ministry, what is the principle for us?

Don't worry about what you don't have. Don't be paralyzed by a sense of lack or scarcity. Don't use what you don't have as an excuse for not caring or not getting involved in people's lives.

Rather, focus on what you have to give. Give what you have- of time, energy, resources, love, etc. and give it in faith. Remember the feeding of the 5000? What did Jesus do with 5 loaves and 2 fishes offered in faith? Remember the disciples. What did Jesus do with 12 quarrelsome, insignificant people?

Look at the lame man in this passage. What happened to him? Where was he at the beginning of the passage? Where is he at the end?

He goes from being at the gate of the temple begging to being inside the temple worshiping (v.8).

What do you think happened to this man's view of God in the process? His view of himself? The church? Don't we know a lot of broken people around us? Aren't we ourselves a bit broken? Wouldn't we love to see this kind of transformation in ourselves and in the people around us? How will this happen?

Through Jesus. Through entrusting our life to Jesus. Through wanting Jesus more than any other thing. Through doing everything we do for Jesus. Through knowing Jesus.

Verses 9-11

How do the people react when they see this man "walking and leaping and praising God"?

They are filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. When God is at work people will marvel. They will marvel and some will begin to ask questions and discover that God is who they have really needed and wanted all along.

🍏 Are we people who are living our lives in such a way that onlookers keep asking, "What's up with those Christians? There's something different, something alive, something both scary and compelling about them. Let's go take a look."

🍏 Let's get at this another way. Do we believe the Apostles were "normal" people who were simply filled with God's Spirit? Or do we think there was something special, unique, irrepeatable about who they were and what they did? Do we think any of them would have gotten into Harvard? Would any of them have stood out at our parties because of their intellect, looks, charm, charisma or credentials? No! So what's going on with them? And can we get in on it?

The story goes that when D.L.Moody was a young man he heard a preacher say, "The world has yet to see what God will do with a man wholly consecrated to Him." Moody heard that and said to himself, "By God's grace, I'll be that man." Moody's life bears testimony that God was indeed gracious and Moody came close to being that man.

I'm haunted by that preacher's statement and by Moody's response. What about you?

Acts 3:12-26 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme

Jesus is glorified by deeds of power done through the Apostles and by courageous witness that interprets what God is doing, points people to Jesus and calls for response

Outline: Peter's Sermon and Response

3:12-16 How the healing happened — by the name of Jesus

3:17-26 What the healing demands and why — Repentance

Personal Study Questions

1. Outline Peter's sermon. What are its elements? Why does Peter include each element?
2. What strikes you or surprises you about this passage?
3. Look at the titles Peter ascribes to Jesus. What do they signify?

Verses 12-16

Why is the crowd staring at Peter and John? What do you suppose they are thinking? What conclusion might they be drawing? What does Peter want to make very clear to them? Why? Why not take some of the credit?

*Peter asks the question, "Why do you stare at us as though **by our own power or piety** we had made him walk?" Anytime God does something unexpected we are tempted to look for some human cause — human strategy, skill, ability, even human piety or human prayer. What does Peter know? God may use all these things but he is always the initiator and main actor; he is always the one responsible for every "work of God."*

Why does Peter want to make clear that the healing of the lame man was God's work and not his and John's?

First, because it's the truth. Peter is under no delusions about who did it. Second, it's dangerous to think we can play God. If we think we are responsible for doing what only God can do we will become crushed by the burden. We have an important part to play in what God is doing but it is only God who does it. Third, if Peter had not resisted the temptation to take credit for the healing he would have robbed the crowd of what they really needed — Jesus!

What could Peter have focused on in his sermon? What did he focus on?

Peter could have focused on the miracle itself. "Okay folks, gather 'round and examine this man. I want you to understand this really is a miracle. He could have focused on the man and made it a testimony service, "Okay, tell the crowd what happened to you."

What Peter focuses on is Jesus. There is a place for talking about experiences and giving testimony but these things can't take the focus off of Jesus. We've got to put Jesus at the center of our witness. Why? Because only Jesus can save, heal, restore, make whole.

🍏 What does it mean for us to make Jesus the center?

What is Peter's argument in vv. 12-16? What is his point?

1. *The healing is not done by the Apostles' power (v. 12)*

2. God glorified his servant (v. 13a)
3. You handed him over and rejected him (v. 13b)
4. You rejected him and killed him (vv. 14-15a)
5. God raised him from the dead (v. 15b)
6. Jesus' name made the man strong (v. 16)

*The point Peter wants to make is **how** the healing happened. It didn't happen by the power of the Apostles but by Jesus' name. How? The very Jesus whom the crowd had rejected and killed, God raised from the dead, vindicating him and enabling his power. The sub-point is that this Jerusalem crowd had really messed up in rejecting Jesus.*

Let's unpack this a bit . . .

What does Peter say about Jesus in vv. 12-16? What names/titles does he use? What do they tell us about Jesus? **(Make sure you read Isaiah 52:13-53:12 It tell us why Messiah must suffer - Acts 3:18)**

Peter refers to Jesus as "God's Servant," "The Holy and Righteous One," and as the "Author of life." The word used for "servant" is the one used in the Septuagint (Greek) translation of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, where the coming servant of God (52:13) is described as the one who would be wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (53:5). The concept of "servant of the Lord" was well known in Israel because of Isaiah 42-53 and other texts. So when Peter used "servant" and then went on to speak of "the Holy and Righteous One" — another title for Messiah that also appears in Isaiah 53:11 — it's pretty clear that he was thinking of this passage. So Peter was teaching that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the OT Scriptures. That's why Peter begins his sermon with, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors. . . ." It is as if Peter is saying, "Our God, working through our history is fulfilling his covenant promises by raising up this Jesus. He is the focal point, the fulfillment of all our hopes and dreams. In rejecting him, you have rejected your God, denied your history and cut yourselves off from blessing of God's covenant.

Imagine you are part of the crowd listening to Peter. What thoughts and feelings, what objections, might you have?

You might be feeling confused, guilty, resentful, angry. And you would probably be thinking to yourself, "How dare he say these things? How could he make such assertions so confidently?"

But what's the evidence Peter can cite as proof of his assertions?

The lame man was no longer lame!

How did he get healed?

Through Jesus, who had been vindicated by God.

Why did God need to vindicate Jesus? And what did God's vindication of Jesus signify? What had the Jews done?

They had handed Jesus over and rejected him before Pilate, though he had decided to release him (v. 13).

They had rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be given to them (v. 14). Pilate had given them the choice between Jesus and Barabbas,

thinking that, given the difference in moral character between Jesus and Barabbas, they would never choose Barabbas. But faced with either a perfectly holy and righteous man or a man who for political ends was prepared to murder, they felt more comfortable with Barabbas and chose him. (We still make such choices today).

They killed the Author of life (v. 15). This shows the suicidal insanity of rebellion against God and rejection of his appointed Savior. Jesus was the only source of life and they rejected him. They chose a murderer — someone who took life — over Jesus, the only one who could give life.

In vindicating Jesus, God had rejected their judgement of Jesus and confirmed that Jesus was indeed his Chosen One.

What question do you think is now going through the minds of those in the crowd?

Oh no! Woe is us! We have rejected and killed the Lord's Chosen. What will God do with us.

How does Peter address this question in vv. 17-26? What does he want to see happen?

Peter appeals to them. Why? Peter isn't interested in merely condemning his hearers. What he really wants is that they would repent of their sin, believe in Jesus and be saved. So Peter doesn't stand aloof from them. He calls them friends (Greek, Lit. "brothers") and says, "I know you acted in ignorance." He is forthright in pronouncing the people culpable for killing Jesus but he doesn't say how terrible they are. Rather, he says he knows they acted in ignorance. Their ignorance was no excuse; it did not place them beyond the need for repentance, but neither did their direct involvement in Jesus' condemnation place them beyond the reach of redemption. So he appeals to them, "Repent, and be forgiven."

🍏 What about us? Of what must we repent?

The Jews rejected and killed Jesus. Maybe we haven't done this directly (though Jesus was led to the cross for the sins of the whole world, including ours). But even as "followers" of Jesus, what are we guilty of? We're guilty of ignoring Jesus, of reducing him to our image and of not taking him seriously, of taking him for granted, of trying to bend him to our purposes. We need to repent.

🍏 What benefits come to us when we repent?

1. *Forgiveness — Most people, even if they can't put a name to it, carry heavy loads of guilt and shame and don't know how to get rid of it (cf. the movie "The Mission"). People need forgiveness and the only place they can really find it is in Christ.*

2. *Times of Refreshing (v. 20). Most of us go through much of life feeling pretty stuck in what we do. We feel flat. And we try to shake the flatness by seeking a variety of experiences. The problem is that the excitement doesn't last. In Christ there are times of refreshing, times when Jesus becomes so real to us that our whole spirit, soul and body are revived.*

🍏 What are some key applications from this passage?

1. Let God be God

Don't be tempted to take credit for God's work. Don't be tempted to take on God's work. Play your part but don't carry burdens or expectations that aren't yours to carry.

2. Keep your focus on Jesus

It's really easy to become distracted, even by good things, and allow Jesus to be pushed to the periphery of your life and conversation

3. Be quick to repent

Don't let sin fester unconfessed in your life. Be willing to have your sin pointed out even if it's done none too gently. Don't get defensive, resentful and retaliatory. Repent. It will bring health and renewal to you.

Acts 4:1-22 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

There is a clash of competing authorities. Peter and John are forced to choose which authority they will obey. They choose to obey Jesus at risk to their lives, but at benefit to their souls.

Outline:

- 4:1-7 Responses to healing and first sermon - By the rulers (1-3, 5-7), by the people (4)
- 8-12 Peter's second sermon - How healing happened; what it means
- 13-22 Responses of both authorities (13-18, 21-22) and apostles (19-20)

Introduction/Warm up

When, because of your faith in Jesus, have you done/said something which got you into trouble with those in authority? What happened?

Questions for Individual Study

What's going on in this passage? Who are the characters involved? What seems to be their main concern? Why? How do Peter and John react to the situation they are in? What new things do they tell us about Jesus?

Verses 1-7

What happened in Ch. 3? How do the rulers respond? Who are these rulers and why do they respond the way they do?

In ch. 3 a lame man is healed and Peter explains to the large crowd which gathers how the healing happened, who did it, and what its significance was. The rulers swoop down on the scene, much annoyed and obviously very threatened, and arrest Peter and John.

Who were these rulers?

Collectively they made up the Sanhedrin or ruling council of the Jews, made up of 71 members presided over by the high priest. It's important to note that they were not representative of the Jewish nation as a whole; they were a tightly closed group of aristocrats descended from the old patrician families. Neither were they typical of the priesthood in general, who tended to be Pharisees. The bulk of the Sanhedrin was made up of Sadducees who were very much men of the world. Over recent centuries they had been deeply influenced by Hellenistic rationality and culture and that, combined with the satisfaction of wielding religious and political power, had induced in them a worldly-mindedness and a luke-warm spirituality. They had wealth (they enjoyed massive revenues from the temple), they had power, they mixed in the highest circles (both Jewish and Gentile), they were educated, polished and sophisticated. (You can picture them in the Harvard Faculty Club, can't you?)

Politically, they ingratiated themselves with the Romans and followed a policy of collaboration. Theologically, they believed that the messianic age had begun in the Maccabean period (2nd-1st Century, BC); so they were not looking for a Messiah. They also denied the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. The world as it was, was good enough for them; it was the only world they really believed in.

The Apostles, with their talk about fulfilled prophecy, the last days, the hope of a coming Messianic Kingdom, all based on the presupposition of the reality of Jesus'

resurrection, offended the Sadducees sense of rationality, challenged their lifestyle, their worldview and their vested interests. The Sadducees saw the apostles as both agitators and heretics and were intensely threatened by them.

Verse 8-12

Peter and John are standing on trial before a hostile court. What might they be thinking?

They are probably thinking about Jesus' trial before this same group of people (Lk 22:66-71; Mk 14:16-35). Was history going to repeat itself? Were they going to suffer the same fate?

What was their legal strategy? What could they have done instead? What was their key goal?

If their key goal had been to try to save their own skin, they would have said as little as possible, downplayed the situation, kept Jesus' name out of it and acted cowed. Instead, they took the offensive. In effect, they put the Sanhedrin on trial, acting like prosecuting attorneys. Why such a risky strategy? Because they wanted to bring honor and glory to Jesus more than they wanted to save themselves. You get the sense that they thought to themselves, "Wow! Look at this audience: high priests, captain of temple guard, elders. We may never get a chance like this again. Let's go for it!"

Look at v. 8. How does it begin? What does this tell us about the Holy Spirit's filling?

"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit." The Spirit's filling is not once in a lifetime. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to fill us a new every day and in every situation. He is a person, not a mere power. We need to be in communion with Him, seek His help.

Why is Peter filled with the Spirit? For what purpose?

To bear witness to Jesus. The Spirit loves to empower those who want to bear witness to Jesus.

What is Peter saying in his sermon?

Ultimately, Peter charges the Sanhedrin, who are the most eminent religious and spiritual authorities in Israel with having 1) failed to recognize God's Messiah when he came, 2) actually killing him and 3) being anti-Christ and therefore anti-God.

This is why Peter quotes from Ps 118:22. The psalm depicts a procession up to the temple gates (v. 19), then through the gates to the altar (v. 27). The whole scene is that of the temple and Peter's use of it has to keep this imagery in mind. Who, then, could the "builders" be, if not those in charge of the temple, i.e., the high priest, rulers, and elders? And who is the "cornerstone" if not he Messiah? So, prophetically, the psalm is saying that the high priest and his cronies would one day reject the Messiah and find no place for him in their religious system. But, in spite of them, God would intervene to make the Messiah the foundation of the temple, the foundation of Israel's spiritual life. This is what Peter drives at.

Why does Peter add v. 12?

According to the rulers, who alone are saved? Yahweh (cf. Isa 43:11-12; 45:2) And Peter agreed. So what was Peter doing? Was he advocating they should defy a mere man along side Yahweh? No! Peter was arguing that Jesus was in fact God incarnate. As such, there was by definition, no salvation apart from Jesus. To reject Jesus was to reject God. Peter was saying that these religious professionals had missed the whole point of

their religion, that they were not saved people and never would be unless they humbly repented and put their faith in a man they had recently condemned to death.

Verse 13-22

Picture the frustration of the rulers. They kill one man, Jesus, who had threatened their authority and position, and now a bunch of Jesus clones had popped up. What would our world be like if we became Jesus clones?

What problem faces the rulers now in terms of deciding what to do?

They couldn't deny the miracle had happened (and apparently couldn't disprove the apostles' repeated claim that Jesus was raised from the dead) Everyone knew the miracle was genuine and people were praising God for it. To punish the apostles who had done the miracle would be to tell the people to stop glorifying God: a very difficult thing for a priest to do and still retain credibility with people (vv. 21-22)

What is peculiarly striking about the rulers' response to the miracle? What are they interested in? What are they not interested in?

They were not interested in getting at the truth, in actually finding out what happened. All they wanted was to stop the spread of the apostles' message. What they were interested in was maintaining their authority and position. They were more afraid of losing that than they were of being on the wrong side of God.

So what do the rulers decide to do? Why doesn't their plan work?

They decide to lean on the apostles with all their religious and professional authority, to threaten them and cause them to crumble.

Peter and John don't crumble. Why? They are not afraid to suffer and die. Why? Because they know who Jesus is, Lord and Messiah. They trust his character; he was willing to die to save them from their sins. They are intensely aware of his mercy; they did not merit salvation. They know the power of God; mortals cannot thwart His purposes. Because they weren't afraid to suffer, the rulers had absolutely no power over them.

They were asked to choose between competing authorities: Jesus had commanded them to preach and to be his witnesses. They could not obey Jesus without disobeying and defying the council. And they could not obey the council without flatly disobeying Jesus. They had to choose. And their choice depended on their view of Jesus. He wasn't just a reformer or rabbi or prophet. He was the Lord incarnate, exalted to the position of supreme power and authority in the universe. For Peter and John, the choice was clear.

🍷 What about us? When we experience the clash of competing authorities what choices do we make? Do we follow the example of John and Peter? It depends on who we think Jesus is.

How important was Peter and John's refusal to be cowed by the ruling council? What did their courage under pressure accomplish? Do you think they knew what would happen?

It allowed the Gospel to continue to spread through the Jewish community and then, over time, to the Gentiles where it eventually reached us.

Peter says in v. 20, "we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." Let's be people who ask God to make this true of us as well. There is a lot at stake- family, friends, colleagues, etc. Let's ask for the filling of the Spirit and for God's boldness. Let's begin opening our mouths. Who knows what will be accomplished?

Acts 4:23-31 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme

How does the early church respond to crisis? They come together in unity and pray, affirming God's sovereignty and seeking His help to fulfill their calling as witnesses.

Outline

4:23-24a	The context
4:24b-30	The Prayer
4:31	The Answer

Warm Up/Intro Question

When was the last time you felt like you were under some kind of attack or in some sort of crisis? How did you handle it?

Questions for individual study

How do these disciples handle the crisis they are in?

What do you notice about their prayer? What strikes you?

Read Ps. 2 What is Ps 2 all about? How do these disciples use it to interpret the situation they are in? What is their view of history? What is their view of God?

What is God saying to you through this passage?

Small Group Discussion

What is the first thing Peter and John do when they are released? What does this say about them and about the community to which they belong?

They go to their friends and report what the rulers had said to them. Peter and John aren't trying to be lone ranger heroes; they are part of a community of friends who are actively and intentionally following Jesus together. You get the sense that they see it not just as Peter and John's problem, but as their problem. Whatever happens they are in it together.

What's the first and immediate response of this group of friends to P and J's report? How does their response compare to our response when we receive threats of opposition?

Instead of immediately trying to figure out what to do, trying to figure out a strategy or response of some sort, they turn to God in prayer. And they pray as a united body. The word translated as "together" is the Greek word, "homothymadon" which is used 11 times in Acts (1:14, 4:24, 4:32, 6:5, etc.). It means to be 9in one accord, to have the same passion.

Luke keeps bringing up the unity of this group of believers. It seems to be a hugely important concept to him. Why do you think this is? What brought these early believers to such unity despite all their differences of background, language, temperament, etc. . . ? Do you think it's important for us to seek such accord? How might we do so?

Perhaps the greatest theologian America has ever produced is Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). In addition to being a rigorous thinker, Edwards was a man of great personal piety with a deep love both for God's glory and people's soul. In the 1730's, deeply troubled by the spiritual apathy and gross sin of his day, Edwards wrote a little book with the title, A Humble Attempt To Promote Explicit Agreement And Visible Union Of All God's

People In Extraordinary Prayer For the Revival of Religion And The Advancement Of God's Kingdom. People took Edward's exhortation to heart. Numerous prayer meetings sprang up across church and denominational lines. Shortly thereafter The Great Awakening broke out, swept the country, crossed the Atlantic and spread throughout Europe and elsewhere.

For Edwards, "explicit agreement and visible union of all God's people" was critical for effective prayer. Luke seems to be saying the same thing here in Acts. For the early believers, their shared vision and understanding of who Jesus was drew them together across their differences. We need to emphasize this shared vision of Jesus and we need to deepen our commitment to unity. We need to exercise humility before God and before one another, take relational risks and be patient and willing to do whatever is necessary to become united- all of this flowing out of our shared experience of God in Christ and informed by our communal reading and reflection of Scripture. And then we need to pray- often, a lot, perseveringly, in faith.

How do the believers begin their prayer? What do they say about God?

God is the Sovereign Lord. This was a term used of a ruler of unchallengeable power. The Sanhedrin might utter threats and throw its weight around, but the Sanhedrin's authority was subject to an infinitely higher authority.

God is the Creator. He is the origin of all earthly powers, authorities, and institutions. The authority of the Sanhedrin was derived from, given to it, by the Creator and was to be used only to accomplish His purposes. When the Sanhedrin, then violated God's purposes, it exceeded its authority, made its authority invalid, became illegitimate and therefore ought not to be obeyed. (This is the theological basis for civil disobedience)

God is the Revealer. He spoke by the Holy Spirit through David. He continues to speak today, primarily, though not solely through Scripture and never in contradiction to Scripture.

Lets look at Ps. 2 together. What is the psalm about? How does the early church use it to interpret their situation? How do they see the opposition arrayed against them? Against who is it ultimately directed? How do we see opposition directed against us?

Psalm 2 states the general principle that throughout history, the powers of this world have stood against the cause of Good and His Messiah. The psalm originally grew out of the crowing of a new king in Israel, possibly David. Whenever a new king was enthroned, the vassal rulers around him were required to come and submit to him; but some of them refused to do this. What Psalm 2 says, using the imagery of the crowning of an earthly king, is that God has crowned His king, that the nations have revolted against God's messiah, but that their revolt is in vain.

The early believers quoted Ps. 2:1-2 and then proceeded to review in prayer before God the detailed way in which the concerted action of Herod and Pilate (who prior to this had been enemies), of the Gentiles and the people of Israel matched exactly the situation described in the psalm. The crucifixion of Jesus was a "vain raging" against God, a concerted attack on God's Messiah. The Sanhedrin's opposition was not ultimately against them, but against God and dealing with it was not up to them, but up to God who would work through and beyond them. And like the opposition against Jesus, the opposition against them, though it might cost them their lives, would be in vain, because God remained in control and His purposes were always good.

🍏 What forces are arrayed against us as Christians? What obstacles and opposition do we face in fulfilling our calling as Christians? Do we remember that God is sovereign, that He is Creator and Lord of History?

Do we magnify the forces and situations brought against us and minimize God's great power, love and sovereign control?

Let's focus now on vv. 29-30. What strikes you about this part of their prayer? Is there anything surprising about their prayer? What do they ask for? What don't they ask for? What's their overriding concern? What don't they seem very concerned about? And what perspective on reality do the believers reveal?

The disciples begin by reminding themselves of who God is- Sovereign Lord and Creator. And they, from Scripture, gain a macro-view of history- The world is always opposed to God, but in vain. Now, with their vision of God and of history clarified, and themselves humbled they are ready to make their petitions. What's odd about their prayer is that they don't pray for the defeat of the evil forces, or for their own safety. They don't ask for wisdom as to whether or not they should lay low for awhile. Instead, they ask 1) for strength and courage to speak boldly and without compromise and 2) that God would intervene by doing not just miracles, but miracles through the name of Jesus. What they wanted was that Jesus be exalted and vindicated. Further, they don't ask for miracles of vengeance and destruction, but for miracles of mercy. Why do they ask for miracles? Because the miracles both create the opportunity for the preaching and also vindicate the truth of the preaching. What the preaching does is to interpret and explain the miracle. Both are necessary for effective witness- deeds (not necessarily miraculous) to raise questions, and words to answer the questions and direct people to Jesus.

In their prayer the believers take into account the full forces of the enemy- the enemy is powerful. But, while evil is a reality, God is more powerful still. Believers need to be the ultimate realists, seeing the world as it is while remembering that the world is not all there is.

How does God answer their prayer?

1) The place where they were gathered together was shaken. Why? This shaking was evidence of God's presence (cf. Ex 19; Isa 6). God wanted to reassure, encourage and affirm His people. It was an expression of compassion, empathy and grace, a sign of His presence and approval. 2) They were all again filled with the Spirit and enabled to speak the word of God with boldness. And 3) Acts 5:12 indicates that their prayer for signs was also answered.

Applications:

Two key things come out of this passage. 1) If we are serious about doing the will of God we will face serious opposition and endure great suffering. What will give us strength to face suffering? What will give us strength to face suffering and opposition will be: united fellowship, trust in the sovereignty of God, and Scripture hidden in our hearts. 2) The chief weapon we bring to bear against opposition is prayer- united, persistent, faith-filled prayer.

🍏 Their prayer is a model for us:

1. They were of one heart. There was a unity in the face of diversity, discouragement and persecution
2. They began with praise. They reminded themselves of who God is: Sovereign, majestic
3. They acknowledged God's action in history. He's in control.
4. They relied on the truth and authority of Scripture.
5. They relied on their relationship with Jesus. Everything was in his name.

6. They made very specific and vision-filled requests- boldness, signs
7. They expected results and answers to their prayers
8. They received spiritual strength and power, received what they asked for
9. They directed this power into mission and ministry.
10. They were brought back to where they started, united fellowship (v. 32), but now, they are even more united.

🍏 We need to begin where they begin - united by a shared vision of who God is and what He's called us to do. And, like them, we need to remind ourselves of our plumb line - Sovereign Lord, Creator, Revealer, Enabler, Wonder-Worker, the One who ordains history, the one who has the trump card. The enemy thought he had the victory, but God trumped him by exercising love. God is greater than any circumstance that seems to be defeating us. Even death is but a passageway to Him.

Let's hang together, let's do the serious work of love, let's endure suffering and opposition, let's pray and persevere in faith, let's celebrate and rejoice in worship. This is our calling. It doesn't get any better than this!!!

Acts 4:32-5:11 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme

Having successfully withstood opposition from without, the early church now deals with opposition from within.

Outline

- 4:32-35 The Unity of the Believers
- 4:36-37 The Positive Example of Barnabas
- 5:1-11 The Negative Example of Ananias and Sapphira

Warm-up Question

How have your values, priorities and concerns begun to change since you became a follower of Jesus?

Questions for Individual Study

- How did the believers in the early church express their oneness?
- Why does Luke include the story of Barnabas?
- What was A and S's sin?

Questions for sub-group discussion

- Share your observations, questions and impressions with one another.
- What motivated A and S? And why do you think God dealt with their sin so severely?

Study Notes and Questions

Verses 32-35

What were the believers like? How did they express their oneness of heart and soul? How did they show their love and concern for each other? How were the needs of individuals in the community met? What was their attitude toward material possessions? What sacrifices were they making for one another? Why, do you think, they were willing to make these sacrifices?

If you were an outsider looking in on this community what might you be thinking? What questions would this community raise for you? Would you be attracted or repelled by it? Why?

How are we living out our unity in our fellowship? When outsiders look in on us, what do they see? What questions does the community life of our fellowship raise for outsiders?

Verses 32 and 34 are about the sharing of possessions. Sandwiched between these two verses is a verse about evangelism. What is Luke trying to say?

I think Luke is trying to say two things: 1) The believers' unity greatly affected their witness to others. It raised questions, drew crowds, released energy and enthusiasm, served as partial vindication for their message. 2) The believer's unity was not an end in itself. They were called to be a witnessing community. Every chapter of Acts (except ch. 27) says something about evangelism; it is in many ways a history of evangelism.

- 🍏 How important is evangelism in our fellowship? How can we give evangelism greater priority in our fellowship?

- 🍏 What are the obstacles to developing and maintaining a unity of heart and soul? And what can we do about them?

One obstacle is that we don't like anyone "prying" into our personal lives. We resent it when people question us or try to hold us accountable. So we lower our standards for and settle for a functional sort of unity whereby we agree to work together in the accomplishment of some task, but don't really open our lives to one another. One of the things that made the early Methodist movement so powerful and effective was that it refused to settle for relatively surface unity. Wesley made the following rules for the Methodist bands or small groups:

In order to "confess our faults one to another" and to pray one for another that we may be healed, we intend, 1) to meet once a week, at the least, 2) to come punctually at the hour appointed, 3) to begin with singing or prayer, 4) to speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our soul, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since the last meeting, 5) to desire some person among us (thence called a leader) to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins and temptations.

Another obstacle is that when we raise high standards for unity we then have high expectations of each other. Consequently, the pain of inevitable disappointment is also high. The greater the depth of our unity, the greater capacity we have to disappoint and hurt one another. Often what happens is that hurt individuals, in their efforts to solve a problem, focus on their hurts and give vent to them. This may take the form of a battle for justice or truth, but it is actually a battle to retrieve a hurt ego. It's okay to express hurt, but not to be consumed by it. Ultimately, we need to crucify ourselves (Phil 2:1-11; Eph 4:2, 32) for the sake of the body and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph 5:21).

A third obstacle to deep unity is that it takes a lot of time. We need to be willing to spend time with one another.

A fourth obstacle to unity is that we have a "this is my own" attitude to what we possess. We may, theologically, believe that all that we have- time, gifts, opportunities, possessions- belongs to the Lord. But, in reality, we don't live this way. As followers of Jesus we cannot make our lifestyle decisions on the basis of our peers in society, but rather after discerning the purpose of God and seeing the needs of the believers around us.

Verses 36-37

What does Luke tell us about Barnabas? What do you think it means to be a "Son of Encouragement"? Do you know any "encouragers" Why are they necessary? Why do you think Luke highlights Barnabas? What role does he play in the structure of the narrative?

Luke uses Barnabas as a foil. He talks about the community life of the believers, uses Barnabas as a positive example, and then gives us the negative example of A and S who, by their actions and motivations, threatened the integrity and unity of the fellowship. A theme that is very important to Luke is the proper use of wealth. It is used properly when it builds relationships and community and meets needs. (Luke 12:33-34; 16:9; Acts 2:44-45; 11:27-30; 24:17). For Luke, wealth used purely for private indulgence is a sin. It is

properly used when disciples live out of their being filled with the Spirit. And only if they do not follow the guidance of the Spirit will they use wealth for private indulgence rather than to express and build community. Barnabas is depicted as one who follows the Spirit's leading. A and S are depicted as having resisted and blasphemed against the Spirit.

Verses 5:1-11

What's going on in this passage? What do A and S do? What's their plot? How does Peter describe their sin? What is their sin? Is it keeping back some of the money? Why do you think A and S do what they do? What could A and S have done?

Who does Peter discern lurking behind their sin? And why are they judged so severely?

A and S's sin is not that they did not give away all the proceeds of their land sale. Peter makes clear that they were under no compulsion to sell the land or give the money away (v. 4). Rather their sin was lying and hypocrisy, ultimately directed against the Holy Spirit. They wanted the credit and prestige for sacrificial generosity without the inconvenience of it.

The verb "kept back" is the Greek verb "nosphizomai" which has the connotation of to misappropriate or to embezzle. It is only used 3 times in the NT- twice here and in Titus 2:10 where it is translated as "pilfer" or "steal". It is also used in the Greek translation of Jos. 7:1 to describe Achan's theft. The story in Joshua is that Achan stole money and clothing after the destruction of Jericho and thus brought God's judgment upon the Israelites.

Behind A and S's sin Peter sees the work of Satan. In Luke 22:3-5 we are told that Satan entered into Judas and this is associated with Judas accepting money to betray Jesus. Here A and S betray Jesus' church for the sake of money and Satan is behind this as well. What A and S did was as bad as what Judas did. If they had gotten away with this unscathed it would have threatened the unity and witness of the church which was a reflection of and demonstration of the presence and empowering of the Spirit in the church. If they had gotten away with this it would have discredited the whole reality behind Pentecost, that this was God's people, doing His work, in His power.

A and S were not prepared to yield complete obedience and devotion to the Lord Jesus; they only pretended they were. They thought they could deceive the apostles and get away with it. They found they were in reality tempting the Spirit of the Lord, lying to God, cheating the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit exposed their hypocrisy and vindicated Himself and His presence in the church. A and S fell under the judgment of God.

A and S lied to win the esteem of the church. The danger of doing that is very real for us today. It's serious because it causes us to be dishonest with ourselves. If we try to put on a show of being what we are not we destroy our chances for growth by blocking the grace of God. And our deception hinders true unity in the body. It also makes us susceptible to the influence of Satan. We've got to be willing to uproot untruthfulness in ourselves and need to be willing to be decisive in uprooting untruthfulness in the body. It's the only way healing will occur and growth will continue.

🍏 What lessons or applications do we want to draw from this passage?

- 1) The necessity of pursuing unity of heart and soul
- 2) Right perspectives on possessions
- 3) Dealing with deceit and sin decisively

Acts 5:12-42 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

The early church successfully overcomes the second wave of persecution directed against it.

Outline:

- 5:12-16 Signs and wonders
- 5:17-21a Arrest but deliverance
- 5:21b-27a Council perplexed
- 5:27b-32 Trial
- 5:33-39 Gamaliel's Advice
- 5:40-42 Apostles' response

Warm-up/Intro Question

How does jealousy affect people? How does it influence their attitudes and actions?

Questions for Individual Study

How does 5:1-11 set the stage for 5:12-16? Then, what's the connection between 5:12-16 and 5:17-52? Who are the key actors in this passage? What does each do or say? Why? Do you identify with any of them? What questions does this passage raise for you? And what strikes you most? Why?

Questions for Sub-group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with each other.

What do you make of the apostles "rejoicing that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name"? What's behind this perspective? Is this a noble or viable perspective for us to hold today?

Study Notes and Questions

Verses 12-16

Let's begin by reviewing the context. What happened in 5:1-11? What was the key issue? What result did it have on the church? In Jerusalem at large?

Ananias and Sapphira lied to God and the church, threatened the church's unity and served as channels for Satan's infiltration. God judged them severely, thus preserving and strengthening the unity of the Church and cutting off Satan's influence. The key issue had to do with "what power or what name" was behind the life and ministry of the early church. The incident with Ananias and Sapphira demonstrated that God, through the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus was in control.

The result was that "great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things" (v. 12). What were people fearful of (both awe and terror)? The holiness, judgment and sovereign rule of God. God, and by extension His church, was not someone to be taken lightly; commitment to Him was serious.

How did 5:1-11 set the stage for 5:12-16? What's going on in 12-16? Is there anything new happening here? What kind of language is emphasized?

The church was shaken by what happened with Ananias and Sapphira. Harmony and trust had been broken; great sin had entered the church. The church was afraid of God and His holiness, maybe of whether or not they measured up to His standards, maybe of whether they had lost the blessing of God.

How did God speak to their fears?

He purged the sin out of their midst and then poured out even greater blessing. Notice the language used- many signs and wonders (v. 12), more than ever (v. 14), great numbers (v. 14), a great number (v. 16). There are many signs and wonders, great numbers believe, and for the first time (outside of Pentecost) great numbers gather from outside Jerusalem. The gospel is now moving from Jerusalem to Judea.

What is God saying about the church?

My Spirit and my blessing are still with you. Do not lose heart. Verses 13-14 are a bit puzzling. "None of the rest dared to join them. . .", yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord. This is what I think Luke is saying. The apostles are doing signs and wonders and preaching, while the church is living out its unity with one another. As a result much of Jerusalem holds the church in high esteem. At the same time everyone knows what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. So, people are attracted to the church, but are afraid of it at the same time. So that only the totally committed, the true believers, dare to join.

Verses 17-21a

What happens in this paragraph? Who arrests the apostles? Why? Why were the Sadducees jealous? What did they want? How did jealousy affect them? From what did it cut them off?

The Sadducees, frustrated by the fact that the church was spreading, arrest the disciples. Luke says they were filled with jealousy. Why were they jealous? They were jealous of Jesus because it was his name, rather than theirs, that was being proclaimed. And they were jealous of the apostles because they were performing signs and wonders that the Sadducees couldn't imitate, and attracting followers in numbers much greater than the Sadducees could command. The Sadducees wanted both spiritual power and name recognition and popularity. They didn't have them and were jealous. And their jealousy prevented them from assessing carefully and honestly the claims of the apostles. Ultimately, their jealousy cut them off from the gospel and from God.

How widespread is jealousy? How dangerous? What can we do to deal with our jealousy?

I would guess that every one of us occasionally experiences jealousy and that some of us are consumed by it. And it's extremely dangerous. It was behind Ananias and Sapphira's sin as well as that of the Sadducees. It leads to hypocrisy, gossip, rage, self-pity, discontent, depression. And it's hard for us to talk about. We may be more likely to confess sexual sin than jealousy. But we have to be honest about whatever seeds of jealousy are germinating within us. We have to confess this sin to one another, to ask God to examine us and free us, to examine ourselves in order to get at the roots of our jealousy. It's not a trivial sin; we must deal with it.

Okay, back to the text. What happens after the apostles get arrested? What does God do?

God sends an angel to spring them from jail (There is an irony here. The Sadducees did not believe in the existence of angels, Acts. 23:8), and commissions them to speak to the people.

Verses 21b-27a

What happens next? Picture this scene from the perspective of the chief priests and the rest of the council. What are people thinking and feeling? What are people talking about? And why do you think God delivered the Apostles from jail only to allow them to be arrested again? What was God saying?

The Council is shocked and utterly perplexed. "What do you mean they're not there? How could the prison doors be locked and the guard standing at the doors but have no one inside? This is utterly nuts!"

Luke says they were perplexed "Whether they admitted it to themselves or not, a pattern was repeating itself. Only a few months ago they had sealed a tomb and set guards around it to make sure a dead body didn't escape. But somehow the body had vanished. They had thought up their own rationalistic explanation for this (Mt.28-11-15), but I'm not sure they were convincing even to themselves. Now, 12 men had somehow vanished from a secured cell, with guards around it. The parallel between this event and the one a few months previously was uncanny.

It was meant to be. It was in fact an act of mercy on God's part towards men who were determined not to repent. It was an attempt to grab their attention and stop them from adding to their already grievous sin. It was an invitation, as well, to repent and be forgiven.

Verses 27b-32

Of what are the Apostles accused? And how do Peter and the Apostles respond?

They are accused of disobeying the Council's earlier command not to preach in Jesus' name and of making the council guilty of Jesus' blood. The irony is that at the trial of Jesus this was the very thing they had taken upon themselves. (Mt 27:24,25) The sense I get is that they were consumed with guilt, but refused to admit it, that they knew they had condemned a righteous man to death, but were not willing to admit their sin. Instead, in their attempts to deny their guilt and rationalize it away they were being led into greater and greater sin and deception.

Guilt, like jealousy, can't be ignored. It must be faced honestly, admitted and repented of. And, where possible, restitution must be made.

Verses 33-39

What is Gamaliel's point and advice?

Theudas and Judas are examples of individuals who led Jewish movements, who were killed or driven off and whose followers then disbanded. The implication was that it would be so with the Jesus movement. The leader, Jesus, had been killed; the followers would eventually disband. Now all the council had to do was wait for this to happen. Of course, there was the remote possibility that the apostles were right, that God had raised Jesus from the dead, in which case opposition to them would be fighting against God. So, Gamaliel urges caution and the council agrees.

Verses 40-42

What happens then? And how do the apostles respond to it?

The Apostles are severely flogged and then released. And they do what Jesus told them too do in the face of persecution (Mt. 5:10-12; Lk 6:22-23)- they rejoice. They also again boldly defy the council's prohibition. They do not cease to teach and preach in Jesus' name.

Applications

- 🍏 Dealing with jealousy and guilt honestly
- 🍏 Being willing to suffer for Jesus' name
- 🍏 Obeying God rather than any human authority

Acts 6:1-7 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

The infant church successfully resolves another threat to its unity and mission

Outline:

- 6:1-2 The problem: Neglect of Hellenistic widows; neglect of word of God
- 6:3-4 Proposed solution: Division of Labor
- 6:5-6 New Leaders selected and commissioned
- 6:7 Result: Number of Disciples Increased greatly

Intro/Warm Up Question:

Have you ever been in a group where there was conflict between its members? How did the group handle it?

Questions for Individual Study:

What is the problem? What's the proposed solution? What's the result?

Questions for Subgroup Discussion:

Share your observations, reflection and questions. What do you learn from this passage about how to resolve conflict in a group?

Questions for Whole Group Discussion:

What is the problem?

The problem was 2-fold. Verse 1 says that the Hellenistic widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. This is about the care of the needy. Widows can't support themselves. There is a Biblical obligation to care for widows and orphans.

Verse 2 implies that the 12 apostles were being so consumed with day to day administration and trying to meet needs that they were neglecting the word of God.

What causes it? How is the fact that the disciples were increasing in number connected to the problem of the Hellenistic widows being neglected?

The problem was caused by growth and success. When the infant church was still fairly small, the apostles could probably meet most of the needs and keep on top of all that was going on. But as the church grew, so did the needs and problems. New leaders and structures were needed to care for people and manage growth well. So part of the problem was that there were too few leaders and inadequate structures for this stage of the church's development.

Who were the Hellenists and the Hebrews?

The Hellenists were Jews who came from the Diaspora (i.e. from the lands to which Jews had been deported or to which they had otherwise settled), had settled in Palestine, and spoke Greek as their primary language. The Hebrews were Jews who were natives of Palestine and spoke Aramaic as their primary language.

Most Hellenists and Hebrews spoke both languages. Although earlier scholarship posited that there was a large cultural and theological divide between Hellenistic and Hebrew Jews, both Palestinian and Diaspora Jews were influenced by Hellenistic culture.

What dynamics might be at play for the Hellenistic widows in particular be excluded?

In light of the growth, part of the problem may have been the working out of certain power dynamics due to majority/minority, ethnic, and language differences. Hebraic Jews would have been the majority, the "hometown people," and since all the apostles were Hebraic Jews, would have also represented the people with power. Many Diaspora Jews, when they got older, would come to spend their last days in Jerusalem, the Holy City, because it was considered virtuous to die there. Thus, there were many Diaspora widows in Jerusalem without family to help take care of them. The church met as a whole group, but met much more frequently in house churches, probably divided by language. As Hebrew Jews, the Twelve were probably part of the Hebrew house churches, and thus aware of the needs in the Hebrew Christian community but a lot less aware of the needs in the Hellenistic Christian community.

While it is possible that the Hebrew Jews looked down on the Hellenistic Jews and that these pre-Christian prejudices reasserted themselves in the church so that they intentionally neglected the Hebrew widows, more likely a blindness that often plagues the majority/power group and is often imbedded in the structure of organizations was at play.

Whether the neglect was intentional or unintentional, it was still wrong.

How did the Hellenists handle their problem?

They complain or "murmur." The Greek word used is "goggysmos." This is the verb which is used in the LXX (the Greek translation of the OT) to denote the murmuring of the Israelites against Moses (Ex 16:7, Num. 14:27). Evidently the Hellenistic church members were murmuring against the apostles, who received the relief money, and were therefore expected to distribute it equitably. While the need of the Hellenistic widows was legitimate and they had a just grievance, the text suggests that they could have voiced their need and asked for help without doing so in a complaining fashion. There is a breakdown of trust.

In the same way that a majority group can unintentionally neglect or be blind to the needs of a minority group, it is easy for minority groups to quickly assume the worst of the majority group. From the bottom, it is easy to quickly assume the worst motives of the majority.

How might you have responded if you were one of the apostles to this complaint?

- *Got angry and defensive, vent hurt feelings and try to vindicate yourself*
- *Dismiss the complaints as unspiritual or unimportant*
- *Shun the difficult people or even throw them out*
- *Exerted power and outvoted them*
- *Procrastinate and postpone (Yes this is an important issue, but we are so busy now, we'll get to this at our next board meeting)*

How did the apostles respond to the situation?

The apostles were not motivated by ego. They weren't trying to maintain control or project their own point of view. They weren't trying to protect their own rights or power. They tried to solve the problem in a way that was just fair, holy, effective and equitable, and in a way that enabled them to fulfill their own sense of calling from God. They wanted to meet needs, preserve and strengthen the unity of the church, and be faithful to God.

So they called the whole community together, both Hebrews and Hellenists, listened to the complaints, acknowledged their legitimacy, and proposed that additional leaders be selected who would be given both responsibility and authority to meet the needs which had been expressed. They shared power, status and resources with the new leaders, affirming both them and their task.

The seven new leaders all have Greek names, suggesting that they were selected from the Hellenistic community. Craig Keener calls this the first example of affirmative action. "Those with political power generally repressed complaining minorities; here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority." This points to the church realizing that this is not merely an issue of meeting the needs of Hellenistic widows, but an issue of sharing power. The Hebrew majority was willing to change the system to let the minority group participate fully in the church.

What kind of ministry were the seven called to? What criteria were established for them? Why?

They were called to a ministry of service. This was a ministry which wasn't culturally prestigious or attractive. In fact, it involved a task that their culture defined as women's or slave's work—serving meals. Moreover, they were called to a ministry where there had been conflict, complaining and a loss of trust. So they needed to be people who had good standing: i.e. respected by both communities, who were full of the Spirit, not consumed by their own ego or desire for status, and full of wisdom (i.e. able to discern the right thing to do when choices had to be made). The qualifications for ministry focus on character rather than on skills or credentials.

Were the apostles guilty of spiritual elitism? Were they saying that praying and preaching were more important than serving meals?

No. The text says that both the Hellenistic widows and the ministry of the word was being neglected. The text also uses the same Greek word, "Diakonia" to describe both forms of service. John Stott says this:

It is surely deliberate that the work of the Twelve and the work of the Seven are alike called diakonia (1,4), "ministry" or "service." The former is "the ministry of the word" (4) or pastoral work, the latter "the ministry of tables," (2) or social work. Neither ministry is superior to the other. On the contrary, both are Christian ministries, that is, ways of serving God and his people. Both require spiritual people, "full of the Spirit" to exercise them. And both can be full-time Christian ministries. The only difference between them lies in the form the ministry takes, requiring different gifts and different callings.

. . . All Christians without exception, being followers of him who came "not to be served but to serve", are themselves called to ministry, indeed to give their lives in ministry. But the expression "full-time Christian ministry" is not to be restricted to church work and

missionary service. It can also be exercised in government, the media, the professions, business, industry and the home. We need to recover this vision of the wide diversity of ministries to which God calls his people."

The apostles were simply saying that their particular gifting and calling was to pray and preach. God had called and equipped others to do the vital ministry of food distribution.

What was the result of the solution to the problem?

Both the Hellenistic and Hebrew widows were cared for. The church was strengthened in its unity, the word of God continued to spread, the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Earlier the devil had attacked this infant church through external persecution and through internal corruption. Here the devil tried to divide the church, to cause it to split. And he tried to weaken the church by distracting the apostles from their central calling to pray and teach, thus lessening their evangelistic zeal and leaving the church vulnerable to false doctrine. Again, by the grace of God, the devil's schemes were thwarted.

Summary: What process does the church use to deal with this issue?

- 1. There were advocates who took up the cause of the widows. The Hellenists took up the cause on behalf of their widows. Even if they voiced this in a complaining way, the fact that they advocated at all is a positive thing.*
- 2. There is a public raising of the issue in the context of the "whole community of the disciples" We tend to whisper in hallways.*
- 3. The struggle for the solution also occurs in the public arena*
- 4. There is an empowerment of those who were being neglected. People chosen to oversee this ministry were all Hellenists—the minority.*

Applications:

-  What people and needs are being neglected in our fellowship? What minority group may be marginalized?
-  How are we dealing with conflict? Are we treating each other with respect and dignity? Are we "murmuring"?
-  How do we view power in our groups? How do we deal with what can become power struggles?
-  Do all of us see ourselves as ministers who are called to serve? Are we aware of the particular service to which God has called us? Are we in the right service for us?

Introduction

We have just finished studying the first major section of Acts. It's time now to take a step back, look at the big picture and trace some of the dominant themes we have noticed so far. It is also time to stop, listen and both reflect and respond to what God has been saying to us up to this point.

Read 1:1-6:7 outloud. (You can either have one person read the whole passage or have each person in you small group take turns.)

What do you notice? What strikes you? What grabs your imagination? What challenges you?

(The above four questions may be all you need to ask. The sharing and discussion may take off without any further impetus from you. If you or your small group would like a bit more structure try using some of the following questions:)

What major themes or ideas do you see?

What is this infant church like? Why is it growing?

How is the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit revealed? How is the presence and activity of the devil also revealed?

If you were watching this church from the outside what picture of God would you get? Think of one or two non-Christian friends. If they could look in on this church how do you think they would respond? Why?

🍏 Do you sense God saying anything specific to you or to your small group or even to the whole fellowship from this first major section of Acts?

🍏 To close you may decide to have each person in your small group write a 10 minute response or prayer to God, or you may spend time as a small group in corporate prayer. If you have time you may decide to do both.

Prominent themes in Acts

1. Priority of Evangelism
 - a. Every member evangelism- not just an elite few
 - b. Signs and wonders
 - c. Content laden- strong apologetics which withstood questions people were asking
 - d. Most capable people released for reaching the lost

1. Power of the Holy Spirit
 - a. ch. 1: Records promise of Spirit
 - b. ch. 2: Descent of Spirit
 - c. ch. 3-28: Spirit's work in and through the Church

1. Community Life — Vibrant and Alive
 - a. Passionate about Mission
 - b. Members cared for each other
 - c. Pursued holiness
 - d. Dealt with matters affecting its unity
 - e. Cared for the poor

1. Teaching/speeches — Early church proclaimed Christ as Supreme Lord with Conversion in view
 - a. For disciples
 - b. In evangelism

1. Prayer
14 of the first 15 chapters (ch. 5 excluded) and many of the later chapters mention prayer.

2. Breaking Human Barriers in Christ
Cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, gender, racial, ethnic

3. Place of Suffering
The early church took on suffering for the cause of Christ, and taking Jesus as its model considered suffering a basic ingredient of discipleship.

4. Sovereignty of God
God is working out His sovereign purposes (even through suffering)

5. Jewish reaction to the Gospel

10. Legal status of Christianity

Acts 6:1-15 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Opposition erupts against Stephen because of strong disagreement over what is acceptable worship and because of the fear of change

Warm-up/Intro Questions:

How do you react to change? Do you look forward to it? Feel threatened by it? What if the change feels imposed upon you- how do you react then?

Questions for Individual study:

How is Stephen described in 6:1-15? Does anything strike you about this description? What are we told about his opponents? Where are they from? What do they do? What change is brought against Stephen? Why is this a big deal?

Questions for sub-group discussion:

Share your observations, reflections and questions. Look again at the charge brought against Stephen in v. 14. "We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." Is the charge true? Is this what Jesus was about? Look at Mt 5:17-20; 24:1-2; Jn 2:13-22.

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion:

How is Stephen described here?

- *He is of good standing (v. 3), i.e. well respected both within the church and without.*
- *Full of the Spirit and wisdom (v. 3)- Wisdom has to do with living one's life in a way that's consistent with God's character and purposes. It is knowing how to discern God's will in the midst of the full complexity and ambiguity of life. Wisdom is both a gift of God and an acquired skill. It comes from growing in the knowledge and experience of God, from knowing and obeying God's word, and from prayerfully reflecting on the issues before you. God is eager to give wisdom to those who seek and obey Him. Personal sin, a heart of unforgiveness, unresolved conflict can impede our ability to receive God's wisdom.*
- *Full of faith (v. 5)- willing to trust Jesus, take him at his word, risk all for his sake*
- *Full of Holy Spirit, God's power (v. 8)- Did great wonders and signs*
- *Full of God's grace (v. 8)- Spiritual charm, winsomeness, sweetness, able to act in a Christ-like way under provocation (ch. 7)*
- *Opponents could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit filling him (v. 10).*
- *Face like an angel (v. 15)- his communion with God was such that some of God's glory was reflected in him. The same thing had been said of Moses (Ex.34:29ff).*

In v. 8 Stephen is said to be full of grace and power? What kind of combination is that? Who do you think of when you think of a gracious person? Who do you think of when you think of a powerful person? Is your gracious person and your powerful person one and the same? Do you know anyone who is both full of grace and power? Why do people choose to be gracious? Why do they choose to exercise power? Is it usually for the same purpose? How can a person (or fellowship) express both grace and power at the same time? Would our fellowships be described as being full of grace and power? Could they be? How might grace and power be expressed in our context?

The early church was full of both grace and power. Stephen was so. Clearly, Jesus was. The key is being filled with God's spirit.

Although Stephen is full of God's grace and power, what happens to him? Is this what you would have expected to happen? Why would someone who was full of Grace and who worked miracles on behalf of others at no benefit to himself arouse such opposition? What can we draw from this?

Who were Stephen's opponents? What do we know about them? What might we assume about them?

They were probably Hellenistic Jews who were freed Roman slaves or their descendants. This means they were Jews of the dispersion who had returned to the Holy Land and now met in their own synagogues.

Why did they return to Jerusalem?

It may be that they wanted to return to their cultural and religious roots. Perhaps it was an act of defiance against their former oppressors. For whatever reason, it may be that they had decided to enmesh themselves in their Jewish identity, to prove that they were fully Jews. Now, over the previous few months Jerusalem had been experiencing major social disruption.

Who would be most upset by this?

Maybe it would be people who had come to Jerusalem to set their roots in the traditions and practices of their Hebrew ancestor.

What were they arguing about with Stephen? What charges did they bring against him? What happened? How did the argument progress?

They accused Stephen of speaking blasphemy against Moses (i.e., the Old Testament) and against God (v. 11). They also accused him of speaking against the temple (v. 13) and of arguing that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs Moses had handed to them (v.14). These were extremely serious charges. (on the level of speaking against Jesus and the cross). Nothing was more sacred to the Jews than their temple and their law. The temple was the "holy place", the sanctuary of God's presence, and the Law was "holy scripture", the revelation of God's mind and will and purpose.

The opposition started with theological argument. When they found that they couldn't out think and out argue Stephen, they then turned to lies and slander. Finally, they turned to violence. It seems like they were so agitated by what Stephen was preaching, and so afraid of the changes it might bring that they couldn't really listen to him so as to evaluate its truthfulness and validity. Instead, in their anger, frustration and fear they violated their integrity and eventually resorted to violence. This progression or pattern may be illogical, but it is not at all unusual. People violently resist change even if it is to their benefit.

🍏 Are there changes that God may be calling you/us to make which we have been resisting? How do we respond to challenges to change our viewpoint or worldview, our practices, our use of money and resources, our goals and ambitions, our vocation?

🍏 From 6:1-7, how would you have articulated Stephen's job description? What had he (and the other six) been appointed to do? What was his task? Now look at 6:9-15. What is Stephen doing here? Does it have anything to do with the task given him in 6:1-7? If Stephen were asked to articulate his "calling" what do you think he might say? When we think about God's calling upon our lives, how do we view it? Do we think

of it as performing a particular task or job? Or, is it something broader than that? Are we tempted to restrict or reduce God's call on our lives?

Os Guinness defines calling as "the truth that God calls us to Himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to His summons and service." Implied in this is the idea that calling is much more than one's career or job, that we are to live out our calling in all of our life-work and play and rest and relationships. Stephen understood this. His appointed task was to ensure that the distribution of food to the widows was done efficiently and fairly so that all had enough. He saw his calling, however, much more broadly. His calling was to know God intimately, to follow him, worship Him, obey Him bear witness to Him. His calling revolved not around work, but around God.

We are tempted to elevate our careers or tasks – doctor, lawyer, professor, educator, architect, internet entrepreneur – to the primary position in our lives. Having done this we tend to live a bifurcated life. When we're at work we pursue our calling; when we're not, we please ourselves. Further, when we identify our calling as a particular career or task, it becomes difficult to hear God speak to us outside this career/task. "It's not my calling", we think to ourselves or say to others.

Because Stephen saw his calling as being to God in Christ he was able to sense God directing him and filling him. Where are we in our sense of God's calling?

Key Applications:

- 1) Christian Character – Are we full of faith, grace, power, wisdom, the Spirit? Are we intimately related to God?
- 2) Worship – The Jews limited God to the temple and the law. How do we put God in a box?
- 3) Change – Are we open to God-initiated change?

Calling – Are you called to someOne, or merely to something?

Acts 7:1-53 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Stephen argues from the OT that he is not guilty of blasphemy, but that instead, his opponents are guilty of resisting God because they have tried to put Him in their cultural box. The key question is, "How big is God? Who has access to Him? How?"

Outline:

- 7:1-8 Abraham
- 7:8-16 Joseph
- 7:17-34 Moses-rejected Deliverer
- 7:35-43 Moses- rejected Prophet and Leader
- 7:44-50 Tabernacle and temple
- 7:51-53 Stephen gives judgment

Warm-up/Intro Questions:

Have you ever had the experience of discovering that what you thought was true about God and about what it means to follow Him was wrong? What was that like for you? How did you handle it?

Questions for Individual study

Read through this passage once. What do you think Stephen is trying to accomplish in his speech? What question or charge is he trying to answer?

Now, read the passage again and divide it into major thought units: Who is the major character in each unit? What is God doing? What's the major point in each thought unit? How do the people respond to the leader God sends?

Questions for Sub-group Discussion:

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. What do you see as the major theme tying this passage together?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 7:1-8

Let's look at verse 1 together. What's going on here? What is the high priest asking Stephen? What are the "things" being referred to?

Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin and questioned by the high priest. "Are these things so?" In other words, are you guilty of speaking against Moses and God, against the temple and the law? Are you guilty of blasphemy?

In his speech Stephen didn't explain that he had never said Jesus would physically destroy the temple. Jesus had never said this and so Stephen hadn't either. But Stephen had begun to draw conclusions from what Jesus had said and from his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension that would alter his view of the temple and laws. And this altered view of the temple would have sounded blasphemous to the council. So, what Stephen tried to do in his speech was to argue, from the OT scriptures, that he was not being blasphemous either against God or against Moses and the Law.

Okay, now let's look at verses 2-8. Who is the main character? What happened to him? Where did God appear to him? Is this important? What did God say to him? What didn't God give to Abraham? What did God give him? What's significant about all this?

Palestinian Jewish tradition strongly emphasized that there was something particularly special, holy sacred about the land of Israel. Some teachers even claimed that God revealed himself directly only in the land of Israel. In verses 2-8, Stephen points out that although God called Abraham to the Promised Land, He revealed Himself to Abraham in Mesopotamia, far to the east of Palestine. Further, although Abraham was the father of the Jews and was seen as the model person of God by the Jews, neither he nor his descendants for 400 years were able to possess the Holy Land. Stephen's point was that the promise of God, the revelation of His will, and radical faithfulness to Him was not contingent in any way to the geography of Palestine. God and His purposes were much bigger than a particular piece of land.

Verses 7:9-16

Let's move on to verses 9-16. What's going on here? Again, who is the main character? How is he viewed in Jewish history? What happens to him? What does God do? Where? What point is Stephen making? Look at vv. 11-13. What is Stephen trying to say here?

The main character here is Joseph, one of the key leaders in Jewish history, who was mightily used by God to deliver his people. Out of jealousy, his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. And that's where God met him- in Egypt, not Palestine. Joseph's jealous brothers, those who opposed Joseph, the man of God, were Israel's patriarchs. So, Stephen begins the second emphasis of his speech: You, Israel, oppose the real leaders God gives you. Stephen punctuates this point in vv. 11-13. Joseph rescued his family, but at first they did not recognize him. This is like a parable: Joseph's family did not recognize its God-appointed deliverer; Israel does not recognize the deliverer God sends to her.

The other theme that begins to emerge here is that of God's sovereignty and faithfulness. Despite the jealousy of his brothers and Joseph's being sold into slavery, God was with Joseph, regularly rescuing him from all his afflictions and, in fact, using them to accomplish His purposes. Joseph is a clear example that opposition to something or someone that is favored by God will not succeed; instead, it back fires. Here, Stephen is using Joseph's life to foreshadow Jesus' life (and his own)-opposed, but vindicated by God.

Verses 7:17-35

Let's look at vv. 17-35. Now, what's going on here? Who is the main character? Where is the action taking place? Focus on vv. 17-19 for a minute. What kind of shape are the Israelites in? How does that compare with the plight of the Jews in the 1st Century AD? What might Stephen be implying here?

Israel's hard times in Egypt, during which a deliverer was desperately needed, resembles the difficulties the Jews were experiencing in 1st century Palestine. They were under Roman occupation which at times became very oppressive, and in an ironic and tragic parallel, they also had experienced the horror of their newborn children being killed when Herod, in fear, dealt carefully with the Jews by having their children killed (Mt. 2:16). As in the time of Moses, many people in the 1st Century were looking for another prophet like Moses to deliver them from oppression.

Why does Stephen mention Moses' gentile education in vv. 20-22?

It contributes to Stephen's polemic that / God planned to reach beyond Israel even from the beginning.

What's the point of vv. 23-29? What did Moses sacrifice or risk? Why? How did he see Himself? What did he expect would happen? What actually happened?

Moses sacrificed his standing in Egypt to identify with his people. "He supposed that his kinfolk would understand that God through him was rescuing them, but they did not understand" (v. 25). As with Joseph, God raised Moses to deliver his people and the people rejected their God-appointed deliverer.

Okay, what happens in vv. 30-34? Where does the action take place? Where is Mt Sinai? How does God refer to the ground upon which Moses is standing? What makes it holy? Where else do we see this "holy ground" or "holy place" language?

God not only revealed Himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai and sent him to Egypt, but He also called the mountain where Moses was standing "holy ground", the same term (same Greek words), was used by Stephen's accusers for the temple (6:13). Stephen is saying that what made the ground upon which Moses was standing holy was God's presence. It wasn't the mountain or the building itself which was the critical factor, but the Lord's presence. And the Lord could manifest His presence wherever He chose.

To sum up vv. 17-34: 1) God reveals Himself outside the Holy Land. 2) Israel rejects her deliverers.

Verses 7:35-41

What's going on here? How is Moses described? What did he do and say? How was he received by his people? What implied comparison is Stephen making? Who is like Moses? How?

Moses is described as a God-appointed ruler and judge and liberator who does wonders and signs and who is rejected by his people. Jesus also was a God-appointed ruler and judge who did wonders and signs.

Many Jewish people recognized that God would send a deliverer like Moses as Stephen indicates in v. 37 (quoting from Dt. 18:18). Stephen, in effect, asks, "In what way will the prophet be like Moses?" His answer is: He will be rejected by his people (vv. 35, 39); his hearers very opposition proves his point (cf. Isa 53:1-3)

What further point does Stephen make in vv. 40-41? What did their ancestors do?

Right after Moses received "living oracles" to give to their ancestors he was rejected, not obeyed, pushed aside because in their hearts they longed for Egypt (v. 39). Worse, in vv. 40-41, they turned to actual idolatry, making a calf and offering sacrifice to an idol. They made a deity of human design and worshiped it. As opposed to worshiping the true God. So, Stephen here begins to drive at the distinction between true and false worship. Anything which has at its core something of human design is an idol which engenders false worship.

Now, what "works of their hands" were the Jews currently idolizing?

The temple, the humanly built temple

Verses 7:42-50

What happens here? Let's start with the first part of v. 42. What does God do? Why?

Because of their idolatry God turned away from them and handed them over to worship the host of heaven (i.e., sun, moon, stars, -idols). God allowed them to reap the natural consequences of their idolatry. In worshiping a god who could not speak, could not lead, could not protect them, they cut themselves off from the only God who could help them.

In vv. 42b-43 Stephen quotes from the Greek translation of Amos 5:25-27. What is this passage all about? What question does v. 42b ask? What's the answer given? What consequences are there?

Did Israelites offer sacrifices when they were in the wilderness? Yes they did, but they were offered to the wrong deities, to Moloch and Rephan (the Hebrew text speaks of Sakkuth and Kaiwan). Therefore, God will judge them by allowing them to be conquered and exiled to Babylon

In v. 43 Stephen plays on the term translated as "tent" (NRSV) or tabernacle (KJV, NASB). He's saying that the Israelites carried the tabernacle of a pagan god in the wilderness, that their history is rife with idolatry.

What point is Stephen making in vv. 44-47? Why didn't they need the tent of Moloch? What had God given them?

Stephen is saying the Israelites had no excuse for their idolatry. They hadn't needed the tent of Moloch because God had given them the "tent of testimony", made according to the pattern God had passed along to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 25:8,40). This tent was brought into the Promised Land and was still in the land in the time of David.

What do you make of v. 46? Why does Stephen speak of David seeking a dwelling place for the "house of Jacob?"

Stephen might be engaging in a bit of polemic here. Stephen's audience thinks of the temple as the house where God dwells, but it is really just a house built for the house of Jacob, i.e., the Israelites. The temple was thought to be a place where God's people could come and be with God and in this sense the temple was a house for them. Stephen doesn't criticize this use of the temple and he doesn't deny that God blessed and approved the building of the temple, but he denies that God meant it to be the idols that his hearers had made it.

How do vv. 48-50 further Stephen's argument? What's the point?

It's not that God's presence can't be found in the temple. But, His presence can't be confined there. Further, God can't be controlled or manipulated by the building of a temple or by the rituals of the temple system or by the power moves of the temple hierarchy. What is being opposed is a God-in-the-box theology that suggests that if God can be located and confined, He can be manipulated and used to human ends. To attempt to mold or control God with human hands and according to human devices is idolatry.

Stephen is making clear that God does not dwell in the Jerusalem temple. He may visit there, but He doesn't live there; He lives in Heaven. Central allegiance to a temple built with human hands puts Israel in danger of repeating its earlier wilderness sin, for the golden calf had also been made by "their hands".

Verses 7:51-53

How does Stephen close his speech? What charge does he bring against his hearers?

Stephen now uses extremely charged terms to describe his audience. Stiff-necked and uncircumcised were standard prophetic insults in the OT, meaning that the people were

spiritually dead and unwilling to listen to the truth. Stephen is saying that his hearers, like their ancestors had rejected God's messengers and, worse, had betrayed and killed the righteous One. And, rather than Stephen being the one guilty of breaking the law and blasphemy, it was they who were guilty.

Application

🍏 How are we (not evangelicals in general, but us) like Stephen's hearers? What are some of the ways we try to put God in a box? How do we try to localize or nationalize or domesticate Him? How do we try to control or manipulate Him with our religious practices? Are their leaders or "prophets" sent from God whom we reject, because they challenge our status quo? Make us uncomfortable, threaten us with change? Are there aspects of the work of God or character of God we are missing because they don't conform to the way we expect God to be?

Acts 7:51-8:4 Study Notes

Key Theme:

The martyrdom of Stephen opens the door to a widespread persecution of the church resulting in the church being scattered and the Gospel being proclaimed outside Judea.

Outline:

- 7: 51-54 Stephen's Charge; People's reaction
- 7:55-59a Stephen's Vision; People's reaction
- 7:59b-60 Stephen's Last Words
- 8:1-4 Reaction to Stephen's Martyrdom

Warm-Up/ Intro Questions:

What's the worst thing that ever happened to you? Can you see any ways in which God brought something good out of it?

Questions for Individual Study:

What charges does Stephen bring against his hearers in vv. 51-53? How do his hearers respond? Why? What do you make of Stephen's vision? What happens as a result of Stephen's martyrdom?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion:

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another.

Why do you think God allows Stephen to be martyred and the church to be persecuted and scattered?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 7:51-53

What charges does Stephen bring against his hearers? What do these charges mean? In what ways are they just like their ancestors? What's the irony of v. 53? In what ways have they not kept the law?

Stephen accuses his hearers of being stiff-necked, i.e., proud and inflexible, unwilling to bend or rethink things. He also calls them uncircumcised in heart and ears, which is a way of saying they were spiritually dead, unwilling to listen to the truth and separated from God. And he charges that they are forever opposing the Holy Spirit. Here Stephen is implying that in opposing him they are, in fact, opposing the Spirit.

They are like their ancestors in that they also were guilty of persecuting the prophets and rejecting God's messengers. They had rejected Jesus and were now rejecting Stephen.

In v. 53 Stephen accuses them of hypocrisy, of claiming reverence for the law yet of not keeping it. Here Stephen accuses his hearers of being guilty of the charge, which they had accused him. How had they not kept the law? 1) In betraying and murdering The Righteous One (v. 52b), they had not listened to Moses, who prophesied; "God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as He raised me up." (v. 37, DT 18:15-18). 2) In bearing false witness against Stephen (6:13-14), they violated the commandment in Ex. 20:16. 3) When they kill Stephen, they will violate another commandment (Ex 20:13, murder), just as they did with Jesus' death. So it is his accusers and their ancestors who act against the authority of Moses. The accusers stand accused.

How do Stephen's hearers respond at this point? Why do you think they didn't respond in this way earlier in Stephen's speech?

They become engaged and ground their teeth- you have to be really angry to grind your teeth! Interestingly, they don't become this angry when he attacks their "temple theology". The reaction comes when Stephen directly attacks the character of his hearers. This is what seems truly offensive to them.

Why did Stephen attack their character directly? Why didn't he just point out the flaws in their theology and then just stop? Do you think Stephen suspected that they might respond so angrily? Did Stephen just lose his temper and cut loose? Do you think he had a death wish? What was so vital that he was willing to risk his life for it? What might have happened if Stephen had backed off?

As was the case with Peter, it's clear that Stephen wasn't primarily concerned with protecting himself or escaping punishment. It's also clear from v. 60 that Stephen wasn't angry with his hearers. Even as they were stoning him he was asking God to forgive them.

It may be that Stephen provoked his hearers not out of anger, but out of love. First, there was his love for Jesus. Out of love for Jesus and in faithfulness to Jesus' command to bear witness, Stephen courageously proclaimed and defended the gospel even before a hostile audience. They were so stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears that only very blunt, harsh language had the capacity to penetrate their hardened hearts. I think Stephen was trying to cause a reaction even if it might cost him his life.

Are we willing to ask God to give us that kind of love for Him and for people? What are we willing to risk so that others might have the opportunity to turn to God?

Verses 7:55-59a

What does Stephen see? What enables him to see? What does Stephen's vision mean? Why do you think God gives Stephen a vision at this point? What does the vision do for Stephen?

Stephen is given a vision of heaven where he sees God the father in His glory and Jesus standing next to Him. What enables Stephen to see? A fresh filling of the Holy Spirit. The Greek text indicates that Stephen experienced an intensified anointing of the Spirit that opened the door to a vision of God's glory and of Jesus.

His statement in 7:56 echoes what Jesus said about himself in Mk. 14:61-62. For that Jesus was judged guilty of blasphemy and killed. Here Stephen challenges that judgment by affirming that Jesus is, in fact, the glorious Christ and is now at God's right hand.

I think God gave Stephen this vision at this point for two reasons. One reason was to bear witness to his audience. Jesus is who he said he is. He is at God's right hand. Therefore, repent! The other reason was to strengthen and encourage Stephen. Stephen, don't lose heart. You're on the right track. It's leading you to me. I am here to receive you. God, in his mercy, often gives us special revelations of Himself when He calls us into difficult situations. Have any of you experienced this?

Why does Stephen call Jesus "The Son of Man?" Where does that title come from? What does it mean?

This is the only place outside the Gospels where the phrase “Son of Man” is used as a semi technical title for Jesus? It was as Son of Man that Jesus suffered and was vindicated by God (Lk. 9:22) because it was only as a human being that Jesus could experience death. The title also envisions Jesus fulfilling the roles described in Dan 7:13-14. There, one like a Son of Man comes into the presence of God, the Ancient One, and receives glory, dominion and kingship. He is served by all peoples, nations and languages in an everlasting, indestructible kingdom. In the context of Daniel 7, the coming of the Son of Man would vindicate the righteous (Israel) against their oppressors (the nations). Stephen’s hearers would know in which category he places himself and in which category he places them.

Scripture normally speaks of Jesus sitting at God’s right hand in his role as ruler and judge (Mt 25:31, Mk 12:36, 16:19; pH. 1:20). Hebrews emphasizes Jesus role as priest. In Heb. 10:12 we are told, “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at God’s right hand. Here, the contrast is made between Jesus who sat down, and the temple priests, who always stood (there were no chairs in the Jerusalem temple), signifying that their work was never finished. They had to make sacrifice upon sacrifice because their sacrifices were only types of Christ’s sacrifice. When Jesus had made his sacrifice, his work was done. So, he sat down at God’s right hand.

But here, in Acts 7, Stephen sees Jesus standing. Why?

I think Jesus is standing to both receive and welcome Stephen and to serve as his advocate before the Father (Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8). As Stephen is being rejected by earthly courts he receives a vision of Jesus welcoming him, acting as his advocate, testifying on his behalf in the court of heaven. And Jesus is not only his advocate, but also the Judge whose judgment alone matters from the eternal perspective. Therefore, Stephen has nothing to fear; he can rejoice.

Also, confirmed in this vision is what Stephen had been arguing for in his speech. F.F. Bruce comment: “The presence of the Son of Man at God’s hand meant that for his people a way of access to God had been opened up more immediate and heart-satisfying than the temple could provide. It meant that the hour of fulfillment had struck, and that the age of particularism had come to an end. The sovereignty of the Son of Man was to embrace all nations and races without distinction; under his sway, there is no place for an institution which gives religious privileges to one group in preference to others.”

Verses 7:59b-60

What does Stephen say as he is being stoned? What does this say about him? And what does this remind you of? (Look at Lk 23:46; Mk 15:37)

Stephen’s words indicate that he is full of faith and of forgiveness and they echo the words of Jesus on the cross. Stephen has become like his Master.

Verses 8:1-4

What happens as a result of Stephen’s martyrdom?

- 1) *Stephen’s death proves his point. They reject the prophets. This marks the break between official Judaism and the early church. No more will the church be seen or see itself as a sub-sect within Judaism. And this lays the theological groundwork for the expansion of the Jesus movement outside Palestine.*

- 2) *It leads to the persecution and scattering of the church as a whole and thus to the direct spread of the faith outside Judea.*
- 3) *It sows a seed in Saul- a seed whose fruit would later be reaped on the road to Damascus.*

Key Questions/Applications

🍏 Why does God allow Stephen to be martyred and the church persecuted and scattered? Why doesn't He deliver them? Would the church have scattered to spread the Gospel if it hadn't been forced to do so by persecution? Is there something that God wants us to do that we are not doing? What will it take for God to get us to do it?

🍏 Peter's speech led to mass conversions; Stephen's led to martyrdom. Was Peter more "successful" than Stephen? Why or why not? How do we measure or understand "success"? Are we consistent in applying our theology of success to the incidents of our lives? That is, is what we say we believe about success the way we really feel about success? How can we internalize our theology of success? Can we internalize it on our own?

🍏 What are we willing risk for the cause of Christ? Are we willing to risk our lives, our careers, and our creature comforts? Do we believe that whatever sacrifices we make are not in vain? Do we believe that God can bring good out of even the worst things that can happen to us?

Acts 8:4-25 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Forced to leave Jerusalem because of persecution, Philip goes to Samaria bringing the Gospel with him and many Samaritans believe.

Outline:

- 8:4-13 Philip in Samaria
 - 26-30 The scattered church goes preaching
 - 9-11 Philip does signs
 - 12-13 Philip's power is greater
- 8:14-25 Peter and John in Samaria
 - 14-17 Peter and John lay hands; Samaritans receive Holy Spirit
 - 18-24 Simon tries to buy the Holy Spirit's power
 - 25 Peter and John return to Jerusalem, preaching to Samaritans as they go

Warm-up/Intro Questions:

What caused you to first become interested in Jesus and the Gospel? What first grabbed your attention?

Questions For Individual Study:

How would you divide this passage? Who are the key characters in each passage and what is the key issue? Based on this passage, how would you describe Samaritan culture? What seems important to the Samaritans?

Questions For Sub-Group Discussion:

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. Why do you think Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem? Why was this important?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion:

Verse 8:4

What happens in v. 4? What does the church do? What helps the church deal with the persecution against it in a productive way? Why doesn't the church get discouraged?

Look at Mt. 24:9-14.

Jesus had warned his followers that they would be persecuted. But he had also promised salvation to those who endured to the end. Jesus concluded in v. 14 by saying "And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come." So, Jesus' followers were not caught unawares and they weren't left wondering what they should be doing even in the context of persecution. "And this good news of the Kingdom will be proclaimed. . ."

There are different words for "scattered" in Greek. One means dispersed so that the item is gone from that point on, like scattering a person's ashes on the ocean's waves. That's not the word used here and in 8:1. The word used here means scattered in order to be planted. All the Jewish leaders did by scattering the believers was to plant them in the places to which they had been scattered, for there, they proclaimed the word.

🍏 Is this true of us? Are we willing to endure to the end? How do we deal with being “scattered”? We’ve been “scattered”, caused to leave places that felt like “home” to us, to come to Harvard. Are we choosing to put down roots and bear fruit for Jesus, or are we feeling a little frustrated and sorry for ourselves, because Harvard and even our fellowships can be hard places sometimes? The early Christians allowed themselves to be planted. Because of this even the hard things that happened to them served to advance the cause of Christ. What would it look like for us to allow God to plant us here?

Verses 8:5-8

What happens in v. 5? Who is Philip? Where does he go? What’s significant about this? What do we know about the Samaritans?

Philip was one of the 7 Hellenistic Jews who were appointed to manage the daily distribution of food to the widows.

When he is forced to leave Jerusalem he goes to Samaria and begins proclaiming the Messiah there. This was a bold and startling thing for Philip to do because there was a long-standing and very deep-seated hostility between the Jews and Samaritans going back for centuries. When the Assyrian army had overthrown Samaria and carried the Jews of the of the Northern Kingdom away to Assyria, some Jews were left behind. These Jews intermarried with the foreigners who had been settled in Samaria in their place and took up some of their religious practices. So, they were viewed by the Jews as ethnic and religious half-breeds and deeply scorned. This problem was further compounded when the Samaritans set up a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim. This was prohibited in the OT, but the Samaritans solved this problem, rejecting the OT except for the first five books. In 128BC, the Maccabean ruler John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan temple, causing deep resentment. Sometime in the period 6-9 BC, certain Samaritans desecrated the Jerusalem Temple with human bones, making it unclean (See Num 19:11ff). By New Testament times the hostility between Jews and Samaritans was very great. Samaria would not have been an obvious place to go to reach good news about a Jewish Messiah?

So, what does Philip do in Samaria? How is it received? Why do you think Philip gets the reception that he does?

Philip proclaims the Messiah to them and does signs which include casting out demons and healing the sick. As a result, there was great joy in the city and people listened eagerly to what Philip said.

What is a sign? What is the purpose of signs? What are signs supposed to do? What are things that we could do at Harvard that would serve as signs to people, pointing them to Jesus? How might we bring great joy to Harvard?

🍏 And who are our “Samaritans”, people with whom we have had historic hostility, but whom God wants us to reach? For example, an interesting coalition of evangelicals and feminists has formed to combat the rapid growing sex trade. Are there other such opportunities for us? Are there communities to which we could bring great joy that might lend to hearts more open to the Gospel?

Verses 8:9-11

Lets’ move on to vv. 9-11. What do you make of Simon? How is he portrayed? What are we told about him? What did he call himself? What did the Samaritans say about him? How did they receive him?

Simon is portrayed as a powerful magician who had amazed (vv.9,11) the Samaritans with his magic. Generally, magicians were not well regarded in the Roman world. Among the charges leveled against them was that they used miracles to gain money for themselves (maybe like some televangelists today). But, they were feared and respected. And the Samaritans took Simon very seriously. He called himself great and the Samaritans agreed with him, calling him "the power of God that is called Great". This designation seems close to the inscriptional evidence about a god who is less than the supreme God, but nonetheless very powerful. So, Simon may have been given divine status and he apparently did nothing to dissuade them. He seems to be someone who had power and liked power.

Compare v. 6 with 10-11. What similarities do you see? What do these suggest?

Luke parallels the Samaritans' responses to Philip and Simon. In both cases, the Samaritans are attracted by the great power both Philip and Simon possess and "listen eagerly." It does not seem that listening eagerly amounts to faith or conversion.

What differences do you see in the two accounts? What's different about each's exercise of power? What's the lesson for us?

Philip exercise power on behalf of others, casting out demons and healing the sick, thus bringing great joy to the city. He's motivated both by compassion and the desire to proclaim Jesus. Simon practices magic. We're not told of what sort and who benefits. Rather than bringing about great joy, he stirs up amazement. And the person he proclaims is only himself.

The sad truth is that Christians often start out like Philip, having right desires and motivations, but sometimes end up like Simon, having become seduced by power. We at Harvard have been given a measure of power. We need to receive it as stewards, use it well, and hold it loosely, i.e. not be seduced by it.

Verses 8:12-13

Okay, let's move on to vv. 12-13 now. What's going on here? Earlier, in v. 6, we were told that the Samaritans "listened eagerly," to Philip. What are we told in v. 12? How do they respond to Philip?

They do not just listen eagerly; they believe the good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus. And, having believed, they commit themselves which is symbolized by their desire to be baptized.

Why do they believe? Our passage begins by describing a power encounter, i.e., an encounter between the spiritual power of Philip's God and the magic of Simon in which it is demonstrated the power of God is greater than the magic of Simon. (This is implied by the fact that even Simon is "amazed.") In a power-oriented society, as Samaria is portrayed to be, a demonstration of power serves as a catalyst for people's becoming open to the Gospel. But a demonstration of power is not enough. Philip also gives them a truth encounter by preaching and teaching so that they have a correct understanding of Jesus and the Gospel. And he calls for commitment, symbolized by baptism.

If Samaria is a power-oriented society, what kind of society is Harvard? What grabs people's attention Harvard? What engenders openness to new ideas and commitments? If this is too abstract, think about a couple of your pre-Christian friends at Harvard. What's important to them? What seems to grab their attention? Why does it grab their attention? What's underneath it?

Verses 8:14-17

Let's move on. What happens in vv. 14-17? Why do you think the Jerusalem apostles send Peter and John to Samaria?

The Jerusalem apostles took seriously their roles as leaders and teachers and Shepherds of the infant Church. Given the history between the Jews and Samaritans it would have been hard for them to trust the Samaritans. The fact that the Samaritans had played fast and loose with the OT to justify their disobedience to God's will would have made the apostles hesitate to accept at face value the report that the Samaritans were coming to faith in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. They needed to check it out to see if it was true.

What do Peter and John do? Why do you think the Holy Spirit had not come on any of them yet? What might God have been saying to the Jews? To the Samaritans? What does Peter and John's trip accomplish?

Peter and John laid hands upon the Samaritans, prayed for them to receive the Holy Spirit and God sent His Spirit to them. In Acts, there is not a single pattern for the coming of the Spirit. The Spirit comes sometimes with Apostles present, sometimes without (9:17); sometimes with the laying on of hands, sometimes without (2:38); sometimes very close to the time of water baptism, sometimes not; sometimes before water baptism, sometimes after (as here). The point is that God's gift is in God's gift is in God's control.

So, why did God choose to withhold the outpouring of His Spirit until the Apostles came down from Jerusalem?

The mother church in Jerusalem needed confirmation that the Samaritans were true believers. That confirmation came in the form of the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit when the apostles laid hands on them.

There is also another reason God withheld His Spirit until the apostles came. The Samaritans had to submit to having apostles from hated Jerusalem lay their hands on them. They had to acknowledge a measure of dependence upon and identification with the Jerusalem church. If the Samaritans had been allowed to receive the Holy Spirit without first having given up their repudiation of Jerusalem and their rejection of all the scriptural prophecies that the Messiah would be of the seed of David, they would have been in real danger. They could easily have imagined they could believe in "Jesus" and receive the "Spirit" without repenting of their former attitude. There could have come into being two forms of Christianity: one Jewish based on the Jesus of history, and the other Samaritan, with a Jesus and a Spirit of their own making, divorced from history.

So, the Jewish Christians had to repent of their parochialism and nationalism; they had to keep believing that God was God of more than the Jews. And the Samaritans had to repent of their attempts to erect a God of their own making; they had to believe that "salvation is from the Jews" (Jn 4:22). So, what did Peter and John's trip accomplish? Under the sovereignty of God it preserved the unity and health of the church.

Verses 8:18-24

What happens in vv. 18-24? What does Simon do? What does he want? What is his concept of the Holy Spirit? What is our concept of the Holy Spirit? And what do we want?

Simon sees that the Spirit is given through the laying on of hands and so he offers Peter and John money. Why? Not so that he might have the Holy Spirit, but so that he might have the power to dispense the Spirit to anyone upon whom he laid his hands. Maybe Simon thought that being able to dispense the Spirit would be a way to gain further power or prestige or profit. As with Ananias and Sapphira,, the use (or attempted use) of possessions symbolized the state of Simon's heart. He wanted God's power, but he didn't want a relationship with God. When Peter calls upon him to repent and pray for forgiveness, he doesn't express a desire to be right with God, merely a desire to be freed from punishment.

It seems that Simon thought of the Holy Spirit as a power which could be bought and used; he thought of the Spirit as a commodity. We, also, are tempted to think of the Spirit as merely a power. So, if we want more power in our lives, the thing to do is to get more of the Spirit. If we have "it", then we can use "it" to integrate our lives, overcome our problems, etc. But the Holy Spirit is not an "it." He is a person. God. The object of our relationship to the Holy Spirit is not that we might have more of Him so that we can use him. It is, rather, that he might have more of us and use us (cf. Acts 13:2). Simon didn't understand this; sometimes we don't either.

Simon's request was motivated by the same illusion of power that drives so many in today's business leaders, actors and athletes with the appearance of unusual significance. But God's power has little to do with outward appearances or worldly acclaim. Showered with uncritical adulation (8:9-10), Simon became obsessed with himself and his supposed importance.

Verse 8:25

What do Peter and John do next? What has happened to them? How have they changed?

They testify and teach in Samaria and then set out on a return journey home to Jerusalem. But they stop along the way in "many villages of the Samaritans." Their picture of God has expanded. They have seen God work in places and people and ways they hadn't imagined. Their theology had been expanding, but their experience had still been somewhat restricted. Now God had pushed them into an experience which enabled them to grow into and apply their theology. For mission to advance, both theology and experience have to grow together.

Any one interested in joining us in Ecuador?

Applications:

- 🍏 How can we serve as signs pointing people at Harvard to Jesus? What opportunities do we have to bring great joy?
- 🍏 Are there "Samaritans" whom God wants us to reach?
- 🍏 Do we take the unity of the body as seriously as God does?
- 🍏 Have we succumbed to the illusion of power? How much time and energy do we devote to fantasizing about how great we could become? Do we only pay attention to those who stroke our ego? Or, do we listen to those who aren't impressed with our status and will level with us about our weaknesses? How much does status and position define who we are? How does it affect where we live, what we buy, what we wear, who we socialize with? Suppose we were to lose it all- what then?

Acts 8:26-40 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

In obedience to the Holy Spirit, Philip proclaims the gospel to the “ends of the earth.”

Outline:

8:26-30b Philip hears and obeys
8:30c-35 Philip teaches and proclaims
8:36-40 Philip baptizes

Warm-Up Intro/Questions:

Have you ever felt like God was prompting you to do something that seemed irrational and even counter-productive? What did you do? How did you handle it?

Questions for Individual Study:

Who are the main characters in this passage? What does each do? What do you learn about each? What strikes you about this passage?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion:

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. Then, what do you learn about evangelism from this passage?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 8:26-30b

Before looking at vv. 26-30b, let's review a bit. What was Philip doing in the previous passage? How well was he received?

After leading a kind of revival in Samaria where many were coming to faith in Jesus, how do you think Philip might have felt about being told to go to the Gaza road- a road which was in a ruined, deserted area with very little traffic? What might Philip have been thinking? Do you think it made sense to him? How might he have been tempted to respond? But what does he do? Why?

Philip would probably have been feeling very exhilarated by the revival that was taking place in Samaria and also beginning to get close to the people there. The angel's command would not have made much sense to him. "Leave these people; leave the work begun here, and go to a deserted road." "A road?" "Yes, a road, the Gaza Road." "But it will take me days to get there... and there is nothing there!" "Yes, but go!" "But why? What's going to happen there? And what about the flock here- who's going to take care of them?" "Philip, go!" "OK. I'll go."

Philip goes. He obeys what seems to be a ridiculous command. He could have resisted; he could have demanded explanations; he could have pouted. Philip doesn't do any of these things. He obeys. He trusts God above his own reasoning. Sometimes God's commands don't initially make sense to us. Sometimes God tests our faith through such commands(e.g. Ex 14:16; 1Kings 17:3-4, 9-14; 2Kings 5:10), but His commands are never

capricious. The key question for us is not, "Do God's commands make sense?" but "Do we trust God enough to obey when they don't make sense to us?"

What happens when Philip goes? Who does he encounter? What do we know about Ethiopia? What might Luke be telling us?

The Ethiopia of that day was not the same area that is called Ethiopia today, (modern Ethiopia was called Abyssinia and converted to Christianity in the 4th Century AD), but what is now primarily Sudan. In the OT Ethiopia was described as a remote and distant land (Ezek 29:10; Esth 1:1), renowned for its wealth (Job 18:19; Isa 45:14) and its military prowess (2Kgs 19:9; 2 Chr 14:9-13; Isa 37:9). The Ethiopians were a dark-complexioned people (Jer 13:23), one of the wicked nations of the world (Isa 20:3-5; 43:3; Exek 30:1-9), who were to be among those foreigners who would be converted and acknowledge the true God of Israel (Ps. 68:31-32; Zeph 3:9-10).

In Mediterranean legend and geography, Ethiopia figured as the very ends of the earth. It may be that Luke here foreshadows the rest of the fulfillment of Jesus' mandate (Acts 1:8) in Acts 8, because he highlights both the mission to Samaria and (with the eunuch) in Judea, but also in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch a mission that would reach the ends of the earth as the eunuch went on his way back to Ethiopia. This goal of reaching the earth's limits with the message of salvation went back not just to Acts 1:8, but also to Isaiah (Isa 49:6); 62:11) from which the Ethiopian was reading.

(As an interesting side note, we see from this passage that the Gospel reached parts of Africa, reached people of color, before the gospel came to what we would call Europe today. Christianity has never been merely a Western religion.)

Let's focus on eunuchs now. What does the OT tell us about them?

During this period, eunuchs in the courts of this part of Africa were not only castrated, but also, usually partially dismembered. This meant that the eunuch could not have become a full proselyte to Judaism even if he had wanted to, because he could not be properly circumcised. So, from the point of view of Judaism, this put him on the permanent fringes of the religion to which he was showing great interest. Dt 23:1 was regularly interpreted to mean that eunuchs were to be excluded from God's assembly, so it may have been that the eunuch, after having traveled a huge distance to get to Jerusalem, was not even allowed to enter any part of the temple. Imagine what a crushing a disappointment that would have been.

What are we told, and what might we surmise, about this eunuch in vv. 27-28?

He's a very important official in charge of all the treasury of the Candace (Candace was a title, not a personal name). This means he was both competent and trusted. He is also very wealthy; most people walked, the more well-to-do rode horses, but only the most wealthy had chariots.

Clearly, he is spiritually hungry and open. It was a huge effort to go to Jerusalem (about a 30 day journey each way). The fact that he is reading Isaiah on the way back home not only confirms his spiritual hunger, but also says something about his character. The high probability is that he wasn't allowed to worship in Jerusalem, yet he doesn't get bitter and angry. He still wants to know this God whose people have rejected him and so he's reading Isaiah, trying to know God. This means that the Spirit of God is at work in his life.

Verses 8:30b-35

Let's look at vv. 30b-35. Try to put yourself into this scene. Philip sees the eunuch in his chariot, and the Spirit says, "Go over to the chariot and join it." What do you think Philip is thinking as he starts jogging over to the chariot? What do you think the eunuch is thinking as he sees Philip approaching? What happens?

Philip listens and then takes initiative by asking a question. The eunuch is open, humble, eager. "I don't understand. Come up here and help me."

What is the Eunuch's question and what is he reading? What does Philip do with the question and the passage? How might this passage particularly resonate with the eunuch?

The eunuch is reading from Isa 53, and his question is, "Who is this passage talking about?" Why would the eunuch want to know this? Well, the passage is about someone who was slaughtered like a lamb, who was humiliated, who was denied justice, who had no descendants and whose life was taken away from the earth.

What had happened to the eunuch? He had traveled all the way to Jerusalem to worship and they hadn't even let him into the outskirts of the temple. Talk about humiliation and injustice! Imagine how Jesus, also rejected by the Jews, would resonate with him.

Now, who was this Jesus? That's the question Philip would answer, Jesus was the suffering servant who by his atoning sacrifice had become the savior of the world. And this Jesus was the one who would fulfill a prophecy of particular significance to the eunuch- Isa 56:3-5. Isa 56 says that a day would come when eunuchs who obeyed God would be given full-fledged participation and status in His house. They would no longer be just a "dry tree" (Isa 56:3), but they would have "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters" ((56:5).

So, Philip begins with the passage that the eunuch is reading, explains it and puts it in context and tells the whole story of Jesus.

🍏 Can we do this? Can we take Scripture, put it in context, explain it, use it to point to Jesus? Do we want to do this? If so, what will it take for us to know the Scriptures this well? How will we make the study of Scripture an integral part of our lives?

Verses 8:36-40

What happens next? What does the eunuch want to do? What happens after the baptism? What happens to the eunuch? What happens to Philip? What does he do?

The eunuch believes and wants to be baptized. It's almost like he can't believe how good the good news is. His question, "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" indicates that he can't quite believe it's true that in the gospel he is fully accepted. Eunuch or no eunuch, Jesus has room for him! So, he's baptized and goes on his way rejoicing.

Philip, meanwhile, gets moved about 25 miles north to Azotus, lands, and keeps on proclaiming the good news. Nothing, even these rapid movements, keep him from preaching now.

Applications:

So, what do we learn from this passage as a whole?

🍏 God is sovereign and his salvation plan is meant to include all sorts of people, even the foreigners and the marginalized. God is sovereign and He is actively at work preparing people, even unlikely people, to respond to Him? God is sovereign and sometimes He commands His people to do seemingly bizarre things, but there is a purpose behind them. God is sovereign; He is neither bizarre nor capricious.

🍏 God is sovereign, but human obedience and human initiative and human preparation have their part. Are we sensitive to God, willing to obey, able to take initiative and prepared to respond to the opportunities God puts before us?

🍏 Are we willing to be evangelists? Are we willing to build into our lives the qualities we see in Philip which enable him to be a “successful” evangelist under God’s sovereign control? And do we see the gospel as good news everyone, even the marginalized and the rejected? Are we willing to seek those whom our culture says aren’t worthy?

Acts 9:1-19a Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Saul, the persecutor of the church, is chosen, converted, called and commissioned.

Outline:

- 9:1-9 The Lord and Saul
 - 9:1-2 Saul persecutes
 - 9:3-7 Saul is confronted
 - 9:8-9 Saul is prepared
- 9:10-16 The Lord and Ananias
 - 9:10-12 Lord commands
 - 9:13-14 Ananias Resists
 - 9:15-16 Lord reassures
 - 9:17-19a Ananias and Saul

Warm-Up/Intro Questions

Who was the unlikeliest person you knew who came to faith in Jesus? How did it happen? How did this person change as a result?

Questions for Individual Study

Who are the main characters? What part does each play in the narrative? What does the Lord do for each character?

Questions for Sub Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. What applications do you draw from this passage?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 9:1-2

What has Saul been doing since Stephen's stoning? (See Acts 8:3). What does he want to do now? Why do you think Saul is so zealous in his persecution? How does he view the early church? What does he think the followers of Jesus are doing? What threat does he see them representing?

We are told in 8:3 that Saul was ravaging the church. In 9:1-2 we are told that Saul wants to extend the range of his ravaging to Damascus, which was an important city about 135 miles north, northeast of Jerusalem. Although a primarily Gentile city, it had tens of thousands of Jews living there and several Jewish synagogues. So, Saul wants to go to Damascus, track down all the disciples of the Lord there, bind them whether men or women and bring them back to Jerusalem to be imprisoned or even killed. (After Saul was converted, he records in 2 Cor. 11:24 that on 5 separate occasions he received the 39 lashes which sometimes caused death from synagogue authorities for bearing witness to Jesus. This lashing may have been what Saul had in mind for all those belonging to the "Way".

Why was Paul so vehement in his rage and opposition?

He saw the followers of Jesus apostates, heretics, blasphemers and he realized along with Steven that the new order inaugurated by Jesus and the old were incompatible. Whereas, Stephen had argued, The new has come; the old must go." Saul's point was, "The old must stay; therefore the new must go." For Saul, the idea of a crucified Messiah was impossibility, and the practice of praying to Jesus (7:59) an utter blasphemy threatening the monotheism of the Jews. And when Stephen proclaimed that the temple was no longer necessary all this was too serious to be ignored; it had to be stopped by whatever means. Saul saw the followers of Jesus as a cancer, as a demonic assault against the Jews, the chosen people of God. And zeal for the Lord inflamed him and set him on the warpath.

Verses 9:3-7

What happens as Saul is going to Damascus? What does he see? Coming from where? What does he hear? Who is speaking?

Saul sees a light from heaven flashing around him and falls to the ground. Light or lightning was a regular feature of theophanies in the OT (cf. Ex 19:6; 2 Sam 22:15). But this was not a theophany, per se, but a Christophany, a revelation of Jesus, the Christ. Saul had been attributing divinity to him, even praying to him as God. In a flash (bad pun intended) Saul recognizes that these followers of Jesus were right.

Try to put yourself in Saul's shoes. He hears, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." What has just happened to him? What has happened to his worldview, his understanding of reality? What does he realize about his view of God and his stance toward God? What do you think he expects will happen to him?

Saul's whole life has just been turned upside down. Most of what he thought about God, he now learns, was wrong. Worse, he thought he was defending the honor of God's name, burning with zeal for God. But now he knows that he is the heretic, the blasphemer, the enemy of God. What he deserves is death; God should rightly strike him dead. Yet, God doesn't strike him dead. He shows him mercy and redeems him. Think about how it affects the way Saul lives his life from this point on.

🍏 What do we deserve from God? Do we know that we deserve wrath, but instead receive mercy? Will we allow this truth to infuse our view of God and to radically affect the way we live our lives?

Let's look again at v. 5. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Who does the Lord say Saul is persecuting? What does this say about how Jesus views his followers, views us? How does this encourage us when we are feeling overwhelmed or anxious or discouraged? What does it say about Jesus concern for us and presence with us?

There is a deep, vital, flesh and blood connection between Jesus and his followers. When we are called the "body of Christ", there is more than just a poetic metaphor being articulated. Jesus is with us; we belong to him and are in him. He belongs to us and is in us by his Spirit. What happens to us happens to him because Jesus has made it so. He will never leave us nor forsake us. He will never shield himself from our pain. He will embrace every ounce of it with us; he will hold us and carry us and shield us through our pain. We can come to him with our pain, because he is already with us in our pain. He is Emmanuel, God with us. We are never alone, never totally misunderstood, never without hope or courage or strength when we are in Jesus.

🍏 Now lets think about this from another perspective. When we gossip against, mistreat, ignore or other wise hurt other believers whom are we also hurting? Would we treat Jesus the way we sometimes treat

one another? Do we see Jesus in the eyes of every believer- every believer? Do we see him in the midst of every gathering of his people, however feeble it might seem?

🍏 The reverse of this is also true. When we bless other believers, whom are we also blessing? (Cf. 25:40) How do we want to treat Jesus?

Verses 9:8-9

What had Jesus told Saul to do (v. 6)? What did Saul do? What might Saul have done and thought about during his three days in Damascus? What does his neither eating nor drinking indicate? What's the irony in Saul's situation?

Saul did what Jesus told him to do. He got up, was led into Damascus and waited for his next instructions from the Lord Jesus. While he waits he fasts which indicates that he was both repenting and also seeking God's face. The irony is that previously he could see, but was in fact blind. Now, he is physically blind, but beginning to spiritually see. He is now fasting of food and drink, but perhaps feasting on the body and blood of Jesus.

Verses 9:10-12

While Saul waits in Damascus what is the Lord doing? To whom does he give visions? What is revealed in each vision? What does the Lord say to Ananias? What does he want Ananias to do? What does the Lord reveal to Saul? Why the double visions?

The Lord appears to Ananias, who is called a disciple, in a vision and is told to go to Straight Street, to the house of Judas to look for Saul, who is praying and who has seen Ananias in a vision. (I'm tempted to allegorize here. Saul awaits Ananias on Straight Street, where his life will be straightened and redeemed, in the house of Judas, where his betrayal and persecution of Jesus will be forgiven.)

Both Ananias and Saul are given visions so that they may be prepared to encounter and receive one another. The visions make clear that God is in control and directing all these events. Without believing that God is in control Ananias would not have the courage to go to Saul. Without believing that God was in control, Saul also would lack the courage to fulfill the Lord's mandate upon his life, both then and in the future (cf. V.16)

Verses 9:13-14

How does Ananias respond? What is his concern? Is this legitimate? What is difficult for Ananias to believe?

In effect, Ananias says "Lord, I've heard about this guy. He's evil, out and out evil. He wants to destroy all your followers, all of us, me. If I go to him he'll arrest me. Are you sure this is what you want me to do?" Ananias, understandably, doesn't trust Saul. What is really difficult for him to believe is that someone like Saul could be changed, could be converted.

🍏 What about us? Do we believe God can reach and change anyone He chooses? Are we willing to pick even one such unlikely person and begin to pray daily and fervently for his or her conversion?

Verses 9:15-16

How does the Lord respond to Ananias? What does he say to him? How does he reassure him? What does the Lord say about Saul? What will be Saul's task? How costly will it be?

Verses 9:17-19a

What does Ananias do? How does he refer to Saul? What does this mean? What had to happen in Ananias' heart before he was able to do and say what he did to Saul? What had to happen in Saul's heart in order to receive it?

Craig Barnes says this, "Saul was converted from being a persecutor to an apostle of the church. Ananias was converted from fear to hospitality. In one of the finest moments of the Early Church, Ananias goes to his persecutor Saul. He places his hands on Saul. And the first words he says, the first words Saul heard from the church he tried to destroy were, "Brother Saul". He made his tormentor his brother. At the time Luke wrote this story, the Early Church was at times severely persecuted, as it was for the next three hundred years, and as it still is in some parts of the world today. The way the church has always, always, always overcome persecution is by reaching out to the tormentor, saying "Brother Saul". That is what Christ asks of you in responding to your tormentor as well. Can you say it to the ex? To the person who is trying to get your job? To the person who has dragged you into court? Or who hurt you so deeply? It is the only way to transform evil with love."

What is Ananias' task? What does he do for Saul? He enfleshes the Lord's forgiveness and links him to the Lord's body. Are there any "Sauls" in your life –people who need to experience the Lord's love and mercy enfleshed, or, who need an advocate, or who need help to be integrated into the body of Jesus? Are there people you find unnerving or whose past you find distasteful, yet who need your help? What will you do with such people?

Applications:

- 🍏 How will we treat fellow believers?
- Are we willing to turn enemies into friends?
- Do we believe God can save anyone? Even "Godless Harvard"?

Acts 9:19b-31 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme

Saul, the former persecutor becomes the persecuted, because of his preaching that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God

Outline

- 19b-26 Saul in Damascus
- 26-30 Saul in Jerusalem
- 31 State of the Church

Warm-Up/Intro Questions

What was one of the biggest changes that occurred in your life as a result of your conversion? Can you remember any changes in your outlook or motivation, or ambitions or lifestyle? What change stands out to you?

Questions for Individual Study

What does Saul do in Damascus and Jerusalem? What does he say about Jesus? What obstacles does he face? What happens to the church?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Look at 9:1-31 as a whole. What are the elements of Saul's conversion? What happened in him to lead him from being a persecutor of Jesus to being a preacher of Jesus?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 9:19b-25

Focus on vv. 19-22. What does Saul do in Damascus? What does he proclaim? What is the center of his preaching? What does this confirm about the nature of his conversion? Where does Saul proclaim Jesus? Why there? What is obvious to the Jews in Damascus concerning Saul? How do they respond to him?

Saul immediately begins to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying that Jesus is Son of God and Messiah. It was precisely these kinds of claims about Jesus made by Stephen and others that had so enraged Saul previously. His preaching reflects his totally new perspective on who Jesus is and on what it means to be faithful to God. Given his past behavior as a persecutor of the church, his embrace of Jesus in and of itself would have confounded the Jews. They would have been more than astounded that such a radical change had taken place in him. This change coupled with his forceful preaching would have been an extraordinarily difficult apologetic to ignore.

It is obvious to all the Jews in Damascus that something astounding has happened to Saul. He left Jerusalem with the intent to round up, bind and perhaps even have killed the followers of Jesus. By the time he arrives in Damascus he himself has become one of those followers. How can this be explained? (Imagine Al Gore going on national TV to say he was dropping out of the presidential race and throwing his support to George Bush, or Bill Gates saying Linux is a better operating system after all, or Lou giving up ice cream for tofu- things like this just don't happen.) The most logical explanation is that Saul encountered the risen Jesus. It's also the explanation most hard to swallow because to accept it means a radical change.

Conversion implies change; it necessitates change. What difference is our conversion making in our lives? Can our families and friends detect new loyalties, new perspectives, new ambitions, new character changes? Is there anything in the way we live our lives that makes our preaching difficult to ignore? Should there be?

Lets move on to vv. 23-25. Luke tells us that "after some time had passed" Saul had to flee from Damascus to escape a plot against him. Gal. 1:15-18 suggests that the time period referred to was about three years. During this period Saul left Damascus, went to Syrian Arabia (of which Damascus may have been either a part or at least bordered) and then returned to Damascus where he spent some time before being forced to flee to Jerusalem. We don't know how much time he spent in Arabia and how much he spent in Damascus; we just know that the combined period was about 3 years.

What happened while Saul is in Damascus? What kind of response does he get to his preaching? What does this tell us about the effectiveness of his ministry?

There are two responses to Saul's preaching. Some believe and become his disciples. Others become enraged and plot to kill him. Luke refers to Saul's opponents as "Jews". This is a further indication of the split between official Judaism and the early church. The disciples of Saul, though Jewish in origin are no longer seen as Jews; instead they are those who belong to the way.

Verses 9:26-30

What happens when Saul flees to Jerusalem? What do you think it was like for Paul to return there? What does Saul attempt to do? How do the disciples receive him? Why?

It must have felt almost surreal for Saul to return to Jerusalem. Everything was the same yet everything was different. Enemies had become friends; friends had become enemies. He left as a hero of the Jews; he returned as a perceived traitor.

To further complicate things, Saul's new "friends", his fellow believers weren't sure they wanted him as a friend. "And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple." For all the Jerusalem believers knew, Saul was feigning conversion so as to infiltrate and entrap them. The fact that there were believers still in Jerusalem indicates that despite fierce persecution the church held firm and possibly even continued to grow. The fact that they were afraid of Saul may indicate that the church had gone underground to some extent.

What does Barnabas do for Saul? What risk does he take? How important is Barnabas (and Ananias) to Saul? If Saul hadn't had a Barnabas how might this have affected his Christian life and ministry?

Barnabas risked his own life and that of his fellow believers in going to Saul and bringing him to the apostles. Even though Saul's story sounded convincing to him, Barnabas could not have had conclusive proof that Saul's conversion was real. His decision to trust Saul and serve as his advocate was a risk. There was a risk either way. If Barnabas was wrong about Saul, then lives would be lost. If Barnabas, to avoid this risk, decided not to trust Saul and serve as his advocate then perhaps Saul would flounder in his faith. Ultimately, I think Barnabas trusted not so much in Saul, but in God. Converting a murderous zealot like Saul was just the kind of thing God would do!

After being received by the Jerusalem believers, what does Saul do? What happens?

Saul speaks boldly, even among those who probably were instrumental in Stephen's stoning. As a result, in Jerusalem as previously in Damascus, a plot is hatched to kill him and Saul is forced to flee. As Stott says, "The story of Saul's conversion in Acts 9 begins with him leaving Jerusalem with an official mandate from the high priest to arrest fugitive Christians, and ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a fugitive Christian himself."

In sum, what characterizes Saul's preaching?

Saul's preaching is centered on Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, courageous, costly, and provoking of response.

Is this characteristic of our preaching and ministry also? What kind of response do we get to our ministry at Harvard? Why do you think this is? If we had a choice between being largely ignored or being widely noticed with some converting and others violently persecuting us, which would we choose?

Verse 9:31

How is the church identified in the first part of v. 31? Where is it? What contributed to the church's peace? How was it built up? What does it mean to live "in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit?"

Luke doesn't speak of the "churches" throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria, but of the "church"- singular. The emphasis is on unity. There is one church made up of Judeans, Galileans, Samaritans, etc. (The fact that Luke makes no mention in Acts of a church being planted in Galilee indicates that Acts is not an exhaustive account of the full ministry and range of the early church) Despite substantial pressures to splinter the church remains united and makes it possible for people of diverse cultures and languages and social status to come together as brothers and sisters.

What contributed to the church's peace was that 1) Saul, who had spearheaded the persecution of the church, was converted and 2) Saul, who had aroused fierce opposition from the Jews, was removed. The peace that ensued probably allowed the still infant church to catch its breath, provide sound teaching and develop its necessary structures.

We saw in the incident with Ananias and Sapphira and its aftermath (among other incidents) what it means to live in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Spirit. It means taking God seriously; He is God, not someone to be trifled with, not someone who can be fooled by false zeal. It means being quick to confess sin and being eager to repent. It also means knowing God's presence, receiving God's guidance, experiencing God's affirmation and strength in all situations.

Now look at 9:1-31 as a whole. What elements do you see in Saul's conversion? What had to happen in him to bring about his conversion? Disregard the immediate time frame and the supernatural phenomena and focus on the shift in Saul's perspective. How did Saul's perspective change?

First, Saul needed new insight about himself, about Jesus and about what it meant to do God's will. He had to see that he had been wrong and that the Christians were right. And he had to be willing to repent of his false views and the actions that resulted from them.

Second, Saul needed to turn. He had to renounce, turn from, his old views and embrace, turn to, new views. He had to leave behind one image of how to serve God (persecute Christians) and take up a new image of how to serve God (proclaim Jesus). He had to let go of one view of Jesus (rebel and blasphemer) and grasp a new view (Son of God and Messiah).

Third, Saul needed to respond. Conversion isn't complete until a response occurs. Saul needed to respond by identifying himself with Jesus and his people and by taking up the mandate to bear witness.

Application

- 🍏 What will we allow to characterize our Christian life and ministry? How will we live out our conversion?
- 🍏 What do we learn from Saul's conversion that might help us in our evangelism?
- 🍏 What can we do to help our friends gain new insight into themselves and Jesus? How can we help them see what they need to turn from and what they need to turn to? How can we model for them what proper response to Jesus implies?

Acts 9:32-43 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Peters, like his Lord, Jesus, itinerates from place to place, performing signs and strengthening the saints.

Outline:

9:32-35 Peter in Lydda
9:36-43 Peter in Joppa

Warm-Up/Intro Questions

What do you think of when you hear the words “holiness” or “saintliness”? What characterizes a holy or saintly person? Do you know anyone who epitomizes holiness or saintliness for you?

Questions for Individual Study

What does Peter do in Lydda and Joppa? Compare and contrast the two incidents. What’s similar? What’s different?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. If the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Dorcas are signs, to what do they point? Also, given that Luke only has a limited amount of time and space, why does he include these two stories?

Study notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

What was Peter doing in v. 32? Why was he going “here and there among all the believers”? What did his role seem to be?

Peter was going around visiting the various communities into which the Gospel had spread. He had already been to Samaria to examine the situation there. Now he was making his way to the coast where Philip had been following his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. It seems that, as in Samaria, Philip had seen success in his ministry because when Peter goes there are already churches there.

Why is Peter visiting these new bodies of believers? Probably to provide pastoral care and oversight, to teach and encourage, to pass on news, and to ensure the continued unity of the church. Peter is not just committed to the church in Jerusalem, but to the church wherever it is to be found.

While perhaps having primary commitment to our local church and campus fellowship, do we also have concern for the church as a whole? How can we express this concern in a practical way? As a first step, are there practical ways we can express concern for and deepen unity in the GSCF as a whole?

What happens in Lydda? Who is Aeneas? Look at Luke 5:17-26. What similarities do you see between this passage and Luke 5? What might Luke be trying to tell us?

In both passages we have a paralytic who is healed by Jesus. In the Luke passage we are told that the healing authenticates Jesus’ claim that he has authority to forgive sins. In the Acts passage nothing is said about sin. We are not even told explicitly whether Aeneas was a believer or an unbeliever prior to the healing. But both passages in their exhibition of supernatural physical power point to the reality of the risen Christ. And the

Acts passage in which Jesus heals through Peter, points to Jesus' ability to empower his people. Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit who was sent by Jesus, can minister like Jesus. So can the other apostles, Stephen, Philip, Paul etc. I'm starting to think that what we are seeing in Acts is supposed to be normative for believers. What do you think?

Verses 9:36-43

While Peter is in Lydda what's going on in Joppa? Who is Dorcas? What are we told about her? How is she described?

A disciple named Dorcas dies. She was someone who was devoted to good works and acts of charity (lit. "Full of good works and giving alms") This suggests that she was a woman of means with leisure and freedom to do good deeds for others. The text also suggests that Dorcas was of some prominence in that community and that perhaps the church met in her home. Clearly she is deeply loved and mourned. This passage may say something about the role and stature of women in the early church.

Dorcas is described as being "devoted" to good works. Where have we seen the word "devoted" previously in Acts? What caused the devotion of the church in Acts 2? What might have caused Dorcas' devotion?

The word "devoted" occurs in Acts 2:42-47 in reference to the life of the church following the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. The Spirit so worked in the new believers that they became devoted to the "apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer." Devotion is a strong word, which Luke does not use loosely. It seems to be brought about by a full-fledged experience of the Holy Spirit. Dorcas, it is implied, is filled with the Holy Spirit and so devoted to and empowered for ministry.

What was Dorcas' ministry? How significant was it? What might its equivalent be in our campus culture?

Her ministry was that of doing good works and giving alms with, perhaps, a particular focus on caring for the widows in the church at Joppa. It was a ministry of service and mercy and generosity. And it was important enough that two men were sent to Lydda to look for Peter and bring him back to Joppa to minister to her. As was the case in Acts 6:1-7, this kind of practical service to those in need is highlighted as a vital element of a healthy church. And the people who provide such service are honored.

Why does the church in Joppa go looking for Peter? What do they expect Peter to do?

It seems that they expected that Peter would be able to raise Dorcas from the dead. He must have been known as someone with extraordinary gifts of healing.

What happens when Peter gets to Joppa? What does he see? What does he do? What happens?

Peter arrives in Joppa and is brought up to an upstairs room where Dorcas is lying. All the widows are there weeping and showing Peter the tunics and other clothing Dorcas had made for them. Then Peter does what he had seen Jesus do when he healed the synagogue ruler's daughter. (MK 5:35 ff) Peter puts them all outside and after praying, turns to her and says, Tabitha cumi" (the Aramaic for Tabitha, get up). And she opens her eyes and sits up. Peter then helps her up and presents her to the saints and widows.

What does Dorcas see and experience when she's raised up?

She opens her eyes and there stands the Apostle Peter himself who raises her up and then calls everyone into the room. Who's there? All the people for whom she had worked

so hard before she died, and they were greeting her with great joy and gratitude. And there, too, was the work she had done, the garments she had made which the widows had been showing to the great apostle. Such gratitude, such honor, such recognition for her labors. If ever a person caught sight of the lasting effect and value of her work, that person was Dorcas when she was raised from the dead.

What do you think this might have done for her?

It must have been a huge encouragement to her and further deepened her resolve to go on working with all her might for the rest of her life.

🍏 Now, think about this. Why do we often wait for someone to die, or in our case, to graduate and leave before we fully express our gratitude for his or her service to us? Why do we wait until the end to offer thanks and to honor those who serve us? What would it do for these folks if we expressed thanks liberally and regularly? What would the expression of thanks do for us?

Okay, let's look at the Dorcas story as a whole. To what does it point?

1) It points to Jesus as the resurrection and the life. 2) It also points to our full resurrection at his return. 3) It assures us that our labor will not have been in vain (1Cor 15:50-58). It's an encouragement to persist in our work and a warning not to indulge in shoddy workmanship. When Jesus returns and both the living and dead meet him, "all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (2Cor 5:10). If our works survive Christ's inspection then we will have the sheer joy of knowing we've pleased him. We will also experience the joy of being received by the friends we've helped on earth (Lk 16:9). We will have the joy of seeing the work we did in our lifetime kept eternally and we will even receive a reward from Jesus himself (1Cor 13:12-14).

But, it's also possible to find our work judged as unworthy. A believer in that position will still be saved, since salvation is a gift and was never at any stage a reward for work done. But such a believer will miss out on all the joys listed above.

Sometimes service in church and on campus feels really hard. We feel like we're not accomplishing much or that people aren't grateful or that there is way too much else to do. We need to be encouraged by the fact that nothing we do for him goes unnoticed by Jesus and that everything we do out of love for him will be received by him. Dorcas gets a glimpse in this life of what we may all experience in the next. Just as she was undoubtedly encouraged, let us, by faith, also be encouraged.

Now, let's look at the passage as a whole. How does Luke describe the believers in Lydda and Joppa? What term does he use (vv. 32, 41)? What does the term mean? Why might Luke be using it here?

The term used is "saints", that is, "holy ones". Luke uses several terms in Acts to denote his fellow members of the faith. His favorite term is "disciples" which he uses about thirty times. "Believers" gets used a lot, too. But "saints" is very rare.. It occurs in 9:13 in 9:32 and 9:41, and then in 26:10. So, 2 out of only 4 uses occur in this passage. Why? The passage that follows, Peter's encounter with the Gentile, Cornelius,, hinges on Peter's difficulty in changing his view of what is "clean and unclean", what constitutes holiness before God. It might be that Luke uses the two incidents in 9:32-43 to set the stage for the Cornelius incident by expanding our definition of saintliness or holiness.

🍏 What do we learn about saintliness from this passage? It's not simply a negative thing concerned with not doing bad things and not touching unclean things. Saintliness is also positive. True saintliness leads to a life of service to God and to others. It empowers us to love and to serve. It conforms us to Jesus' character and allows the Holy Spirit to work through us with power. Is this the kind of holiness we express?

Applications

- 🍏 How will we express practical concern for the church as a whole?
- 🍏 How will we thank and honor those who serve us?
- 🍏 Will we continue to labor in the Lord with faith and perseverance?
- 🍏 Will our holiness be practical and active?

Acts 10:1-16 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Peter begins to learn that "what God has made clean, he must not call profane." (v. 15)

Outline:

10:1-8 Cornelius and His Vision

10:9-16 Peter and His Vision

Warm-up/Intro Questions

Have you ever had the experience of changing a long-held personal opinion as you got to know God or heard from Him in the Bible? What happened?

Questions for Individual Study

What are we told about Cornelius? About Peter? How does God guide Cornelius? How does he guide Peter?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions. What's the key issue in this passage? How does it begin to get resolved? What does this passage say to us? How might God want us to apply it?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 10:1-8

Let's begin with vv. 1-2. How is Cornelius described? What are we told about him?

He is a centurion (in command of between 60-100 men; the equivalent of a modern army captain) of the Italian Cohort. So, he's a Gentile, an officer in the Roman occupation force and thus an enemy of the Jews. But he's not portrayed as an enemy. Instead he is portrayed as a devout man who is active in his piety. He gives alms generously to the people and prays constantly. He is called a God-fearer. God-fearers were Gentiles who were interested in the God of the Jews, who worshiped God and followed much of Judaism, but who were not full-fledged converts to Judaism. This is a man who is spiritually hungry, open and seeking God. He also appears to be kind, generous and humble.

Look at vv. 3-4. What happens to Cornelius? What was he doing (v. 30)? How does he respond? What does the angel of God say to him? What's striking about this? What does it mean that his prayers and alms have ascended as a "memorial" before God?

Cornelius is praying (v. 30) during a time, 3 pm, that was normal for pious Jews to sacrifice and pray. While he is praying he receives a vision of an angel of God coming in and addressing him by name. Clearly, God knows Cornelius; He knows his name, his character, his deeds, his heart. The angel says to Cornelius, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. The language in v.4 invokes reference to the sacrifice language of the OT (Lev. 2:1-2; 5:5-6, 11-13). A "memorial" was that part of the meal offering that was burnt, i.e., presented to God. The idea here is that spiritual sacrifices like prayer and almsgiving could be offered up to God in addition to regular sacrifices, or in their stead if one lived in the Diaspora (i.e., lived outside of Israel) and could not travel to Jerusalem, and God would accept them. It may be that Luke is

suggesting that the prayers and alms of this Gentile were accepted by God in lieu of the sacrifices which he was not allowed to enter the Temple to offer himself. That is, God had acted to break down barriers between Jew and Gentile by treating the prayers and alms of a Gentile as equivalent to the sacrifice of a Jew. Does God hear the prayers of seekers? Yes, God looks into the hearts of people seeking Him and hears their prayers as memorials.

On another vein, do you ever wonder if your "spiritual sacrifices" (cf. Rom 12:1-2, Phil 4:18) make any difference? Do you wonder if God hears your prayers and notices your acts of piety and service? If God notices the prayers and piety of a not-yet believer like Cornelius how much more will he notice you? Be encouraged and continue in faithfulness.

What does the angel tell Cornelius to do and how does Cornelius respond? What does this indicate about Cornelius?

The angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to look for a man named Peter with the implication that they are to bring Peter back with them to Caesarea. Cornelius responds immediately to this strange vision. As soon as the angel leaves, Cornelius calls two of his slaves and one of his devout soldiers, tells them everything and sends them off to Joppa. Like the centurion in Luke 7, this centurion understands what is the proper response to rightful authority- immediate and unquestioning obedience. Further, the fact that he sends a devout soldier, i.e., one who worships the Jewish God, indicates that Cornelius has a measure of wisdom. The devout soldier will be better able to negotiate the religious and cultural barriers between Gentile and Jew. And the fact that he tells his servants everything indicates that Cornelius trusts them, knows them and both respects them and is respected by them. (How many of us would go around telling our friends we were receiving visions from God? We would only tell something like this to people we know well and trust.)

Verses 9-16

Let's fill in the context a bit. Where is Peter? With whom is he staying? What's problematic about this?

Peter is in Joppa, in the home of Simon the tanner. Tanners worked with leather which meant they had to handle dead animals. Dead bodies were unclean according to Jewish thinking. And anyone who touched them became unclean. So, a normal Jewish person would have nothing to do with such people. Yet, Peter stayed with him, even though he seemed to be quite tuned in to issues having to do with profaneness and uncleanness (v. 14). So why does Peter stay with Simon, a man considered unclean? There are two possibilities. One possibility is that Peter is inconsistent. That is, he's willing to overlook uncleanness in a Gentile. The other possibility is that, though Simon is unclean, Peter accepts him because he is a fellow believer, and acceptance of fellow believers is the right thing to do. If this is the case it at least begins to prepare Peter to put down his Jewish scruples and eventually receive an unclean Gentile as a brother.

What about Joppa itself? Does that ring a bell for any of us?

It was at Joppa that the disobedient prophet Jonah had boarded a ship for Tarshish in a foolish attempt to run away from God. Why was Jonah trying to run away from God? Because God had told him to go to Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and preach repentance there. Jonah didn't want the Ninevites to repent and thus be spared from God's wrath. He wanted God to wipe them out instead. He wanted God's mercy for himself and his people, but not for his enemies. He resented the fact that God

was willing to pour out mercy upon those Jonah considered undeserving. And he wasn't going to let God use him as an instrument of mercy so he fled from God.

Now Peter is about to face a similar question. Will he allow himself to be used by God as an instrument of mercy and grace to those who had been considered unworthy? Will he put aside his racial prejudice and ethnocentrism to reach out to those who on some level have been his enemies and who have not lived up to his religious standards?

🍏 Are there people we refuse to go to because we don't want God to be merciful to them? Or do we have religious or cultural scruples that unnecessarily cut us off from others? Are we guilty of racism or ethnocentrism, in however subtle or even unintentional a form, which cut us off from some people? Which serve to cut them off from God?

OK, let's go back to the text, Peter is up on the roof. What is he doing? What happens to him?

Peter is on the roof praying, and while praying he receives a vision. As we have talked about in previous studies, prayer is a very important topic for Luke. Both Cornelius and Peter have their revelations while they are praying. You remember that it was in the context of prayer that the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. Luke is saying that it is in the context of His people's prayer that God pours out His Spirit and reveals His power. And it is as His people pray that God makes His will known.

So, let me say it again. Do we want God to pour out His Spirit? Do we want God to manifest His presence and power? Do we want God to reveal His will? Then let's be humble and dependent and pray.

🍏 Now, stop for a minute. We've talked about the importance of prayer at least a half dozen times so far this year. Each time we've nodded our heads and said, "Yes, that's right. Prayer is crucial. We must pray." Well, the question is, "Are we praying more now, individually and corporately, than we were in September and October? If not, why not? Are we waiting for God to hit us on the head with a sledgehammer?"

🍏 If we are praying more, how has God been answering our prayers? What have we seen of God's power and presence, His Spirit and will? Let's talk about what we are seeing God do.

Now, let's go back to Peter. What does he see in his vision? While still in his trance how does he respond to it? Why does he respond this way?

Peter sees heaven open and something like a large sheet coming down. In it is a mixture of clean and unclean animals (see Lev. 11). Then Peter hears a voice saying "Get up Peter: kill and eat." Peter responds, "No way, Lord. Not a chance. I've never eaten anything profane or unclean. I'm not going to start now." Three times this happens and three times Peter says, "No way." Why does Peter react this way? Why, in his vision, does he disobey the heavenly voice? Peter is absolutely horrified and revolted (Think about eating a rat. How excited would you be about that.) From earliest childhood he had been taught to distinguish between clean and unclean animals. He'd been taught not to "defile" himself, taught to consecrate himself and be holy. Here God was telling him to overturn decades of habit and centuries of tradition. So Peter is confused- deeply confused. Maybe he thinks to himself, "I can't be hearing or seeing this right. I must be missing something." Or, maybe he thinks, "God is testing me. He's testing me to see if I remain faithful. Well, I'm not going to blow it this time. I'm not going to fail this test."

Why was this so hard for Peter to understand? Why was it so shocking to him?

Because it was God who established the food laws. Was it possible that God was now repealing His own law? That's what God was saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (v. 15)

Why did God institute the food laws in the first place? And why was He now repealing them?

Look at Mark 7: 18-23. Here Jesus makes the case that it's not what we eat that makes us unclean. It's what's already in us- evil thoughts, sexual immorality, etc., that makes us unclean. What God is concerned about is real moral, not physical uncleanness. Jesus' disciples had a hard time with this. They originally thought that eating "unclean food" defiles a person morally. But it wasn't the food itself that was defiling. Rather, it was God's prohibition on eating certain kinds of food that made eating it defiling.

When Peter protests against eating unclean food the voice replies: "Don't call unclean what God had made clean." How did God make it clean? By removing the prohibition He'd once placed on it.

So, why did God originally forbid Israel certain foods?

To teach them certain lessons by introducing the categories of ceremonial cleanness and uncleanness. And this was intended to keep them pure from the moral and spiritual uncleanness that so polluted the Gentile nations (Lev. 18:24-28) So, to reinforce the moral and spiritual prohibitions God added laws for ceremonial cleanness (Lev.20:25-26). Positively, these laws reinforced Israel's thinking that as a nation they were separated to the Lord. Negatively, they had the practical effect of making social mixing with Gentile nations difficult, since Israelites couldn't eat Gentile food. It was a way to build a wall between Israel and the corrupting influence of the Gentiles (See Gal. 4:1-3 where Paul says that Israel under the law was like a child needing strict rules.)

But, there were problems with this wall-technique. First, it led unintentionally to Israelites thinking they were intrinsically better than Gentiles. Second, it led to a confusion between moral and spiritual holiness on the one side and ceremonial holiness on the other. Third, it led to the false idea that Israelites were God's favorites, whatever evil they did, whereas the Gentiles were rejected by God whatever good they did. (Paul argues against this in Rom. 2:25-27) All this led to a lot of misunderstanding and hostility between Jew and Gentile.

The time had come to put aside this dividing wall between Jew and Gentile. Instead of food laws to help His people stay pure God instituted something new. It began at Pentecost. He gave His Spirit to His people to empower them to live lives of purity and holiness. With this kind of power they were now free and able to move out of their little protective enclaves so as to bear witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth. The holiness made possible by the gift of the Spirit, rather than separating them from others, sent them out to others.

Applications:

- 🍎 Are we growing in our ability and willingness to pray?
- 🍎 Are we actively seeking to befriend and engage people for Jesus' sake?

🍏 Are there some to whom we refuse to go because we are either afraid of or offended by them?
Are there some to whom we refuse to go because we think them undeserving, because we don't want God to be merciful to them?

Is our expression of holiness prideful, contentious and unnecessarily off-putting?

🍏 Are there other unnecessary and unintentional barriers that we place before seekers- barriers of language and jargon, or music or practice? How would we know if such barriers existed?

Acts 10:17-33 Study Notes

Key Theme:

God continues orchestrating events which will allow the Gentiles to have access to the Gospel.

Outline:

10:17-23 Peter's meeting with the messengers

10:24-33 Peter's journey to and arrival in Ceasarea

Warm-up/Intro Questions

Can you think of times in your life when God undeniably orchestrated events so as to make His will clear to you? What was the situation? And what did God do?

Questions for Individual Study

Trace the evolution of Peter's thought. How does it change? What does God do to prepare and enable Peter to change? What does this indicate about God?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, questions and reflections with one another. What parallels do you see between the situation recorded in this passage and our world? What might God be saying to you from this passage?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 17-23

What does Peter do with the vision he has received (v. 17)?

Peter is greatly puzzled by the vision he's received. But he doesn't dismiss it out of hand. He keeps wrestling with it, thinking about it (v. 9). It's clear that he doesn't understand it and doesn't like it, but he doesn't try to ignore it or run away from it. He may be slow to understand and resistant to change, but he is not willfully disobedient nor casual in his discipleship. It seems that he really wants to understand and obey.

🍏 What about us? What do we do with the "hard sayings" of God? How do we respond when we see something in Scripture that is difficult for us to understand or troubling to us? Are there things in Scripture which we choose to ignore or which we try to rationalize away? Are we willing to puzzle over, wrestle with, think deeply about God's "revelations" to us? When it comes to hearing from God, are we willing to hear with integrity?

While Peter is puzzling over his vision, what is happening below a the gate? Why did the messengers stand by the gate? Why didn't they go right up to the house? What does this say about them?

The three men sent by Cornelius arrive at Simon's house, stand at the gate and call out, asking for Peter. They don't go beyond the gate. Why? They know what Jews think of Gentiles; they know they are perceived as unclean. Maybe they felt a bit insulted and offended, particularly given that they were considered more unclean than a smelly tanner. But whatever pride may have flared up, they suppress. They choose not to offend, they wait by the gate. It could be argued that it would have been justifiable to have expressed offense. It might have been justifiable, but it wouldn't have been productive.

They had been sent on a mission; there was no room to allow pride to get in the way of that mission.

🍏 We have at least a general sense of what God wants of us. We know He wants us to express love, be merciful and gracious, forgiving, reconciling and peace-making. How often do we let our own pride and ego get in the way of this? How often do we allow ourselves to get offended such that we become ineffective as conduits of God's love and grace? Cornelius' messengers have a mission. They do not let their ego get in the way of the mission. They serve their master. We have a master and a mission. Let's not allow our ego to get in the way.

The men are standing by the gate and Peter is on the roof puzzling over, trying to make sense of his vision. What happens next? How does Peter respond? What is he beginning to understand?

The Spirit says to Peter, Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation for I have sent them. So, Peter goes down and meets with them. He is beginning to see that his thrice-repeated vision and the coming of these three men is connected. He's still not sure yet as to what the connection is. He's not sure of what he's supposed to do or what will happen. He just knows that somehow there is a connection and God wants him to go with these men.

What new things do we learn about Cornelius at this point?

The messengers tell Peter that Cornelius is upright, well spoken of by the whole Jewish Nation, and that Peter has been summoned so that Cornelius can hear what he has to say.

What does Peter do then? What does this indicate?

Peter invites these Gentiles in for the night; he provides them with lodging. Scrupulous Jews tried to avoid all such contact with Gentiles. The fact that Peter invites them into his "space" and receives them as guests (In the Middle East, the idea of a "guest" was a deep, important concept) indicates that the meaning of his vision is starting to become clearer to him. "

Three visions, three men. What God has made clean, you must not call profane. God must be calling these men clean- I don't get it- but God has called them clean. So, I'd better invite them in." Peter invites them in, hosts them, and the next day he goes with them, taking some fellow believers from Joppa with him.

Who sent these three messengers (v. 20)? And look at this section as a whole. What happened? What does this say about God's ordering of events in peoples' lives?

Cornelius receives a vision in which he is told to send for Peter. Then Peter receives a vision which prepares him for the coming of these messengers. While Peter is puzzling over his vision the men arrive. While Peter is still thinking about his vision, the Spirit tells him to go down to them and go with them. Why? Because the Spirit sent them. The Spirit sent them through Cornelius, but nevertheless it was the Spirit's doing. God was in charge; God was orchestrating this entire encounter.

🍏 Does God still initiate divine appointments? Does He still orchestrate events to bring people together? Is it possible that God is sending people to our "gates" that we might be instruments of His grace and truth to them? Is it possible that sometimes we miss these divine appointments, because we are too

preoccupied with our own agendas, or too blinded by our own prejudices, or even too intent on living out a wrong kind of holiness?

🍏 Who is in our circle of contact- lab mates, floor mates, colleagues, etc? Is it possible that their presence, however casual, in our lives is not arbitrary? When they tell us they're feeling bored or frustrated with work, or feeling lonely and hurt in relationships could it be that they are expressing an unconscious hunger for God? Could it be that if we were prayerful, willing to listen carefully and transparent about our own relationship with God they also might see Him as the focus of their hunger? What do you think? This is possible, isn't it?

Verses 24-33

When Peter and his fellow believers arrive at Cornelius' house who do they find waiting for them? What does this indicate? What does Cornelius do when he seen Peter?

They get to Cornelius' house and find a whole household waiting for them. Cornelius had gathered together all his relatives and close friends. And they were eagerly awaiting Peter's arrival. When Peter gets there, Cornelius, in front of everybody, humbles himself, falls at Peter's feet and "worships" him. It seems that Cornelius saw Peter as some sort of divine or angelic figure. So, Cornelius is a devout, upright, prayerful, generous, God-fearer- a truly pious man- but he's not well-formed theologically. He needs Peter to teach him and he knows it. He's ready and eager, prepared, to hear what Peter has to say.

🍏 What about us are we allowing God to prepare us to hear His word? Are we ready and eager and reverent? How ought we prepare our hearts?

What is Peter saying in v. 28? Why does he begin the way he does?

He's explaining to the Gentiles why he was willing to come. In effect he says that if it were solely up to him he wouldn't be there. His presence among Gentiles violates everything he had believed and practiced throughout his entire life. But it wasn't solely up to him. His life didn't belong to him; it belonged to God. And God had shown him that he should not call, i.e., treat anyone as profane or unclean. God had shown him that believers shouldn't look down on a person from any race or ethnic group and say they are unfit to hear the Gospel. Or, they are too unclean for me to enter their house to share the Gospel. The word that makes v. 28 so powerful is "anyone". God rules no one out of His favor on the basis of race or ethnic origin or mere cultural or physical distinctives (or political orientation or social-economic class or educational status, etc.) Peter's point is that God will not allow us to write off anyone. We must not snub anyone. God has enough room in His heart for all. If we are His people, so must we. And if we really get this it will take us to people and places we never would have imagined.

🍏 So, where has God been taking you lately?

What is Peter's question in v. 29 and what does it indicate? How does Cornelius answer?

Why did you send for me? What do you want me to do for you? Peter still doesn't know why God is orchestrating all this. He may have thought that he was being called to pray for or heal someone like Jesus had done when he healed another centurion's servant in Luke 7. It is step by very slow painful step that Peter discerns what God has in mind.

Cornelius describes the vision he received to Peter and then in v. 33 indicates what he wants. He wants to hear the word of the Lord, the word the Lord has for Cornelius

through Peter. The language Cornelius uses suggests a gathering prepared to worship God and in some ways it echoes Acts 1:13-14. What was going on in Acts 1:13-14? The believers were awaiting Pentecost. Luke may be suggesting that Acts 10 is a sort of "Gentile Pentecost", the catalyst that would wend forth a worldwide mission to Gentiles just as Acts 2 catalyzed a mission to Jews.

Acts 1:8 had made clear that such a mission to Gentiles would take place. Acts 10 showed how the major barrier to such a mission- Jewish ethnocentric purity laws- would be overcome. God, Himself, would remove the barrier. And God, Himself, would bring Jew and Gentile together. God orchestrated the Jewish Pentecost; He orchestrated the Gentile Pentecost also.

Applications

- 🍏 Are we willing to think deeply about and obey God's word, even the passages that are troubling to us?
- 🍏 How much do we let our ego or sense of entitlement get in the way of obeying God fully?
- 🍏 Are we tuned in to God's "divine appointments?" Are we aware of people at our "gates"?
- 🍏 Are we open to being "sent" by God, open to going to people and places that only God would choose for us?

Review of Acts 1 – 11:18 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

The Holy Spirit empowers community, witness, and the breaking of barriers.

Outline:

1:1 – 1:11 Themes introduced by Luke

1:12 – 11:18 Life of the early church and early works of the disciples

Warm-up/Intro Questions

Read Acts 1:1 – 1:11

What themes or ideas does Luke introduce in the first 11 verses of his book?

From these verses, what would you guess the book will be about?

What might the title, "Acts," mean?

Luke introduces the idea of the kingdom of God (v 3); the promise of the Father, i.e. the coming of the Holy Spirit (v 4,5,8); their call to be witnesses (v 8); and the promise of His return (v 11).

The title, "Acts," could refer to the acts of the believers or the acts of the Holy Spirit. What Luke implies is that it's the acts of Jesus being done by His followers who are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Look at 1:8.

What was Jesus saying to His disciples?

What were they supposed to wait for?

Why?

They were supposed to wait for the Holy Spirit who would grant them the power they would need to bear witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

In many ways, Acts 1:8 is the theme verse of the Book of Acts.

Questions for Individual Study

Take 10 minutes and page through the book up to Acts 11:18.

Look at the titles, at beginnings of chapters, and at first sentences of some of the paragraphs.

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

What were your major impressions of these first 11 chapters?

Did you notice any major characters or events?

The book starts in Jerusalem. Did you notice where the disciples go and who they encounter along the way up through chapter 11? What does this tell you?

Major impressions might include: There's lots of action; lots of people got saved; the believers were bold under pressure; the Jewish authorities just don't get it.

The main characters are Peter, Stephen, and maybe Paul.

Pentecost is the key event, but there are a number of miracles, lots of preaching, a martyrdom, and many converts.

The book starts in Jerusalem, goes to Judea and Samaria, and begins to expand to the ends of the earth. Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8 is being fulfilled.

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Let's focus on the community life of the early church.

Look at 2:42-47, 4:32-37, and 6:1-7.

What do these passages tell us?

The early church didn't just sit in pews together. They actively loved each other and met each other's needs. There was a gladness, an exuberance in their worship together.

But Acts 6 tells us that the early church was not problem-free. They had to work through conflicts, forgive one another's mistakes and sins, share power and authority, and expand leadership as their fellowship grew.

Prayer was an essential practice of the early church.

In Acts 4:23-31 Luke opens a window for us so that we can look in on one of their prayer meetings.

What strikes you about their prayer?

It's a prayer meeting of friends (v 23) who remind themselves of who God is (Sovereign Lord, Creator), of what God had said (v 25,26), and who can see their situation in light of God's word (v 27,28). Therefore, they can see God's purpose and pray with wisdom and boldness (v 29,30). And God is quick to answer (v 31).

Applications/Reflections or response:

- 🍏 As we've been overviewing these first 11 chapters of Acts, how has God been speaking to you?
- 🍏 Have particular passages or thoughts been resonating in your heart?
- 🍏 Have you been reminded of a particular person or incident from your life?
- 🍏 Is there something you sense God wants you to know, or something God wants you to do?

Let's take a couple of moments to reflect and then let's pray together.

(You may want to split up into groups of 2-3 to share and pray together.)

Acts 11:19-30 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Cross-cultural barriers are broken, allowing the gospel to reach pagans; and the unity of the church is further strengthened.

Outline:

- 11:19-21 Pagans become believers
- 11:22-26 The Jerusalem church investigates and confirms
- 11:27-30 Jewish and Gentile Christian unity gets lived out

Warm-up/Intro Questions

Have you ever heard stories of God doing something unusual somewhere else and been suspicious as to whether or not these stories were true? What were the reasons why you were suspicious?

Questions for Individual Study

What contrast does Luke make between verses 19 and 20? Why do you think he makes this contrast? What is he trying to say?

What do you notice about Barnabas' ministry in Antioch? What kind of man is he? What does he do? How is the unity between the Jewish Christian church and the Gentile Christian church affirmed?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. What's the most surprising thing for you in this passage? Why?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 11:19-21

What's going on here? What catalyzes it?

Persecution drives most of the believers (all of whom were Jewish) out of Jerusalem (see 8:1) scattering them to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch where they preach the word.

What contrast does Luke make between verses 19 and 20? Why do you think he makes this contrast? Who were the men who spoke to the Hellenists (religious pagans) in Antioch? Where were they from? Does this imply anything?

In verse 19 Luke tells us that these Jewish believers who were forced to flee Jerusalem took the gospel with them but "spoke the word to no one except Jews." Why did they evangelize only among fellow Jews? Probably because they had never previously associated with Gentiles in any manner and didn't believe that the gospel was meant for Gentiles also.

In 10:1-11:18 we saw that the Gentile Cornelius and his household became believers and received the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Peter and that the Jewish believers eventually accepted this fact and rejoiced in it (see 11:18). So then, what's the problem? If the precedence has already been established that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (11:18), why do these Jewish believers refrain from evangelizing Gentiles also? The problem is two-fold. First, Luke does not write in a strictly chronological fashion. His primary ordering principle is to show how the gospel

spread geographically, ethnically, and sociopolitically. So, it's possible that the proclamation of the Cypriot and Cyrenean Jewish believers to Gentiles in Antioch happened as soon as, if not before, the Cornelius episode. Therefore, these Jewish believers would not have had a precedence allowing for witness to the Gentiles. But secondly, even if these Jewish believers had known that the gospel was for Gentiles also, it would have been hard for them to follow through on this. They were so used to keeping themselves separate from Gentiles, and the thought that Gentiles were not worthy of God's salvation was so ingrained in them that even evidence to the contrary was hard to believe and act on.

So then, what might have helped the Cypriot and Cyrenean Jewish believers of verse 29 to cross these huge ethnic and conceptual barriers? These believers were already Greek speaking and had grown up in Gentile areas (Cyrene is modern day Libya); so they were probably more comfortable around Gentiles. Also, because they understood Gentile culture and thought, they were better able to contextualize their message so it would make sense and be winsome to Gentiles. Notice that they proclaim, "The Lord Jesus" – a message better suited to a Gentile audience than the proclamation of Jesus as the Son of man or the long awaited Messiah of the Jews. Having said this, Luke makes clear that ultimately they were successful in their preaching because the hand of the Lord was with them.

Verses 11:22-26

In verse 22 how does the Jerusalem church respond to the news they hear from Antioch? What do they do?

They send Barnabas to investigate. Why? They wanted to make sure that what was happening in Antioch was truly of Jesus, was true to the teaching and practices of Jesus. This was a legitimate expression of concern and oversight on their part.

Such concern and oversight remains legitimate today. Given the prevalence of cults, false doctrines and sheer untruth in our culture (and maybe particularly on campuses) Christian leaders need to be willing to investigate and oversee. We can't allow just anybody to teach and do whatever they want just because they claim to be Christian. We need to check out his or her background, theology and practice. But we don't want to be overly controlling or narrowly doctrinaire. We want to be responsible and careful but not rigid or paranoid. Sometimes it's a fine line between these extremes.

Why do you think they send Barnabas? What do we know about him so far? See Acts 4:36-37.

Barnabas was a relatively early convert, a well-known and established member of the Jerusalem church, and one who was well respected and loved. Also, his background made him well suited for this task. He was a Levite which gave him rapport with the Cypriot believers and with the Gentiles in Antioch.

Looking at Acts 4:36-37, 9:26-27 and this passage how is Barnabas described? What kind of person is he? What does he do? (What could he have done instead?) How does he live up to his nickname (son of encouragement)? In what ways is his response in this passage similar to his response in chapter 4?

Barnabas is the only person in Acts described as good and he is said to be full of the Holy Spirit and faith. From his actions we can see that he was a generous person – generous in his spirit and with his resources. From chapter 9 we can see he was willing to take risks and serve as an advocate on behalf of Saul. He does the same with the Gentile church in Antioch. He sees the grace of God at work in them and rejoices and exhorts them. Along with the grace of God, he probably saw lots of theological confusion, maybe some sinful practices, and not a lot of spiritual maturity; but he doesn't focus on this (although he does stay with them for at least a year after this, teaching them and rooting

them in the faith). Instead he focuses on the evidence of grace and rejoices. In chapter 4 Barnabas shares his material resources with fellow believers who have need. Here he shares his spiritual resources. In both cases, he shares what he is gladly, joyously, freely, and gratefully.

🍏 What do you like about what you've seen of Barnabas so far? In what ways would you like to become more like him? Ask God to begin working those characteristics into your life.

Look at 11:25. What does Barnabas do? Why do you think he does this? What does this indicate about him?
Barnabas goes to Tarsus (about 100 miles away – a week's journey in those days) to look for Saul. Why? Because he sees the opportunity for greater results (he has vision), knows he needs help and is willing to ask for it (he's humble, not interested in being "the only show in town," willing to share power and influence). Further, Barnabas had recognized Saul's ability and potential when he'd seen him preach years earlier, and he'd remembered him. (He was a man who observed people carefully, looking for their potential and wanting to encourage their growth, development, and fruitfulness; and he was not threatened by or jealous of other people's gifts and abilities.)

🍏 Have there been Barnabas-type figures in your life? What did they do for you? Are there people to whom you sense God calling you to be a Barnabas? What will be your next step in fulfilling your calling to them?

What is striking about 11:26? What were the disciples in Antioch called? We tend to use the word "Christian" pretty casually but think about what the pagans in Antioch were saying when they called the disciples "Christians." What are the implications and significances of such a title being applied to a believer?
When we call ourselves Christians are we giving true testimony to the character of Jesus, or are we "misusing the name of the Lord our God," taking the name of the Lord in vain? (See Exodus 20:7).

Verses 11:27-30

What's going on in this section? Who comes to Antioch? With what message? How do the disciples in Antioch respond? What does this say about them? What does this do for the unity of the church? Compare what the Jerusalem church sent to Antioch with what the Antioch church sent to Jerusalem. What was the common spirit? What did these two "sendings" do for the health, vitality, growth, and unity of the church as a whole?

Some prophets come down from Jerusalem to Antioch. Among them is Agabus who predicts a severe famine. Notice that Agabus doesn't suggest a response. It's the Antioch disciples who are Gentiles who determine to take up a collection to send to their fellow believers in Jerusalem. This may be the first charitable act of this nature recorded in history – one race of people collecting money to help another race of people. This is what the Spirit-empowered gospel does. It breaks barriers and bridges cultures.

This passage as a whole shows a deep partnership in mission. The mother church in Jerusalem had sent the gospel. Now the daughter church in Antioch sent money to the mother church. Each church gave what it had to meet the needs of the other. In this mutual giving and receiving, the unity and full participation of Jews and Gentiles within the church was demonstrated. Think about what kind of witness this was to those outside the church.

Applications/Reflections/Response:

- 🍏 As we look at this passage as a whole, what signs of spiritual health do we see in the Antioch church?
- 🍏 What signs of spiritual health do you see in your fellowship?
- 🍏 Are there things to be learned or emulated from the Antioch church?
- 🍏 In what ways can you contribute to the spiritual health and growth of your fellowship?

What do you think God is saying to you through this passage?

Acts 12:1-24 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Only God is sovereign. Unrighteous rulers who try to oppose God and usurp His place will fail and be judged.

Outline:

12:1-5 Herod opposes the Jerusalem Church; James is killed; Peter is imprisoned

12:6-19 Herod fails; God delivers Peter

12:20-24 Herod is judged; the church grows

Warm-up/Intro Questions

God is sovereign and good, right? But often the world doesn't seem to reflect this reality. Life often seems chaotic and cruel; and powers other than God seem to exert control. When are you tempted to doubt God's goodness and sovereignty over world affairs (and over your own life)? How do you handle these situations? What helps you get through them?

Questions for Individual Study

Herod and Peter are two key people in this passage. What do you learn about each of them? What kind of people do they seem to be? What seems to be important to them? How would you compare and contrast them?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another? Why do you think Luke includes this passage in his narrative? What point does it serve?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 12:1-5

From these first few verses what kind of man does Herod seem to be? What seems to motivate him?

He seems violent, calculating and insecure. He has James executed; and then when he sees that the Jewish populace approves of this, he has Peter arrested also. He's like a politician who sends out trial balloons and takes polls to figure out what he's going to do next. In some ways he also seems to be afraid of Peter, given the strong security measures he takes (v. 4). It may be that he knows about the earlier time (Acts 5:17-19) when Peter had been imprisoned by the Sadducees and had somehow escaped from prison. Herod seems determined in this case to make sure that Peter stays where he's put.

What Herod doesn't seem sure of is his own power and authority. To curry favor with the Jewish populace, he does a series of evil acts. The ruler allows himself to be ruled by the whims of the ruled, and evil occurs.

Earlier in Acts, while the Jewish leaders had been opposed to the church, the Jewish people had been generally favorable and many had come to believe. This favorable response no longer seems to be the case. What do you think might have brought about this change of view?

Luke isn't absolutely specific but there are two things he highlights. Firstly, widespread persecution resulted from Stephen's speech and martyrdom in Acts 7. In that speech Peter argued against the centrality and necessity of the Temple for proper worship

of God and also argued that God's presence and activity were not limited to Israel. Further, Stephen argued that the Israelites had repeatedly practiced idolatry, persecuted the prophets God sent, and violated the law of God. In short, he questioned their exalted opinions of themselves as God's chosen and argued that they lived no better than the Gentiles.

The second key event was that Gentiles were brought into the church as Gentiles (Acts 10 and 11). This further eroded the special status of the Jews and was a blow to Israel's national pride and status.

So, the church was beginning to be seen as a threat to Jewish identity, status and tradition. It had to be destroyed.

Having our sins exposed, being criticized, and having our self-identity and integrity challenged are very painful. The temptation is to strike out and try to silence the accusers. This response can be dangerous. How could the Jews have responded to the explicit and implicit criticism of the church? How might we respond to criticism directed against us?

Now imagine that you are one of the members of the Jerusalem church during this period. How might you be feeling? What might you be tempted to do? What does the church do?

I'd be feeling scared, confused and tempted to flee or at least hide out. The Jerusalem church, however, stays and prays.

🍏 Have you ever been in a situation where the environment seemed contemptuous of or hostile to the Christian faith? How did you feel in that situation? What was your response? In retrospect, what did you learn from that situation? If it happened again, would you handle it any different this time?

Verses 12:6-19

If you were imprisoned and expecting to be killed the very next day, how do you think you would spend your last night on earth?

Look at Peter. How does he spend what he expects to be his last night? What does this say about him and about what's important to him?

Peter is sound asleep – very sound asleep. The Greek text indicates that he had to be strongly shaken to be aroused; and it's clear that he's groggy and half-asleep as the angel is leading him – he thinks he's dreaming. It seems that he's not afraid to die and not at all worried about it. His trust seems to be in God's sovereignty and goodness. He might die; he might be delivered. Either way, he was in God's hands and his future was secure. So, he could sleep with a clear mind and a peaceful heart.

🍏 What about us? What's important to us? What do we want from God? Are we able to rest in God's goodness, regardless of the outcome of our circumstance in life?

In verses 12-17, Peter realizes that he's not just dreaming, that he's actually been delivered from prison. He then goes to Mary's house where many had gathered to pray. How do you imagine this scene? What's humorous and ironic about it?

Peter had been imprisoned, chained between two guards; yet with other guards standing watch outside the locked door of his cell. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared. The chains fell off his wrists; the guards didn't try to stop him; the cell doors opened; and the iron gates leading into the city also opened of their own accord. Peter was freed from the clutches of his enemies and rushed to his friends. What happens when

he gets there? He's locked out! He can't get in! He's locked out of a prayer meeting hosted by his friends.

The irony is that they are in there praying (praying fervently and sacrificially in the middle of the night) for Peter. Their prayers are answered. Peter's at the door; but they don't believe it. They just don't believe it! They think Rhoda's delusional or that Peter's already been killed and Rhoda has seen his angel. (There was a widespread Jewish belief that when a person died, his ghost or angel who looked like him hung around on earth for a while – cf Luke 24:37.)

Now why didn't they believe Peter would be delivered? These believers had probably prayed for James after he had been arrested. What happened to him? He was executed. So, their uncertainty as to what would happen to Peter is understandable. But their slowness to believe is still striking.

🍏 Can you relate to this? Have you ever prayed, even fervently, but then been utterly shocked and amazed when God answered your prayer? What insight did that give you as to your core view of God?

Now, let's go back to the prayer meeting. Imagine you were James' mother or maybe his best friend. You're at the prayer meeting. Peter comes in. Everyone is amazed and elated. You are too. But what else might you be feeling and thinking? What questions might you have?

Look at verses 18-19. What happens when morning comes? How does Herod react? What does he do? Why do you think he reacts so strongly? What might be going through his head? Why do you think he leaves Judea for Caesarea?

Herod is incensed. He'd planned to have Peter brought out and publicly executed that morning. His expectation was that Peter's execution would please the Jewish authorities, raise his stature in their eyes, and make the Jews easier to govern. Now his plan was demolished and whoever was responsible was going to pay. There was no humanly possible way, given the precautions taken (chains, doors, different sets of guards), for Peter to have escaped. So how did he escape? There were only two options. Either God delivered him, or all the guards, at risk to their own lives, entered together into a plot to help him escape. Herod can't retaliate against God. So, it's the soldiers who bear the brunt of his frustration and wrath.

I don't know why Herod leaves Judea for Caesarea but I wonder if he begins to feel spooked in Judea. Too many weird things, things outside his control happen there. He blames the soldiers for Peter's escape; but I wonder if deep in his spirit he recognized the hand of God and vainly tries to escape His presence.

🍏 Have you ever been in a position where you know deep inside that you were resisting God? You could rationalize your actions or attitudes; you could suppress God's voice; you could try to avoid His presence; but you couldn't entirely avoid the sense that God was lurking behind your shoulder. What happened? What did you do? What did God do? What did you learn from this?

Verses 12:20-24

The situation in this section is that the Hellenistic cities of Tyre and Sidon were dependent on Herod's territories for vital food supplies; and Herod had been withholding trade from them. So, they sent a delegation to him in the hopes of appeasing him. Their motive in going to Herod seems pretty straightforward. But what do you think is Herod's motive in agreeing to meet with them? What does Herod do? Why does he put on his royal robes?

I think Herod wants to flaunt his authority and humiliate them a bit. They, on the other hand, are there to humble themselves and stroke Herod's ego so that he will allow food stuffs to get to their people.

If you were a psychologist viewing this scene, how would you have explained Herod's mindset and actions? What fueled him? What made him what he was? Does Herod seem like a uniquely flawed character to you? Are there ways in which you see yourself in him? Are there ways in which we are guilty of robbing God of His glory?

Look at this passage as a whole, and look at it in its surrounding text. Notice that Acts 12:25 picks up the narrative from 11:30 with 12:1-24 as an interlude between these two verses. Why do you think Luke includes this passage in his narrative. What point does he make?

Only God is sovereign. Any powers, whether in heaven or on earth, arrayed against Him will eventually fail and be judged. Faithfulness to God regardless of whatever opposition will eventually bear fruit (v. 24). We don't know what will happen to us. Deliverance may come to us in this life; it may come only in the next. But we do know that whatever happens to us, the greatest challenge we face is to trust God and be obedient. We will often be puzzled and sometimes even be dismayed by God's activity in this world and in our lives but the justice and goodness of God will be displayed for all to see. May we be found faithful on that day.

Applications:

- 🍏 In what areas is it hard for you to trust in God's goodness and sovereignty? Where are you struggling to accept God's will?
- 🍏 Are there areas in your life where you are tempted to resist God?
- 🍏 Are there areas in your life where you are tempted to rob God of His glory?
- 🍏 How will you allow this passage to affect your prayer life?
- 🍏 What do you think God wants to say to you through this passage?

Acts 12:25-13:12 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Intentional, planned overseas missions by a church is inaugurated.

Outline:

12:25-13:3 The first missionary team is sent off

13:4-5 Mission to the Jews first

13:6-12 Mission to the Gentiles

Warm-up/Intro Questions

Have you (or someone you know) ever felt called by God to do something unusual or radical? What was the situation? How did you (or that person) respond? What were the results?

Questions for Individual Study

What was the church in Antioch like? How is it described? What was its make-up and characteristics (see also Acts 11:19-30).

What role does the Holy Spirit play in this passage?

How would you describe the ministry in Cyprus?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. What role had Barnabas and Saul played in the Antioch church? What did they mean to that church? What might the other Antioch believers have been thinking or feeling when they heard the Holy Spirit's call to send out Barnabas and Saul?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 12:25-13:3

Let's begin by trying to make sense of the problem in 12:25. The NRSV reads that Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem. But this doesn't make logical sense in context. Firstly, John Mark lived in Jerusalem and didn't need to be returned there. Secondly, the text in chapter 13 begins with Barnabas and Saul in Antioch. The logical flow is that they had been in Antioch, gone to Jerusalem with famine relief funds and then returned to Antioch.

The textual problem has to do with whether to read the original text as "eis" (to) or "ek" (from). There are early manuscripts favoring "eis" and others favoring "ek". The simplest solution is to accept that "eis" is original but that the issue can be resolved by a matter of punctuation: "Barnabas and Saul, returned, having completed their mission to Jerusalem, and brought with them John whose other name means Mark."

This solution connects 12:25 with what precedes in 11:30 and what follows in 13:1.

From both this passage and 11:19-30 what do we learn about the Antioch church? What were its characteristics? What do you think it would have been like to be a member of this church?

It was an active, vibrant, growing church which was well-taught, united, and generous (Acts 11). Also, it had strong, spiritually sensitive, prayerful, gifted and obedient leaders (Acts 13). It was the kind of church of which you would be proud to be a

member; the kind of church where diverse people were valued and where intimacy with God and direction from Him was sought.

What was the church doing in verses 1 to 3? Why do you think they were fasting and praying? What's the purpose of fasting?

Verse 2 says that they were worshiping the Lord and fasting and that it was in this context that the Holy Spirit spoke to them and directed them. The implication is that they were earnestly seeking God, wanting to be in His presence and wanting to hear from Him.

The main purpose and value of fasting is to enjoy a period of uninterrupted concentration upon God so as to ascertain His will and receive His power. Generally, fasting is an indication of urgent desire and an expression of humility before and dependence upon God.

🍏 Have you ever fasted and prayed? Why did you decide to do that? What were the circumstances? What was the experience like for you? What was the result? How did fasting affect your prayer? How did it affect your experience of God or spiritual sensitivity to Him? Are there things going on in your life right now that make you wonder whether you should fast and pray about them? In what ways can the group help you to do this? Are there things which we should fast and pray about as a group?

Let's focus on the leaders of the Antioch church, the prophets and teachers. What do prophets and teachers do?

Prophets serve as the mouthpieces of the Lord. Sometimes they predict what will happen at a future date (e.g., Agabus predicting a coming famine in 11:27). But more generally, they are the ones who tell us, "This is what the Lord says to you." Usually prophets issue a call to repentance or to radical trust and obedience.

Teachers exposit the Scriptures; they help us to understand the content and the meaning of the Christian faith. In doing so, they help us to see the character of God and to understand something of His purposes in the universe.

Ephesians 4:11 tells us that prophets and teachers are among the gifts that God has given to the church. Do we receive these gifts with gratitude? Do we listen to them carefully (not necessarily, uncritically – we are to test the prophecies and teachings)?

🍏 Have you ever experienced the ministry of authentic prophets and teachers in your life? How did this affect you? Are there ways we can be more open to this ministry? Have you ever exercised the ministry of prophecy or teaching in a particularly powerful way? What was that like? What happened?

Let's look at who these prophets and teachers were. What can we discern from their names and backgrounds details given?

Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus (Acts 4:36). That is, he was ethnically Jewish and of the tribe that served in the Temple; so a person of some status. But he hadn't come from Jerusalem. He was a Jew of the diaspora – those Jews who were scattered beyond Judah in Gentile lands. This means that he was a Jew who was in touch with Greek culture and perhaps even sympathetic to aspects of it.

Simeon is a Jewish name. The fact that he was called Niger (black) suggests that he had black skin and that perhaps he was from North Africa.

Lucius is a Latin name which means he was probably brought up in Roman culture. It was men from Cyprus and Cyrene who first went to Antioch and preached the gospel to Gentiles there; so he may have been one of the men who founded the Antioch church.

Manaen is a Greek form of a Hebrew name, so he was probably a Hellenistic Jew. The Greek text uses the word, "syntropos" to refer to his relationship to Herod Antipas. If taken literally this could mean that he and Herod were nursed by the same wet nurse. But it was also a common word to refer to an intimate friend. In any case, it seems that Manaen had been brought up with Herod and so was a person of high social standing with a background similar to Herod's. Although Manaen and Herod were brought up together, their paths widely diverged. Herod killed John the Baptist and later become involved in the trial of Jesus. He never showed any real spiritual sensitivity or made any response to the gospel. Manaen, on the other hand, became a Christian and a leader in the church.

Finally, Saul was a former Pharisee who had been a persecutor of the church he was now trying to build up.

What do we infer from the leadership make-up of the Antioch church? 1) It reflected the ethnic and cultural diversity of the city of Antioch. The church was successful in reaching out to and bringing together people from every sector of Antiochian society. 2) The church's integration demonstrated the diversity of its membership and leadership in the full unity of all people within the body of Christ. There weren't people who were left out, ignored or neglected; and there weren't people who were either privileged or discriminated against because of their background. 3) It demonstrated the power of the gospel to both woo and transform anyone.

🍏 Are there groups of people that your fellowship has difficulty reaching out to? Does your fellowship reflect in its leadership, both the diversity of its membership and of your particular venue of ministry? How can we promote broader membership and leadership? Pray (even fast and pray) that God will give you wisdom as to the reasons for this.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of the people who made up the Antioch church. The Holy Spirit says, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them (v. 2)." What was the Holy Spirit asking this church to do? What role had Barnabas and Saul played in this church's life and development? How important had Barnabas and Saul been to that church? As a church member, what might you be thinking and feeling upon hearing that the Spirit wanted to send these two guys off? And on the other side, imagine you are Barnabas or Saul. What might you be thinking and feeling if you were one of them? What had the Antioch church meant to them?

The Holy Spirit was asking the Antioch church to release its best leaders – the leaders who were most gifted, mature and experienced; the leaders who had been most instrumental in grounding them in the faith and helping them to grow; the leaders who had stamped their own character into the character of the fellowship. Think how much the Antioch church reflects the character of Barnabas. The Holy Spirit asked for their best, and the Antiochian church gave it. This was an act of extraordinary faith and generosity, an act of costly obedience. They didn't try to protect themselves. They didn't try to send someone else, someone less necessary to them. They trusted Go and sent their best. And Barnabas and Saul, though deeply invested in the life and ministry of the church in Antioch were willing to go. This, also, was costly obedience.

What might this suggest about how we are to respond to God?

God wants our best. When we know that God wants us to do something (let's make sure that it's God who is calling us), we ought to give our best to it – our best effort, energy, attention, discipline, and perseverance.

🍏 Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like God was asking you to give up something which seemed crucial to your well-being? What was the situation? How did you handle it? What were you thinking and feeling throughout it? What helped you? What did you learn as a result?

Verses 13:4-5

Barnabas and Saul are set apart, prayed for and sent off. Where do they go? What do they do when they get there?

The text doesn't say that they were told specifically where to go. They decide to go to Cyprus, probably because Barnabas is from Cyprus and may still have family and friends there. Sometimes God gives us a broad mandate and allows us to determine the details of how to fulfill that mandate.

When they get to Cyprus, they proclaim the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. What the synagogues first? In some sense it follows the pattern of God's activity – He went to the Jews first. And Paul always went to the Jews first (Romans 1:16). Even with a commission to preach to the Gentiles, he always started with the Jews. (This makes me wonder whether I ought to be more prayerful and active in reaching out to the Jewish people I know.)

Verses 13:6-12

What happened when they got to Paphos? Whom did they meet?

Barnabas and Saul encounter a Roman pro-consul (the highest official in Cyprus, equivalent to a governor) and a Jewish magician named Bar-Jesus (meaning son of Jesus) or Elymas (meaning sorcerer). Magicians or court astrologers allegedly predicted the future and attempted to alter the fates with their magic. They were not uncommon in the Mediterranean world so it's no surprise to find the pro-consul advised by a magician. It's also no surprise that the magician is Jewish. In the Greco-Roman mind, Jews and magic were closely linked.

What does Sergius Paulus want? How does Elymas react? Why?

The proconsul summons Barnabas and Saul because he wants to hear the word of God. Why? Perhaps because he's just curious. But perhaps he's hungry for God or not fully satisfied with how Roman power and Jewish magic are working in his life. We, every human being, all of us, were made for God. Apart from God none of us can be fully satisfied. We can suppress our longings for God. We can ignore them or deny them or twist them. But we can't eliminate them; we cannot satisfy them apart from God. We need to remember this as we pray and continue to reach out to our families and friends.

Elymas opposes Barnabas and Saul and tries to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Why? His power and position are threatened. He has a stake in keeping the proconsul in spiritual darkness.

How does Saul (now called Paul) respond?

Saul calls Elymas a son of the devil. Why? Because he's trying to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Isn't this what the devil does? Doesn't he strain to oppose the work of Jesus? Doesn't he try to destroy the church and keep people away from the faith?

Saul also tells Elymas he will be blind for a while. Why? It's a vivid object lesson, fitting the punishment to the crime. Elymas is struck with physical blindness and has to go around trying to find someone to lead him physically by the hand. This is so that the

horror of the experience of physical blindness might bring home to him, before it's too late, the seriousness of his spiritual condition and activity.

- 🍏 What has helped you to understand the seriousness of spiritual darkness in yourself and in others?

What happened to the proconsul?

When the proconsul saw what happened, he believed. Why? He was amazed. By what? The miracle? What does verse 12 say? "By the teaching of the Lord." Barnabas and Saul had laid a foundation for belief through their teaching. The miracle helped to confirm the truth of what they had taught. Word and deed came together. Neither is sufficient on its own.

- 🍏 How do we confirm the truth of what we teach? Are there ways we can better do so by the way we live?

Applications/Reflections/Response:

- 🍏 What is Jesus asking of you in this period of your life? Are there areas of your life where you think Jesus is asking more of you than you can give? How does this passage help you to pray and think through this? How can your small group also help you?

- 🍏 The world is full of stakeholders who serve as "sons of the devil." That is, serve their own interests, they try to turn people away from God or from making faithful decisions. Are there people or institutions who are trying to turn you away from God? How will you handle this? Do you know others who are being turned away from God? How might you help them?

- 🍏 Spiritual darkness is a most terrible thing, but it's something we take for granted and accept as normative. Are you willing to allow God to sensitize you to the horror of spiritual darkness? Are you willing to be an instrument of God's light to your family, friends, colleagues, etc. . . ?

Acts 13:13-43 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

The Gospel continues its westward expansion despite transition, desertion, opposition and persecution.

Outline:

13:13-16: Paul and Barnabas go to Pisidian Antioch

13:16-43: Paul preaches to Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue

Warm-up/Intro Questions

If someone were to ask you to give a brief summary of God's activity in your life, what would you say? How has God demonstrated His presence, power and grace? How have you responded to Him in the various stages of your life and spiritual journey?

Questions for Individual Study

What do you notice about the make-up of the missionary team? How would you outline Paul's sermon? What points is he trying to establish? How does he establish them? What's his ultimate point?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. What are the things that strike you from Paul's sermon?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 13:13-16

Look at verse 13. What strikes you about how this missionary team is described? What seems to be implied? What does this indicate?

The team is described as "Paul and his companions." This seems to imply that Paul is the primary leader of the group, the one with the most prominence. But up to this point in Acts it had been Barnabas who had filled this role. It appears that a leadership shift had taken place with Paul taking the lead role over Barnabas.

We are not told how the leadership shift took place or for what reasons. We can assume that Paul's leadership gifts became evident, that it was recognized that he was more gifted than Barnabas for this type of ministry. We can also assume that Barnabas took this demotion of sorts graciously, but that it might have been a bit difficult and awkward for both Barnabas and Paul.

🍏 Have you ever been in a situation where someone you had nurtured, mentored and led surpassed you in gifts and abilities and took over the place of prominence and leadership? What did that feel like? How did you handle it? What did you learn in the process?

What else are we told in verse 13? What does John do? Put yourself in John's shoes. Why might he have decided to leave the team?

The text doesn't tell us why John decided to leave. Maybe he got homesick, missing family and friends. Maybe he got tired or frustrated or sick. Maybe it was a lot harder than he had anticipated it would be. Maybe he lost sight of what the sacrifice was all

about. Maybe the progress of the gospel no longer seemed worth the effort. This is all speculation. However, in Acts 15:36-41 we are told that Paul viewed John's leaving as a desertion and that Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement as to how to handle it.

🍏 Have you ever been part of a group or team working on something difficult and costly and someone quit on you, deserted you? How did that person's quitting affect your morale? How did it affect your ability to complete the task before you? How did you feel toward that person who quit? How did you handle the situation? How did it turn out?

All Christians are called to a life of faith, sacrifice and service; we are all called to be in ministry. In the pursuit of our calling we all face discouragement and run into obstacles. What discouragements and obstacles are you facing now in your faith and ministry?

🍏 What will help you to persevere to keep your sense of God's calling before you, to continually remember what you're doing in ministry is important? How can the small group come alongside you to help?

John left them and in verse 14 we are told "but they went on." Where did they go? Why do you think they went into the synagogue? What might they have been hoping would happen? What did the synagogue rulers do? Why do you think they decided to invite Paul to speak?

Paul and Barnabas went to Pisidian Antioch possibly because Sergius Paulus, who had extensive family connections there, suggested it. On the Sabbath they went into the synagogue, sat down and waited. It was customary that after the Scripture readings, someone would be asked to give a sort of extemporaneous exposition. (cf. as happened with Jesus in Luke 4:21) It seems that part of the missionary strategy of Paul et al was to go into synagogues, wait and then when asked to speak, use the opportunity to preach about Jesus.

Why might Paul have been asked to speak? He had excellent credentials – tribe of Benjamin, Pharisee, educated under Gamaliel's (who was considered the greatest teacher of his day) tutelage.

So, Paul leveraged his credentials in order to gain opportunities to speak about Jesus. And he maximized these opportunities by being so versed in the Scriptures and so aware of his audience that he could effectively target his message.

🍏 We, by virtue of being at Harvard, have credentials. What will we do with our credentials? Will we use them to open doors for Jesus or merely to open doors for ourselves? How might we leverage the credentials we've been given to gain opportunities to both speak for Jesus and to act in ways that reflect His character and advances His purposes? How will we figure out what Jesus' purposes are? What do we (both as individuals and communities) need to be doing now to be prepared to make the best use of the opportunities when they open to us?

🍏 These are difficult questions, rarely leading themselves to quick, straightforward answers. Are there ways we can set aside regular time to prayerfully, perseveringly and courageously tackle these questions together? How might we do this?

Verses 13:16-43

Next week we will analyze Paul's sermon in detail. We will talk about his aim, his audience, his theology, and about how and why he puts his sermon together in the way he does.

For now, I'd like us to focus on a phrase from Paul's sermon. This phrase is found in verse 36. Here Paul is contrasting Jesus with David to argue that the prophecies of Isaiah 55:3 and Psalm 16:10 (quoted in part by Paul in Acts 13:34-35) refer not to David but to Jesus. In Acts 13:36 Paul says almost in a throwaway fashion, "...for David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, died..."

I'm captured by this phrase. How did David serve the purposes of God in his own generation? How did he know what God's purposes were? What was it about him that, despite huge character flaws, made him a man after God's own heart (verse 22)?

🍏 Does God have a purpose for each of us to serve? Does he have a purpose for us to serve in our own generation, in our current generation here at Harvard? If so, how can we discern that purpose? And if we discern it, what would help us to embrace and fulfill it? What would help us to embrace it and persevere through the inevitable setbacks, obstacles, discouragements and disappointments? What would help us maintain our vision and focus, not to be distracted and sell-out?

There is another phrase from Paul's sermon that grabs my imagination. In verse 41 Paul quotes from Habakkuk 1:5, where in its original context, Israel was warned about the rise of Nebuchanezzar and the threat of invasion. The prophet Habakkuk in essence raises the question, "Where is the God of heaven? Why is He taking so long to bring justice?" God's answer to him is, "I'm doing something that even if someone told you, you wouldn't believe."

🍏 Is it possible that God is, right now, doing something that we are having a hard time believing? What is it that God is doing that our culture scoffs at? How is the scoffing of our culture affecting us? How can we help one another withstand the scoffing, help one another see and believe the marvelous but also mind-boggling works of God?

Applications/Reflections/Response:

Paul and Barnabas had to face discouragements and overcome obstacles in their quest to follow Jesus and to be faithful to the calling placed upon their lives. I think this is true for us as well.

- 🍏 Where or how are we experiencing the stress and wear that is part of the call to follow Jesus?
- 🍏 How can we help, encourage, and support one another to follow Jesus as well?

Acts 13:16-43 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

Paul proclaims the superiority of Christ over the law of Moses and proves that the doctrine of justification by faith is not some strange novelty invented by the Christians but is attested to by the law and the prophets of the Old Testament.

Outline:

- 13:16-25 Salvation history culminates in Jesus
- 13:26-37 The death and resurrection of Jesus fulfill God's promises
- 13:38-41 The choice is between life and death
- 13:42-43 Many choose life

Warm-up/Intro Questions

How would you explain the doctrine of justification by faith to your non-Christian friends? What is difficult to believe or offensive to non-Christians about this doctrine? Why? Is this a difficult doctrine for you to believe or live out as a day to day reality? If so, why?

Questions for Individual Study

What is Paul's main point in this sermon? How does he get there? That is, how does he move to his main point? How does he prove or substantiate it? What illustrations or examples does he use? What is the logical flow of his sermon? What subpoints pave the way and point to his concluding main point? How would you outline this sermon? Why do you think Paul proceeds the way that he does?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

We are going to change our format a bit tonight. Normally we have some individual study time, move into some small group discussion and then conclude with whole group discussion. Tonight we will go from individual study to whole group discussion and together unpack and analyze Paul's sermon. We are going to try to figure out not only what Paul says but why he says what he does. The key question we will try to answer is, "What makes this effective gospel preaching?"

Following this whole group discussion, we will break up into small groups to answer the question, "What might be effective gospel preaching for our circle of non-Christian friends, our culture?" Each small group will be asked to put together a sermon that might be preached to our culture. Finally we will come together again as a whole group and each small group will share its sermon and talk about why they did it together in the way they did. My hope is that we will stimulate one another's thinking and be emboldened in our own evangelism.

Verses 13:16-25

Who is Paul's audience? Whom does he address?

Paul addresses two audiences – Israelites and God-fearers. The Israelites were Jews, including proselytes, who kept the law, circumcised their male children and maintained a strict kosher kitchen. The God-fearers were uncircumcised Gentiles who were attracted to the synagogue community and to Yahweh, but who remained Gentiles and who had not promised to keep the whole law. For this reason, i.e., because they were not full proselytes, they were not members of the synagogue per se. The fact that they attended the synagogue service, even as second-class citizens, says something about their spiritual

hunger and openness. The fact that they were not willing to become full proselytes says something about how culturally formidable the obstacles were.

What does Paul say to this audience in this first section of his sermon? What is his main point? How does he develop or substantiate this point?

His main point is that salvation history culminates in Jesus who is the long-awaited and promised Savior (verse 23). In making this point about Jesus Paul also begins to make the point about how and why God saves. He saves not because of human effort or merit but because of His grace which is received through belief in Jesus (verse 39).

To make the point that God saves by grace and not by merit or law keeping what objection must Paul anticipate and overcome? For what reason do the Jews think they are saved?

Justification and salvation by faith might seem like a strange novelty invented by the Christians. . . . What Paul does is to show that in fact it is a doctrine testified to by the law and prophets of the Old Testament (cf. Romans 3:21). How does Paul do this? (Note: I'm borrowing very heavily from David Goodings commentary on Acts in this section.) He cites three instances of salvation from Israel's past history. Now these were at a lower level of salvation – physical salvation – than spiritual salvation offered in Christ; but they were real experiences of God as Savior and so could act as precedents that established the basic conditions on which God grants His salvation.

First, Paul cites the long history of God's choice of Israel and His establishment of them in Canaan. Notice the verbs. Who initiates? God. Initiates to do what? To save. God chose the patriarchs, increased the people's numbers in Egypt and protected them from destruction, put up with them in the wilderness, etc. . . . As Deuteronomy 9:4-8 makes clear that none of this was because of their merit.

Secondly, God gave them judges (verse 20). We think of judges as people who preside in law courts but these judges were saviors and deliverers of the people. The whole book of Judges is an account of Israel's constant sin, of God's judgment on their sin, and then of God's merciful forgiveness and salvation of His people by His grace.

Paul's third example has to do with Israel's insistence that God give them a king. They had grown discontent with God's way of saving them and demanded that God give them a king to rule over them. Why? "So that we may be like other nations [this desire to be like other nations is what kept getting them into trouble] and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles" (1Samuel 8:20). In effect they were saying, "Give us a king so that we don't have to depend on God." To teach them that neither they nor their chosen king (1Samuel 12:13) had the wisdom or power to save them, God gave them Saul as king. Saul was a disaster. He deliberately disobeyed God in critical situations, proved unable as a savior, rejected and persecuted David, the God given savior, and ultimately suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Philistines which also resulted in his death by suicide.

God's answer was to remove Saul, the people's idea of a savior, and to give them a savior of His own choosing, David. David wasn't anywhere near perfect but he was never apostate like Saul and he did what God appointed him to do: he save Israel from their enemies. In doing so David became a prototype of the promised Messiah who would be a descendant of David's. In the centuries that followed God many times promised through the prophets that He would send the Messiah. Every Jew knew these prophecies. Paul concludes this first section of his sermon by saying, "Jesus is the Savior you have been waiting for."

Why does Paul bring in John the Baptist in verses 24-25?

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for all Israel. That is, John made clear that Israel was estranged from God and in need of reconciliation with Him. Israel hadn't been meritorious and needed grace and forgiveness. But as John made clear, John was not the one who could effect this reconciliation. He was not the Messiah. That role belonged to Jesus. Paul does what John did; he directs his hearers' attentions to Jesus.

Verses 13:26-37

Okay, what is Paul doing here? What is he trying to establish? What questions or objections is he trying to answer? How does he do so?

Paul has just argued that Jesus is the promised Savior. The question would then arise, "How do we know this is true? What evidence do you have?" Here, in this section, Paul answers those questions by arguing that Jesus' death and resurrection fulfill Old Testament prophecy and demonstrate that He is indeed the long-awaited Messiah of Israel and Savior.

Before getting into the heart of Paul's proof concerning the identity of Jesus, let's look at what Paul says in verse 26. Who is Paul addressing here and what is he saying to them?

Again, Paul addresses both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. He says, "To us the message of this salvation has been sent." Not only are the Jews included, as would be expected, but the God-fearing Gentiles as well. The nonnegotiable theological position of the Jews had been that, as the chosen people of God, they had been given an exclusive channel to God through the Mosaic Law. Gentiles who also wanted to find God could do so only by becoming Jews and agreeing to adhere to the law. Here Paul seemed to be suggesting what would be an outright heresy to many Jews and particularly to their religious leaders: Gentiles could be saved without becoming Jews first. This was bound to raise opposition to Paul and his message; but to the Gentile God-fearers it would seem like the breath of life.

Let's look now at Paul's contention that Jesus is the promised Messiah. How does Paul try to prove his point?

First, Paul brings up the scandal associated with Jesus. What scandal? The Jesus Paul was holding up as Israel's savior had been executed at the request of the leaders of their religious capital city, Jerusalem. What kind of credentials were these? If He were God's anointed, why was He seemingly cursed by God? Instead of trying to duck this question, Paul brings it up himself and meets it head-on. How? He argues the death and resurrection of Jesus are the strongest possible evidence that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, and they are the very means by which God has provided salvation in its fullest sense, at the highest possible level.

How is Jesus' death a proof of His identity as Messiah? The prophets had said that the Messiah would be rejected by the nation. Isaiah 53 says so explicitly. The story of Saul and David provided a clear prophetic analogy: David, a God-appointed savior, had also been rejected and driven out of the nation by Saul. So, Paul argues, not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah and the rulers and people of Jerusalem attempting to put an end to the claims of Jesus (because they were not tuned in to what their prophets had prophesied about Him) only established the more His claim as Messiah (13:27-29). They did to Jesus the very things that the prophets said Israel would do to the Messiah. That's pretty strong proof as to Jesus' identity.

The resurrection of Jesus adds more weight to the scale of proof. How? Again, let's return to the prophetic analogy of David. Having been rejected and thrown out of Israel

by Saul, David comes back again and becomes king. Jesus, having been rejected and killed also comes back. He comes back from the dead as king and there are many witnesses who will attest to this fact (13:31).

Beyond this prophetic analogy, Paul cites three Old Testament scriptures to substantiate his claim: Psalm 2:7, a passage about God's son [remember what we talked about when we were studying Acts 2 – how the situation in Psalm 2 actually took place in the life and death of Jesus] being vindicated; Isaiah 55:3 about the “holy and sure blessings (NIV)” which could be sure, i.e. permanent, only because of the resurrection of David's son; and Psalm 16:10 about God's Holy One not being allowed to decay (the sense in which “experience corruption” is being used). All three texts may have been regarded as Messianic in pre-Christian Judaism (the evidence is clear in each case.). All three related to David from whom God had brought to Israel the Savior Jesus (Psalm 16:10), the holy promises to David are realized (Isaiah 55:3 – note: it's worth reading Isaiah 55:1-5 to get the flavor of the promises and salvation God was offering) in the enthronement of Jesus as Messianic King (Psalm 2:7; cf. Acts 2:36 and Romans 1:4).

For many of us Paul's method (and Peter's) of slinging verses together seems a bit weird. The rabbis used a technique called “gezerah shavah” to connect passages that used the same key word and that they thought had connecting themes. So Paul uses the word “holy” in Isaiah 55:3 to lead into a citation of Psalm 16:10 which guarantees that the object of David's promise, i.e. the Holy One, would never rot. In other words what may seem like a weird way to us for Paul to go would not have seemed weird to his audience. It was culturally and theologically appropriate and would have seemed eminently reasonable to them.

Verses 13:38-41

Paul's sermon has been building up to the climax which comes in verses 38-41. What is it that Paul wants them to know? Why does he want them to know this? What choice does he lay before them? What warning does he give them?

Paul wants them to know that despite their ignorance and failure, forgiveness is available to them. Through Jesus, God forgives. Verse 39 further states that everyone who believes is set free (the Greek word is “dikaio” which the NIV translates as “justified”) from all those sins from which the law of Moses could not justify or set free.

So since Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the Savior of all and since He is attested to by both the Scriptures and eyewitnesses, the audience must not make the same mistake the Jews of Jerusalem made. Just as Israel and David were God's chosen ones, so too is Jesus and this must be recognized. Why? Because the promises of God, the promised they've been waiting for and hoping in are fulfilled only in Jesus.

Take care, Paul says, lest you perish. He cites Habakkuk 1:5 where Israel was warned about the rise of Nebuchadnezzar and the threat of invasion. Israel didn't heed this warning and suffered disaster. Don't let the same kind of thing happen to you, Paul warns his audience.

Verses 13:42-43

What are the results of Paul's sermon?

First, Paul and Barnabas receive an invitation to return the next Sabbath say more. Secondly, there are many converts to Jesus among both the Jews and the Gentile God-fearers (hence, the exhortation to continue in the grace of God – note: a few months later Paul would have to write to these new converts (the letter to the Galatians) to exhort them again to continue in the grace of God because they were already falling away).

Let's look at Chapter 13 as a whole. What principles for effective Gospel communication can we derive from Paul?

1. *Paul had Gospel values, perspectives and purpose: He saw himself as a called and sent person and threw himself into his calling, giving his best. He was willing to leverage his credentials and opportunities for gospel purposes. He used his vocation (tent-making, leather working) as a means for ministry. He was prepared so as to be able to take advantage of opportunities when they came. He was not inured to the fate of the spiritually lost and blind; he allowed their fate to trouble him and to goad him to action. He was connected to God, sensitive to the Holy Spirit – fasting, prayer, worship, obedience. He was willing to suffer for the cause of the Gospel.*
2. *Paul knew his audience, their story, how they thought, how they saw and understood themselves, what their core questions were, and how deep their longings were.*
3. *Paul knew where seekers, spiritually open and hungry people might be. He was willing to go their turf.*
4. *Paul anticipated their questions and objections and was prepared to answer them.*
5. *Paul started from where they were, what they already knew and believed. He started from a common base out of which his argument could arise.*
6. *Paul used culturally appropriate language and form and logic and reason that was accessible and made sense to them. He used their own authorities, the sources they trusted to build his argument.*
7. *Paul didn't distance himself from his audience or point fingers, but he did make the choices clear and called for a response.*
8. *Paul didn't direct attention to himself but to God. Even when he told his story, he used it to point to God. He made the facts, the content of the gospel clear (but largely in narrative, not propositional or abstract form). He made God in Christ the issue.*

Applications/Reflections/Response:

- 🍏 What might effective gospel communication look like in our culture? How do people think and feel here? What is their story? How can we learn their story and understand their worldview?
- 🍏 What questions and objections do people have regarding Jesus and the Gospel? What do we need to do to be able to answer these questions or objections?
- 🍏 Where might the Gospel resonate with their lives, speak to their hopes, fears, longings and aspirations? In what ways or areas might the Gospel be good news to them? (In what ways or areas is the Gospel good news to all?)

Acts 13:42-52 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

The gospel continues to spread despite opposition.

Outline:

- 13:42-43 The initial responses are positive
- 13:44-48 The whole city gathers to hear; Jews reject while Gentiles rejoice
- 13:49-52 The word spreads throughout the region; Paul and Barnabas are driven out but the disciples are filled with joy and with the Spirit

Warm-up/Intro Questions

Can you remember a time in your life when, despite difficult circumstances, you were experiencing joy? How do you account for the joy you were experiencing then? Did your experience of joy last a long time? Do you have any sense as to why you sometimes experience joy and sometimes don't?

Questions for Individual Study

Compare and contrast the various responses to the gospel in this passage. What do you think is behind these responses? How would you explain them?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. What intrigues you or puzzles you in this passage? Why do you think the Jews were jealous? Why do you think the disciples were filled with joy?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 13:42-43

What are the initial responses to the sermon?

There seem to be at least three responses: 1) The people urge them to come back and speak on the next Sabbath. These people may be indicating strong interest but not yet belief; they want to hear more before making up their minds. 2) Some people walk away. They've made up their minds; they're not interested. This group may include those Jews who stir up trouble later. 3) Many Jews and devout converts to Judaism follow Paul and Barnabas, who speak to them and urge them to "continue in the grace of God." "To continue in the grace of God" may imply they had believed Paul's message and received God's grace of salvation – forgiveness of sins and justification before God. These reactions to God's word are fairly typical (cf. Mark 4:1-20).

🍏 Most of us, I think, would be deliriously happy if we got these kinds of results. Many of our friends and colleagues seem oblivious or apathetic to our attempts to point them to Jesus. Do we have any insight as to why our attempts at evangelism are not bearing as much fruit as we would like? Are we bothered enough by our friends' lostness that we might want to invest serious time in fasting, praying, thinking, and reflecting? (Okay, I know this is a loaded question, but I'm feeling desperate about this.)

Verses 13:44-48

What happens on that next Sabbath? Who gathers? Who's included in "almost the whole city?" Why are there all these people there? What do they want?

Almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. That means that many of the people who had been in the synagogue the previous week had been talking with their friends and acquaintances about what they had heard. Apparently, they had created a great buzz of interest. Within this crowd were all the Jews who normally participated in the Sabbath services. There were also the Gentile converts to Judaism and the Gentile God-fearers who also attended the synagogue. What's new here is that there were huge numbers of other Gentiles – Gentiles who hadn't previously shown interest in the synagogue worship of the Jews – who had also shown up. They had shown up to hear the word of God. Something about Paul's presentation of God's word had captured their interest in a way that previous encounters with the word of God (largely the Old Testament) had not. What this indicated was that underneath their previous seeming apathy lurked a yearning for God.

🍏 Is it possible that many of our friends who seem apathetic to the gospel actually are hungry for God? Could it be that part of the problem lies not just with the hardness of their hearts but also with the sterility of our witness?

Who are "the Jews" in verse 45? How do they react? Why?

The text isn't clear as to whether "the Jews" refer to all the Jewish people in Pisidian Antioch or just to the Jewish leaders. Verse 42 says that "the people" urge them to speak again. It may be that Luk is making a distinction between the Jewish people and the Jewish leaders – that the people are open to the gospel and the leaders are opposed. Verse 50 says that "the Jews" incited the opposition of the city's Gentile elites which implies to me that the Jews referred to are Jewish elites. Verse 43 implies that many of the Jewish people became believers which further indicates to me that a distinction is being made between the Jewish people and their leaders.

What's the irony here? Who'd been in the synagogue originally? How had the Gentiles gotten there? Who'd been evangelizing them? So why didn't the Jews welcome all these Gentiles with open arms?

The fact that there were both Gentiles converts to Judaism (verse 43) and Gentile God-fearers in the synagogue mean that the Jews had been active evangelists. They had reached out successfully to a number of the Gentiles, including some of the Gentile leaders and people of high standing. They were concerned about Gentiles coming to know the true God.

Further, the Old Testament was full of references to Gentiles coming to faith. Part of the promise to Abram (Genesis 12:1-3) had been that through his descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed. The passage from which Paul had quoted the previous week, Isaiah 55, went on to say, "See, you shall call nations that you do not know. And nations that do not know you shall run to you, because the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for He has glorified you (verses 4-5)."

As a result of Paul's sermon and the conversations that ensued, Gentiles in unprecedented numbers had turned out this next week to hear Paul preach. Could this be the kind of thing Isaiah had been thinking about? And given the obvious interest the Jews had previously shown in evangelizing Gentiles, wouldn't it be logical to assume they would be really excited to see Gentiles in such numbers interested in hearing the word of God expounded?

So, what's the problem? Verse 45 says, "But when they saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul." They were jealous of the large turnout of Gentiles. Why? Maybe because in their

outreach to Gentiles the local Jews had been a lot less successful in attracting them than Paul and Barnabas were. Rather than being excited that the Gentiles were showing spiritual hunger, they were jealous because it wasn't due to their efforts. They were jealous that someone else was more successful, someone else would get the credit.

🍏 Have you ever been in a situation where you had worked really hard at something and then someone else came along who did it a lot better? How did you feel? How did you handle it? Have you ever worked hard at a ministry and then seen someone else doing the same thing with seemingly greater results? Were you able to rejoice in that situation? What did your reaction tell you about yourself?

Verse 45 says, "And blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul." What might they have been trying to contradict?

The text doesn't explicitly say but it's likely that they were protesting against Paul's declaration that forgiveness of sins and justification before God could not be earned by keeping the law of Moses but must be received through belief in Jesus. They may have resisted this doctrine partly because it put Gentiles on equal footing with Jesus. It threatened their privileged position. If so, this means they were willing to evangelize Gentiles but only in a way that protected their position and made Gentiles just like them. Inevitably, such an approach would limit their effectiveness in outreach.

🍏 Are we willing to change in order to reach out more effectively? How do we feel when we experience an influx of newcomers in our fellowship? Do we welcome them and seek to meet their needs? Are we expected to stick to our structures and ways of doing things mostly because we like them and feel comfortable with them? Do we put unnecessary road blocks in the way of seekers, making it harder for them to become Christ-followers and members of our fellowship?

How do Paul and Barnabas respond to the opposition of the Jews?

They speak boldly – they need courage to speak boldly because they know that tempers are red-hot and the situation has become more dangerous for them. So why speak at all? Why not sit down, shut up, and slink away – discretion is the better part of valor? Because the faith of the new converts is at stake. If Paul and Barnabas don't hang in there, defending their message, the new converts would be tempted to think the arguments of the Jews were true; they'd be tempted to "leave" the grace of God (verse 43).

What do Paul and Barnabas say? How do the Gentiles respond?

First, they declare a missionary and theological principle: God's word must be spoken to the Jews first. But if the Jews reject the gospel, they will turn to the Gentiles. Further, Paul says, in rejecting the gospel, what the Jews are actually doing is rejecting themselves. They are judging themselves unworthy of eternal life.

Then, in verse 47, Paul and Barnabas give the scriptural rationale for turning to the Gentiles. They quote from Isaiah 49:6 which they see as a command of the Lord.

What is Isaiah 49 all about?

This is one of the "servant" songs in Isaiah. In Isaiah 49:3-4 the servant is clearly Israel. But in Isaiah 49:5-7 the servant is the one who fully carries out the servant's mission and suffers on behalf of Israel (as in Isaiah 52:13-53:12). This servant had been (in pre-Christian Judaism) identified as the Messiah. The early Christians recognize Him to be Jesus.

What Paul and Barnabas are saying is that as followers of the Servant Jesus, they take up His mission, part of which is to reveal the way of salvation to the Gentiles because the Jewish people believed that they were predestined for salvation by virtue of descent from Abraham. The idea that many Gentiles had been "destined to eternal life" would be offensive but this was exactly what Isaiah 49:6 implied.

The Gentiles hear what Paul and Barnabas say, understand its implications, are glad and praise the word of the Lord. Many become believers.

Verses 13:49-52

What happens next?

1) The word of the Lord spread throughout the region – opposition wouldn't stop its growth. 2) The Jews incited the Gentile elites of the city against Paul and Barnabas and stirred up persecution (probably violent) against them, driving them out of the city. 3) But the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. In fact, one of the signs of being filled with the Spirit is joy (Galatians 5:22).

Applications/Reflections/Response:

🍏 In verses 38-39 Paul articulates the doctrine of justification by faith. It is this doctrine which agitates the Jews and makes the Gentiles glad. How does this affect us?

🍏 To what extent has the assurance of justification by faith alone become the basis of our inner security with the Lord? Do we live as people who know that we've been acquitted, forgiven, reconciled once and for all by Jesus' death and resurrection?

🍏 Has this resulted in freedom from guilt and shame and compulsive ways of trying to prove ourselves or trying to make ourselves right with God by our own efforts? Are we liberated from trying to win His approval and the acceptance of others?

🍏 Do we know that God loves us, that He's for us and not against us? Are we experiencing the joy which comes from being recipients of the limitless grace of God?

🍏 Could it be that this is what our friends are waiting to see before they become willing to entrust themselves to Jesus?

Acts 14:1-18 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme:

The Word of God continues to advance through opposition, persecution and misunderstanding because of the grace of God poured out on His faithful ambassadors.

Outline:

14:1-7 Paul and Barnabas in Iconium

14:8-18 Paul and Barnabas in Lystra

14:8-10 Healing of the lame man

14:11-13 Reaction of Lystrans: Idolatrous worship

14:14-18 Response of Paul and Barnabas: Preach contextualized gospel

Warm-up/Intro Questions

What pops into your mind when you hear the word “idolatry?” What is idolatry? What “idols” is our country tempted to worship?

Questions for Individual Study

Look at the places to which Paul and Barnabas go – Iconium and Lystra. Who is their audience at each place? What do Paul and Barnabas say and do? What kind of reaction do they get?

Questions for Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections and questions with one another. What struck you? What puzzled you? Look at Barnabas and Paul’s sermon in verses 15-17. How does it differ from Paul’s sermon in 13:16-41? Why do you think it’s different?

Study Notes and Questions for Whole Group Discussion

Verses 14:1-7

Where do Paul and Barnabas go after being driven out of Pisidian Antioch? Where is Iconium in reference to Antioch? Why do they go so far?

Iconium was about 90 miles southeast of Antioch and was the easternmost city of Phrygia. Why go there? The most likely reason is that they wanted to get away from the area controlled by the authorities in Antioch. (But I don’t think they left Antioch just because of the persecution. Rather, I think they left because they had accomplished their purpose in being there: they had planted a healthy church. The persecution may have precipitated the leaving but was not sufficient in and of itself to cause them to leave.)

What happened in Iconium?

The same thing as in Antioch? Paul and Barnabas went into the synagogue, spoke in a similar fashion to what they had done in Antioch, and experienced similar results. A great many Jews and Gentiles believed, but there were other Jews who did not believe.

The non-believing Jews incited and poisoned the minds of some Gentiles against the brothers (new converts). Who were these Gentiles and how were their minds poisoned against the new believers? The text doesn’t tell us but my assumption is that these Gentiles were influential, established elites who wanted to preserve order and the status quo. My guess is that the unbelieving Jews painted Paul and Barnabas as rabble rousers and the newly established church as a divisive force and a threat to the established social order.

Look at verse 3. What's surprising here? What do you expect will follow after the word "so"?

I expect the text to say, "So Paul and Barnabas fled the city, moving onto" Instead it says they stayed there a long time and spoke boldly.

Why do they stay for a long time despite opposition? What's their message? What do they do? What might Paul and Barnabas staying in the face of opposition have communicated to the new converts? How might it have helped them?

They stay because of the new converts. They want to strengthen and encourage them, to root them in the faith so that they do not become deterred by opposition. So Paul and Barnabas stay, thus modeling courage and faith under fire and demonstrating the depth of their own belief that the message of the gospel was indeed good news and worth any sacrifice. Why was it good news? Because it was a message of God's grace – grace which was offered to them.

What does the Lord do?

He enables them to do signs and wonders as a way of confirming that Paul and Barnabas' message is indeed of God.

🍏 How do you handle pressure, opposition or ridicule? Do you persist or do you back off? Why? Do you have friends who are under assault and who need their faith strengthened? How might you come alongside them to encourage them? Are there places where, in the face of opposition, it would help others if you spoke boldly for the Lord? How is the Lord working through you to confirm the message of His grace? What "signs and wonders" is He enabling you to do?

What happens as a result of Paul and Barnabas staying for a long time and boldly preaching?

Just as the synagogue community had divided over Paul and Barnabas' preaching so does the city: some siding with the Jews, others with Paul and Barnabas. Verse 5 indicates that the opposition was so severe that an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews (who ordinarily didn't collude on much together), along with their leaders, to stone Paul and Barnabas. Somehow Paul and Barnabas found out about the plot and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities which were outside the jurisdiction of Phrygian officials. Undaunted by the persecution they had just fled, Paul and Barnabas continue to preach the good news.

Verses 14:8-18

Let's move on to the next section, beginning with verses 8-10. Who does Paul encounter in Lystra? What's the context?

Paul is preaching and in the audience is a man who had been crippled from birth and never walked. Paul looks at him, sees that he has faith to be healed, and heals him.

All kinds of questions are raised from this passage. Why does Paul look at this man intently? Is it because he sees the man's condition and feels compassion? Or is it because the Holy Spirit commands him to do so? And how does Paul know that this man had the faith to be healed?

In order to really focus on others we need to be prepared to look and listen. We need to take the time to get beneath the crust of people's lives and hear the meaning behind their words.

What does faith to be healed mean? Faith in what? Where did this faith come from? What catalyzed it?

The lame man had been in the audience listening to Paul preach. Apparently he had believed the message Paul was preaching. So the sermon catalyzed the lame man's faith. He was beginning to believe in Jesus, the Savior.

Further questions arise. Was the healing dependent upon the man's having sufficient faith? What is the connection between faith and healing?

God usually (but not always) moves in His supernatural power in response to faith. But the location of that faith will, however, vary from case to case. For example, when Jesus healed the centurion's servant, the faith was not in the sick servant but in an intermediary, the centurion. When Peter raises Dorcas from the dead, it's not because Dorcas has faith for healing but because Peter does. Here, the faith is in the lame man. So, in some cases the faith of the sick person is a factor in the healing process and in some cases it is not.

What else can we learn or know about healing?

1. *It is God who heals. He often works through our faith but only He is the healer.*
2. *If we pray for healing and the person for whom we pray is not healed, this does not necessarily mean that either we or the ill person is deficient in faith. (Remember Paul's experience: he prayed three times for his "thorn in the flesh" [which many commentators believe to be a physical ailment] to be removed, but it wasn't. The problem wasn't with Paul's lack of faith but that God had different plans for Paul.)*
3. *We should be willing to pray for healing. Let's not refrain from praying because we're afraid it won't "work". Whether the person we pray for is physically healed immediately or not, he or she will experience something of God's grace as we pray.*

How do the crowds react to the healing? What do they say and do? Why? What does their response indicate about how well they understood Paul and Barnabas' preaching? Why do they misunderstand so badly? What is their worldview? How does it affect the way they interpret what Paul and Barnabas say and do?

*The crowds start shouting, "The gods have come down to us in human form." Why do they say this? The pagan worldview, as did the Jewish worldview, allowed for the intervention of supernatural power in daily life. They believed in the miraculous, in angels, demons and gods. More specific to this incident, there was a famous myth recorded in Ovid (*Metamorphosis* 8:626ff) which was set in the Phrygian or Lycaonian hill country. The myth records a descent by Jupiter (Zeus) and Mercury (Hermes) to earth. They go to 1000 homes, seeking a place of rest but are rejected. Finally they come to a poor, very humble home of an elderly couple, Baucus and Philemon, who receive the gods and extend sacrificial hospitality, giving the last bit of their food and drink. The gods reward them for their hospitality, but the rest of the region is judged and destroyed.*

The crowds, familiar with the myth that Ovid recorded, assume that once again "the gods have come down to us in human form." So they decide to make a great sacrifice (very expensive sacrifices) to honor the gods who had appeared again incognito. Why? They want to avert judgment from falling on the region once more. The priest of Zeus, whose temple stood just outside the city, brought bulls with garlands (decorations for sacrifices) on their necks to the city gates because both the priest and the crowds want to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas immediately.

It seems clear that the crowds had not really understood what it was that Paul and Barnabas were preaching. The meaning they invested in the word "god" was very different from that which Paul and Barnabas meant. For these pagans the gods were a lot like human beings, "sometimes kind and benevolent but often capricious, proud and

vain – just a lot more powerful.” The goal was to appease them, even manipulate them, to gain their favor. It may be that the crowds gathered to hear Paul and Barnabas, not fully understanding but intrigued. When they see the outstanding miracle of the lame man healed, they interpret it through the only grid – their pagan worldview – available to them. Monotheistic Jews would have interpreted the miracle one way; these pagans interpret it in another, in a way radically different from the way Paul and Barnabas intended.

🍏 Everybody has a worldview, a way of understanding and interpreting “reality”. (See addendum.) People with different worldviews are in danger of talking past one another if they do not understand and take into account one another’s different worldviews. How is our Christian worldview different from that of our culture? What do we need to know and take into account so that we make sense to our audience?

How do Paul and Barnabas respond to the crowds attempts to worship them?

They immediately tear their clothes, a gesture suggesting they thought blasphemy was about to be committed (contrast Paul and Barnabas’ response with that of Herod in Acts 12:20-23) and ran into the midst of the crowd to prevent this travesty.

What do Paul and Barnabas say? What’s significant about their address in verses 15-17? How does it differ from their synagogue sermon? How do Paul and Barnabas begin to contextualize their message for this particular audience? What points of contact do they establish?

This is the first sermon to pure pagans, i.e. to Gentiles who have not been exposed to or are attracted to Judaism and synagogue worship. Therefore, it is different in style and approach from their earlier synagogue speech. It starts further back, tries to explain fundamental truths and attempts to clear up misunderstanding.

They begin by calling the crowd “friends” (Greek, men). They do not distance themselves from the crowds. “We are mortals like you – we’re all in this together, all on the same plane.”

They ask a question, “Why are doing this?” This is an attempt to grab the crowds attention by speaking into a situation important to them.

Paul and Barnabas talk about bearing “good news”. Everyone wants good news. What’s the good news? That the hearers do not need to be dependent on worthless things (cf. Romans 1:21;8:20) to be delivered but that there is a true and living and real God who could and would save them. It is this God who is the one and only Creator. In the past this God allowed all the nations to follow their own ways. Implied in this is the idea that God is not capricious and will not hold their idolatrous past against them. Instead, because He is a good and gracious God, He offers them life and hope and salvation. Even in the past, though He allowed all the nations to follow their own ways, He didn’t abandon them. He demonstrated His goodness and grace by giving rains and harvests, food and joy. He is a good God – not capricious, moody or unpredictable. They can depend upon Him and be saved by Him. They are not left to their own cleverness or wisdom. [What wisdom has God left within our culture?]

So the key point Paul and Barnabas want to establish is that there is only one God (cf. 1Thessalonians 1:9-10; 1Corinthians 8:6; Acts 17:22-31). To worship anything else is worthless.

🍏 What is the key point we need to establish?

Applications/Reflections/Response:

🍏 “The gods have come down to us in human form.” The cry of the pagans in this passage is radical but not nearly radical enough. Christians affirm that God came down to us, not just in human form, but in actual humanity: God became a human being. And this God, though, no longer present in the flesh, remains with us and for us by His Spirit with all His wisdom, power and glory.

Have we allowed this truth to capture our heart and fuel our hope? What would our lives look like if we lived with the active expectation that our God is always with us and that His power is always available to us to accomplish His purposes? What are a couple of specific ways your prayers would change if you held onto the truth of God’s availability to you as an ongoing reality? How might your attitudes and actions change?

🍏 The image of God has been defaced in our culture. What we mean by God and what our non-believing friends mean by God may be very different. Our worldviews may be extremely different. How might we bridge these differing worldviews so that our message may be understood as we intend it? What language, images, analogies, stories might be helpful to us in this regard?

🍏 The key point Paul and Barnabas want to establish is that there is only one God worthy of worship. The many “gods” of the Lycaonian pagans were “worthless” things. Our culture also has many “gods” and we ourselves are tempted to “worship” worthless things. What things or people in our lives have you elevated to the status of idols? What are you guilty of “worshipping”? What would help you to restore these things or people to their proper size and place in your life?

Acts 16: 1-15 Study Notes and Questions

Key Theme

Under God's sovereign guidance and preparation the gospel begins its advance into Europe.

Outline

16:1-5 Timothy sacrificially joins the team

16:6-10 God guides the team

16:11-15 Lydia is converted

Intro/Warm-up Questions

How did the Lord open your heart to the gospel? What people and circumstances did He use as part of the process? Do you remember when you were first conscious of the fact that you believed? What did that experience feel like? What difference did it make in your life?

Questions For Individual Study

How do people – Paul, Timothy, the missionary team, Lydia - make decisions in this passage? What motivates them? What criteria do they use? How does God provide guidance? What part do Paul and his team play in discerning that guidance?

Questions For Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections, and questions with one another. What intrigued or puzzled you? What do you want to talk about from this passage? How did you see the discerning of God's will being worked out in this passage?

Study Notes and Questions For Whole Group Discussion

Verses 1-5

We already looked at this section of Scripture last week. I'd like to ask us to consider a few more questions arising from this passage.

We said last week that Paul had Timothy circumcised for utilitarian not theological reasons. It would make their mission a bit easier. Why did Timothy agree to be circumcised? Was it his prerogative to choose not to be circumcised? What motivated him to undergo such a painful procedure? Did Paul have the right to ask this of him? Is Timothy's example meant to be a norm for all Christians? Why or why not?

What questions might Paul and Timothy have considered in making their decision about circumcision?

Some of their questions may have been: Whom are we trying to reach? What are the evangelistic opportunities? How will it affect the believers, the Christian community?

Does this violate biblical teaching or values? What might the impact be on our mission?

What are some key ministry principles you discern from this passage?

- 1) *Get rid of unnecessary obstacles to the gospel.*
- 2) *Be willing to meet people where they are.*
- 3) *Know what is important to the people you are trying to reach.*
- 4) *Be aware of ethnic and cultural issues and identities.*
- 5) *Be willing to give up your prerogatives for the sake of ministry to others.*
- 6) *Know your purpose. Make decisions on the basis of that purpose, not on the basis of personal comfort or preference and not out of fear.*

🍏 What are some “circumcision vs. non-circumcision” issues for you and your fellowship? What are the issues where the exercise of your rights and prerogatives might effect the fruitfulness of your Christian impact? How are decisions in those kinds of situations made? What values predominate? What criteria will we consider?

Verses 6-10

Let’s look now at vv.6-10. What happens to Paul and his team in this section? Where do they plan to go? Where do they end up?

In 15:36 Paul declares his intent to return to the cities where he and Barnabas had planted churches in the first missionary journey. These cities were in Asia Minor (modern Turkey – when Acts speaks of the province of Asia it means the Roman province of Asia, ie, Asia Minor).

What happens?

They are frustrated by two divinely closed doors (having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia, attempted to go into Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them) – expressions of God’s negative guidance. And then while in Troas during the night Paul receives a vision of a Macedonian man calling out “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” On the basis of this vision, combined with the two previous experiences of negative guidance, the group (not just Paul) concludes that God has called them to proclaim the good news in Macedonia.

Okay, what do we learn about decision-making and the discernment of God’s will from vv.6-10?

- 1) *Paul and his team had a clear sense of mission but they didn’t have a blueprint. On the basis of their understanding of their mission they used their reason and experience to plot their course. They made decisions and acted on them but they were willing to hold their decisions and plans loosely. That is, they weren’t stubbornly committed to them. When God provided more specific guidance they were able to receive it. They had a very clear direction rooted in a firm purpose but as they pressed forward they were also responsive to God’s leading and thus willing to change their direction as God led. We have to maintain a balance between thinking and planning and praying and listening to God. He works through all of this to grant us His will. How do we maintain this balance? Only by cultivating the habits of daily prayer, worship and reflection.*
- 2) *God’s guidance was not negative only but also positive. Some doors were closed but a door was also opened. When they ran into closed doors they did not become discouraged or passive. They didn’t start mistrusting God or themselves or the validity of their mission. They simply tried the next path they could see and continued trying until they were led to God’s open door. It probably took weeks or months to get to the right door but they persevered. And those weeks and months of seeking God’s direction were not wasted. We also need that kind of perseverance and trust. Once we get a sense for God’s call upon us we need to keep trying things, to not be afraid to fail, to keep going until we discover the specific direction God wants us to go.*
- 3) *Paul did not have any more specific information at the start than we tend to have. What he had was a general mandate to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. With that general mandate he goes to work. Most of us have a sense of the general mandate God has given us. We also must take that and go to work. We want*

God to give us very specific direction so we often wait passively or feel overly frustrated when things don't work out the way we planned. And then we tend to get angry with God. What God wants us to do is to trust Him, to keep listening but to be faithful with our general mandate in the midst of our specific lack of direction. As we do this the specific direction becomes more clear and we are then in a position to respond to it.

- 4) *Both Paul's general mandate and specific direction were in line with God's values and commitments. They reflected God's character and mission. This will be true for us as well as we try to discern God's guidance.*
- 5) *Paul did not discern God's guidance and make decisions entirely on his own. The rest of the team was involved in the process (v. 10).*
- 6) *The discerning of God's will was based on a combination of factors. There was the negative guidance of the Spirit, the positive guidance coming out of the vision in Troas, the use of reason, the corporate discussion etc. The verb in v. 10 translated as "being convinced" means literally "to bring together", to put together in one's mind, and so to infer something from a variety of data".*

Verses 11-15

Let's move on to w. 11-15. And let's ask the same basic questions. What happens in this section? How are decisions made? What criteria are used? What part does God play? What part do Paul and his team play? Where does the man in the vision tell them to go? Are they given specific direction? How do they decide where in Macedonia they should go? Why Philippi?

The man in the vision calls them to go to Macedonia only, not to any specific place in Macedonia. At that time Macedonia was divided into four provincial republics or districts. Philippi was the major city of the first district of Macedonia, and an important Roman colony city. It lay on the Via Egnatia, the main east-west route across Macedonia, connecting Rome with its eastern provinces. It was the most influential city in Macedonia both because of its location which made it an important trade and commercial site, and because of its political status. In 42 BC. Anthony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius in a battle nearby. In celebration of the victory, Octavian made Philippi a Roman colony, populated it with retiring Roman soldiers, and gave the city the "ius italicum", the legal character of a part of Italy even though it was outside of Italy. This was the highest honor that could be bestowed on a provincial city. Essentially this meant that its colonists enjoyed the same rights and privileges as if their land were part of Italian soil.

So, why Philippi? Not having specific direction, I suspect Paul and his team decide to go to Philippi because of its perceived strategic importance. Paul was a strategist. He campaigned in the great cities of the Roman world. He seemed to select centers on trade routes, sea-ports, places where there was much coming and going. From these cities the message of the gospel would run like fire far and wide. He started with present-day Turkey, moved on to Greece and then set his sights on Rome and beyond that, on Spain.

What happens after Paul and his team arrive in Philippi? What do you think they did for the several days they were in the city prior to going to the place of prayer? Why did they suppose there was a place of prayer by the river? And why did they go there?

My guess is that they take those days to pray, to walk around, to observe and listen. They may be trying to get a sense of the spiritual climate, to get a feel for what people are thinking about and talking about, trying to get a sense for what their ministry

approach might be. In other words, they are probably actively asking God for guidance through prayer but are also seeking God's guidance through observing and thinking.

On the Sabbath they go looking for a place of prayer. They may have been looking for the presence of a synagogue in the city. Not finding one they conclude that the presence of Jews is either small or non-existent. Why look for Jews by the river? Because the river facilitated the observance of ritual ablutions. So, it was a logical place to look.

Why look for Jews and God-fearers at all?

Because these are people who have an already present spiritual interest, people who are already willing to inconvenience themselves in their pursuit of God, people willing to embrace their minority status for the sake of their souls. Paul goes there because he thinks it is likely that he will find spiritually hungry, spiritually open people there.

🍏 Where might the spiritually hungry, spiritually open people be at Harvard? Where might we go to look for them? What might the signs of spiritual hunger and openness be?

One of the people at the river was a woman named Lydia. What are we told about her? What's significant about this?

The first thing we are told about her was that she was a worshiper of God. This means that she was spiritually hungry; she wanted to know God. We are also told that she was from Thyatira, a thriving manufacturing and commercial center whose trade in purple was renowned in the Roman world. Purple cloth was ranked in value with gold and was important not only for adorning emperors and temples but also for tribute and international trade. It seems clear that Lydia has an intense hunger for God. There is no status for her to associate herself with these women and the God of the Jews. It might even have been bad for her business.

When Paul begins to speak God opens her heart to listen eagerly and to believe. Here again we see a Divine-human partnership. Paul speaks but God opens the heart of Lydia. Both are necessary for Lydia to believe.

What does Lydia offer to do? How important is this? Who benefits?

Lydia offers them hospitality. She urges them to stay in her home. She offers her home as a base for ministry and as a place where the church at Philippi that will soon come to existence and grow will be able to meet Lydia's offering of her home was crucial in a city like Philippi. Roman anti-semitism was widespread; any religion that threatened the traditional gods and customs was highly suspect. Without a sponsor of some social status and means the church would have struggled to gain a foothold.

Besides the potential for threatening her social status, her hospitality was also financially costly to Lydia. On the other hand, it was also of enormous benefit to her. It gave her more access to Paul and his team and probably accelerated her spiritual growth. So, her hospitality benefited Paul and his team, benefited the cause of the gospel and benefited her.

🍏 Are we willing to pay costs to grow spiritually? How much do we value spiritual growth? Is it part of our foundational criteria for decision-making?

Application/Reflection/Response

🍏 All of us struggle with making decisions and with discerning the will of God. What decisions are we struggling with right now? What have you seen in this passage that may be able to help you in making your decision? What might God be saying to you through this passage?

Key Theme

The saving power of Jesus Christ

Outline

16:16-24 Liberating a slave girl from a demonic spirit
16:25-34 A jailer is saved along with his family
16:35-40 Paul pushes back with the legal system

Intro/Warm-up Questions

Have you ever witnessed the power of God? When? Where? How? What did you feel?

Questions For Individual Study

What do you see the power of God? How do people respond? What is the result?

Questions For Sub-Group Discussion

Share your observations, reflections, and questions with one another. What questions do you have? What does it tell you about the power of God? What are the different ways in which the characters cooperate with or resist God's work?

Study Notes and Questions For Whole Group Discussion

Verses 16-24

What is the slave girl's problem?

She possessed by a spirit

She is a possession of oppressive men

What is her message? Is it true? Is it helpful? Why is Paul Annoyed? Why does Paul liberate her? Why did he take so long?

Why are Paul and Silas arrested?

He screwed up their business prospects

Racism — they were Jews

Fear of their power?

How might Paul and Silas *feel* at the end of the day? Consider how their arrest is similar to the accounts of Jesus' arrest.

🍎 Sometimes the liberating *Good News* of Jesus undermines profitability. What/who is it that has an interest in keeping you away from the completely liberating work of Jesus in your life?

🍎 Sometimes it is costly to be involved in liberating others. What are some of the risks you face in your circle of relationships?

Verses 25-34

We said that Paul & Silas might *feel* bad and broken about being in jail. Maybe they feel stupid for casting the spirit out of the slave girl. How do they behave?

Joyfully worshipping and witnessing

What happens?

Inmates overhear and there is more liberation – an earthquake!

How do we see the power of God here?

The cells open

Paul & Silas and all the other inmates stay

(Uh... Why do they stay after all?)

The jailer repents

More...

What is it that converts the jailer?

The presence of Paul & Silas after the earthquake and open cells

What signs do you see of his conversion?

His mercy and care toward Paul & Silas

🍏 There is simply no reason for Paul & Silas to remain in the jail unless Jesus is alive, the Holy Spirit has filled them and they are on a mission. Much of our lives seem perfectly explainable by other means - career path, the market, parents' expectations, etc.. I think it was Mother Teresa who said that followers of Jesus should live such extraordinary lives that they would be incomprehensible apart from the presence of God. What keeps our lives from being more unexplainable?

Verses 35-40

Why does Paul refuse release from the jail?

Paul is very shrewd. Perhaps their beating has discredited them and the Gospel and he wants both to be exonerated. Lex Valeria (509 BC) and Lex Julia (23 BC) were two laws which protected the civil rights of Romans - protected citizens from punishment and incarceration without a trial.

🍏 Paul is once again pragmatic in his use of a variety of methods to make sure the Gospel can go forward. Casting out demons, singing, staying in prison when he could have escaped, using the power of law and embarrassment. What are the tools, methods available to us that we should be wary of? Which we should embrace?