

LESSON 5

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (Chapters 11-15)

- I. Gentiles Mission by the Apostles in Acts 11/13/14/15
 - The Council of Jerusalem
 - The Church's evangelizing ministry to the people of other faiths
 - Vatican II council on non-Christian religions
 - II. The Church of Antioch & The Antiochian Orthodox Church
 - III. Arrest of St. Peter and Fate of Agrippa I
 - IV. Paul's First Missionary Journey
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Gentiles Mission: In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we see the gospel reaching the gentiles who accepted Jesus as their Messiah. The early Christian church was growing because of the gentiles who added in number of the believers. But the mindset and response of the apostles was a bit mixed one initially towards the gentiles who entered into Christian communities. We find both acceptance and resistance and they even convoked a council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) to discuss this issue of accepting the gentiles who joined the covenantal people (Jewish Christians). This theme is one of the major themes in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Let us see the biblical context of the gentiles and how they were accepted later on and what is the current understanding of the Church regarding the people of other faiths?

Who are the gentiles? The gentiles are the ones who are not Jews. From the Jewish perspective, Gentiles were often seen as pagans who did not know the true God. During Jesus' time, many Jews took such pride in their cultural and religious heritage that they considered Gentiles "unclean," calling them "dogs" and "the uncircumcision." Gentiles and the half-Gentile Samaritans were viewed as enemies to be shunned (see John 4:9; 18:28; and Acts 10:28).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus alluded to the common association of Gentiles with paganism: "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:47). In another place in the same sermon, Jesus noted, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases like the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7).

Jesus came to offer salvation to all people, Jew and Gentile. The prophet Isaiah predicted the Messiah's worldwide ministry, saying He "will bring forth justice to the Gentiles" and would be "a light to the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:1, 6). In Mark 7:26, Jesus

helps a Gentile woman who had asked for her daughter's freedom from a demon. Interestingly, both Jews and Gentiles are mentioned in the account of Jesus' death. The Jewish leaders arrested Jesus, but it was Pilate, a Roman (a Gentile) who sentenced Him to death and Romans who carried out the execution. Later, the apostles prayed, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city [Jerusalem] to conspire against your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:27).

As the gospel spread in the early New Testament era, many Gentiles were converted. Acts 11:18 records the reaction of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who "praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'" When the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch heard the good news, "they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). When writing to the (mostly Gentile) church in Rome, Paul communicated his goal: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). Paul realized that the coming of Jesus provided the opportunity for salvation to whoever would believe in Christ's name (John 3:16).

Did Jesus come only for the Jews and not the Gentiles?" Jesus is the Messiah that the Jews had been anticipating for centuries (Luke 2:25; 3:15). As such, He was born into a Jewish family and was reared according to Jewish law in a Jewish town (Luke 2:27; Galatians 4:4). Jesus selected Jewish disciples, spoke in Jewish synagogues and the Jewish temple, and traveled mostly in Jewish areas. His mission, in fulfillment of the Jewish prophets, was to the Jewish people first. However, none of this means that Jesus' ministry was limited exclusively to the Jews.

In Matthew 15, there is an incident that, at first, seems to confirm the idea that Jesus came only for the Jews. Jesus was traveling through Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile region, and "a Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly'" (Matthew 15:22). This Gentile woman recognized Jesus as the Messiah ("Son of David"), but "Jesus did not answer a word" (verse 23). As the woman kept up her appeals, Jesus finally responded, but His words seemed to hold little hope: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (verse 24). However, the woman did not give up, and Jesus eventually granted her request, based on her "great faith" (verse 28).

The fact that Jesus helped the Canaanite woman, even though His mission was to the Jews, is a significant detail in the Gospel narrative. Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus gave other indications that His power and compassion reached to all people. He healed a Roman centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10). He traveled through the Gentile region of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:1). He ministered in a Samaritan city (John 4).

Jesus came to save everybody (1 John 2:2). Jesus Christ is God Himself (John 1:1). Jesus died on the cross as the payment for all our sins, and He rose from death in resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Jesus said He was the Good Shepherd, and He predicted that His flock would be greatly expanded: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

It took a while for the early church to recognize that salvation was available to the Gentiles. The Jewish Christians who fled the persecution in Jerusalem went into the Gentile regions of Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, but they were "spreading the word only among Jews" (Acts 11:19). Peter was hesitant to bring the gospel to a Gentile household, but God made it plain that Cornelius was also one of the elect (Acts 10).

"Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too" (Romans 3:29). Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, but He had come to offer salvation to everybody. The Messiah was to be a "light for the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:6). So call on Jesus, because "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21).

"What was the meaning and importance of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)?"

In the earliest days of the Christian church, the church was comprised predominately of Jews. In Acts chapter 8 the gospel spread to the Samaritans (who were ethnically mixed Jews-Gentiles), and many Samaritans received Jesus Christ as Savior. In Acts chapter 10, the apostle Peter was the first to take the gospel specifically to the Gentiles, and many received Christ as Savior. In Acts chapters 13-14, Paul and Barnabas had a very fruitful ministry among the Gentiles. All of these Gentiles turning to faith in Christ caused concern among the Jewish believers, first expressed in Acts 11:1-18, and the issues that caused concern were ultimately decided upon at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

The issues centered on two questions:

1. Do Gentiles first have to become Jews before they can become Christians?
2. Do Gentiles have to observe the Mosaic Law after they become Christians?

The impetus for the Jerusalem Council is given in Acts 15, verses 1 and 5, "But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' . . . It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses." Some Jewish Christians were teaching that Gentiles had to observe the Mosaic Law and Jewish customs in order to be saved. Since this teaching clearly contradicted the fact that salvation was by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (Acts 15:11), the apostles and church leaders held the first Christian council to settle the issue. In verses 7-11, the apostle Peter spoke of his ministry with the Gentiles, as recorded in Acts

chapter 10. Peter focused on the fact that the Holy Spirit was given to uncircumcised Gentiles in precisely the same manner the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles and Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost. This led Peter to the conclusion that there should be no “placing a yoke on the neck of the [Gentile] disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10).

James, who had become a leader of the church in Jerusalem, agreed with Peter and declared, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). The Jerusalem Council then proceeded to give four “rules” that Gentile Christians should live by. These were not rules the Gentiles must follow in order to be saved. Rather, the rules were to build harmony between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the first century. The four rules the Jerusalem Council decided upon were that Gentile Christians should abstain from food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. The instructions were not intended to guarantee salvation but to promote peace within the early church.

It is interesting that the issue the Jerusalem Council was dealing with is still very much an issue in the church today. There are groups still teaching that Christians must obey the Old Testament Law. Whether it is the Sabbath day or the food laws or all of the Old Testament Law outside of the sacrificial system—there are groups that declare observance of the Law is either required for salvation or at least a crucially important aspect of the Christian life. Sadly, these groups either completely ignore or grossly misinterpret the decision of the Jerusalem Council. The specific goal of the Jerusalem Council was to decide what aspects, if any, of the Old Testament Law Christians must observe. The Jerusalem Council, for the sake of melding the Jewish and Gentile cultures within the Antioch church, said that the Gentiles should eschew their former pagan practices associated with idolatry. There was no mention of the Sabbath whatsoever. Further, the Jerusalem Council made it abundantly clear that these rules were not requirements for salvation by reaffirming that salvation is by grace for both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:11). How many arguments would be solved if the church today would simply follow the principle set by the Jerusalem Council—limit your liberty for the sake of love

Jesus was born a Jew, according to His human nature, and He ministered in Israel. Is it correct to say that the Gospels only deal with the gentiles inadvertently? The main focus of the Gospels is indeed Israel. In Matthew 10:5-6 we read that Jesus sent the twelve out on their ministries and said, “Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” During His earthly ministry the Lord Jesus Christ was offering the Kingdom to the Jewish people, in accordance with the prophecies of the Old Testament. However, while the Kingdom was being offered to Israel, this did not rule out gentiles. This is explained in Romans 15:8-9, “Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: And that the gentiles

might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name.”

Did Jesus minister to gentiles during His earthly ministry? He certainly did. In Matthew 15:21-28 we read of our Lord’s ministry to the Canaanite woman and her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Furthermore, Jesus gave the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19 He said: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations. . . .”

Jesus’ Ministry Strategy: The vision of a kingdom that included Jews and Gentiles was part of Jesus’ plan from the very beginning of His ministry. Jesus’ first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth demonstrates that His life purpose extended far beyond the nation of Israel. He was not surprised that His own people – the Jews – did not receive His message. “That’s the way it has always been,” He said. (Luke 4:24, author’s paraphrase). He then gave an example: “There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah ... and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow” (Luke 4:25-26, ESV). His hearers knew the rest of the story told in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings 17. Received into a Gentile home, Elijah performed the remarkable miracle of replenishing the flour and oil, then later restored the widow’s son to life – not a Jewish widow, but a Gentile!

Jesus did not stop with the example from the ministry of the Prophet Elijah. He rubbed salt into the wounded feelings of His audience with the story of Naaman, the Syrian. He was not only a Gentile but a military leader-captain of the Syrian army, which at that time was at war with Israel and had almost eradicated the hapless little nation (2 Kings 5:1-14). Naaman was stricken with leprosy, and although there were many lepers in Israel, “ ... none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4:27).

No more dramatic illustration could have been given that the grace of God was not limited to the people of Israel and that Gentiles often displayed greater faith than those who were considered “children of the kingdom.” It is a small wonder that the proud citizens of Nazareth were infuriated at this brash young man who insulted their nation and called into question their privileged status as God’s chosen people!

First Strategy: To the Jews

Jesus did have a deep conviction of a special mission to the Jewish nation who were God’s treasured possession (Exodus 19:5). He expressed this so strongly that some have concluded that He envisioned no mission beyond Israel. But careful consideration of all His words and actions reveals that it was a question of strategy: As Paul later expressed it, His mission was “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16; 2:10, King James Version).

Jesus' concern for Israel was shown in the instructions to the 12 disciples as He sent them out on their first preaching mission. "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles," He said, "and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6). The apostle Paul later wrote, "God, having raised up His servant, sent Him to you (the Jews) first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness (Acts 2:26, ESV, author's clarification in parentheses). His ministry was restricted primarily, but not exclusively to the Jews (Matthew 8:1-13). Indeed, in the very same context is the prediction that the preaching ministry of the disciples would be extended to the Gentiles; "You shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles" (Matthew 10:18).

Luke's Gospel tells of a later preaching mission in which 70 others were sent out two by two (Luke 10:1). Just as the 12 apostles symbolically represent the 12 tribes of Israel, the 70 symbolize the Gentile nations. In Genesis 10, the descendants of Noah are listed, 70 in number. Rabbinical tradition assumed that this was the total number of nations scattered over the earth after the Tower of Babel and repeatedly referred to the 70 Gentile peoples. Jesus may have used this means of symbolizing His long-range purpose. The 12 were sent to heal the sick and announce the nearness of God's kingdom. The 70 were sent later on a training mission in preparation for their ultimate mission to the whole world. Jesus ministered to the Jews for the Gentiles.

Second Strategy: To the Gentiles: Most of the public ministry of Jesus was conducted in Jewish territory. Under the circumstances, the number of personal contacts with Gentiles recorded in the Gospels is surprising. He healed a Gadarene (Gentile) demoniac (Matthew 8:28-34). Another time, among 10 lepers healed, one was a Samaritan (a mixed race, half-Jew), and Jesus remarked upon the fact that only the foreigner returned to thank Him (Luke 17:12-19). A Samaritan woman was the sole audience for one of Jesus' greatest dialogues. She received the assurance that the time was near when God would be worshipped, not just in Jerusalem (where the Jews worshipped) or at Mt. Gerizim (where the Samaritans worshipped), but all over the world "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:5-42).

A Canaanite (Gentile) woman's faith was rewarded when her daughter was healed. Much has been made of Jesus' challenging remark at the beginning of the encounter: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). He declined to heal her because His mission was first to the Jews. The woman understood and didn't challenge this. Even so, she humbly submitted herself to Jesus, asking for His mercy. The significant point is that Jesus did minister to this Gentile woman and praised her faith in the presence of His disciples and the Jewish onlookers (Matthew 15:28). This incident echoed forward to Romans 15:8-9 that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.

Another example of Jesus reaching the Gentiles involved a Roman centurion whose servant was healed. Commander of a band of 100 foreign soldiers quartered at Capernaum to keep the peace, this Roman leader was despised by the Jews who resented this “army of occupation.” Conscious of his own authority as a military man, he humbly assured Jesus that it would not be necessary for Him to go to his house to heal his servant (and thus render Himself unclean — because He was a Jewish man — by entering a Gentile home). “But only say the word, and my servant will be healed,” he declared with genuine faith (Matthew 8:8). Jesus turned and announced to the Jewish crowd which was following Him: “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matthew 8:10). He did not stop there but continued with this solemn prediction: “I tell you, many such foreigners shall come from the east and the west to join Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But many others who thought they were ‘sons of the kingdom’ (the chosen people of Israel) shall be shut out” (Matthew 8: 11-12, author’s paraphrase).

In Jerusalem, during the week of Passover, a group of Greeks who had made a commitment to follow the laws of Judaism asked to speak with Jesus (John 12). Their request for an audience caused Jesus to declare: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (John 12:23). The deep interest of the Greeks was evidence that the world was ready for His redemptive mission to be culminated by His atoning death: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32, ESV). “All men” — Greeks as well as Jews — this is the clear implication of these profound words recorded by John.

Jesus’ Teaching in His Last Earthly Week: The events of Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem bear eloquent testimony to the fact that He moved resolutely toward the cross. He entered the city on a donkey, in order to fulfill the prophet Zechariah’s prediction from the Old Testament of a king who would speak peace to the nations and whose dominion would be from sea to sea (Zechariah 9:9-10). Then He went to the temple and found greedy religious businessmen taking advantage of those that had come to worship. So He cleansed this corruption from the court of the Gentiles (the outermost court of the temple in Jerusalem that could be entered by all peoples), declaring sternly, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations” (Mark 11:17). Standing in the temple, He denounced the chief priests and Pharisees, the official leaders of the Jewish nation, for having failed to be good stewards of the truths of the kingdom which had been entrusted to the chosen people, and solemnly declared, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (Matthew 21:43).

When asked concerning the end of the age, Jesus said, in effect: “Don’t be misled. It will not be as soon as some think. For this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all nations, and after that, the end shall come” (Matthew 24:4-14, author’s paraphrase). Concerning His return in glory, He was purposely vague,

declaring, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36). But when He does come, He promised, "Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:32).

Just before the Passover, at a house in Bethany, an adoring woman anointed His body with costly ointment. When she was criticized for her extravagance, Jesus stoutly defended her with these words: "She did it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her" (Matthew 26:12, 13).

The next evening in the upper room with His disciples, He sealed the new covenant with them, in anticipation of His death. He declared as He passed the cup, "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Only the disciples were present, and all were Jews. But Jesus knew that the small nucleus of a new chosen people, the remnant of Israel, was soon to be enlarged, as the many for whom He died heard the good news of His love and forgiveness and placed their trust in Him as their Lord and Savior. After Jesus' resurrection, His last words before He went back to heaven gave instruction to His followers: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). God's heart has always been for the nations, and the global vision of the risen Jesus remains the same. Jesus' call is for His followers to reach all peoples with the good news of His love and forgiveness

What is the mind of the church now regarding her evangelizing ministry to the people of other faiths?

Jesus fulfils the prophecies of Isaiah concerning his mission to the Gentiles (Isaiah 56 and 60) Isaiah clearly proclaims the radical message that God's blessings are for all people even foreigners and eunuchs who were often excluded from worship and not even considered citizens in Israel. Whatever our race, social position, work or financial situation, God's blessings are as much for us as for everyone else. We should not exclude anyone in any way.

Ad Gentes - "To the Nations" - is the decree issued by the Second Vatican Council that deals with the missionary activity of the Church. ***Ad Gentes*** affirms the work of missionary activity within the larger context of the Church's mission of evangelization to all people, even those who are already Christian. The Church is charged with "preaching the gospel and implanting the church among people who do not yet believe in Christ" (AG 6), yet the activity of the whole church "is by its very nature missionary" (AG 2).

God has sent the Church, “the universal sacrament of salvation,” to the nations (*Ad Gentes*) to preach the gospel to all. This responsibility falls on the whole people of God. Missionary activity is supported by inculturation and trained local catechists, as well as efforts to improve social and economic conditions, and efforts to seek justice and to promote the human dignity of all. While there are people who hear a special call to serve as missionaries, spreading the faith is the responsibility of every Christian. Spreading the faith begins with interior conversion and the effort to lead a profound Christian life. Our faith is rooted in scripture and tradition, and while the methodology surrounding evangelization may have changed, our mission remains the same. There are still souls who do not know Christ. We are called to spread the knowledge of the love and saving power that only Jesus Christ can give to the ends of the earth. We are called to be the sign of the living Christ *Ad Gentes* – to the nations. “And the glory of God which shines on the face of Jesus Christ may shine upon all men through the Holy Spirit.” (2 Cor. 4:6) (AG 42)

Vatican II council on non-Christian religions: *Nostra Aetate* (1965): This is the shortest document issued by the Second Vatican Council. It is a Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. It affirms that “all men form but one community”. This is so because they “all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth” and they “all share a common destiny, namely God”, whose “providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all men”.

Firstly the council then makes the point that the Church has a high regard for anything which may “reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.” Yet the Church remains duty-bound to “proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life.” As God has reconciled all things to himself in Christ, it is only in Him that “men find the fullness of their religious life.”

Secondly the Council states the Church’s high regard for Muslims, because they worship “God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth” and they strive to do His will. Muslims also have some recognition of Jesus and Blessed Mother. Therefore, the Fathers ask all to forget past quarrels and to make a sincere effort at mutual understanding: “For the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.”

Thirdly the Council acknowledges the special ties which link “the people of the New Covenant to the stock of Abraham”, and so explores briefly the relationship of the Church to Judaism. The Church understands that “the beginning of her faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets” and that the salvation of the Church is mystically prefigured in the exodus. She realizes she received the revelation of the Old testament through the Jews, and that the “she draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted” (Rom. 11:17-24), because Christ has reconciled Jews and Gentiles through His

cross. She also knows that the apostles and Mary were Jews, as were many pillars of the early Church.

Although the Church holds “as holy Scripture testifies” that “Jerusalem did not recognize God’s moment when it came” (Lk 19:42), she recognizes with St. Paul that the “Jews remain very dear to God” and that God “does not take back the gifts He bestowed or the choice he made.” Therefore, “the Church awaits the day, known to God alone, when all peoples will call on God with one voice.” Since all this is so, the “Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation”. In particular the Fathers note that “neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during the passion.” Moreover, although “it is true that the Church is the new people of God”, yet “the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture.” Thus the Church opposes every form of persecution, and deplores all anti-Semitism. To the contrary, “it is the duty of the Church...to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God’s universal love and the source of all grace.”

Therefore, the Church reproves any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion. Accordingly, following the footsteps of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, the sacred Council earnestly begs the Christian faithful to “conduct themselves well among the Gentiles” (1 Pet 2:12) and if possible to be at peace with all men (Rom 12:18) and in that way to be true sons of the Father who is in heaven (cf. Mt. 5:45).

II. Church of Antioch

Acts 11: 19-26 *Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that arose because of Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, **and Antioch**, preaching the word to no one but Jews. There were some Cypriots and Cyrenians among them, however, who came to **Antioch** and began to speak to the Greeks as well, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas [to go] to **Antioch**. When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord in firmness of heart, for he was a good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and faith. And a large number of people were added to the Lord. Then he went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him he brought him to **Antioch**. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a large number of people, **and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.***

The intense persecution that broke out in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen prompted some Jewish believers to flee to Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:19). When leaders in the Jerusalem church heard of the considerable number of Gentile conversions taking place in Antioch, they sent Barnabas there to minister to the growing congregation (Acts 11:22-25). Barnabas sought out the apostle Paul in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch,

where together they taught the mixed assembly of Jewish and Gentile believers for a whole year. It was here at Antioch of Syria where believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Christianity was launched on its worldwide mission and it is here the believers aggressively preached to the Gentiles. Antioch of Syria played a more important role in the early church than any other city. After Rome and Alexandria, Antioch was the largest city in the Roman world. Paul used this city as his home base during his missionary journeys. The city was home to many Diaspora Jews—those deported through captivity who had chosen to remain living outside Israel but maintain their Jewish faith. These Hebrews engaged in business and enjoyed full rights of citizenship in the free city of Syrian Antioch. Through them, many Gentiles in Antioch were drawn to Judaism and, eventually, Christianity. One such Gentile convert was Nicolas from Antioch. He was among the seven Greek-speaking (Hellenist) leaders chosen to serve as deacons in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-7).

The Antiochian Orthodox Church traces its beginnings to Acts 11:26. It broke with the Catholic Church in 1054 AD. The Antiochian Orthodox Church has its own patriarch (religious overseer) and patriarchate (ecclesiastical jurisdiction). According to the World Council of Churches, the Antiochian Orthodox Church has 4.3 million members worldwide. Even though the Greek Orthodox Church is separate from Catholicism, many of its practices are similar, such as the veneration of saints. The Antiochian Orthodox Church observes seven sacraments, venerates icons, prays to Mary, the “Mother of God,” and other saints, offers prayers for the dead, and teaches a salvation based on works (such as keeping the sacraments).

III. The arrest of Peter (Ch 12: Peter was arrested by Herod Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the great) during the feast of Unleavened bread, the weeklong festival directly after the feast of Passover.

Who is Herod Agrippa I? For good or evil, families have lasting and powerful influence on their children. Traits and qualities are passed on to the next generation and often the mistakes and sins of the parents are repeated by the children. Four generations of Herod family are mentioned in the Bible. Each leader left his evil mark

Herod the Great murdered Bethlehem’s children. Herod Antipas was involved in Jesus’ trial and John the Baptist’s execution. Herod Agrippa I murdered the apostle James and Herod Agrippa II was one Paul’s judges. Herod Agrippa I’s plan was to execute Peter but the believers were praying for Peter’s safety. The earnest prayer of the church significantly affected the outcome of these events. Prayer changes things, so pray often and with confidence. *“More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of”* (Lord Tennyson). The prayers of the group of believers were answered. We should be people of faith who believe that God answers the prayers of those who seek his will. When we pray, we must believe that we will get an answer. God sent an angel to rescue Peter. Angels are God’s messengers, our guardian angels. They are divinely

created beings with supernatural powers and they sometimes take on human appearance in order to talk to people. They are God's servants

Fate of Herod Agrippa I: Pride is a serious sin. He made a fatal error. During his visit to Caesarea, the people called him a god and he accepted their praise. God chose to punish him immediately and within a week he died. He had a horrible death accompanied by intense pain. He was literally eaten alive from the inside out by worms. To be eaten by worms was considered to be one of the most disgraceful ways to die.

IV. Paul's First Missionary Journey: The apostle Paul went on three pioneering missionary journeys. His first missionary journey started in Syria and took him to Cyprus and Asia Minor.

Paul's first missionary journey is recorded in Acts 13 and 14. As persecution in Jerusalem increased, Christian believers fled and dispersed throughout the region. Thus Antioch in Syria became a quickly growing church. In approximately AD 47, while the church in Antioch was fasting and worshipping, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul [Paul] for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). So after praying and laying their hands on them, the church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

Paul and Barnabas first sailed to the island of Cyprus, which was Barnabas' home territory. They arrived at Salamis and taught in the synagogues along with John Mark, Barnabas' cousin. The three continued preaching across the whole island and finally arrived at Paphos on the opposite side. In Paphos, the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, summoned Paul and Barnabas because he "sought to hear the word of God" (Acts 13:7). However, a Jewish false prophet and magician, Elymas, tried to prevent the proconsul from coming to faith. Paul, "filled with the Holy Spirit," struck Elymas blind thus performing his first miracle (Acts 13:9-11). Upon witnessing this miracle, the proconsul believed. Paul and Barnabas then set sail from Paphos to go into modern-day Turkey while John Mark set sail to return to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13).

In Turkey, Paul and Barnabas made their way to Antioch in Turkey where they taught in the synagogue and many believed. However, the following week when nearly the entire city gathered to hear their preaching, some Jews began contradicting them and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas. After this rejection of the gospel from the Jews, Paul said, "we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). Acts 13:48 records that "when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed."

Eventually being driven out of Antioch by the Jews, Paul and Barnabas went to Iconium and taught in the synagogue there. Many believed, and Paul and Barnabas performed signs and wonders during their stay in Iconium. Over time, however, the city became

divided between those who followed the Jews and those who sided with the apostles. When Paul and Barnabas learned that their opposition was planning to stone them, they fled to Lystra, Derbe, and the surrounding area (Acts 14:5-6).

In Lystra, Paul performed another miracle – healing a man who had been crippled since birth. Unfortunately, the miracle caused the people to believe that Barnabas was the god Zeus and that Paul was Hermes, the messenger and chief spokesman of the gods. Paul and Barnabas had to work hard to convince the people that they were mere men and prevent them from making sacrifices to them. Then Jews from Antioch in Turkey and from Iconium came and persuaded the crowds to stone Paul. After the stoning, Paul was dragged out of the city and left for dead. However, when the disciples gathered around him, he got up and walked right back into Lystra. The next day, he and Barnabas went to Derbe and shared the gospel; many more disciples were made.

Upon completing their time teaching in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps returning through Lystra, to Iconium, to Antioch in Turkey to encourage the believers there and appoint elders in each church before making the trip home to Antioch in Syria. To get from Antioch in Turkey to Antioch in Syria, they passed through Perga and set sail from Attalia, taking the time to share the gospel in both places.

The entire missionary journey is believed to have taken twelve to eighteen months, thus putting Paul and Barnabas home in Syria around AD 48. In Antioch in Syria, Paul and Barnabas "gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27).

We can learn many things from Paul's first missionary journey: how God calls individuals to become missionaries, the importance of having a supportive home church, the helpfulness of having ministry partners, realistic expectations that not everyone will accept the gospel message, the need to raise up leaders in groups of new believers and to check in on them periodically, and the joy of sharing what God has done by reporting back to those who have prayed for you. This first missionary journey helped spread the gospel and prepared Paul for his other journeys in the years following.