

Reading Together
New Testament Bible Reading
May 23 – 29

Monday, May 23 – Acts 10: 24 – 48

Today's reading marks a huge change in the early Christian Church. Prior to this the gospel had gone out to just a few Gentiles (non-Jewish people), but now everything is about to change. In fact, almost all of the rest of the book of Acts is about the gospel going to the Gentiles and spreading out into Asia Minor (present day Greece and Turkey) and Italy (Rome was the center of the known world in that day). If you look back at 10:1 you see that Cornelius was a commander of an important Roman regiment of soldiers, and now he is going to become a Christian. God went to extraordinary measures for this to happen. Cornelius has a vision to contact Peter at the same time Peter is having a vision that assures him that it is okay for him to go to the home of a Gentile. This was a big deal. Jewish laws forbade Jews from going into the home of a Gentile and having a meal with them. It would have made a Jew unclean to do so. While Peter was a Christian, he was also still a good Jew, so he was very aware of the restrictions on having contact with Gentiles. In the vision Peter had, God not only assured Peter it was okay to do this, God told Peter he must do this.

As we read we see Peter share the gospel with Cornelius and all of his family and then a second amazing thing happens. Cornelius and his family all receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and they were able to speak in tongues just like the disciples did on the Day of Pentecost. This lead some to believe that all Christians should receive the Holy Spirit if their conversion is real. But think why God had this happen. Look at how surprised the Jews who were with Peter were that this happened. They needed this miraculous confirmation that non-Jews could be saved, and they got it by seeing the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on these Gentile converts, just as it was on the disciples at the Day of Pentecost.

Tuesday, May 24 – Acts 11: 1 – 30

In the first part of today's reading, word spreads about what happened in Cornelius' home, and Peter is called on the carpet by Jewish Christians for having anything to do with Gentiles. When Peter explains the vision he had and that Cornelius and his family received the gift of the Holy Spirit in the same way Jewish believers did, it not only silenced the criticism but it also made the Jewish Christians realize that salvation can come to the Gentiles as well.

In verses 19-30 the focus shifts to the Church in Antioch. Antioch was primarily a Gentile city located in present day Syria. Now you not only have Gentile believers, now you have a church that is Gentile as well. Notice how this church started. It was because of the persecution that broke out after Stephen was martyred. God uses persecution and suffering for his glory and to spread his kingdom. As this church grows, the church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to go and minister there. Barnabas gets Saul (Paul) to go and help him. This becomes the beginning of a major missionary movement to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Also notice how Agabus predicts a famine in Judea and the Gentile Church begins to organize a relief effort to assist the Christians in Judea. Raising a collection from the Gentile Christians for a relief to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would become a major component of Paul's ministry efforts.

Wednesday, May 25 – Acts 12: 1 – 25

Chapter 12 highlights some of the early persecution the church was experiencing at the hand King Herod (the puppet king of the Jews, who was installed in this position by the Roman Empire). First, we are told that Herod has James, the brother of John, put to death, and then we are told that Herod has Peter arrested and put in prison to await execution after the Passover ends. The night before his trial Peter is in prison chained between two guards and an angel shows up and sets him free. What is amazing is what happens next. Peter shows up at a house where Christians have gathered together to pray for Peter, and as Peter knocks on the door they don't really believe that it is him! Do you ever pray and not really expect God to answer your prayer? But God isn't through. As you continue reading we see Herod's inflated ego get the best of him and as the people cry out and declare Herod to be a god, the true and living God strikes him dead. As Christians we must always believe, know and understand that whatever is happening in our lives, God is in control!

Thursday, May 26 – Acts 13: 1 – 12

Acts chapter 13 marks the start of the first of Paul's three missionary journeys that are recorded in the book of Acts. The journey begins with a short boat ride to the Island of Cyprus, which is just off of the coast of modern day Syria and Turkey. Notice that this journey came about as a result of fasting and prayer. Paul nor the other apostles did anything without praying about it first and waiting to hear from God. We could learn a lot from them! In a town called Paphos, the proconsul (mayor) sends for them because as verse 7 yells us he wanted to hear the word of God. One of the proconsul's attendants

was a sorcerer who was also a Jew. He is first referred to in verse 6 as Bar-Jesus, and then in verse 8 as Elymus; don't be confused they are the same person. In that day it was common if you were a Jew living outside of Judea to have both a Jewish name and a Roman or Greek name (Saul/Paul is another example of this). When Elymus tries to obstruct the preaching of the gospel to the proconsul, Paul goes right after him. Look how strong the language is in verses 9-11. Now look in verses 11-12 to see the results of Paul's bold confrontation. In our society we are told not to judge others and everybody should be allowed to believe whatever they want to believe. Paul doesn't take that tact does he?

Friday, May 27 – Acts 13: 13 – 52

From Cyprus, Paul and his companions sail back to the mainland to Perga which is on the coast of present day Turkey. Paul is invited to preach in the synagogue (the synagogue was the local place of worship for Jews). Notice how Paul uses the Old Testament to explain who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do. His message is so well received that the next week the whole town comes out to hear him speak, so now the Jews go from being curious about Paul's message to being jealous of his popularity. As a forerunner of what will happen in many other places, Paul and his companions are persecuted and driven out of the area. But pay special attention to verses 49 and 52. First, in verse 49 notice that in spite of the persecution the Gospel spreads, and then notice in verse 52 that in spite of persecution and being run out of town Paul and his companions are filled with joy. How could this be? Because joy does not come as a result of circumstances, it comes as a result of doing what God has called you to do.

Saturday, May 28 – Acts 14: 1 – 28

From Perga Paul moves inland to a town called Iconium. They stayed there for a while preaching the good news of the Gospel, many believed and God allowed Paul and his fellow missionaries to do many miraculous signs that confirmed the truth of what they were saying. But once again persecution arises and this time there is even the threat of being stoned to death, so Paul moves on to the cities of Lystra and Derbe, which were not too far from Iconium.

In Lystra and Derbe Paul goes from hero to zero very quickly. After healing a man who had been born lame in both feet, the crowd wants to proclaim that Paul is a god who has come down from heaven. It almost takes away from Paul's message about Jesus. Look how hard Paul struggles to make them understand that he is not the god, Jesus

is. How easy it would have been for Paul to just sit back and soak up all the glory for himself, but that is not what Jesus sent him to do. It is not long before troublemakers come to town from some of the cities Paul has already visited and they stir the crowd up to stone Paul. Paul is left for dead outside of the city gates, but Paul is not dead, in fact Paul gets right back up and goes back into the city. Notice how neither being adored by the crowds nor being attacked by the crowds deters Paul from his mission.

Look at verse 22, as Paul encourages the new believers he doesn't tell them that being a Christian will take care of all of your problems in life. In fact, it is just the opposite. Paul tells them that they should expect to suffer if they want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the end of Paul's first missionary journey.

Sunday, May 29 – Acts 15: 1 – 35

Acts 15 marks one of the most important episodes in the life of the early church. Because of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles many non-Jews (uncircumcised) have become Christians, and there were Jewish Christians that believed that in order to be a Christian, one first had to become a Jew (verse 1). This was causing a controversy in the church so a meeting was held in Jerusalem involving all of the leaders in the early church. After some Christians, who were also Pharisees spoke to defend their position that all Christians must become Jews (circumcised), Peter speaks and shares how God used him to bring Cornelius to faith (chapter 10) and how from Peter's own observations the Holy Spirit had worked in Cornelius' heart the same way it had in Jewish believers' hearts. Next, Paul and Silas got up and shared their experiences in seeing the Gentiles in Turkey become Christians, and how the Holy Spirit worked in their lives. Finally, James, the brother of Jesus, who was not a believer until after Jesus rose from the dead, spoke and talked about how the Old Testament pointed to a day when Gentiles would bear the name of the Lord as well (verses 16-18 quoting from Amos 9: 11-12). James' judgment, which is affirmed by the whole council, is that the church should make it as easy as possible for these Gentiles to become Christians. A letter is composed to be sent to all of the new Gentile churches telling them basically not to engage in the pagan practices that were prevalent in the towns they lived in.