

## Acts – Route 66 – What now?

### Acts 1:7-8

**Jesus said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 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.”**

### Prayer

Here’s a question for you: Have you ever had a time where you had to make a decision and the obvious choice didn’t seem like the best choice? Or have you ever been in a situation where you know you need to do something different, but your mind is simply blank? My guess is that most of us have faced either or both of those situations. Or perhaps there are other uncertainties and unknowns in your life. In fact, there are probably many here right now staring at the blank wall or two roads diverging in a yellow wood.

That, in essence, was the plight of the very first followers of Jesus. Consider their situation. After following Jesus for 3 years, he was just brutally executed. And the authorities of the day were very keen on guilt by association. Now add to that Jesus’ amazing, yet hard to fathom resurrection. It would seem that any reasonable person would ask: What now?

The book of Acts records various answers to that question. But it also reframes that question. It shows what Jesus did through his first followers and some, like Paul, Timothy and Luke, who came later. But it also invites us to ask ourselves the very same question: What now?

Here is the outline of the book of Acts:

- Commissioning the Church – Ch 1
- Mission in Jerusalem – Ch 2-7
- Mission in Judea & Samaria – Ch 8
- Mission to the Gentiles – Ch 9-14
- Jerusalem Council – Ch 15
- Mission to the Gentiles in the wider Roman world – Ch 16-21
- Beginnings of Roman Persecution – Ch 22-28

Since Luke wrote this second book as a continuation of of all Jesus began to do and teach which Ryan covered two weeks ago. I appreciate his comparison of the two works to Star Wars: A New Hope and The Empire Strikes back. I would offer an additional comparison. The Fellowship of the Ring moving into the Two Towers. At the end of the Fellowship, the heroes are faced with several “what now?” options. And those choices directly inform and frame the remainder of the Lord of the Rings.

I think it is also important to remember that even though this book is often called the Acts of the Apostles, it would be more accurately called the Acts of Jesus Christ. And Jesus acts in 4 distinct ways throughout the book.

- Through the proclamation of the gospel, that we are dead in our sins but can be made alive through faith in Christ.
- Through miracles attesting to the authority given to the apostles
- Through changed lives that come from faith, repentance and obedience to Christ

- Through persecution that spreads the gospel in ways the apostles would not have taken on their own

In considering the entirety of the book, I have come to this realization: it is very easy to read Acts exclusively as a history book, rather than something more. But what if we spent a moment and probed this book a little more?

- What can we learn from the effective preaching of God's word?
- What can we learn from God miraculously healing and transforming people's lives?
- What can we learn from men and women who take seriously the call of Jesus to faith and obedience?
- What can we learn from persecution that can come from the government or the church or even our own friends?

Along with all this, what can we learn from ordinary men and women who faced the very real question of What now? Here's my challenge to each of us: let's ask questions of the text. Why was this written? Not just the book, but each specific event. Why is it here over 2,000 years later in our laps and on our phones? Let's ask questions of God. What do you want me to learn? How do you want me to grow? Let's ask help from the Spirit. Will you allow the word of Christ to dwell in me richly? Will you help me live in a manner worthy of the calling I've received? And let's ask questions of ourselves: Are we ready to listen to God and his word? Are we ready to love Christ and obey him?

These have been my prayers and my personal questions leading up to this sermon. Why was Acts written? More than that: why were certain sermons recorded, miracles reported, acts of obedience shared and persecutions noted? From there what are we to learn about faith, about boldness, about submission to and defiance of authority, about following God's leading, about unconstraining the gospel, about moving when God moves us and staying when God stops us?

With all of that, we need to remember to simply dwell with Jesus in his word. If you remember nothing else, remember this: we need to let God's word soak into us. We need to let Acts soak into us. Let the sermons and the miracles and the obedience and the persecution be like a summer rain that saturates the ground and nourishes all of God's creation.

I cannot trace out all of the events Luke records in the book of Acts. Overall, Luke's goal is to answer the "what now?" question left hanging after Jesus' death and resurrection. What will happen to the gospel message? What do we do now? What comes next? Jesus' mission did not end with his ascension. His big story is right there at the beginning.

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We are not in control of the process, but we are a part of it. The gospel will go forth and we will be God's witnesses in the exact location and situation he has placed us.

But now, I would like to look at three "what now?" moments within this bigger storyline. The first is in Acts chapter 2. Remember the context: Jesus had been crucified on Passover, then resurrected 3 days later. In Acts 1 we are told he was with the apostles for 40 days. And 10 days later is Pentecost. That is

where we are on the calendar, less than 2 months after Jesus' death and resurrection. But what were the apostles thinking? Clearly, they were obeying Christ's command to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit. But they were men and women just like us. Weren't they? They had to have been asking What now?

Then along comes the Holy Spirit with a resounding answer to their question. First came the miracle of speaking in the languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem.

#### **Acts 2:1-8**

**When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?"**

Then came Peter's message with 3 essential points:

#### **Acts 2:21**

**And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.**

#### **Acts 2:23-24**

**this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.**

#### **Acts 2:36**

**Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."**

Finally, Peter applied the sermon:

#### **Acts 2:37-39**

**Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."**

What is the result of all this:

#### **Acts 2:41-42**

**So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.**

This is the amazing start of the church. God answers the apostles “what now?” with miracles, preaching, salvation and obedience. Look at God’s faithfulness to bring lost souls into his kingdom through the proclamation of the truth. It is no different today. There may be some people sitting in this room or listening online who have heard the gospel a hundred times: Jesus died so you could live. Or maybe you are hearing that truth for the very first time. It doesn’t matter. Hear God’s word: **everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.** What matters is this: what now? What will you do with the truth that is in front of you? Will you respond like those in Jerusalem? Will you receive Jesus’ free gift of salvation?

But what about those of us who have followed Jesus for years? What are we to learn from this passage? Is this more than a history lesson? More than facts for Bible trivia fun night? As you ask yourselves “what now?” from this passage, there is at least one thing I would like us to consider. Look with me again at

### **Acts 2:42**

**And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.**

There is one word in that verse that jumps off the page. Do you see it? The word translated by the ESV and most other translations is devoted. Several translations capture the original verb tense as an on-going action, ie continually devoted. But what does being devoted mean? The dictionary would say it is to be earnest towards, to persevere, be constantly diligent, to attend diligently, or to adhere closely.

We need to chew on this. Here’s where we need to ask questions of God through the text. What does it look like to be devoted? Am I devoted to the apostle’s teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers? If not, how can I grow in devotion? If I sense that I am, how can I grow even more? How can I help others grow in their devotion to Christ and his church?

Now, here’s the tricky part and a lesson I had to learn from a few wise teachers. I really can’t answer these questions for you. Can I tell you how the Spirit has provoked me in my devotion to Christ? Sure. (Reading, prayer, meditation) Could I give you 3 or 6 or 12 steps to grow in your devotion? Absolutely. But hear this clearly: I’m not the real teacher in this room. (Mt 23:8-10). I’m not the author nor the perfecter of your faith (Heb 12:2). There is only one person who can show you what devotion looks like. His name is Jesus. This is my take-away. Slow down, take some time today and honestly ask God what devotion looks like for you. Then listen for God’s answer.

Let’s look at another “what now?” moment in the book of Acts. Turn with me to Acts 10

### **Acts 10:1-5**

**At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter.**

If you have read through Acts before, you may have noticed that everyone who has received the gospel up to this point has been a Jew or directly connected to Judaism. Now however Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile, is praying to God and is actually instructed by an angel to reach out to Peter. Do

you see the “what now?” moments coming? What will Peter do? How will the Gentiles respond? How will the other Christians (who were Jews) respond? How will this impact the gospel going forward?

To answer the Peter question first, God gave him vision to clarify his thinking about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. And, because it was Peter, God also gave him very explicit instructions on what to do next.

#### **Acts 10:10-16**

**And he [Peter] became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.**

#### **Acts 10:19-20**

**And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.”**

I can imagine many of you are thinking “wow! I wish God were that clear to me?” I can sympathize with that thought. But I also wonder are we listening as intently as Peter was? Are we as quickly obedient in the things God has made clear to us? Are we ready to say “your will be done” even when that requires resetting our priorities and even our presumptions about people who are different than we are?

So, Peter went to meet with Cornelius and after prefacing why he was ok breaking Jewish custom, he begins laying out a basic gospel message.

#### **Acts 10:39-43**

**And we are witnesses of all that he [Jesus] did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”**

At this point the Holy Spirit moves in their midst

#### **Acts 10:44-48**

**While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.**

I want to pause here a make comment about miracles. There are many physical miracles in the gospels and in the book of Acts. All of them are profound and worthy of our consideration. But I have to say that

what is recorded here in Acts 10 is no less a miracle than raising Lazarus from the dead. A bold statement, to be sure, but here's why: these two transformations (the Jews sharing the good news with the Gentiles and the Gentiles actually abandoning their polytheism plus their disdain for the Jews) are not just opinion changes (Lord of the Rings is better than Harry Potter) or preference changes (Moka coffee is better than Starbucks)

What is miraculous about most miracles recorded in the gospels and Acts is that Jesus didn't just heal a surface issue. My back was stiff and now it is not. Instead, he routinely reversed conditions that required remaking a whole person. Consider the man born blind in Jn 9. Jesus did not simply give him working corneas and retinas. Since he was born blind his brain did not develop the necessary functionality to process input from his eyes. The man needed to be renewed, born again, as it were, with both working eyes and a rewired brain necessary to see, and also the ability to process all the inputs he had never received before. What is "orange" to someone who has never seen anything, ever?

The transformation of Peter and the Gentiles is no different. They each have been wired by their respective cultures and religions, not simply to dislike the other, but to see the other groups as sub-human. "Gentile dog" was not a complement. But in this what now? moment, Jesus is bringing a miraculous rebirth both to Peter and to Cornelius and to those gathered with them.

If I would have to guess, I imagine this was not expected by Peter. Maybe Cornelius would believe the gospel or at least be receptive to it. But no, God breaks open the flood gates and draws in all who heard the word. But this leads to another "what now?" moment. What are the Jewish Christians going to do? Would the rewiring of Peter's heart attitude toward the Gentiles flow to the Jewish Christian leaders? In one sense much of the remainder of Acts and many of the epistles deal with this very question either directly or indirectly. But in Acts 11, we see the beginning of an answer.

Peter gives the leaders the back story, including his vision and God's directive to go Caesarea. He concludes his report with this:

#### **Acts 11:15-18**

**As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."**

Right here, midway through Acts 11, is the reason we have the gospel. You and I are direct beneficiaries of these very events. God worked through Cornelius', Peter's and the church leaders' what now moments to open the door for the gospel to go forth not just to the Jews, but to the Gentiles as well. This should be a moment of praise and adoration to our good and great God.

There may be some of us who are facing similar "what now?" moments. We could be like Cornelius who was pleading with God and is directed to find wisdom and truth from someone more experienced in the faith yet someone with whom we disagree on substantial yet secondary matters. Cornelius listened to God, but he also listened to Peter, someone he culturally hated. Are we open to the same thing? Are we willing to let God speak to us through people we politically or culturally disagree with? Or, are we always the smartest and wisest person in the room? Instead, maybe we are like Peter who had to overcome decades of an entrenched perspective that some people were less worthy of receiving God's truth. Are

we limiting our missional lives because of our attitudes and assessments of others? I would ask you to let this text press on you. Where do you find yourself in this account? What miracle of rebirth do you need? Where is God calling you to trust or act or speak to propel the gospel forward?

I do want to look at one more what now? moment. In Acts 21 Paul is headed for Jerusalem. There were several who prophesied to him regarding what would happen when he arrived there.

#### **Acts 21:10-12**

**While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.**

Paul has had many "what now?" moments in Acts and there will be more to come. But this one sets the trajectory for the remainder of the book. And in a way it sets the stage for the gospel to go beyond the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin. Paul has to decide. Which path does he take?

#### **Acts 21:13-14**

**Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."**

What comment can I add to this? Elsewhere Paul has said "to live is Christ and to die is gain". Here in Acts 21, he embodies that statement. Paul faced the "what now?" of God's hard path by embracing it and following it, knowing that through it, Jesus would be exalted in it all.

In my heart I sense there is someone here or listening to this message that is facing a similar seemingly insurmountable decision. Your heart may be breaking. Your tears may be flowing. Your doubts may be mounting. I don't know your exact situation. I don't know the fear, uncertainty and doubt that may be swirling around in your heart and your mind. But hear this. God knows. If we look back to Gethsemane, Jesus went through the same deep waters. He has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. He has called us brother, sister, friend. And he is interceding for us, even in this moment. And, as Corrie Ten Boom has said "There is no panic in Heaven! God has no problems, only plans."

I want to end where I began: two roads diverging in the woods. This week we will each face a choice, a path, a direction, or an opportunity. Acts has shown us these situations are not to be avoided. Instead, they are, by God's grace, to be embraced. Let us live in the gospel. Let us be devoted to the teaching of Christ. Let us seek God's direction. Let us ask God questions. Let us listen to his voice. And let us face whatever future God holds for us, including persecution, with the certainty that Jesus is leading us exactly where he wants us to go.

Prayer