

Changed lives and a world turned upside down

Acts, James, Galatians

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What does it take to change a habit?

- We've all struggled to lose weight or exercise or get up earlier or all sorts of things we wish we'd do differently
- But it's never easy to change something we've been doing for many years, is it?
- It's never easy to change even the most simple of habits, but in our podcast today we'll see that the followers of Jesus not only changed their personal behavior from that of fearful cowards to fearless leaders, but that thousands of Jewish believers totally changed the faith practices that had been the core of their identity since the time of Abraham.
- In our podcast, we'll look at the history of the incredible changes that took place after Jesus Resurrection that we read about in the book of Acts and then we'll look at two of the earliest books that were written to the early church, James and Galatians.

First let's look at the book of Acts as we start to look at the changes in the church brought about in the New Testament

Basic facts about Acts

- Written by Dr. Luke—a Greek, and only non-Jewish writer of a New Testament book
- Companion of Paul later in his life—in the book of Acts, he switches from talking about the activities objectively to “we”
- A Christian who was an excellent historian, who carefully researched his facts
- And the fact that he doesn't record either the death of Paul or the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD is evidence that Acts was written in the early 60's and the Gospel of Luke earlier.
- Some have proposed it was written when in Rome with Paul. Paul was busy writing to the various churches and perhaps Luke was likewise occupied with his history that some have said was also somewhat of a legal brief that showed that Christianity was not a danger to the empire.
- If that is the case, it worked as tradition tells us that Paul was released after two years under house arrest and went on another missionary journey, but then sadly was again taken as a prisoner
- In his final imprisonment, Paul writes, “Only Luke is with me.” 2 Tim 4:11 and I would imagine he was with him until the end.
- Recommend the Movie “Paul, Apostle of Christ”

What do Acts tell us about the start of the Church?—let's review events

- In the Gospels, Jesus has risen and appeared to disciples
- Acts carries on and tells us: *In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a*

period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

- *⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*
- *⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*
- *⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*
- *¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*

Comments on the start of Acts

- Jesus was with them for 40 days. We don't know much about it except that we know
- He talked about the Kingdom of God—what it means to live as a citizen of it
- He regularly ate with them...I love the everyday, humanity of this—like Jesus on the beach, making breakfast for the disciples
- It doesn't say he did astounding miracles—he ate, he talked, he answered questions
- He promised them that they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit
- And still they wanted to know....if he would restore the kingdom to Israel at this time.....
- I can't imagine his frustration

But he reminds them

- *⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*
- *⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*
- A few important things here:
 - ***Our focus isn't to be on the Second Coming***
 - ***But on being His witness—that is who we are, good or bad....***

Now quickly.....

- They return to Jerusalem
 - Wait and pray
 - When Pentecost arrives, (50 days after Jesus resurrection and 10 days after he went back to heaven) and the Holy Spirit descends on them in a powerful way
- Peter gives one of the most powerful sermons ever
- Where he explains what is happening, that it is what was

prophesied by the Prophet Joel—that the Holy Spirit would descend on all people

- He identifies Jesus as the Messiah that was long-promised and ends with the challenge:
- Acts 2:36 Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”
- ³⁷When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”
- ³⁸Peter replied, “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. ³⁹The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”
- 3,000 respond to his call and the church was born

A parenthesis here that is extremely important on how we do evangelism today

- It is the huge different that defines the uniqueness of the ministries of Peter and Paul
- **Let’s look at Peter’s audience:**
- Now there were staying in Jerusalem **God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.** ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹(**both Jews and converts to Judaism**);
- Peter’s audience consisted of “**God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.**” those who took the time and expense to travel to Jerusalem for this feast and who had a rich history of study of God’s Word and looking forward to the Messiah.
- When Peter showed them Jesus was the one who fulfilled the promises in this way, they had a rich store of knowledge and one might assume the predisposition to believe it along with the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, when we get to the Apostle Paul

- This was more often his method, as happened in Ephesus:
- Acts 19:8 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there **for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.** ⁹But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. **He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.** ¹⁰**This went on for two years,** so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.
- His approach involved lengthy discussions, interactions, laying a groundwork of knowledge for people who knew little to nothing about Christianity

A challenge to the church today

- Many who grew up in the church are trying to use Peter’s strategy to reach Paul’s audience and
- It either doesn’t work or people respond without really understanding what they are responding to
- What I mean by that is for Boomer leaders—we grew up in a world where everybody knew the Bible—maybe they didn’t believe it, but they knew the basic stories and respected it
- One of the great evangelists of the time, Billy Graham could repeatedly make the statement, “the Bible says.....” and people took it as a statement of authority
- His audience had the background of a biblical worldview in their hearts and lives and after a clear message and challenge, many responded

The world is very different today

- We are in a situation much more like it was for the Apostle Paul when he went to Athens and he saw them worshipping every imaginable god
- When he challenged them on it...he did not get a great response
- It says, “*When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”*”
- Later some did believe, but it was after a process of sharing, interacting, educating.
- Conclusion: we must take time when sharing what it means to be a follower of Jesus— can’t just challenge people to trust Jesus and then be done with it
- Why groups like Evangelism Explored and Alpha work well now
- Last week we talked about how all religions acknowledge someone named Jesus lived, but we need to know the real Jesus
- ***ALSO too so important that we make it clear Jesus’ expectations on how we are to live

Which is precisely the question it seemed that the early believers in Jesus had

- If their entire way of worshipping God—eg from sacrificing in the Temple and following all the laws to trusting Jesus for salvation so radically changed, how were they supposed to live in this new way of faith?
- They know they aren’t to sacrifice anymore, but do they still obey the various laws, do they need to be circumcised as a rite of entering into the Christian faith? Keep all or part of the laws?
- Jesus had said in the Sermon on the Mount that He didn’t come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it, but what did that mean?
- That is what the books/letters first written were about

First book written in NT times—James

- About James, human brother of Jesus, most likely eldest after Jesus
- Matt. 13: 55 Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?
- In Luke 8 probably one of the brothers along with their mother who came to see Jesus, presumably to take him

back home

- John 7:5 “For even his brothers didn’t believe in him”
- Key passage: I Cor 15:7, where it says that: For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance^[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ **Then he appeared to James**, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.
- Significant how only individual ones named were Peter and James—the leaders of the church—passage believed to be part of an early creed—often repeated
- James totally changed
- Then in Acts 1:14—Jesus mother and brothers
- Paul lists meeting with James Gal. 1: 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.
- By the Acts 15 at the first Council of the Church in Jerusalem, others speak, but James is obviously the Leader. He is the one who gives the final decision of the council.
- Leader of the church there, and never left Jerusalem, martyred there early 60s

The book of James

- **Written to encourage people facing trials**
James 1: *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*
- ⁴ *Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*
- Persecution of the early church; he was eventually martyred
- **Emphasis on living what you believe**
- James 1:22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Importance of Faith AND deeds

- What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.
- ¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”
- Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.
- ²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his

son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

- **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: in the ancient world you could believe in whatever god or however many gods you wanted to and it had NO impact or influence on how you lived your life. Christianity was very different—it demanded a life of holiness—not to be saved, but to show you were saved, under new management, that Jesus is Lord**

He also talks about

- The tongue, so important to control
- Submitting to God, not boasting about tomorrow
- Not showing favoritism
- Patience and humility
- Prayer: Admit your faults to one another and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous man has great power and wonderful results. ¹⁷ Elijah was as completely human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for the next three and a half years! James 5:16-17 (TLB)

Galatians—early clarification of Law vs. Grace

- Written by Paul
- His story: Phil 3:4 if someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.
- ⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Shows that observing the Law, not the way to salvation

- Trying to also gain righteousness by the Law is “a different gospel”
- **.... know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.**
- Changes everything—
- **There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are**

Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:28-29

And now what is pleasing to God, not forced works, but

- Gal. 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.
- Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.
- ***Very similar themes as in James—care for each other, be humble, nurture the fruits of the Spirit***

Everything changed with Jesus

- His death fulfilled the requirements of the Law
- No longer would people be identified by HOW they worshipped, but by WHO they worshipped
- And by how closely they lived like Him—by their discipleship
- Jesus said people will know we are his disciples because of the love we have for each other
- And the letters of the New Testament spell out how what living as a disciple who reflects Jesus and loves means.....

A reminder that Jesus reflecting love isn't an emotion as much as actions—as James and Galatians reminded us and also.....

- Love never gives up.
- Love cares more for others than for self.
- Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
- Love doesn't strut,
- Doesn't have a swelled head,
- Doesn't force itself on others,
- Isn't always "me first,"
- Doesn't fly off the handle,
- Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
- Doesn't revel when others grovel,
- Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
- Puts up with anything,
- Trusts God always,
- Always looks for the best,
- Never looks back,
- But keeps going to the end.