

The Story – To The Ends Of The Earth

Last week we talked about the fact that Jesus' plan for taking the story of redemption to the whole world is us, the church! We are the story of redemption. I want us to look at the development of that concept in the first years of the church. I want to share some key events, recorded in the book of Acts, that led to the story of redemption being taken to the ends of the earth, then I want to make some final observations.

What's happened? After Jesus' ascension into heaven and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples are preaching and telling the story of Jesus, how he was crucified, buried, on the third day he rose again, he ascended into heaven and is seated at the Father's right hand, offering salvation to all who will believe and trust in him and people were responding to the message of redemption in Jerusalem.

Acts 3 records the extraordinary healing of a crippled man at the temple gate. Since every Jewish man in Jerusalem regularly went to the temple, everyone had seen him begging. When the lame man asked Peter for money, Peter said, **“Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”** Acts 3:6 Instantly the man, lame from birth, was healed and word spread throughout the city. The ruling court of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, investigated this miracle. Upon hearing from Peter and John that this miracle happened through the name and power of Jesus, they ordered them to stop preaching in that name and the first winds of persecution begin to blow. Refusing to be quieted, they continue to preach, pray, heal the sick and cast out demons in Jesus name. In response, they are arrested by the Sanhedrin and placed in jail, from which an angel of the Lord releases them during the night and they go right back to preaching the gospel. They are called before the Sanhedrin again and I want you to see something that Peter says at this point. Explaining why they must continue to preach Jesus, Peter tells them, **“The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.”** Acts 5:29-31

Notice that Peter says, “repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.” I understand, the gospel came first to the Jew, first to Israel, and Peter was talking to Jews, but it was not only for Israel. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Jesus said they were to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Perhaps they thought that meant take the gospel to every Jew, regardless of where he was living. They were still thinking salvation was for the Jews.

Something needed to be done to broaden their understanding of salvation. What happens?
Persecution!

Things come to a head between the disciples and the Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin. Acts 7 tells of Stephen, a deacon in the church who becomes the first martyr, the first to die for his testimony of Jesus. As a result, the bible says, **“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” Acts 8:1**

Remember, Jesus said, **“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8.** Too bad that persecution came and people are being thrown into prison, but as a result, the story of redemption is being told in Judea and Samaria just as Jesus said. **“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.” Acts 8:4-5**

Preaching in Samaria was a radical new idea. Remember the prejudice the Jews felt toward the Samaritans. They had nothing to do with them but now Philip preaches the gospel to them, people are saved, healed and delivered and great joy came to the city. **“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.” Acts 8:14** The apostles must have thought Philip had lost his mind. What are you doing baptizing Samaritans? They send Peter and John because they can't believe Samaritans are actually accepting the word of God. When Peter and John arrive they find a revival going on. They tell them about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, lay hands on them and Samaritans begin to speak in tongues as the apostles did on Pentecost. It's fair to say that the apostles were having their minds blown theologically. Salvation is for the Samaritans as well!

Peter and John return to Jerusalem but the bible says on their way they preach the gospel in many Samaritan villages as well. The reach of the gospel broadens! Philip shares the gospel with a government official from Ethiopia. This man is saved and the good news makes its way to North Africa. Philip preaches throughout Samaria and finally settles in Caesarea Maritima, an important Roman city on the coast. (We will be there May 31, 2017 if you want to go!)

It is in this city of Caesarea that something amazing happens. A Roman officer named Cornelius, a gentile living in Caesarea has a vision and is told to send men to find a man named Peter who happens to be staying a few miles down the coast in Joppa. The men leave for Joppa and in the meantime Peter has a vision of animals considered unclean by Jewish law and God

tells him to kill and eat. Peter says he has never eaten anything impure or unclean and the Lord says, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” The next thing you know the men from Cornelius arrive and take Peter to Cornelius’ house. Peter has never been inside a gentile’s home before. It was enough that he had preached to Samaritans but now he is inside a Roman soldier’s house! What’s happening? Peter tells them, “You are aware it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit in his home, but God told me this morning not to call any man impure or unclean, so here I am. What do you want?” Cornelius tells him “I had a vision and God said ‘Find this man Peter and bring him to your house.’ I don’t know why, but we are here to listen to whatever you have to say to us.” Peter began preaching Jesus to them and while he was still preaching the Holy Spirit was poured out on them. It was like a Gentile version of Pentecost. Talk about blowing their minds! Peter said, **“Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” Acts 10:47**

Word spreads. Peter returns to Jerusalem and is immediately criticized for going to the home of a pagan like Cornelius. It was one thing preaching to Samaritans. At least they claimed a shared ancestry, but Cornelius was a Roman! A Gentile! Peter tells them the whole story of what happened, that while he was preaching to them the Holy Spirit came on them, just as he had on the disciples on the day of Pentecost. Peter said, **“So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?” When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.’” Acts 11:17-18**

That’s us friends! God is granting salvation even to Gentiles. Things begin to change in the thinking of the leaders of the church. Look at Acts 11:19. **“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus, and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” Acts 11:19-21**

Gentiles are coming to Jesus. The message has spread beyond Israel. Phoenicia is modern Lebanon, Cyprus an island 60 miles off Syria’s west coast in the Mediterranean Sea and Antioch is in Syria. The church leaders in Jerusalem send a man named Barnabas to Antioch to

investigate. Barnabas brings Saul with him and they spend a year teaching these new converts, both Jews and Gentiles. Antioch becomes an important church for spreading the gospel.

Interestingly, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” Acts 11:26

Speaking of Saul, we can't leave him out. He is a persecutor of the church and the least likely convert around. He was out to destroy this crazy group proclaiming a crucified man to be Messiah and the Son of God but something extraordinary happens to Saul. On his way to Damascus to arrest believers and throw them in jail he has an encounter with the risen Lord (Acts 9). He hears a voice as a light from heaven shines around him and Jesus speaks to him. Blinded by the heavenly light for three days, he is led into Damascus where a follower of Jesus is directed to come and pray for him. Saul's physical sight is restored but more importantly, his spiritual eyes are opened and he places his faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior, Messiah and Lord.

Saul, who changes his name to Paul, becomes known as the apostle to the Gentiles. This Jewish scholar who knew the Law so well becomes the great apologist and defender of the gospel of grace. He learns that God's salvation is for the whole human race. As we said, Paul and Barnabas are teaching the new converts in Antioch when the Holy Spirit said to the leaders, **“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”** The work to which the Lord called them was missions. The church leaders laid hands on them and sent them out as intentional missionaries to Jews and Gentiles alike, taking this message to the ends of the earth, preaching first in the synagogues and then in the market places, establishing churches, discipling converts and raising up leaders to care for the new believers in each town.

From this little group in an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, the gospel is now spreading throughout the known world. Through Paul and Barnabas and their missionary journeys, the church broadens its' reach. In major cities and ports people hear the gospel and are saved and then take the good news back to their own cities and countries. By the end of the first century, Christianity is well established throughout the Roman world. Paul himself had preached in Syria, Turkey, Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Italy, Lebanon, Sicily, Malta, and other places. Some believe he preached in Spain. The gospel spreads to Asia, to India, to Africa. From Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The story of redemption was on its way!

There were challenges. Persecution continued. The church leaders had to grapple with what it meant for Gentiles to accept the gospel. For the gospel to cross cultural boundaries. Would the Gentiles essentially have to become Jews and then become followers of Christ? The

disciples and church leaders wisely realized that the gospel meant salvation apart from the keeping of the Jewish cultural laws of diet and tradition. Salvation was through faith in Christ alone and with that message, the church grew. Now, let me mention a couple of things we learn from this New Testament history lesson.

God works all things for his purpose. You know that and so did the disciples, however, it must have been hard for them to believe that persecution and being arrested and beaten and threatened was a good thing. Bad things happening make me think, “Lord, where are you and what are you doing? Why would you let this happen?” But when the church scattered, the gospel spread to the far reaches of the world and God’s purpose was fulfilled.

In Acts 3 when Peter was preaching to the people after the lame man was healed at the temple, he said speaking of Jesus’ crucifixion, **“I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer.” Acts 3:17-18** This is how God fulfilled what he had said would happen, through Jesus’ crucifixion. And looking back at the persecution of the church, we can see, this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold would happen: you will be my witnesses and take this gospel to the ends of the earth.

Is there something happening in your life right now that you can’t understand why it’s happening? Perhaps this is how God is going to fulfill what he has promised to do in your life and in your circumstances. Keep trusting him. Keep obeying him. **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28**

Never underestimate the reach of God’s grace. The disciples couldn’t believe God would save Samaritans, but Philip dared to step across that barrier and preach the gospel. Revival broke out and they were saved and filled with the Holy Spirit. What do you know? God’s grace and love and mercy can even reach the despised Samaritans.

They couldn’t believe God’s grace could reach gentiles, pagans like Cornelius, the Roman centurion. But what do you know? Cornelius and his whole household and his neighbors get saved and baptized in the Holy Spirit and the disciples discover that even gentiles can be changed by God’s redeeming grace. That’s us. God’s grace was meant for you and me!

The bible says, **“Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” Acts 8:3.** Again it says, **“Meanwhile**

Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.” Acts 9:1 I imagine if you asked the disciples to make a list of people they thought would never be saved, Saul would have been at the top of the list, yet here he is, born again, full of the Holy Spirit, preaching and teaching. Samaritans. Gentiles. Persecutors of the church like Saul. Never underestimate the reach of God's grace.

Who is on your list? What person or what group of people have you written off as being unreachable? I won't even try to suggest a list. I'll just assure you no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. Keep praying. Keep sharing the good news with others and let God do the rest!

What is God's next big idea? Let me explain what I mean. The church scatters and everywhere they go believers preach and tell people about Jesus. But then God speaks to the church in Antioch to send Barnabas and Paul intentionally as missionaries to carry the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. They establish churches and appoint pastors and the gospel spreads. Evangelism and church planting isn't just happening because of persecution, it's happening as the result of a plan. God had an idea he put in the heart of his church. Go, intentionally and make disciples. Establish the kingdom of God everywhere by every means.

What is God's next big idea? What is He saying to his church? What's his idea for reaching the world and how do we fit in his plan? We continue to hear of scores of Muslim refugees finding Jesus. Is that part of his next big idea? A last great push to reach the world. We're investing in technology that will allow us to reach more people with the gospel through the internet. How will God use that and use us? Let's be open to what God wants to do in this hour, in this church, in this community, in this city. I don't know what all God has in store, but he is still calling people, calling churches to go to the ends of the earth. He is still surprising us with the reach of his grace. God still has big ideas for reaching this world. Will you agree with me in prayer that we stay open to all God calls us to do as his church? Listen and obey as we carry the story of redemption to the ends of the earth! Until everyone has heard...

And his next big idea? Well, it just might involve the sound of a trumpet and a catching away of his bride, the church. Redemption's story culminates in a heavenly home, next Sunday!