

## *Good Word* Schedule:

# “Biblical Missionaries”

July, August, September 2015

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## The Missionary Nature of God

**Key Texts:** Gen. 1:26-28; 2:15-17; 1 John 2:16; John 3:14,15; 2 Cor. 5:21; Matt. 5:13,14.

The lessons this quarter invite us to focus on what we commonly call Christian mission. In fact, the adult lesson booklet – and let me insert a parenthetical remark here, that we do follow a lesson booklet that you can see for yourself by Googling “Sabbath School Lesson,” where you will find numerous links that you can follow – but the booklet we follow in making up these lessons is titled, “Missionaries.” So during the quarter we will be looking at various aspect of mission, what it is, why Christians are so interested in missionary work, why so many of them go even to foreign lands to engage in mission work.

This week, we are going to look at what might be called the foundation for Christian mission. Why is mission so important to Christians?

The answer to this question lies in a collection of stories that happen to be, to a large extent, at the very beginning of the Bible. The first two chapters of the Bible tell of the creation of the world. A point to be noticed in those stories is that human beings are differentiated from the rest of creation in the way they were made. Man and woman were created last, they were created by the personal actions of God, and they were made in the “image of God,” something that we never see fully defined. But we would not be far wrong if we concluded that being in the image of God means we have a sense of personhood, the ability to think and evaluate things, and we have the ability to choose between various options. Part of that ability to choose involves the ability to understand consequence and how it might affect our lives. **Genesis 2:15-17** is a key passage when talking about free will, or the capacity to choose.

Think about the implications of humans having the ability to choose:

1. What does this mean in terms of the commonly-voiced idea that God is in control of everything? Does that mean that God’s will is always done, or are there occasions when the will of God is not done?
2. What happens to love is there is no freedom to choose? What would love for God look like if there was no freedom to choose?
3. What does the freedom to choose imply when it comes to moral accountability? If we cannot choose freely, how would you hold a person accountable for their actions?

The Genesis story continues into Chapter 3 where tragedy unfolds. Adam and Eve exercise their ability to choose in a manner that is contrary to the will of God (**Genesis 3:6, 7**). Because of the specific instructions given by God that they were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their actions amounted to a contravention of the will of God and consequences ensued. Some consequences came immediately, some came along the way, and some came much later in their lives. Whatever the case, they lost their original place in God's order.

The remarkable thing in the scriptural record is that God did not run away from Adam and Eve. Though distance had to be created because of the entrance of sin into the world, God did not abandon his now lost creation. Instead, he devised a way in which to save it. It turns out that God's plan was not easy, it has proven to be very costly, it has had to be played out over the span of history, and it will be at least minimally capable of saving those who believe. These various elements ought to give us pause for much thought for the plan to save humans is both complicated and very costly, first to heaven, but also to humans.

When we speak, then, of Christian mission, we ought to see it in light of God's plan to save his lost creation. The mission God took upon himself to save planet earth and those on it, turns out to be a distributed mission. It was shared with Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and it is share also with human beings. This sharing of mission becomes clear when we see Jesus coming to earth to be born a human while retaining his divinity. It is seen in the various descriptions of the work that is done by the Holy Spirit. And it is seen in the various metaphors Jesus used when talking about his Father's plan to save earth that those who have come to faith are to be as light or salt to the earth. Both light and salt have the capacity to infiltrate and affect that which is around them.

The plan of God is something that warrants some careful thought and attention. Some questions you might ponder are these:

1. How do you think God is going to save the world from sin and still preserve the capacity to choose?
2. What would you think of a God who has a plan to save out of sin those who believe who can do so while preserving the ability to choose which is so necessary to the existence of love?
3. What kind of attitude do you find inside yourself when you think of God as one who did not run away from sin, but put himself right into the middle of it?
4. Does the lost-ness of humanity juxtaposed over against the plan of God to save sinners create any urgency in your own life that you should acknowledge?
5. How do you think you might participate in carrying out the plan of God? Do you see any local dimension to this mission, or is it only for overseas?

## Abraham: The First Missionary

**Key Texts:** Gen. 12:1-3; 14:8-24; Heb. 11:8-19; Gen. 3:6; Gen 12:6, 7; 18:18,19

The lesson this week invites us to look at Abraham, one of the most notable people from ancient times. His initial story is found in Genesis 12:1-3 where we find him being called by God to leave his native country to become a wanderer in search of a land God promised to show him. The fact that he acted on God's calling, that he wandered around until he came to the land that was promised to him, sets him up as a paradigm of sorts for all who have followed God's callings thereby making this world a temporary home while they travel and long for the promised home.

This story of Abraham (or Abram as he was first known) is one of great significance, so significant that I once read an assertion that the Bible does have two great divisions, but not the usual ones of Old Testament and New Testament. Rather, the great division is Genesis 1-11 and then from Genesis 12 to the end of Revelation. That was a surprising suggestion but a little thought will make some sense of it because with the calling of Abraham, history changed significantly because from the point at which Abraham decided to follow the calling of God, there have been on this earth some identifiable agent of God living on earth. It is because of the response to the call of God that our lesson identifies Abraham as the first missionary.

A key component to the story of Abraham is the promise God made to him, a promise expansive enough to affect the whole of the human race. A close look at the promise will reveal it had at least three elements:

1. Abraham and his descendant's would be the recipients and guardians of the truth about God's kingdom
2. Abraham would be the channel through whom the promised Redeemer would one day come.
3. Abraham and his descendants would carry the news of God's kingdom to the whole world.

Think about the stories we have in the Bible about Abraham. Here are some questions to discuss in light of the stories of his life:

1. What do you think it was like for him to leave his past home behind acting only on a promise from God? How might that affect the way we live today?
2. According to Hebrews 11:8-19, Abraham was a man of great faith. What might we learn about the process of faithful living from the stories of Abraham? At what point

in his experience do you think he obtained perfection? Or, better yet, how would you describe perfection when you look at his life?

3. What can we learn from Abraham's dealings with other people. Include in your discussion his interactions with the various kings mentioned in his life-story.
4. Hebrews 11:10 is a wonderful verse to contemplate as Abraham is described as one who looked for "a city with foundations whose builder and architect is God." What lessons might we learn from that verse?
5. If you were a missionary, how might the story of Abraham be of help to you?
6. How do you understand the phrase, "step out in faith" as a result of contemplating the story of Abraham?
7. What lessons would you draw from the fact that Abraham wandered around following after God? What spiritual lessons might come from that fact?
8. One of the comments made about Abraham is found in Genesis 18:18, 19 where it speaks about Abraham directing his own household about keeping the ways of God. What might we say about being missionaries in our own homes?
9. What do you have to say about the occasions of unfaithfulness recorded about Abraham? It has been said that those failings made him the father of three generations of liars.
10. It would be beneficial to spend some time thinking about the story in Genesis 22 at Mt. Moriah and the near-sacrifice of Isaac. What lessons can you draw from that story?
11. What reflections do you have on account of Abraham being a significant person in all three of the great mono-theistic religions, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity? How might this fact benefit missions?

## The Unlikely Missionary

**Key Texts:** 2 Kings 5; Mark 1:40-45; 2 Kings 2:1-15; John 15:5; Rom. 6:4-11; 6:1

The lesson this week comes from 2 Kings 5, the record from the time of the ancient kings of Israel, a time period from about 970 – 560 B.C. When you read the record of those times, it becomes quickly apparent that there was a lot of tumult and upset.

The particular story the lesson focuses on is an unusual and unlikely story about a little girl whose name we do not know. She was a servant of a very important man from a neighboring country, a man named Naaman who is described as being a commander of the Syrian army, a great man, highly regarded by the king, and a valiant soldier. He was not, however, a follower of the God of Israel, the God of Abraham.

Naaman, though very powerful, found himself in dire circumstances because he contracted leprosy, a most dreaded disease in antiquity, a disease that often caused people to be cut off from society so as not to bring about the infection of others. In the case of Naaman, this disease is what brought him into contact with Elijah, the great prophet of God.

1. It would be good to pause here to think about how often adversity causes people to be open to interaction with God. Can you think of people who became open to God because their adversity put them into some extremity they could not cope with?

According to 2 Kings 5:1-7, we learn that there was in Naaman's household a captive slave girl who had come from Israel. We have no details in the Bible about the girl's identity or how she came to be in Naaman's home. We only know that into the middle of Naaman's dire circumstances, the little girl inserted information about a prophet of God who could heal Naaman's ailment. For some reason, Naaman was so taken with the words of the little girl, that he asked permission of his King to go to visit the prophet.

Here is an occasion to think about where God's agents might be found and what form they might take.

1. When the little girl was taken captive, who would have thought that she could become an agent of God at the very apex of Syrian power? What thoughts do you have here about how what looks like something terrible might end up being something God can use for a good purpose.

2. Do some “holy speculating” about the conduct of the little slave girl that would have caused her comments to her master to be taken with seriousness.

The interchange between Naaman and the prophet Elijah has some interesting twists and turns to it not the least of which is that the prophet, without coming out to even greet the great man, told him to go dip in the muddy Jordan River seven times and he would be healed.

1. Naaman’s prideful initial rejection of the suggestion is worthy of a few minutes reflection. How often do you think pride gets in the way of good and even godly things?
2. What comments might be made about the skillful way in which Naaman’s retinue gently persuaded him to go ahead and dip in the Jordan? Do you think there are any life-lessons to be taken from that interchange? What might those who deal with the powerful of earth learn from this?

We are left to picture in our own minds the unfolding of the scene as Naaman dipped in the river seven times then to discover himself fully healed, his skin becoming “like that of a young boy.” (2 Kings 5:14).

The response of Naaman to his healing is an interesting one. With great joy, he announced “there is no God in all the world except in Israel” after which he offered gifts to the prophet. At this point we might contemplate several things:

1. What might we make of the joyous response to the acts of God that saved Naaman. Do you see any parallels to salvation now?
2. What do you think of Naaman offering gifts to God’s agent Elijah? Do you think he should have accepted the gifts? What dangers do you see in accepting such gifts? What lessons might a missionary learn from this episode?
3. Notice the comment made by Jesus (Luke 4:27) many centuries later to the effect that “Many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elijah and none of them was cleansed save Naaman the Syrian.” What reflections come to your mind as you think of this? What do you think had happened in the house of Israel that only Naaman was healed? What parallels do you see for today? What cautionary lessons might we learn to help prevent such a circumstance today?

There is one last happening in this story that might well have implications for missionaries. According to 2 Kings 5:18-19, Naaman’s adoption of Israel’s God caused him problems at home in that he still had to go into the temple of Rimmon to accompany the King at worship. It seems Elijah supported Naaman’s plea for pardon for this practice.

1. What might this tell about expectations when it comes to new believers enculturating into their new belief systems? What happens if they adjust too quickly? What happens if they do not adjust at all?
2. What does this story tell us about God? Might it be that the intentions of the heart are of more significance to Him than mere appearances? How do we know what the genuine motivations of another person's heart are?



## The Jonah Saga

**Key Texts:** Jonah 1-4; 2 Kings 14:25; Isa. 56:7; Isa. 44:8; Matt. 12:40; Rev. 14:6-12.

The lesson this week has to do with what is arguably the most famous prophet from antiquity, Jonah, the one swallowed by the great fish. His story is found in the Old Testament book bearing his name, Jonah.

Perhaps the best place to begin discussion of the Jonah story is to note that he, of all people, was put in a position by the call of God to work way outside his comfort zone for he was called to go not to his own people, but to the arch enemy of Israel, a people who we know now were among the most brutal in all history. They made it a point to terrorize those they went to war with so that others would capitulate before the fight even began. The thought of having to go to Nineveh to preach its impending demise filled Jonah with great fear, so much fear that he decided it was better for him to run the opposite way, as far from the place of his appointed task as he could get.

1. Notice that Jonah, though a prophet, was not a perfect man. He was quite subject to the frailties and foibles common to humans.
2. It might be said that he was the first commissioned foreign missionary. What interesting dynamics do you see surrounding that kind of commission?

One of the major elements in the story of Jonah is the picture it paints of God:

1. What do you learn about God from his response to Jonah's flight? Is it possible to run away from God and his callings? How might that affect missions?
2. What do you learn about God and the natural world in this story?
3. Have you thought of the reigning cosmology of Jonah's time and how it affects the story? Do the mountains really have roots? How might the cosmology of the time affect our understanding of the story today?
4. Think about how the misdoings of Jonah, once confessed, became the vehicles of the "conversion" of the sailors. What do you think when through their minds when they learned they were carrying away on their ship a fleeing prophet of the God of both the heavens and the earth?

We ought to notice that in this story, Jonah was not swallowed by a whale but by a great fish that God prepared to capture him with.

1. Reflect on how adversity in the belly of the great fish brought repentance to Jonah. What life-lessons might be drawn from that fact?
2. Notice how prayer turned to praise even in the belly of the great fish!

There is not a little that can be learned from thoughtfully studying the message Jonah delivered in Nineveh. Notice that it has both a threat and a promise. The stark announcement that destruction would come in 40 days if there was no response to the message was the front side of a promise that if repentance ensued, there would be salvation instead of destruction. It is very important to understand that the gospel still has these two elements and failure to speak to both of them results in a watering-down of the message of God sent to humans.

One of the more remarkable elements of the Jonah story is his lament at the end. Astonishingly, when God moved to save Nineveh, Jonah complained rather forthrightly. We almost get the idea that he feared for his reputation more than he cared for the Ninevites! At the same time, his words in Jonah 4:10, 11 are remarkable as he speaks almost inadvertently about the character of God. Particularly touching are the final comments where God speaks of his care for even the little ones and the animals.

1. What lessons about mission and missionaries can you learn from the Jonah story? In particular, think of the courage he had to muster in order to go on the errand God had given him.
2. What would the effects of a watered down message have in Nineveh had Jonah softened the message he was sent to deliver?

## Exiles as Missionaries

**Key Texts:** Dan. 1-12; Isa. 9:5-7; Da. 2:44; Matt. 24:14, 15; Gen. 41.

This week, the lesson is about the missionary effect of those ancient Israelites who were carried off in one of the Babylonian invasions that took place in the time of Ezekiel and Daniel. We learn quite a lot about them from the Book of Daniel and also from Isaiah 39:5-7.

Knowing a little about the history of that time is helpful in understanding this lesson. When Israel came out of Egypt, God made a covenant with them the record of which is found in Deuteronomy chapters 28-32. When you read that record, you will notice that one of the major features of the covenant is a list of blessings and curses. The blessings were to accrue if Israel was faithful to God while the curses were to accrue if they went off into idolatry. Interestingly, the final curse is that Israel would be returned to Egypt, their place of bondage, where they would offer themselves as slaves and no one would buy them. Were this curse to be fulfilled, it would represent the complete nullification of God's calling of Abraham and blessing him and his descendants.

With the provisions of the covenant in mind, it is alarming to read the various predictions of the prophets that Israel was about to be over-run by the Babylonians who, at that time, were the chief enemy of Israel. History shows the Babylonians came three times, first to take the princes and leaders, second to take the artisans and craftsman, and a third time to decimate everything and drive all the people out of the land. Daniel was one of those caught up in the first invasion. His story as a captive in Babylon is quite familiar.

Think of the various stories in the book of Daniel – chapter 1 with the showdown over food, chapter 2 with the showdown over the vision Nebuchadnezzar had that he could not remember, chapter 3 with the amazing face off on the Plain of Dura where the young Hebrew men feared not even to embarrass the King. And don't forget Daniel 6 with the story of Daniel being thrown into the lion's den. Below are some questions that could help lead the discussion of what learning might be had from these stories:

1. What do you think put the steel in Daniel and his friend's backs that they could withstand the kind of pressure they felt in Babylon?
2. Notice the reversals of fortune that followed the willingness of the young men to stand unflinchingly for what they believed to be right. Do you have that kind of stuff in you?

3. What was the effect of the refusal of the captives to bend? Do you think their witness would have been anywhere near as grand had they succumbed to the circumstance in hopes of finding a more subtle way to reveal their beliefs?
4. By the time we get to Daniel 6, there is a new empire and a new king yet Daniel is still in a very high position. What qualities do you think caused such durability?
5. The fact that the king went to the lion's den the morning after Daniel had been thrown in is remarkable. Why do you think he went given the fact that the lions were kept in a hungry state in order to dispatch any people thrown in with them immediately?
6. What would you say about Daniel's decision to continue to pray in his window in spite of the new law? Was there really need for that?
7. Take a few minutes to reflect on the grand sweep of history that emerges from the story in Daniel 2. Notice that the chapter almost self-interprets. Can you from memory make a list of the great kingdoms that appear sequentially in this chapter? How far do you think we are from the day when the kingdom of stone will appear?

This lesson invites us also to look at other exiles whose witness turned out to be significant. Two in particular are Nehemiah in Babylon, and Esther in Persia. Notice how different the approaches of Daniel and Esther were. Can you list some differences?

1. Reflect on the opportunity that came for God to act even dramatically when his followers were willing to stand up even in the face of great adversity.
2. Why do you think there was a sense of urgency in those young men to "stand for the right though the heavens fall" while so many today are much more inclined to be accommodationists? What can be done to turn that around?

## Esther and Mordecai

**Key Texts:** Esther 1-10; 1 Cor 9:19-23; John 4:1-26; Acts 17:26; Matt 22:21;  
Rom 1:18-20

The lesson this week looks at the famous stories found in the Book of Esther, a story first about Vashti the Queen, then about Esther and Mordecai, two Jews in exile who were instrumental in saving their own people from a dreadful law that would have allowed others to attack them and kill them and make off with their possessions.

We might note several things about the Book of Esther. It is unusual for a number of reasons, like there is no mention of God nor is there any mention of prayer, sacrifice, temple, worship, Covenant nor of forgiveness or mercy. It is also all narrative. If you do not know the story, you might read the book. It is short.

The story first features the King's wife Vashti who was ordered, in the midst of a drunken feast, to provide entertainment for the king and his assembly. This she refused to do apparently preferring to preserve her sense of dignity and integrity rather than acquiesce to the king's base request. Here we are left to ponder two things, first the effect that a principled person – in this case a woman – might have on unbridled lasciviousness. We do not know the effect of Vashti's refusal but we can assume the drunken men were denied their unsavory exploitations. Secondly, Vashti disappears from history after this event and we are left also to ponder what the cost of principled behavior might turn out to be. Again, this is speculation, but worthy of some minutes of our time. The point is that principled stands do not always lead to obvious good but the preservation of conscience is always good.

The next person to be featured in the story is Esther, her way into court paved by the absence of the king's wife. Because of palace intrigue, she finds herself in a real bind. There comes a point where she must either go in against all protocols to see the king or simply stand by as her people are slaughtered. She elects to go in to the king on possible pain of death but ends up being well-received and is subsequently able to tell the king of the plot which is then defused by a new pronouncement from the king. In the end, many people joined with the Jews in their practice of religion.

This story raises a number of issues pertinent to missions.

- How do we deal with the fact that Esther, for quite some time, was not public with here religion? Can this be justified? Is hiding one's religion a good idea?

- What were the results of her hiding her faith? What do you think the results would have been if she openly expressed her faith early on in her palace stay?
- Look at the opening text for this week for it is a powerful one. It was spoken to Esther during the time of her exile where, because of her beauty or elegance, she was in the orbit of the king. The text reads: “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14 NIV). What missional components can you draw from this text? Are there times when bravely is simply a must? What makes this statement and Esther’s response to it so inspiring?
  - In some ways, the decree to destroy all the Jews parallels what is predicted in scripture to occur at the very end of time. What parallels can you draw between the two occasions?
  - Why do you think as noted at the end of the Book of Esther (chapter 8) many people came to join the Jews in their religious practices?
  - Think about the ethnic tensions that existed in the palace, Jews, Persians, probably some other people, too. What implications for mission can you draw from the way Esther and Mordecai conducted themselves in that kind of setting? What do you think made their efforts successful?

## Jesus: The Master of Missions

Key Texts: 2 Tim. 1:8, 9; Isa. 42:1-9; Dan. 9:24-27; Matt. 10:5, 6; Acts 1:1-14.

The lesson this week focuses on Jesus as the master of missions. It is interesting to reflect on just how it was that Jesus went about his work. Notice that there are several phases identifiable:

1. Jesus participated in the establishment of a mission to save those on earth when he was yet in heaven as part of the Trinity. Surely this establishes a basic reality about God and his desire to save. How do you think that can get translated into the life of believers now?
2. The next phase of Jesus ministry was to come from heaven to earth in order to enter into human experience. This coming down from heaven to earth is sometimes known as “the great condescension” (see Philippians 2) and it is an absolutely remarkable event in history. Talk about some of the implications of this event. What difference does the coming down of Jesus as a babe have for us?
3. Jesus is next depicted as going to his own people, the Jews. Notice how he set up a base of operations mostly in Galilee, Capernaum being a favorite place for a while. What do you think the benefits of having a known base of operations might be? What would the down-side of this idea be?
4. We see Jesus also carrying his message and ministry to the gentiles. Think of some evidences and examples of Jesus taking the good news of his kingdom to those who were not Jewish. What implications do you draw from these actions?
5. Lastly, we come to the well-known Great Commission of **Matthew 28**. Discuss the key components of this commission. What strategy does it lay out? How effectively do you think it has been followed. How close to fulfillment do you think it is? How are teaching and baptizing linked here and what implications would this have for missions? What obstacles do you think the early believers faced? What gave them power? What is God responsible for here and what humans?
6. Talk about how closely Christians have followed the elements of the Great Commission. And if the Gospel has not yet gone to the whole world, why do

you think that to be the case? Can you think of anything else in the Bible that might also qualify as a Great Commission? How about Jesus' famous call to come and follow him? Does not one commission ask us to come and the other ask us to go? How do you make sense of this?

7. The emphasis on the Great Commission by the church in the Western world has led to the comment that the church in the West is the "Go to" church. We go to other places, do some work, and then leave. How would missions look if we also included the invitation of Jesus to "Come, follow me?" Can it not be said that some of mission involves coming to be with people not just going to take on tasks?



## Cross Cultural Missions:

**Key Texts:** John 4:4-30; Matt. 8:5-13; Mark 5:1-20; Matt. 15:21-28; Luke 17:11-19; John 12:20-32.

This week we are invited to contemplate mission work to cultures unlike our own. 's lesson invites us to consider the interactions Jesus had with those outside of his own people group. As we go down the progression of texts, you will notice that there is a progression from those who are most like him to those who come from very different cultures and societies. The methodologies Jesus uses in approaching people unlike him are useful and informative to missions.

The first instance to look at is in **John 4:4-30**, the story of Jesus interaction with the Samaritan woman. This story is very well known including the way Jesus broke social taboos when talking with the woman. But of more interest than the social taboos are the things we learn from the way Jesus conducted himself in a socially different situation.

Notice:

- Jesus let the woman lead the conversation steering the conversation only a very few times when suggestion proved advantageous to steering the conversation to the missional purposes Jesus had.
- Jesus asked the woman for a real favor. Given the fact of the necessity of water in that area, his request disarmed any immediate defensiveness and opened the way for dialog.
- Jesus was able to distinguish between human social protocols and the precepts of God in that he looked at the woman as a person not a socially-different person of lesser standing.

A second instance in this week's lesson is that of the Roman army officer, certainly someone way outside the comfort zone of most people normally (**Matt 8:5-13**). This is a very interesting story in which the army officer shows up very well first as a caring individual for he came asking Jesus to heal his servant, and then as a socially sensitive person for he seemed to understand the difficulties attached to a Jewish man entering the home of a gentile so he asked only for Jesus to speak a word. Lastly, he manifested himself as a man of faith for he believed without waiting for confirmation.

- What conclusions can we draw about the work of the Spirit in the lives of people outside our own faith community? This man, a gentile, had great faith. How did that come to be so?

- What lessons might we learn about by-passing cultural divides from this story?

The texts in Mark and Matthew also relate stories of Jesus interaction with people who had demons. First there was the case of the man in Gadara who was freed of demons that they entered the herd of pigs that famously rushed to their demise in the lake. The other is the story of a Sidonian child who was freed from a demon. In this latter case Jesus pressed the child's mother from the start giving her a sort of threshold to cross before he acted.

- What lessons do you think the disciples learned from these two interactions both of which were outside Jewish territories? Notice that Jesus was not at all reluctant to engage with the people in need.

In Luke 17 there is the story of Jesus interactions with the 10 Lepers, another well-known story in which only one came back to thank him and, the text notes, he was a Samaritan! It does not seem that Jesus went out of his way to meet these lepers for they came to him. But what is interesting is that the text alludes to the fact that the other 9 were Jews. This means that, in their adversity, the two people-groups had found a way to bridge their differences to find a commonality.

- Does it not seem that, by engaging with these lepers who were social outcasts because it was thought they were great sinners, Jesus declared a missional truth to his disciples that no people are outside of God's interest.

The final interchange in this lesson is the one where a group of Greeks asked Philip if they could see Jesus. This is a very interesting little tidbit because it appears that they came to Philip because he had a Greek name. Perhaps we learn that it is easier to approach people within your own group than to go outside of it at least initially.

- What missional methodologies might be drawn from this interchange?
- In John 12 Jesus uttered one of his famous and hard sayings about losing your life to save it or saving it only to lose it. How do you understand this saying? And how do you apply it missionally?
- This is a good time to reflect on the universality of Jesus. He appeals to all people in all nations reflected by the interest from non-Jews even during his time of ministry.

## Peter and the Gentiles:

**Key Texts:** Acts 2:5-21; 10:1-8, 23, 48; Rom. 2:14-16, Acts 10:9-22; 11:1-10; 15:1-35

This week we are invited to consider the Apostle Peter and his missionary endeavors. Of particular interest are his efforts to carry the gospel outside the Jewish community to the Gentiles. There are several notable events for us to consider;

The first is Peter's great sermon Peter on the day of Pentecost that resulted in the conversion of 3,000 people from various nations and places. Included in this crowd were numerous Gentiles. This sermon had several significant points to it. First, Peter explained how many of the Old Testament prophecies had found fulfillment in Jesus. Secondly, he called for all who heard his message to repent and turn to faith saying that all those who repented would receive forgiveness for their sins and should be baptized. By doing this, he initiated the proclamation of the Gospel to about 15 nations.

- Can we discern how Peter drew a distinction between what might be seen as eternal truths of God and culturally conditioned protocols? How might we do the same kind of thing?
- What do you think of the fearlessness demonstrated by Peter? What do you think cause that in him? Do you think we can be as fearless now as he was then?
- Why do you think there was such a positive reaction to Peter's sermon? Do you think those things can happen today?

A second event to consider is the interaction that took place between Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-8; 23-48). This is a remarkable story. For one thing, Cornelius was a high-ranking Roman officer who was a devout man who feared God and prayed regularly and gave alms to the poor. Then there was the occasion of an angel appearing to him and telling him to be in touch with Peter. And then there was the vision Peter had that caused him to be willing to breach social protocols and go to the home of a Gentile. And when Peter got there he found a whole houseful of people waiting for a word from the Lord.

There are a number of missional items to draw from this, questions to ponder:

- What do you make of God sending an angel to Cornelius? Wouldn't this be a very good way to spread the Gospel? In discussing this, notice that the angel did not convey the Gospel to Cornelius but only told him to get in touch with Peter.

- What do you think caused Cornelius to become a devout man? How should we understand the working of the Holy Spirit in light of this?
- Peter was willing to breach significant social protocols for purposes of mission. What was the source of his willingness to do so? What conclusion might we draw for missional purposes today?
- In this story there are some remarkable verses telling quite explicitly that God does not show favoritism to any people. How do we conduct ourselves in view of that?
- What do you think caused Peter to be a front-runner in taking the Gospel to the Gentiles?

One last item comes before us. Peter's willingness to go the Gentiles was partly the cause of the greatest disagreement in the early church, the subject of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35).

- Notice that tensions always exist when new people come into a believing community.
- Do you think having a council is a good way of resolving differences and issues?
- What do you think of the solution that was adopted, namely that there would be different expectation for different groups of people? How do you think that might help in resolving tensions today? Do you think this was a fair system?
- How did the apostles decide between eternal realities and culturally-conditioned elements?

## Philip as Missionary:

**Key Texts:** 2 Cor. 4:18; Acts 2:44-47, 4:34-37, 6:1-7, Acts 8, 21:7-10

The lesson this week is full of all kinds of things for us to consider and talk about, all of them drawn from the story of Philip the evangelist. Right at the start, it is a bit difficult to figure all this out because there are multiple Philip's in the New Testament. Two of them also had the name Herod and were part of the ruling family that had such dominance in Jesus day. Then there is Philip of Bethsaida who became Philip the disciple who brought Nathaniel to Jesus and later, some Greeks. He is known also as Philip the Apostle who later preached in Greece and Syria. Then there is Philip "the evangelist" who appears several times in the Book of Acts. We first meet him as one of the "table waiters" who was chosen to help care for the poor in the early church. Then, because of persecution, he moved to Samaria where his missional efforts met with good success. It is reported he even performed miracles there. Then Philip shows up down in Gaza involved in that famous encounter with the Ethiopian official that resulted in his baptism. The Ethiopian Christian church dates its origins to this encounter. So, there is a lot to talk about.

We begin by looking at two very interesting verses. First, 2 Corinthians 4:18 – *"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."* NIV. Or there is the NKJV which I like even better, *"While we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."* There is a lot to contemplate here because those engaging in mission are dealing with unseen realities that are actually the eternal elements in life and existence. This is powerful motivation!

Secondly, there is Acts 1:8 *"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."* This is a loose reiteration of the Great Commission found in Matthew. Notice that it speaks first of the power of the Holy Spirit as the means of carrying out the commission. Here we humans need to get a clue. We cannot do mission. We can only participate in what the Holy Spirit is empowering. Secondly, this text lays out something of a geographic strategy, from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria, then to the ends of the earth. In the life of Philip the Evangelist we see this being worked out.

Let's look at some of the particulars in Philip's life and experience:

- He shows up first as one designated to wait on tables set up to care for the poor. Acts 2:44-47, 4:34-37. What do we learn about the Early Church here and how it fostered care and fellowship? Do you think that can be replicated today?
- What were the problems that arose that created considerable social tension? What do you make of the word “murmuring” and what of its effects?
- What do you learn from the solution they devised to resolve the problem? Did the solution work? Are there divisive social tensions where you go to church? How alarmed should you be about that?

We can also look at Philip in Samaria. Most everyone knows there was big tension between the Jews and the Samaritans yet Philip went to Samaria and his efforts met with considerable success - (Acts 8:1-6, 6-15). Notice that the fact that the “Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans – the testimony of the Woman at the well – had somehow become a thing of the past. Do you have any ideas as to how or why that might be?

There is also the famous story of Philip and the Ethiopian – Acts 8:26-39. Some things to notice about this story:

- Samaria is north of Jerusalem while Gaza is well south. Philip was going to the “ends of the earth,” so to speak.
- Here Philip addressed a one-person audience. Those encounters are often the most effective.
- Notice that the Ethiopian was ready to hear the gospel. Why?
- Notice the trajectory to baptism. It was short. Is that kind of thing advisable?
- Notice Philip left right after the baptism giving the Ethiopian no nurture. Is that advisable?

We ought not pass by the fact that later Philip lived in Caesarea Maritima where his four daughters prophesied thereby helping to advance the gospel cause. Along the way, Paul (who used to be Saul the persecutor who was the cause of Philip leaving Jerusalem to go to Samaria) came and stayed with Philip. In this instance, the persecutor and the persecuted met right in the home of Philip where Philip helped nurture and probably instruct Paul.

- There is cause here to contemplate the effect of the gospel on the human person and heart. What does the gospel do to the human heart that former enemies can be at peace?
- Notice also that persecution did not destroy the church – it did do much harm - as much as it gave it cause to spread out far and wide.

## Paul: Background and Call

**Key Texts:** Acts 9:1, Phil. 3:6, I Cor. 15:10, Acts 9:1-22, 26:18, Gal. 2:1-17

### Q. “Who is the most famous of Christian Missionaries?”

We set out to discuss today the person who is, arguably, the most famous of all Christian missionaries, Paul, originally known as Saul of Tarsus. Because he wrote so much of the New Testament and because of his many travels, more is known about Paul than any other first-century Christian to be sure. His activities set a powerful example for Christian missions for coming generations.

The story of Saul, later Paul, is quite remarkable for a number of reasons:

- He was born in Tarsus, an important town on a major trade route which put it at a significant cultural cross-road.
- Saul’s parents were Diaspora Jews, meaning they did not live in Jerusalem or its surrounds.
- Saul was well-educated in that he became Pharisee. Some of his study was done in Jerusalem under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. While we tend to despise the Pharisees, they were admired in their time due to their diligent approach to religion and its practice.
- Paul learned a trade, in his case tent making.
- He rose to some prominence in his religious circles.

We do well to realize that his Pharisaical training proved to be a very good thing for he knew the Scriptures very well, he knew how they were interpreted and understood in their original cultural setting. And his education and cultural understandings enabled him to understand how to lift biblical absolutes out of their Jewish setting thereby enabling the Gospel to go to the Gentiles. This ability was absolutely critical to the development of the early Christian church.

- What parts of the Christian faith do you think are eternal or absolute and what culturally driven? Of what importance is that to missions? How would a person translate the essence of Christianity from one culture to another without compromising its essence?

We should look also at Paul the man. What kind of a person was he? Do we have any clues into his personality or character? Acts 9: 1; Phil. 3:6, 8; I Cor. 15:9, 10; 1 Tim. 1:16; Gal. 1:14; 2 Cor. 11:23-33. What characteristics can be found?

- A man of great passion.
- A man of initiative.
- A man of great perseverance.
- Would you call him humble?
- Fearless? What made him so?

The conversion of Saul to Paul is very well-known. Can you recite the general details, how he had an encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road that brought about a complete turn-around in very short order.

- Do you think sudden and dramatic conversions are good ones?
- Have you ever thought of the possibility of quiet conversions?
- Reflect on Paul's acceptance into the Christian community.
- What might we learn from Paul's as the object of mission? Can his experience, which proved to affect a real and permanent conversion, teach us anything about missions and how they should be done?

After some years of study and development, Paul set out on a missional trajectory. In Romans 15:19, he said that "From Jerusalem and round about as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ."

- Notice that, according to the verse above, a crucial and central element of Paul's mission was to "fully preach the gospel of Christ." how does one go about making this the center of Christian mission?
- We know from elsewhere in the NT that Paul used a strategy of finding those inclined toward the gospel to whom he preached with the intention of raising up churches. This involved preaching, pastoral care, and also edification or nurturing of the new community. Quite a model for modern missions, no?
- Notice also that Paul was not afraid of reaching across cultural divides. This involved some discomfort for him. It also involved creating some discomfort for those who refused to cross such boundaries. His sharp interchange with Peter would be one such example.
- Paul was uncommonly driven by the gospel and its implications. Why do you think that was so? And can it be seen still today?



Lesson #12 – September 19 – prepared by David Thomas, School of Theology, WWU

## Mission and Message

Key Texts: 1 Cor. 1:22-24; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7; 1 Cor. 15:12-22; Acts 15 38-41

Q. – “What are the key elements to Paul’s mission and message?”

The lesson today is again about the Apostle Paul. It begins with a stirring couple of verses – *“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended, but one thing I do; forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”* Phil.3:13, 14 NKJV. Here we see reflected the ethos of Paul’s missionary sentiments. Drawing together Old Testament prophetic messages, Jewish culture and history, the life and teachings Jesus, Paul forged out a Christian understanding of salvation history centered on the person, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his writings, Paul not only explicated the message, he applied it to believer’s lives. His missionary activities encompassed a large territory from Jerusalem, to Syria, up to Italy, and perhaps even to Spain.

One of the major challenges Paul faced – which missionaries today face – was a highly diversified audience. A good example of this is found in **1 Corinthians 1:22-24** – *“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,<sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,<sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”* Here we run into several things worthy of our attention:

- Notice the differing expectations here between the Jews and the Greeks. The one looked for signs, the other for a rational basis on which to rest their understanding.
- How did Paul successfully reach out to each group? (Use of history and prophecy vs. logical narrative?)
- Notice Paul’s common usage of soldering and athletic metaphors enabling him to engage people from two of the major fascinations of the ancient world, particularly the Greeks. What do you think of characterizing faith as a fight?
- What is the role of analysis and even philosophy in mission?

Paul also had a lot to say about the Law. The word “law” in his writings carries several meanings so it is not always easy to figure out what he had in mind. In some cases it seems to indicate a broad reference to religious rules to include ceremonial, civil,

health, and even purification laws. Paul speaks also of the Law of Moses, of the law of sin, and, of course, the moral law of 10 Commandments. As we might expect, when dealing with the lesser forms of law, Paul sees them as having value fixed to a certain time and place. But when he comes to the moral law, he sees them as inviolable and enduring.

We could not, when speaking of Paul, pass by the **cross and the resurrection** in his thought and mission. When coming to the Corinthians, Paul made his famous statement, *“For I am determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”* (1 Cor. 2:2 NKJV). And in 1 Corinthians 15:12-22 he gives a heart-felt explosion on the resurrection and how crucial it is the believers.

- Explain the significance of the cross.
- Explain the significance of the resurrection.
- What is the relationship of death to the resurrection particularly if you understand humans to have inherently immortal souls?

We might look at one last thing pertaining to Paul and the way he went about doing mission. That last thing is the way he could get along with different people. Paul was a hard-working, intense person with a strong personality and very strong opinions. How did he get along with others?

- Notice that he had numerous close friends – see Acts. 13:2; 15:22, 37; 16:1-3’ 19:22, and more. He had at least either friends we know about.
- Notice how Paul sent personal greetings to several people, found in various personal words in his letters.
- What shall we make of those occasions where Paul withstood certain people to their face and contended with them sometimes sharply? Is this a reflection of his humanity or is it a necessary thing in life and mission sometimes?
- We might reflect particularly on the experience of the young John Mark whom Paul at first rejected but then took under his wing again.

## Must the Whole World Hear?

**Key Texts:** Acts 4:12; Psa. 87:4-6; John 10:16; Rom. 2:12-16; John 14:6; Rom. 1:18

Q. – “Will all be saved, or will some be lost?”

This is the last lesson in the progression of lessons we have been following this quarter, all of them focused on the subject of Christian mission. We have seen, over this past quarter that God is seriously missional when it comes to Planet Earth. Interestingly, God uses human instrumentalities to prosecute His mission. And the goal is for the good news about God to go to the whole world, to “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.” This is a very tall order that brings to mind two very big and challenging questions produced by the fact that, in spite of sometimes very diligent and sacrificial work by human missionaries, most of the people in history have not heard the good news of God particularly not as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

The first of these big and difficult questions has to do with the day of judgement that the Bible speaks of, a day of reckoning that is yet to come at which time all humans will be called upon to give account of their lives and their living. So, how is God, in all fairness, going to deal with those billions who never heard?

The second question is related to the first but is focused differently. Is there salvation outside someone’s knowing the Christian plan of salvation? In other words, do all religions offer an equal path to redemption or does one have to know the Christian way in order to be saved. And, to be even more particular, does one have to know the name of Jesus and say it as a saving act of faith? This last question, as we all know, is a rather delicate one particularly in our time.

- a crucial text is Acts 4:12, stating that there is no other name given among humans whereby we might be saved.
- What role does General Revelation play in this subject matter?
- What do we do with all the people in the Old Testament who did not know about Jesus?
- How much must one know in order to be saved?
- Do all religions offer an equal path to salvation?
- What might Romans 2:6, 7 teach about this? “*6 He will render to each one according to his works: 7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;*” *ESV*

- Is the Bible pluralistic in its views?
- Does the Bible teach a universalist approach to salvation, that in time, all will be saved?
- Is some are going to be lost, why does God not save them? Why does he not excuse their sins and let them into Paradise?
- how should we understand the “whole world” phrase? Is it every corner of earth or can it be understood in a more metaphorical sense?