

## Understanding Jesus' Resurrection through the Lens of Acts (#3)

By Bob Young

### The Jesus Story Is to Be Told – to the Most Unlikely

I am thinking and rethinking Acts, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This sermon summarizes my study of Chapters 8-10. I will not mention many details of those chapters. You can read them. Stephen's sermon and stoning; the scattering of the saints which served to spread the gospel; to Samaria; to a proselyte Jew from Ethiopia; to Saul-Paul, to the household of Cornelius. We know these stories—but, do we really know these stories?

We are studying the Jesus Story. What does it mean to obey the good news? How should we respond to and live out the Easter story, the Jesus story? We continue with Lesson #3, the story of Jesus, what impact does the Jesus story have in our lives? What impact should it have?

The third truth—the Jesus story is to be told to everyone in every place—even to the most unlikely!

We miss the unlikely aspect of Acts. Often in studies of the book of Acts, six summary statements are identified. Most of these summaries describe the results of preaching the gospel with quantitative words.

6:7-8, the word spread, a large number of the priests (Jewish priests!) were obedient to the faith. They gave up their livelihood, they gave us status, prestige, power, position, prominence. Perhaps not at the beginning—with the integration of Judaism and Christianity, but certainly in the future. (Other summaries are found in 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, and 28:31).

8:1-4, the believers are scattered to Judea and Samaria! Samaria! To the Samaritans, this is a new group, they believe and obey, they are baptized. The message being preached was the good news of the kingdom, the result was baptism. But in Samaria! Is this next step approved? Can the Samaritans really receive the good news? Is this result acceptable? The preaching in Samaria was not done by the apostles. This preaching was not the original authoritative group of preachers, the first witnesses. This is second-generation preaching, a second-generation preacher. Is it OK to preach to the Samaritans? Can they be accepted? These are somewhat Jewish by religion, but only half-Jewish by birth. We must put ourselves in the context of first-century Judaism, Jesus' resurrection, the gospel. All of the first Christians were Jews, either by birth or proselytes. Doing this is not easy for us.

Acts 8. Did God withhold the Spirit (temporarily) in this case? If so, it was for the benefit of the Jews, so they would accept the Samaritans? What does it mean, that the Holy Spirit was not yet manifest, and that such was only possible by the imposition of the hands of the apostles? This is a traditional interpretation. Perhaps a key is in the fact that the gospel is expanding to a new group. Acts 2—to the Jews. Acts 8—to the Samaritans. Acts 8—to a Jewish proselyte, Gentile by birth. Acts 10—to a Roman centurion, a God-fearing Gentile. It seems that each expansion of the gospel brought its own unique description. Time does not permit a detailed explanation of this point—for note for your own study, that Acts is a continuing story of the gospel going to new ethnic and religious groups, and the details vary slightly as new groups are reached. My point today is that the gospel was being told to the least likely.

8:26ff, to an Ethiopian nobleman, servant of queen, a Jewish proselyte—Gentile by birth, Jew by religion. Philip goes to preach to him, by the direction of the Holy Spirit. This time there will be no problem, no coming of the apostles to bless the preaching of Philip, Philip has been approved, the message can go forth without hindrance to this eunuch, to the world. But do not miss the point that what is occurring is not normal, this is preaching to the most unlikely, but the preaching bears results.

Chapter 9 give us the story of the conversion of Saul, becoming the Apostle Paul. Perhaps there never was a more unlikely candidate. Jesus intervenes personally, Ananias still has doubts. But the gospel is received. And the church grew in number (a second summary, as previously mentioned, in 9:31).

Chapter 10 brings us to the conversion of Cornelius. Gentile, God-fearer. Can the gospel go to "pure Gentiles" who are God-fearers? Peter preaches and according to some traditional timetables and understandings, the Holy Spirit shows up early. In Samaria, the Holy Spirit came late. Now it comes early. Why?

The answer suggested in the text is that the Spirit was present and visible to convince the Jews who had accompanied Peter. The Holy Spirit's coming was made known by speaking in languages to praise God. Then, they were baptized. Some aspects of the story do not change. Baptism, the Holy Spirit; Acts 2, Acts 8, Acts 10.

This is not the end of the unlikely candidates. We could continue through the book of Acts. We could find the gospel preached in unlikely places to unlikely people in the letters of the New Testament – a large number from the household of Caesar became Christians! The process continued through the centuries; the gospel continues to go forth to the unlikely even in our day. Are we among those taking the gospel to the least likely?

I close with a personal illustration. Throughout my ministry, I saw people in need of the gospel message in the families of church members, spouses, children extended families. I usually asked the member about coming to visit in the home, making clear my purpose. One response I received, "You can come, but it probably won't do any good!" But it did. Husbands and children and relatives came to Christ, hundreds through the years of my ministry.

You may have your own example. I am confident there are countless examples about which it was said, "It probably won't do any good." But it did! Have the conversations. Talk to your adult children. Talk to friends, talk to brothers and sisters who have strayed.

A final example... A visitor attended church. I learned the visitor had grown up in the church, but had never been baptized. I asked why. "No one ever asked me." I said, "Well, I am asking you." We studied the Bible, made clear the gospel message, and he was baptized, and his wife, and his extended family encouraged toward greater faithfulness.