

2-16



Session Fourteen

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Awaken our minds in righteousness for you,

Lord our God,

So that our eyes may see your salvation.

May your divinity come and abide in us.

By day and by night and at all times make us, your servants,

Reflect always on the love of your commandments.

Amen

From A Prayer for Early Morning by St. John Mantakuni



The Church Begins

When we spoke about the Gospel of Saint Luke, we said that he originally wrote it as one piece of writing, and that later the piece was divided. The second “portion” of Luke’s writing is the Book of Acts, or more properly the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, in which Luke recounts the history of the early Church.

During the forty days after his resurrection, Jesus appeared several times to His followers. They knew now that he had truly risen, and that He had kept His promise never to abandon them.

Did You Know?

Numbers are one of the many sacred symbols in the Bible. The number 40, which is approximately a generation, appears frequently in the Bible. For example, it rained for forty days and nights (Genesis 7:4); Moses wandered in the desert with the Israelites for forty years (Ex 16:35), David ruled for forty years (2 Samuel 5:4), Jesus stayed in the wilderness for forty days (Luke 4:2) and appeared to the apostles for forty days after His resurrection (Acts 1:3). The forty-day periods of Jesus’ ministry intentionally recall the Old Testament.

Read about one of these appearances in *John 21:1-14*. Look at another in *Luke 24:13-35*. What do these two appearances have in common?

Finally on the fortieth day, Jesus kept another promise: that He would ascend to His Father. The Ascension is a great feast in the Armenian Church and always falls 40 days after Zadic, or Easter—the feast of the Resurrection.

Count the number of apostles in verse 1:13. There are eleven. Now the apostles had a problem. Because the number of apostles chosen by Jesus had been twelve, the dead Judas’s place had to be filled. Read how the apostles accomplished this in 1:21-26.

Read *Acts 1:1-14*. Answer these questions:

1. Where did Jesus command the disciples to stay?

2. What were they to wait for?

3. What did they do with their time?

Pentecost

On the fiftieth day after the Resurrection, Jews from places throughout the known world had gathered in Jerusalem for the Old Testament Jewish feast of Pentecost.

Something incredible happened that day, and things would never be the same again. Read about this in *Acts 2:1-4*. †

Even at this glorious event, some people mockingly said the apostles were merely drunk. The apostle Peter, who had denied Christ just a few weeks earlier, stood up to the crowd and proclaimed the truth. First, he pointed out that nobody was drunk; it was only nine in the morning. Then he showed how Jesus Christ had fulfilled all the prophecies of the Old Testament. He told them that King David had prophesied about a Savior, and that Jesus was the One he had spoken of. So powerful and convincing were Peter's words that about 3000 people were baptized that very day.

These people were the "faithful remnant" we read about in the Old Testament. They were Jews who knew their Scripture, and they recognized that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. They would be the first members of the Church.

This wonderful day of Pentecost is an important feast in the Armenian Church and all churches. The Old Testament feast of Pentecost was filled with new meaning on this day. God's promise that His Holy Spirit would be in His Church forever was fulfilled.

Preaching and Healing

Now the work of the Church began. Peter preached to large crowds, converting thousands more to the new faith. One day, as he and John were going to the Temple to pray, a lame man asked them for money. Write here what Peter gave to the man (see *Acts 3:6*): _____.

The Sadducees, one of the "elite" groups of Temple leaders, did not believe in the resurrection from the dead, so they told Peter and John to stop teaching false doctrines. But despite their orders, the apostles continued to preach as before. Finally the two were taken before the high council and were put in jail.

Read how they got their freedom in *Acts 5:19-21*.

Peter and John were not the only ones to suffer for spreading the Gospel. The deacon Stephen was stoned to death, with the eager participation of a learned Pharisee named Saul, who was a fierce enemy of everyone and everything Christian. With the fierce persecutions in Jerusalem, some of the Christians began going out to Judea and Samaria to preach and teach there.

Word Watch

Pentecost: derives from the Greek for "50th day." It was the Jewish Feast of Weeks (also called Feast of Harvest and Day of First Fruits) which fell on the 50th day after Passover. We read in Acts 2 how those gathered in Jerusalem for that festival witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit (who descended upon the apostles in the form of tongues of flame) as the apostles were suddenly able to speak foreign languages and thus be able to spread the good news everywhere.



Saul's Conversion

On his way to Damascus, the Pharisee Saul was made temporarily blind. He heard the voice of Jesus Christ, asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" This incredible experience made Saul realize who Jesus Christ was. It also made him realize that God must have a special mission for him.

Saul was converted to the Christian faith, taking the name of Paul. He immediately began preaching in the synagogues (synagogues are local buildings where Jews meet to worship and read the Old Testament when they cannot be in the Jerusalem temple).

When Paul returned to Jerusalem and wanted to join the group of apostles, they were afraid to take him in at first, because of his terrible persecutions of Christians up to that time. But finally they did accept him, and soon after that he began making missionary journeys to faraway cities, preaching about Jesus with great power.

Paul's first journey began in Antioch. It was in this city that Christ's followers were first given the name "Christians." It wasn't meant as a compliment, but as a derogatory slur. Yet like many things, what was intended as an insult became a respected title.

Paul was certainly determined to make the name of Jesus Christ honorable. With another Christian named Barnabas, he traveled from Antioch to Cyprus and several cities in Cilicia and Galatia.

At Lystra, Paul and Barnabas had a scary experience. Read about it in *Acts 14:8-20*. ↗

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they told the believers how many people were accepting the new faith. There were essentially three groups:

- Former pagans (often called "Gentiles" in the New Testament)
- Hebrew Jewish Christians, from Palestine, who spoke Aramaic and read the Old Testament Scriptures in Hebrew
- Hellenist Jewish Christians, born outside Palestine, who conversed and read the Old Testament Scriptures in Greek

A Crisis Develops

Now a question arose: would the non-Jews be asked to follow the Old Testament laws given to Moses? (These laws, sometimes referred to as the "Mosaic law," concerned dietary rules, refraining from eating with pagans, Sabbath observances and the circumcision of male babies.) Some of those of Jewish background felt that everyone should follow these rules, since the Old

Testament was basic to Christianity. But the non-Jews who were unfamiliar with these laws were not comfortable with keeping them.

Peter had a vision from God, and the vision made him realize that the Church is open to all, no matter what their background or tradition. The Church leaders met together in council in Jerusalem. They asked for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and decided that converts who were not of Jewish background should not be required to follow the Mosaic laws. The principle of meeting in council under the guidance of the Holy Spirit has been the Church's way of making decisions ever since that first Council of Jerusalem.

Read the letter that the Council of Jerusalem sent out to Gentile believers in Acts 15:22-29. What words in the letter tell you that this was not just a decision of the apostles on their own? Write the words here:

Paul's Second Missionary Journey

After the Council, Paul decided to revisit some of the places he had gone to before, to see how they were doing. On this second journey, he traveled with Silas. When they stopped at Lystra, Paul asked a young Christian named Timothy to join them. They went on to other cities where they told people about the Council's decision in Jerusalem. The number of believers kept growing.

At the harbor city of Troas, Paul had a vision of a man asking him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." They went to Philippi, a leading Macedonian city. There they met a believer named Lydia, who was a sharp businesswoman and a seller of purple cloth. She listened eagerly to their preaching, and then she and her whole household were baptized. She also offered them the hospitality of her home.

Paul and Silas also exorcised (removed) an evil spirit from a young slave girl who made money for her owners by telling fortunes. The owners were furious with Paul and Silas because their chance to make money was lost, so they went to the city officials and accused the two of making trouble in the city. They stirred up the crowd against them by saying that they were Jews and were advocating customs that were foreign to Roman citizens, as the Macedonians were.

The Armenian Angle

St. Paul's journeys show how the faith was taken into the world beyond Jerusalem. St. Gregory the Enlightener (Soorp Kri-kor Loo-sa-vo-rich) similarly journeyed throughout Armenia to bring Christ to its citizens. Like St. Paul, St. Gregory had to wean hearts and minds from pagan traditions and demonstrate how the Lord and Savior was the true way to true life. Read about those journeys in "The Conversion of Armenia" a pleasant condensation of the original 5th century account of St. Gregory's efforts written by Agathangelos.

Paul and Silas were beaten and jailed. Near midnight, as they prayed and sang hymns in their cells, an earthquake rocked the prison's foundations. Doors were thrown open, and chains came undone. When the jailer saw this—and when he saw that Paul and Silas had not made a problem for him by running away—he and his household were baptized.

Another stop on the journey was Athens. The Athenians always enjoyed hearing and discussing philosophy and various religious beliefs. They listened to Paul eagerly, though some scoffed at his words while others took them seriously.

Looking In

Acts 2:42–47 gives us the very first description of a church-like community. Read these verses. List the verbs (action words).

How does this description resemble your parish today? How is it different? Discuss as a class.

Read about the encounter in *Acts 17:16–34*. How do you think you would have responded if you were an Athenian listening to Paul that day?

Paul went on to Corinth, where he met a couple named Priscilla and Aquila. Like Paul, they were tentmakers by trade. Also like Paul, they were eloquent preachers of the faith, helping Paul in his work and becoming two of his closest and most trusted friends. They went with him from Corinth to Ephesus, a port in western Asia Minor, and a major city of the Roman Empire. There they instructed a powerful young preacher named Apollos more deeply in the faith, so that his preaching became even more effective.

Paul returned to Jerusalem and Antioch. He continued traveling to the young churches in Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening their faith and understanding.


Paul's Third Missionary Journey and the Trip to Rome

The third journey took Paul to many of the cities he had visited before. While many loved him and were converted by his words, Paul was always in great danger from those who wanted to kill him because his words were a threat to their own beliefs, especially some of the Jews who did not accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah. And they weren't the only ones. Certain silversmiths were angry, too. Probably you can guess the reason why.

Read about it in *Acts 19:23–41*.

Paul was aware of the danger of what he was doing, yet he continued his work. And though warned not to go back to Jerusalem because of the plots against him there, he did go back and preach to the Church in Jerusalem, telling the people how many Gentiles in distant lands now shared their faith.

But Paul's preaching so incensed some of the hostile Jews that they tried to beat him to death. Roman soldiers had to rescue him from the mob. Paul was taken



to Caesarea to be interrogated by the Roman governor, Felix. He stayed in prison there for two years, but he was often summoned by Felix for religious discussions. Paul's enemies continued to bring charges against him. Being a Roman citizen, Paul demanded that his case be heard in Rome. This request was granted but the journey by ship was a terrifying one.

Everyone survived this adventure, and arrived safely in Rome. Though a prisoner of the Roman government, Paul had some freedom and he continued to preach there and in surrounding areas. But in the year 67 or 68, Paul was arrested and martyred by beheading during a brutal persecution of Christians carried out by the Emperor Nero. Paul's work of thirty years had carried the Christian message to thousands of people in many lands throughout the world. He was truly an apostle, "one who is sent out."

Quick Quiz #14

Fill in the blanks.

- ① to ② _____ and _____ are the feast days that are marked on the 40th and the 50th days, respectively, after Easter.

Choose from the list below to fill in the blanks

- ③ I wrote the Book of Acts in addition to my gospel. _____
- ④ On the way to arrest Christians in Damascus, I was temporarily blinded by Jesus until I understood the true "sight" of faith.

- ⑤ I was chosen to replace the dead Judas. _____
- ⑥ This fellow Christian and missionary traveled with Paul to cities like Antioch, Lystra, Cyprus and Cilicia. _____
- ⑦ After denying Christ three times when he was arrested, I became one of His greatest champions. _____
- ⑧ A sharp businesswoman in the dyed goods trade, I was baptized by Paul and opened my home to the use of Christian gatherings.
- ⑨ My wife and I were tentmakers like Paul. _____
- ⑩ I served the early church as one of its first deacons and was stoned to death with the eager participation of the Pharisee Saul. _____

Matthias

Lydia

Luke

Stephen

Paul

Aquila

Peter

Barnabas