



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Easter 5 (C)
May 19, 2019

[RCL] Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Acts 11:1-18

The Acts of the Apostles depicts Jesus' early followers as observant Jews and the beginnings of the church as rooted within Judaism, yet is concerned with the expansion of the church from those origins to a movement spread throughout the Roman Empire.

In the first part of today's passage, verses 1-3, Peter's fellow apostles and the Jewish believers in Jesus (the circumcised believers) confront Peter as he returns to Jerusalem from baptizing the Roman centurion Cornelius in Caesarea. They demand an explanation for why he has broken the Jewish law by entering a gentile house and eating unclean food.

In verses 4-17, Peter repeats the events of Chapter 10, a device that Luke uses for emphasis. As Peter explains the vision in which God has informed him emphatically and repeatedly that what God had cleansed he was not to regard as unclean, he affirms the point that the Holy Spirit had directed the conversion of the gentiles by recounting a simultaneous vision on Cornelius' part that he should send to Joppa for Peter. When Peter arrives at the house, he begins to proclaim the gospel, but the Holy Spirit falls upon Cornelius' household just as it had upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. Peter remembers God's words and gifts on that day, and understands that it is God's will that the gentiles be saved.

In the final verse, 18, the Apostles and Jewish believers are silenced. They too understand that the gentiles have been given salvation through belief in Jesus, and praise God.

The passage is pivotal in the spread of the gospel from the Jewish followers to the wider world of the gentile Roman Empire. It also makes the distinction between baptism by water, a human act, and baptism by the Holy Spirit, an act of God.

- What are some of the differences and similarities between water baptism and spirit baptism? Which comes first? Is one more public than another?
- Even though the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles at Pentecost, they are slow to understand God's purpose and command that the gospel be preached to everyone. Not all of the Apostles come to this understanding at the same time. Can you think of other examples of times, either in

the Bible or in your own experience, when understanding God's call comes as a process as well as a specific moment of enlightenment?

Psalm 148

Psalm 148 is a hymn of praise. A cast of all the created are called upon to praise God the creator of all the universe. In verses 1-6, the inhabitants of the heavens are exhorted to praise their creator. In verses 7-14, the elements of the earth are called to praise God's glory. God is the exalted and splendid creator of heaven and earth, and the children of Israel, his loyal servants, are especially near to him.

Today's passage from Acts ends with the Apostles praising God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18).

- What parts of Psalm 148 might the Apostles have included in their praise? Try writing some additional verses that the Apostles might have prayed in an extemporaneous outpouring of praise in response to Peter's explanation of events in Acts 11:1-18.

Revelation 21:1-6

This passage describes the revelation of heavenly Jerusalem. A revelation or apocalypse is generally a first-person narrative in which the writer relates one or more visions about the future and/or the heavenly world. The writer of the Revelation to John is both an oral prophet in the tradition of Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah, and a scribe whose written words claim the authority of coming directly from God, the one who was seated on the throne.

In the Revelation to John, particularly in today's passage, we have an example of Christian visionary literature built on the foundations of Jewish apocalypses. The image of the divine throne and the precise layout of the heavenly city contain echoes of Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 40-42, while the new heaven and a new earth and the absence of weeping and crying are echoes of Isaiah 65.

Indeed, even the reference to the holy city Jerusalem supports an essentially Jewish frame of reference. References to the testimony of Jesus Christ and the seven churches of Asia suggest that the writer was a Christian prophet of Jewish origin. His historical context may have included both the destruction and loss of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., and persecution of the Jewish followers of Jesus. Some of the text of the Revelation to John is built on graphic images of destruction. Yet the text as a whole is a glorious act of worship, telling a story of God's enduring presence in the salvation offered by Jesus Christ. The vision ends on a note of hope and faith.

- The beautiful language of the King James version of this passage contains the words: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away." Meditate on this poetry for a few moments. What do these words mean for you? How might you use them in a pastoral context?

John 13:31-35

This passage introduces what is commonly called the “farewell discourse,” in which Jesus announces his impending death to his disciples and offers both comfort and instructions for how they should behave when he is gone.

In verses 31-33, he emphasizes glorification: the enduring and mystical relationship between the Son and God the father. He calls the disciples “little children,” highlighting his oneness with the Father. At the same time, this term of endearment expresses his love for them. Here he turns to two additional themes of his ministry: the commandment to love one another and the Father’s presence in the disciples. “You will look for me,” he says, possibly to tell them of new ways in which they will find him after his departure.

He refers to the Jews, in contrast to his disciples, the Jewish followers of Jesus, and emphasizes how his own followers shall be known: by their love for him, which mirrors his love for them. It is essential that the community of followers of Jesus demonstrate God’s love as a shining light for the world to see.

- Glorification can mean either giving praise or the manifestation of that which is worthy of praise. Read verses 31 and 32 carefully. The words “glorify” and “glorified” appear five times. What does Jesus mean by the word? Does the word “now” change or clarify Jesus’ meaning?
- This passage contains the famous words: “I give you a new commandment.” What is new about the commandment to love one another? What is radically new about the way that God has shown his love for us in Jesus? What does it mean to be a disciple under this new commandment?

This Bible study, written by Susan Butterworth, originally ran for Easter 5 (C) in 2013.

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

© 2019 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.