

ACTS: THE STORY OF THE CHURCH – PART 13

I Hear the Train a' Coming: God's Progressive Progress

Acts 11-12

Things were happening and the pace was picking up for the Jesus Movement. We last saw Peter in Joppa bringing the full message of Jesus to Cornelius. The vision he received that led him to Joppa included a vivid demonstration of varied unclean food items descending on a sheet. He was told to prepare them and eat. Obviously, this was a big *No* for Jews, even those who followed Jesus as the Messiah. It is important to remember that none of the original or early disciples stopped being Jews. It is easy for a modern believer to impute Christianity into the Jesus movement. That word had not yet been coined and would not be for many years.

Peter was being instructed to expand his faith. First century Jews were mired in a Law that had reduced the spiritual progression of Israel to a slow slog. Jesus came to perfect and complete the Law. In many ways He became the relational Law, a Law that was now written on the hearts, minds and souls of all who believed.

Question: So, did this end and eliminate the dietary laws? Well, yes and no. If God blessed the unclean food, it was proper to eat. If a follower wanted to expand their shopping list, they could. On the other hand, if a believer felt more spiritual and connected by continuing to keep the dietary restrictions they could. Gentile followers of Jesus as Savior/Messiah would not be expected to keep the dietary commands.

Question: So, what is the takeaway from the whole *sheet filled with unclean food* and the command to go to Joppa to meet with a Gentile? This was God's plan-in-action to officially bring Gentiles into his salvation. Sure, there was a eunuch from Ethiopia and a couple of other Gentiles who accepted Jesus, but this was the big kickoff of God's plans for full inclusion. Once that door was open there was no closing it.

Acts 11: “Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem,” the disciples had heard about Peter’s exploits in Joppa with Cornelius. When he arrived home, they peppered him with questions: “Why did you stay in the home of people who aren’t even Jewish? You even ate meals with them!” “Are you nuts?” Actually, I added that last exclamation. He told them about the vision and visit, especially him saying to God, “Lord, I can’t eat this food. I’ve never eaten anything forbidden or impure.” Next, he told them he was convinced God led him to Joppa and the home of a non-Jew. His story was proof positive that God had opened a new door for Gentiles to experience salvation, the same salvation Jews were offered. Verse 11:18 tells us the Jerusalem disciples were also convinced God was now the God of the Gentiles and God of the Samaritans *because* he was the God of the Jews.

Acts 12: King Herod, a genuine blight on Israel and humanity in general was reacting against the movement in increasingly violent ways. He had John’s brother Jacob beheaded and when he saw how happy the Jewish leaders were, he had Peter arrested and placed in chains. Leaving nothing to chance he assigned sixteen guards to watch Peter. As Peter slept in his cell an angel came to him and said, “Hurry up! Let’s go!” Peter must not have been overly stressed over his incarceration as the angel had to hit him on his side to awaken him. The chains literally fell off his wrists and despite the “bright light” angels tend to emit none of the guards woke up. Peter put on his cloak and sandals as the angel instructed and off they went; yet another Divine jailbreak.

Peter found his way back to the home of Mary and John Mark. As he knocked a young lady came to the door and when she saw it was Peter she freaked a bit and closed the door on him, leaving him outside. She ran to the others saying, “It’s Peter, he’s here.” No one believed her but when they finally opened the door there he stood.

Meanwhile back in the jail there was no Peter to bring to Herod (for what was to be a quick execution). Herod interrogated the guards and then had them killed (you must imagine how few applicants to Guard School there were after this).

Herod left Jerusalem for Caesarea where he dealt with a squabble with the provinces of Tyre and Sidon. Since he controlled the food supply to both places,

they worked to make amends, and he spoke to the residents from a throne wearing his most regal attire (think photo op). He addressed the people, and it is reported he was quite good. When he finished the people gave him a standing ovation, with some saying, “These are the words of a god, not a man!” O.K., they were hungry and fearful of this unhinged tyrant and that led them to pandering and hyperbole. But it did not end well for the orator who spoke like a god.

“Immediately, an angel of the Lord struck Herod with a sickness, an infestation of worms, because he accepted the people’s worship and didn’t give the glory to God, and he died” (v.23). This is proof positive that God’s plans were progressive and nothing and no one was going to stop them.

Takeaways:

1. The “taking the Gospel to the world” had begun; the Great Commission was now making sense. When Jesus said those words, it was likely a “*huh*” moment for the listeners. Why was this necessary? Most of the Jews lived in or near Jerusalem. Why go to the furthest corners of the globe? Because it was God’s plan and now it began, ever so slowly, to make sense... now it’s doable.
2. The “Missional” movement will never stop. It’s still moving. It might not always work, at least to our human-limited eyes, but it’s still in progress. *Ain’t nothing gonna stop this train!*
3. Again, there will always be pushback, always be some level of persecution, and at times it will be as much from inside as from outside.
4. From provincial Rome to today’s China, Iran and Saudi Arabia it can be dangerous to take a stand.
5. Do not think too lofty about yourself or place God-like faith in a human being. The level of faith and belief we are called to place in God can never

be assigned/bestowed upon a person. There are no gods (well duh), only the Most High God of Israel who created and loved all of Creation. No one is coming who can rescue us from this world. God can and will and He will come back to His creation. That's it. No human can or will. SO, do not place that kind of faith in a person. And while we may say, "Who me? Never." We tend to do just that.

Amen and Amen.

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