



SCRIPTURE SHARED
UNSTOPPABLE
THE BOOK OF ACTS

Week 4: Gentile Inclusion

Week 4, Day 1 – Philip and the Eunuch

Acts 8:4-8, 26-39

⁴ Now those who were scattered went from place to place proclaiming the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶ The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, ⁷ for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed, and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.*

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

Understanding the Passage:

This is our second introduction to Philip. He was selected as one of the deacons of the church in chapter 6, meant to be an administrator of the church community – making sure everyone had enough food and resources – while the apostles continued to travel and preach. By chapter 8, Philip has grown out of his administrative duties and joins the apostles on the road as an evangelist.

Before his ascension, Jesus instructed the apostles to be his witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Thus far, the gospel has spread throughout Jerusalem and Judea, and with Philip's journey to Samaria, we are seeing the continuation of the spread and the fulfillment of Jesus' instruction. Much of this week's readings addresses the inclusion of Gentiles in the covenant, but it's important to note that the Samaritans are not Gentiles. They are Jews who stayed behind during the Israelite exile in Babylon. They began practicing a different form of Judaism, and after the exiled Israelites returned, they had numerous clashes over religion and land. The Samaritans respond to Philip's preaching and are brought into the family of Christ, something that no Jew would have foretold just a few years before.

Following that, Philip is prompted to journey south toward Gaza. He encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on the road who was worshiping in Jerusalem. Due to his heritage, the eunuch would not have been Jewish, nor would have been able to be a convert since he was a eunuch and could not participate in the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision, so it's unusual that he was worshiping in Jerusalem. Clearly the Spirit was already at work in his heart, drawing him toward God. It is no coincidence that Philip was placed in a position to intercept him along the way.

But the eunuch didn't understand what he was reading! How often do we find ourselves in the same situation of reading scripture and just feeling totally flabbergasted by what it's trying to say? We need someone to help us go deeper and really show us the meaning of the scriptures. That's why studying in community (like through Scripture+Shared!) is so helpful. The eunuch wondered who the text (which was Isaiah 53) was about – was Isaiah speaking about himself or about someone else? Philip explains that Isaiah was prophesying about a servant who would come to complete Israel's task: Jesus.

What if Philip had answered the angel's prompting to go down to Gaza but let the eunuch's chariot pass him by? Or stopped to talk but decided the outsider didn't warrant the time it took to explain the prophecy? How often does God place opportunities for conversation and witnessing in front of us and we hurry past them?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Have you ever had the sense that God is calling you to something different the way that Philip was called from an administrator to an evangelist? This doesn't have to be about your spiritual calling, but could include a career or another role you fulfill. What has that felt like? What did it take to make the leap?
2. God put Philip in the position to teach and minister to the eunuch. Can you think of a time when God has put you in the path of someone who needed you to minister to them? Or when someone has entered your life at the exact moment when you need ministering?
3. If you encountered Philip today, what question about scripture would you want to ask him?

Week 4, Day 2 – Peter’s Vision

Acts 10:9-20, 23-28

⁹ About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while it was being prepared he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” ¹⁴ But Peter said, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” ¹⁵ The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon’s house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸ They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰ Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation, for I have sent them.”

²³ So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the brothers and sisters from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ On Peter’s arrival, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.” ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled, ²⁸ and he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.

Understanding the Passage:

Modern English vernacular would have us read “all kind of” in verse 12 and assume that means a variety. But a more accurate translation is actually that the sheet was filled with “every single kind” of creature, reptile and bird. Excluding fish, this includes every animal on earth... most of which would have been off limits for an observant Jew like Peter to consume based on the law handed down by Moses. Bishop Will Willimon wrote,

“We must not read this story from the safe vantage point of a majority religion where broad-mindedness and toleration cost the majority nothing, but rather, read the story as it was first heard—from the minority point of view, people for whom a bit of pork or a pinch of incense or a little intermarriage was *a matter of life and death* for the community. The dietary laws are not a matter of etiquette or peculiar culinary habits. They are a matter of survival and identity for Jews.”

Peter, holding fast to his understanding of the law, rejects the offer to eat the animals on the sheet. He argues with the voice from heaven three times as it continues to tell him, “What God has made clear, you must not call profane.” This is reminiscent of God’s conversation with Job when God essentially asks him, “do you think you are God?”

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding... Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?” (Job 38:4, 36)

The voice from heaven wants Peter to have a looser grasp on the law written in stone and a more solid following of the movement of the Spirit that writes the law on our hearts. It was easier for Peter and is certainly easier for us to have a set of rules to follow that tells us what to do and what

not to do. It's even better when those rules favor people like us or patterns that we already fit into. It's not that those rules don't frustrate us with potential limitations, but they cut through uncertainty and make things clear. But that's not the way of God!

Immediately after this dream, Peter is approached by Cornelius' servants and asked to return with them to their master. Cornelius was a Roman Gentile centurion, as far out of the covenant as one could get. Salvation for Gentiles was a difficult idea to grasp because, until this time, salvation existed only within the confines of the covenant with Israel. Peter realizes that the vision he had wasn't really about keeping kosher in meals, but about not making personal judgments about whether people are considered clean or unclean.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Read Leviticus 11. Why might Peter have struggled with this news that reinterprets what is clean and unclean?
2. How were Peter's objections silenced?
3. In what way was Peter's understanding of God changed?

Week 4, Day 3 – Gentile Inclusion

Acts 10:34-48

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Understanding the Passage:

In Acts 10, we get a front-row seat to the accelerator of the early church's growth – the recognition that folks from any ethnic, cultural, and geographical group are able to be a part of the family of God through Jesus. For the individuals and people groups who have been on the outside looking in for generations, this is extraordinarily good news!

Peter starts by emphasizing that God shows no favoritism. Gentiles are not just included, but are equal to Jews. They aren't the B team. They aren't substitutes or wannabes. There are times when

we grudgingly accept that people who aren't like us are included in something but we treat them as a second class. That is not the case with God. Everyone has exactly equal standing before God.

And then Peter details the good news – it is peace through Jesus Christ as the Lord of all. The things that we've used to create or impose peace ourselves are from humans and are limited. They will never bring real or lasting peace. True peace only comes when Jesus is the Lord of our lives – the ruler of our lives, the one who we live for, the lens through which we see everything. When we submit ourselves to Jesus by acknowledging that we are not Lords, that we are not in charge of everything, then we are able to experience the peace of God.

Peter's message concludes with the emphasis that nothing can stand in the way of God's power. The Holy Spirit fell on those who heard Peter preach the truth about God's grace and love and radical inclusion. There were no rules, no temple authority, and no system of legalism that could get in the way of the work of the Spirit to draw people in.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How do cultural and religious divisions hinder our faith?
2. Can you think of a time in which you've wrestled with your perception of someone as unclean and you questioned whether that person was deserving of God's grace?
3. Read Ephesians 2:11-22. What does Peter mean by "peace through Jesus Christ" in verse 36?

Week 5, Day 4 – Barnabas and Paul with the Gentiles

Acts 13:44-52

⁴⁴ The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul. ⁴⁶ Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' "

⁴⁸ When the gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord, and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹ Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of their region. ⁵¹ So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Understanding the Passage:

What an awesome sight for the apostles, and surely from the vantage point of God in heaven, to see so many people ("almost the whole city") gathered on the Sabbath to worship the Lord! The apostles must have felt the encouragement of seeing the fruit of their evangelism – Jews and Gentiles joined together to worship the one true God!

But not everyone was happy. The Jews, in fact, were furious when they saw the Gentiles that were now included in the family of Christ. Acts doesn't tell us what their specific blasphemy was, but based on Paul and Barnabas' response, we can assume that they said that the good news of

forgiveness and salvation wasn't extended to the Gentiles. Instead of understanding grace as an underserved gift, they were still narrow-mindedly thinking they had earned their way into salvation. Consequently, they judged Gentiles as not deserving of that grace.

Paul and Barnabas remind them of Simeon's proclamation about Jesus at the temple when he was presented as a baby: that he would be the light to the Gentiles and bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Paul and Barnabas tell the Jews that they had their chance - God came to them first through the law and the prophets, but they rejected it and their rejection wasn't going to stop God's eternal mission to bring everyone into the fold.

Unlike the Jews who wanted to preserve the goodness of God for themselves, the Gentiles celebrated and spread the word of the Lord throughout the region. Like many who have come to know Jesus later in life (as opposed to growing up in a Christian household), the Gentiles knew intimately the gift that they had been given and they responded by essentially building longer tables, not taller walls.

The Jews were not placated and drove Paul and Barnabas out of the city. Instead of feeling defeated, Paul and Barnabas "shook the dust off their feet" and forged ahead. They were able to do this because they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Why might it have been so hard for the Jews to expand their understanding of God's far reach?
2. Why were Paul and Barnabas still able to experience joy even after being driven from town?
3. How does the Holy Spirit empower you to kick the dust off your shoes and keep forging ahead even when you're feeling defeated? What does that look like on a practical level for you?

Week 4, Day 5 – Council at Jerusalem

Acts 15:1-13, 19-23, 28-35

¹ Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of

the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

¹² The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me... ¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues."

²² Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter... ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. ³² Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers and sisters. ³³ After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers and sisters to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

Understanding the Passage:

Paul's first missionary journey, which is recounted in Acts 13 and 14, sees him taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus instructed in Acts 1:8. He started preaching in synagogues to Jews in each city he visited, but Gentiles were drawn to his message as well and began following him and Barnabas and some of the other apostles. All was well until some of the Pharisees came from Jerusalem and began telling the new converts that they had to be circumcised before they could become Christ followers. This was in direct opposition to what Paul and others had just taught them. When the tensions got too high, a council meeting was called in Jerusalem so the apostles could hash out their concerns.

In the 5th chapter of his letter to the Galatians, written in 48 CE (shortly after the Jerusalem Council meeting), Paul makes the argument that circumcision and any other rule-keeping system is an affront to the work of Jesus. Instead of accepting the freedom that Jesus offers, the person who becomes circumcised in order to follow Jesus has just accepted another system of slavery. This, too, is his argument for excluding the Gentiles from circumcision as new converts.

James sends Paul and Barnabas back with a letter from the leaders in Jerusalem supporting their approach to ministry with the Gentiles. He outlines things from which they should still abstain (sexual immorality as well as eating meat sacrificed to idols, mixed with blood, or strangled). Clinton Arnold writes,

"The focus of the debate now shifts away from the question of what is essential for salvation to one of how to help Gentile believers break away from their idolatrous pre-Christian practices. Each of these four instructions relates to dangers associated with involvement in idolatry. James wants to make sure that these Gentiles make a clean break with their past when they embrace the living and true God."

All that they need for salvation is belief in Jesus as their savior. It's not that eating meat sacrificed to idols negates their beliefs or that, in and of itself, is against their faith (Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians 8). The problem is that it draws them back too closely to their earlier, pre-Christian practices and could pull them away from living as Christ followers, so they are instructed to avoid these temptations.

The important thing is that they are affirmed in their inclusion in the covenant without circumcision. They, and everyone else who decides to follow Jesus, are now an equal and important part of the family of God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Is following Jesus a religion? Why or why not?
2. What effect have you seen on the church when Christ followers get into disputes with one another?
3. When have you experienced freedom in your life (especially when it has come after feeling constrained)? What happened? How did it feel?

Week 4 Video Discussion Questions:

1. We can't read the book of Acts without seeing the way that God keeps opening the door wider and wider. How does it feel when you've been an insider in some situation (church, family, work, neighborhood) compared to how it feels if you were an outsider who has now been included?
2. Tom quotes Edwin Markham's poem *Outwitted* ("He drew a circle that shut me out- heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and took him in!"). Do you redraw lines in your life to take people in? How?
3. Many of us operate from a position of "I obey, therefore I am accepted." The Gentile mission turns this idea on its head. Do you find yourself falling into that trap of working for your acceptance?
4. What practical steps were taken by the church to sort out the disagreements over circumcision?
5. How did the Jerusalem Council model healthy church disagreement? What can you learn from that about conflict in your life?
6. Ask someone in your group to read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and reflect on that passage in relation to the apostles' witness in Acts. What do you think the difference is between adjusting the gospel to fit a certain context versus watering it down to make it easier to accept?

Prayer requests and other notes.