

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 9, Chapter 3 continued 2

Before we move on in Acts chapter 3 with our discussion of the cripple who was healed by the power of Yeshua through Peter and John, let's recall what we learned in our last lesson.

We talked about the relationship between sin and sickness and found that the Bible frames the issue as one of wholeness....or perhaps more accurately the lack of wholeness... as the dynamic that undergirds the connection between sin and sickness. When we compare and contrast Bible passages on this subject in John 5 and John 9 we find in the first instance these words of Yeshua who was speaking to a lame person he had just healed: ***“See, you are well! Now stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you!”*** But in the second instance we have Yeshua healing a blind man and when asked by His disciples whose sins caused this man to be blind, He answered: ***“His blindness is due neither to his sin nor that of his parents; it happened so that God’s power might be seen at work in him.”***

So in the sense that sinning (meaning wrong behavior, breaking the Torah Law) directly leads to a person becoming ill, Scripture shows that is not necessarily the case. It can be so, but by no means can we establish a concrete direct one to one link between committing sins and sickness; steal a car, get the measles. Commit adultery, get cancer. Rather, it is more about the reality that as a result of the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden, all humans are born in sin (that is, we all are born with sin woven into our DNA). And the result of this is that we get sick and we die. So sickness is the tangible physical manifestation and counterpart of the invisible spiritual condition of sin.

But to God the issue of sin is the lack of wholeness in His created creatures. All of His creatures were created whole. But because we now have sin woven into us, then we are no longer whole; we are blemished. Sickness and death also represent a lack of physical wholeness. Thus since nothing that is not whole can be allowed into the presence of God, and since the Fall of Man nothing remains whole, what is to be done? Answer: God must restore that which is not whole to full wholeness. But how? Through redemption. By the blood and the living water of the Lamb, Son of God, those who profess the Lamb (Yeshua of Nazareth) as their Redeemer are imputed with a kind of wholeness. It is certainly not that our bodies are made physically new and whole, because Believers suffer disease and die just like the wicked do. Rather it is our spirits that are made whole, and acceptable, to God such that when we finally shed these un-whole bodies, our spirits may enter into His presence. As Paul so eloquently said it: **CJB 2 Corinthians 5:8** *We are confident, then, and would much prefer to leave our home in the body and come to our home with the Lord.*

So a key principle that we learned (and frankly sometimes flies in face of what we might have been taught in the past) is that redemption is not an end or goal in itself; rather redemption is the means to attain the goal. And the goal is wholeness before God.

Another thing we discussed was that in Christ's day physicians were viewed with suspicion by the Jews (Luke, the writer of Acts, was a physician). Generally speaking, the attitude was that God was the healer, and so a sick person was to seek God and no one else for healing. Thus medical healing by doctors and prayer for divine healing were regularly seen as incompatible. Even so, because of the dominance of Greek culture and the practice of medicine being so prevalent in the Roman Empire, Jews sort of readapted their thinking and began to accept the notion that medical healing and doctors were themselves a gift from God, and thus could be used in conjunction with prayer for healing provided the medical doctor didn't practice magic. Nevertheless, while out in the Jewish Diaspora this concept of physicians and medicine as NOT being an enemy to faith in God was easily accepted, in Judea and Jerusalem it was less so. Thus at the Temple, when Peter and John seemed to have healed the cripple of our story of Acts 3, they were instantly seen by the locals as faith healers. And so their first reaction was to make it clear that they didn't heal this man; God healed him. And that it was done in the name, power and authority of Yeshua of Nazareth.

Let's re-read part of Acts 3.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 3:12 – end

The first thing to notice here is that in verse 12 it is reaffirmed to whom Peter is addressing his speech: to the men of Israel. Peter is not talking to gentiles, as gentiles are at this point not relevant to anything **Kefa** (Peter) is thinking about (at least, not yet). And because this crippled man was so well known, it was clear that something miraculous had happened to him and it involved Peter and John. Quickly Peter deflects credit that the gathering crowd wants to give to him and says that it was neither power from God given to them, nor was it their personal condition of special godliness. And now Peter gives a speech that is essentially a Gospel presentation. First, he says that the power to do such miracles is invested in but one person: Yehoveh; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (that is, the God of the Hebrews). However this same God has glorified Yeshua of Nazareth, meaning God has given Christ authority and power that belongs exclusively to the Father.

This concept of the power belonging to God the Father, but being given to Yeshua His Son, can be difficult to grasp. Thus there are theologians beginning with some of the earlier Church Fathers who determined that if the Father gave His son His authority and power, that means that Jesus now carries what His Father used to have, but willingly gave up. And that kind of thinking is what results when Yeshua is wrongly cast into a Greek cultural mold, because in the Greek god pantheon, a father god would give power to his son, but whatever power he gave to the son only the son now possessed it and the father god no longer had that particular power. So the son-God could even use that power against his father. And while some of you may be thinking that you had never heard that from a Pastor as regards the Biblical Father and Son, in fact this implication is expressed in the doctrines and attitudes of many mainstream denominations. This is why among some Christians Jesus is seen as supremely relevant, but the Father is seen as less relevant or even irrelevant for so-called New Testament Believers.

But because Yeshua was a Jew who was born and lived in a Jewish Middle Eastern culture, the relationship between a typical father and his son was well understood by Peter's audience. Indeed the family patriarch bore all the power in the family until he became completely incapacitated or died. If at a certain age of maturity the firstborn son seems worthy enough to handle some of the father's affairs, then the father (at his sole discretion) will give the son authority and power to act as the father's proxy in whatever capacity the father decides. But

this in no way means that the father has surrendered the familial authority and power in the sense that he has transferred it to his son, so that now only his son possesses it and the father no longer has a say. When we see the heavenly Father and His Son portrayed to us in the Bible, we must think in these same terms because that is precisely what is intended. The Father holds and retains all power, but he has given power and authority to His Son Yeshua to act as the Father's *shaliach* (His agent). And interestingly Peter characterizes Yeshua not as an equal, but as the servant of the Father. Again, this is but standard Jewish Middle Eastern thinking about the father and son relationship.

But just as Peter had done when he bashed the crowd of Jews on Mt. Zion who were witnessing the Pentecost event of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the speaking in tongues, he now lays the same accusation upon the Jews who have come running to see this formerly lame man leaping around like a deer. He says that the one whom God glorified (Jesus), they denied and disowned. And when Pontius Pilate gave the Jewish crowd a choice of pardoning a criminal murderer or letting the innocent Christ go, the crowd sided with the murderer. The result was that the author of life (Yeshua) was given the death sentence and killed.

While we're here, I want to digress for just a moment to discuss Pontius Pilate. He was the 5th in a series of governors over the Roman province of Judea. And it is as certain as anything can be when we're looking back 2000 years in the historical record, that he came into power on what our modern calendars would say is 26 A.D. He was known as a rigid, reckless and ruthless ruler that tended to stir up civil disobedience rather than to tamp it down using any kind of diplomacy. This was against formal Roman policy that attempted to rule its empire in an enlightened way, not unlike the way Cyrus had operated the Persian Empire.

Pilate was removed from power by Caesar in 36 A.D. for a particularly unconscionable act against some Samaritans who wanted to journey to Mt. Gerizim to meet with a prophet. He killed many of this peaceful assembly for ambiguous reasons. My purpose for telling you this is that because Pilate was the one who condemned Jesus to the cross, then Christ's death had to occur no earlier than 26 A.D. and no later than 36 A.D. So we have a well defined 10 year period for when Christ ministered and died. So when we understand that this miracle of healing the cripple at the Beautiful Gate occurred not long after Shavuot in the same year that Christ died and ascended to Heaven, then we get a good point of reference for dating this event.

In verse 16 Peter pronounces perhaps the most important non-negotiable doctrine of Salvation: ***“It is trust that comes through Yeshua, which has given him this perfect healing in the presence of you all”***. We discussed in our last lesson the Greek work *holoklerian* and while here it is being translated as “perfect healing” essentially it is a term meant to denote wholeness. Thus Peter is saying that it is Yeshua through who comes our restoration to wholeness, just as it has for this disabled man. Notice that once the lame man is made whole, only NOW can he enter the gate into the Temple grounds. And the requirement to receive this restoration to wholeness is trust in Yeshua as the Messiah. Of course it is this trust in Yeshua that Evangelical Christianity has termed grace.....and I can't think of a more appropriate English word than grace to describe what Christ has done for us. This man crippled from birth (as are all human beings) who was made whole did nothing to merit restoration; it was simply given to him as a free gift from God. What an exquisite picture of Salvation we are offered here in this healing.

Next Peter invokes essentially the same words that Yeshua did on the Cross, only slightly modified. In verse 17 Peter says: ***CJB Acts 3:17 "Now, brothers, I know that you did not understand the significance of what you were doing; neither did your leaders."*** This compares favorably with what we find in Luke 23: ***CJB Luke 23:34 Yeshua said, "Father, forgive them; they don't understand what they are doing."*** We should take notice that the only Gospel that records these particular words of Christ is the Gospel of Luke; the same Luke who wrote Acts. So it is no coincidence that Luke chooses to also record that Peter borrowed these familiar words from his master to mitigate the fear and guilt (and probably anger among some of them) that the crowd was feeling.

And, because the Gospel is consistent and never changes, Peter's words about what the crowd should do about their guilt for killing God's Son are essentially the same as he spoke to the crowds on Pentecost: repent. Verse 19 has Peter saying, ***“Repent and turn to God so that your sins may be erased”***. Now there is more to this verse that we'll get to in a little while. But first, I'd like to point out that if you use a KJV Bible that same verse reads like this: ***KJV Acts 3:19 “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.....”*** The CJB says “turn to God”; the KJV says “be converted”. We're going to pause now and take a detour to examine yet another common Christian doctrine that needs to be retired. And it is the doctrine that says becoming a Christian means to convert.

This little word convert has enormous implications; and it has much to do with the wall of separation that has grown between Jews and Christians. And I'll tell you the bottom line up front before I explain the matter more thoroughly. Peter's call is **not** to convert; it is to turn. The dictionary says that to convert means to change in form, or to metamorphose. To become something other than you are. But to turn means: to rotate, swivel, or pivot. I hope you heard the rather large difference in meaning and outcome of the two terms convert and turn. One means to become something else entirely; the other means to change direction. So what is it that a person is supposed to do when we repent and come to Jesus: become something else entirely? Or to change direction?

The Greek word being translated is **epistrefo**. And remembering that what is being expressed is Hebrew thought coming from Peter's Jewish mind, then we need to grasp that the Greek we have it in is effectively a translation. By the way: I'm not claiming that Acts was originally written in Hebrew. I'm saying that while the original written text is Greek (so far as we know), the thought and culture and language of the Bible character Peter is Hebrew. So **epistrefo** is attempting to translate the Hebrew word **shav**, which means to turn back. The issue that has arisen from this intellectually incorrect KJV Bible choice to use the word "convert" stems from an agenda that the Catholic Church held that indeed one had to metamorphose like a caterpillar to a butterfly to become a Christian. Or, even more so, from a cat to a dog. And doubly so for Jews. For a Jew, to convert to Christianity first and foremost meant to stop being a Jew and start being a gentile. This was no misunderstanding, nor did they mean something different than what we mentally picture when we envision conversion. It is precisely what the Church leadership intended since the thinking was that Christianity is a gentiles-only religion; and this doctrine of conversion is deeply imbedded (although often invisibly just below the surface) in most of mainstream Christianity even if Christians regularly don't recognize it for what it is.

Words have meaning. Words create mental pictures that lead to assumptions and conclusions that we make often without consciously realizing it. And while I don't know what we'd do without the written word of God, on the other hand, unless one is versed in the original languages what all of us read from are translations.

But that's only the beginning of the issue of extracting meaning from words. The meaning of words changes over time. Some English words used in the KJV Bible translation don't necessarily mean what we take that same word to mean in the

21st century. Goodness, during my lifetime there are many English words that I used in my childhood that have completely different meanings today. And there are English words that exist today that didn't when I was a youth.

Thus for you who have followed Seed of Abraham Torah Class over the years, you know that one of our basic tenets is that we must try to understand what those words written in the Bible meant to the authors and to the people those authors were directing their inspired words towards, in their time and in their ancient Middle Eastern cultural setting. This historical reconstruction is crucial to extract proper meaning from the words we read in Scripture. What must also be admitted is that some of those ancient Hebrew concepts have been tragically misunderstood (and at times misrepresented) and so mistranslated into English words that give us the wrong impression of their intent, but do fulfill certain theological agendas.

There are a few Biblical words, though, that have more impact on our Christian theology, doctrines and philosophy than others and one of those key words is the term "convert" or "conversion". And while we have found this English word used in the KJV and a handful of other Bibles, and in our study today of the Book of Acts chapter 3 verse 19, this is also true as the word "conversion" applies to the Apostle Paul. And I propose to you today that this word "conversion" needs to be removed from our Believer's vocabulary and removed from our Bibles as concerns redemption, repentance and salvation because it isn't actually there and doesn't belong being inserted there. Conversion gives us an entirely wrong impression about what it was that Peter and Luke had in mind in Acts, and what Paul did in reaction to his experience with Christ, and what he expected of the disciples that they all made on behalf of Messiah.

The traditional scholarship over the past several centuries has concluded that the 1st generation Christian community after Yeshua and the Apostles had already become a distinct religion that was separated from Judaism. Basically the idea is that Peter was in process of rejecting Judaism in favor of Christianity, and Paul already had, and along with it he had decided to condemn as worthless servitude any attempt for new Believers to follow the Law of Moses that was the very heartbeat of the Biblical religion. The term that was coined by later Christian leaders to describe what this well studied Jewish Rabbi Sha'ul did in his extreme change from being a follower of Judaism into an anti-law Christian, was "conversion". Paul was a convert we are told.

But what does being converted mean? A.D. Nock says that conversion means a deliberate and great change is involved, whereby the old was wrong and the new is right. And in indeed that is the crux of Christian doctrine to prove that Peter and then Paul decided that their Hebrew Judaism that obeyed the Torah was wrong, and this new religion called Christianity that abolished the Torah was right.

In the mid 1970's a Bible academic named Krister Stendahl urged his fellow scholars to drop the term conversion and instead use the word "call". His contention was that this English word more accurately portrays to the modern mind what was true: and it is that Peter and Paul did NOT see themselves as no longer part of Judaism or as Jews who abandoned the Law and the Torah. The word "call" softened the contrast between the Judaism that these two Messianic leaders had been practicing and this new and spreading movement that made Yeshua of Nazareth the focus. In other words, for Peter, Paul, and all the disciples what they came to practice after their personal experiences with Christ was a type of Judaism, not a new anti-Judaism religion.

Of course there was push back against Mr. Stendhal from the institutional Christian community that wanted there to be not merely a sharp contrast, but rather a complete break, between Torah-based Judaism and this new Christianity. And this thought process is based on the idea that Paul **converted** from Judaism to Christianity. It means that he discovered that the traditional Torah-based religion of the Hebrews was wrong, and now he would follow the new Christianity that in his day had no holy book whatsoever. After all, it is historical fact that there was no New Testament until around 200 A.D., some 150 years after Paul's time.

So if Peter and Paul (and of course the other disciples) "converted", then why do they continue going to the Temple in Jerusalem, and making sacrifices there? Why does Paul continue to engage in the vow rituals of first allowing one's hair to grow, and then cutting it and offering it at the Temple upon conclusion of the vow terms? Why do they all continue to engage in the Biblical Feasts ordained in Leviticus?

But getting beyond Peter and Paul, how do we deal with the two groups that are routinely said to be Paul's converts: Jews who practice Judaism, and pagan Gentiles who practice idolatry? On the surface it would certainly seem to be correct to say that Gentiles indeed made metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly: from the worship of their traditional gods and idols to the worship of the

God of Israel. Here's the reason why the term "convert" still is inappropriate and misleading even to this situation. In Peter's worldview (which was representative of the general Jewish worldview) the world consisted of two religious communities: Israel's and everybody else (everybody else was "the nations", *goyim* in the Hebrew Scriptures). However there were some Gentiles who had become something called God-fearers; Gentiles who adopted the God of Israel as their god.

So had the Jews reached a point in their cultural evolution of making a distinction between Gentiles and **pagan** Gentiles? No. That kind of thought is nowhere present during the era of the Apostles. A culture or ethnicity and their god were one in the same. So if you are an Israelite you automatically worship the god of Israel; if you are Gentile you automatically worship some other god from wherever you lived. End of story. Thus in the Book of Galatians chapter 5 Paul speaks against other so-called Christian missionaries who are telling the local Gentiles of Galatia that if they receive a Jewish circumcision, then they'll be responsible to keep the "whole law" (meaning the Torah **and** the entire body of Tradition that most national Jews followed). In other words, the acts of having a circumcision and agreeing to live a completely Jewish lifestyle mean that such a Gentile has converted; that he has metamorphosed from being a Gentile to becoming a Jew. And surprise! Paul was against this. He was against conversion. He did not want Gentiles to give up being Gentiles to become national Jews. His Gentiles were to stay Gentiles. Yes, they must stop worshipping their other gods and bow only to the God of Israel; but they were NOT to convert (Christianity calls what these Christian Missionaries were doing that Paul was fighting against as Judaizing). So in Paul's mind, the only true converts were those Gentiles who intentionally became national Jews as the Judaizing missionaries were insisting upon.

You see the problem in using the word convert or conversion is it confuses and misrepresents the situation that is being described in the Bible. The term convert entangles us in the idea that in Peter's day Christianity was created by Christ (as the first Christian) as something for people to convert to.

So if Gentiles were NOT to convert and become Jews, and there was no need for Jews to convert to something else to follow Yeshua, then what was Paul's thought about what had happened to him on the road to Damascus and what, precisely, was he asking these Gentiles he was preaching to, to do? What mental picture did he have that he was urging them to accept and adopt? When you look

at Paul's writings in Greek, he uses certain derivations of the Greek word **strefo** and they all have something to do with pointing to or turning to. For example in 1Thess 1:9 we hear Paul say: "You turned to (**epistrefo**) God from idols, to worship the true and living God". Interestingly when the Greek got translated into Latin, the Latin word chosen was **converso**; and then when the Latin got translated into English the word chosen was convert.

So the idea that Peter and Paul insist upon is that one does **not** convert, but rather one turns. If a Gentile converted that means he would become a Jew, follow Jewish Tradition, and be obligated to follow Jewish ancestral customs. If a Jew converted he became a Gentile and gave up his Jewish heritage. But as Paul said in 1Thess. 1, a new Believer is to turn and unite with God the Father and with the Lord Yeshua.....Jew or gentile.

So Paul in trying to explain exactly what it is that he is asking Gentiles to do says that upon one's faith in Messiah Yeshua, the Holy Spirit enters the Believer and a kind of spiritual family connection is made with the Jewish people. And to illustrate this, Paul likes to use the Roman concept of adoption (after all he is talking to Gentiles). The adopted person does NOT have REAL physical blood or genetic connection to his or her adoptive family; nonetheless, in a real legal way and by means of a state of mind this person becomes part of the family by mutual agreement. The adopted person makes a commitment to the family, and the family imputes family status upon the adopted person. Further, as Paul says in Romans 8 and Galatians 4 that upon this status change, the adopted person (a gentile) can now cry out "Abba, Father" in worship. This "Abba, Father" isn't the Hebrew Patriarch Abraham nor is it Jacob, so no family connection with him is intended. Rather this "Abba, Father" is referring to the heavenly Father, the God of Israel and of Abraham. So just as a Roman adopted person would not claim blood relationship with his new family, he does claim full legal family status based on law and on mutual agreement.

Thus this is how we need to view what Peter meant, and what happened to Paul on the Road to Damascus, and what Paul then expected of those Gentiles that he would go on to evangelize. He expected them to **turn** from their god to the true god.

When we realize this then we can drop this concept that the disciples converted from something wrong to something right. That they all left their Jewishness to become something else. Or that a Gentile is to leave his or her Gentile-ness to

become something else (a Jew). Whatever change there is, or is being asked, it is a spiritual turning.

This also helps us to understand why the Church's insistence that if a Jew wants to worship Christ that they must "convert", is met with such resistance by the Jewish community (as it should be). And this is because a right-thinking Jew understands that by converting the Church most certainly means that the Jew must leave his or her Judaism, ancestral Jewish heritage, and Jewish cultural customs in order to become a Christian.

Paul sums up his position rather well regarding Jews and gentiles, and whether the one should "convert" to become the other, in Romans 2:25 – Romans 3:5

READ ROMANS 2:25 – 3:6

So I ask you to retire the term convert or conversion from your vocabulary, and instead begin to employ the term "turn" in your words and in your thinking. Because that is closer to what Peter meant, and to what Paul did as he was prepared to take the Good News to the world of the Gentiles.

Well, as you can see, because Acts chapter 3 is so loaded with theologically important issues that arise from the advent of Yeshua and the coming of the Holy Spirit, we're still not done with Acts chapter 3. So we will continue in it next week.