

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 10, Chapters 3 and 4

We'll continue to go at a measured pace through Acts chapter 3 and on into chapter 4 because there are so many theological implications that pass right by us if we don't. And when they do come up it behooves us to notice and talk about them.

So; because of a single word that we found in Acts chapter 3 verse 19 in the most popular version of the Bible ever created, the King James Bible, we spent much time last week with an issue of vital importance to our faith and to Jewish/Christian relations. That single word is "convert". ^{KJV} **Acts 3:19** ***"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...."***

The reality is that the English word "converted" is not there in the Greek NT manuscripts. Rather in Greek the word is ***epistrefo*** and it doesn't mean to convert, it means to turn or to pivot. Convert of course means for a thing to become something else entirely. But to turn means for a thing to change direction. So, which is a new Believer to do in order to have our sins blotted out: convert or turn? Big difference. The choice of convert or turn should not be viewed as some highly nuanced scholarly debate that belongs only in the realm of theologians; rather it is fundamental to Christianity and helps to define what the terms of our membership into the Kingdom of God are. Why was the word convert chosen by the KJV translator if the word wasn't actually there? Because the Roman Church had for over 1000 years declared itself to be a gentiles-only institution. Jews were welcome only if they "converted" from being a Jew into being a gentile; a Jew had to quit being Jewish in order to become a Christian. The underlying theological assumption was that Jews were required to change from following something that the Church deemed had been wrong (the Biblical

Torah, the Law of Moses, and subsequent Jewish Traditions) to following something that the Church deemed was right: the New Testament and subsequent Roman Christian Traditions.

Naturally the result was that except for a tiny handful, the world's Jews shunned Christianity for themselves because it necessarily meant giving up their Jewishness and their Hebrew heritage. Thus for around 1700 years a formidable wall has existed between Judaism and Christianity, but in reality the wall is a barrier between Jews and their Messiah.

We concluded our last lesson with me urging all who hear my voice to please remove the term "convert" from your Christian vocabulary. Rather Jews, just as gentiles, are not required to convert but to turn from our sins and from idolatry and from manmade doctrines to the One God Yehoveh, and His Son Yeshua. It is through repentance and **turning** (not converting) that our sins are blotted out, says Peter. Paul says that Jews should remain Jews and gentiles should remain gentiles in Romans 2 and 3. But our mutual salvation comes from the same place: the person and Lordship of Yeshua the Messiah. And we are to share one mutual holy book: the Bible, Old and New Testaments working together as one unified inspired source of God's Word.

Let's move on now and complete Acts chapter 3 and get started with chapter 4.

Open your Bibles to Acts chapter 3 and we'll re-read a few verses.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 3:19 – end

Verse 20 speaks of "times of refreshing" that come for those who repent and turn from their sins to Christ. This refreshing comes to us due to the presence of the Lord. The word refreshing is translating the Greek word ***anapsyxis***. This term occurs in the Septuagint (the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that came before the Dead Sea Scrolls), but there it is translated into English as relief or respite, and not refreshing. So it seems to me that the intent of verse 20 is not so much that the presence of the Lord will refresh, but that He will provide relief and rest. This seems to play well with Yeshua's call that we read in Matthew's Gospel:

^{CJB} **Matthew 11:28** *"Come to me, all of you who are struggling and burdened, and I will give you rest."*

And yet even Yeshua's statement to that effect is but repeating what the Father said in the Torah in Exodus 33:

^{CJB} **Exodus 33:14** *He answered, "Set your mind at rest- my presence will go with you, after all."*

And the reason that I want to draw that connection concerning rest in the Lord for you is this: in verse 20 when it is said that the Lord's presence shall bring the times of **anapsyxis** (relief, rest) to Believers, who is the Lord in this case; the Father or Jesus? The answer becomes clear when we look at the remainder of verse 20: **".....and He may send the Messiah appointed in advance for you, that is, Yeshua."** Obviously the "He" is referring to the Father; otherwise we have the Messiah sending Himself. So it is the Father who is here being called Lord.

Verse 21 explains that Yeshua must remain in Heaven until the time comes for restoring everything. That is, a planet-wide restoration for all who have been elected for restoration will happen upon Christ's return to earth, when the Father decides it is time. And yet we must also understand from the previous verse that it is God the Father by whose power the restoration will come, even when the time of Yeshua's return arrives. This brings us back to another important issue we talked about last week, the well-understood concept in NT times of the relationship between father and son (go back to last week's lesson to get a more thorough discussion on the subject). But the Reader's Digest version is that the Son is subservient to the Father, and the Father can, and regularly does, give some of His power and authority to His Son to wield. But this is not a transfer of power and authority such that now the Son possesses it and the Father renounces the power and authority He used to have. Rather it is that the Son becomes the Father's **shaliach** (his agent, his proxy) to carry out the Father's will. It is the Father's power through His agent....Yeshua....that is being exercised.

Thus when we read in the book of Matthew: ^{CJB} **Matthew 28:18** *Yeshua came and talked with them. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...."* the first question for us to ask is 'who is it that gave to Yeshua all authority'? Answer; the Father. And since the Father and Son relationship of the Bible is used strictly within the context of Hebrew Middle Eastern culture, not Greek or gentile or 21st century Western culture, then we understand that Christ isn't saying that the Father has **transferred** all power and authority that He once carried to His Son Yeshua and now has essentially

become an empty vessel and retired. Rather what is meant is that all the Father's power and authority can be wielded by the Son, Yeshua, as the Father's authorized agent. But the power that the Son wields is still the Father's.

At the end of verse 20 Peter says that this knowledge that he has about Messiah Yeshua, and what His return means, came from all the Prophets of the Tanakh, the Old Testament. But is it true, or just an exaggeration, that even the earliest Prophets looked ahead and saw the day of Messiah coming and spoke of Him? Yes it is true, and Peter goes on to quote words from Moses in Deuteronomy 18 that gives a stern warning that God is going to raise up another Prophet in the future, "from among your brothers" (meaning the Prophet will come from the 12 tribes of Israel), that will be like Moses. And Moses was himself both a Prophet and a Mediator, which indeed is what Yeshua also is. Only Moses and Yeshua held that God-given privilege of Prophet and Mediator, or ever will. And the people (Israel) are to listen to this future Prophet...or else. What is the purpose of a Biblical Prophet? A Prophet is to announce God's will so that the people (including the Israelite Kings) know what God's will is. Thus this second Moses, Yeshua, will also announce God's will. He or she who refuses to listen to God's will that is announced through Yeshua shall be removed from his/her people (Israel) and destroyed.

So Peter is essentially saying that the first Prophet to speak of Yeshua was Moses, and then this prophetic testimony was carried on through all the later prophets beginning with Samuel. It should not go unnoticed that Samuel was the Prophet assigned to anoint Saul as Israel's first king, and then later to replace Saul with David. So many of the pronouncements that Samuel made concerning David would also apply to David's royal descendant Yeshua, meaning the prophecies were Messianic prophecies.

Then Peter connects those Jews standing before him with the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah by saying that they are the sons of the Prophets. Saying these Jews are sons of the Prophets is a Middle Eastern cultural expression that means that they are the ones who are the inheritors of what the Prophets prophesied. Even more they are the ones being spoken of in the Covenant promise God made to Abraham so long ago when He said "By your seed will all the families of the earth be blessed". And since they are biologically connected with Abraham, then God has determined that it is the Jews to whom Christ would first be sent, before anyone else. And this is so that the Jews would be the first ones to turn (*epistrefeo*) from their evil ways and be

saved.

What must be noticed and acknowledged by Christians especially is that the Lord revolved all His salvation plans, efforts, and even the persons involved, around Israel. The Word of God in stone was given to a Hebrew (Moses). The Word of God in flesh was Himself a Hebrew (Yeshua). And both Moses and Yeshua gave God's Word exclusively to Hebrews. Whatever of God's Word would eventually go to gentiles went through the lesser ordinary humans such as the Apostles like Peter and Paul.

Indeed, the roots of our faith are Hebrew roots at every level.

Let's move on to Acts chapter 4.

No sooner does Peter begin to announce the Gospel of Christ than the persecutions begin. And, since as of this time the only people who were hearing the Gospel were Jews, then of course it was the Jewish leadership who were the persecutors. That is the subject of Acts chapter 4.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 4 all

Let's begin by understanding that what we just read is all occurring with the context and timeframe of the healing of the crippled man. It is still the same day, and what Peter said to the crowd in Acts 3 happened immediately upon the healing, and chapter 4 follows in a matter of an hour or so.

Verse one explains that Peter was still explaining about the healing to the crowd (and no doubt answering many questions) when apparently this growing assembly of excited and amazed Jews drew the attention of the Temple authorities who were always on the lookout for trouble. Those who ran the Temple, beginning with the High Priest, held their positions only because the Romans permitted it. So they worked hard to be sure that no unrest at the Temple would upset the Roman leadership and thus endanger their highly profitable occupations.

We are told that a contingency of Temple leadership came to investigate: the priests, the captain of the Temple police, and the ***Tz'dukim*** (the Sadducees). This group was quite angry and upset mainly because of the doctrine Peter was teaching. And that doctrine was of the bodily resurrection of the dead, with

Yeshua as the proof of their claim. We have a couple of items to talk about in this regard. First, we should remember that these Temple authorities were the same ones who had just weeks earlier sentenced Yeshua to death and turned Him over to Pontius Pilate. So since the mood of the times was one of great religious fervor and the expectation of a Messiah to throw off the oppressive Roman subjugation that the Jews hated, Jerusalem was always just one spark away from a serious riot.

Second, the Sadducees were generally seen as heartless and cold in their administration of the Temple and in meting out justice. And they were viewed as lackeys of the Romans, more determined to stay in power by pleasing Rome than having concern for justice for their own people, the Jews. The Pharisees were the more popular party of that day and so the theology of the Pharisees was more widely accepted by the mainstream Jewish public. This issue of resurrection from the dead, especially bodily resurrection, was enormously controversial, and naturally the belief of the Pharisees was at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Sadducees. And the belief of the 3rd largest party, the Essenes, was on many matters different from both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. So if we can step back for a moment and grasp the big picture, the main thing the Sadducee Temple authority was so upset about was the issue of resurrection from the dead, and that was at the heart of Peter's message. Add to it the other delicate issue of the many followers of Yeshua being pretty bitter and angry at the Sadducees for the injustice done to their leader and we can see why the Sadducees needed to intervene immediately lest this situation snowball out of control.

Messianic Rabbi Joseph Shulam in his commentary on the Book of Acts used words from Josephus that described in detail some of the theological differences between the main 3 parties of the Jews, including the thorny issue of resurrection from the dead, and he expressed the philosophies of the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. I can do no better than that, and I think it is so very helpful for Bible students to understand just what the mainstream prevailing views were of resurrection in Christ's era so we can better digest what we're reading in the New Testament; and no place is more affected by these views than the Book of Acts. Here's what Josephus had to say:

“For it is a fixed belief of (the Essenes) that the body is corruptible and its constituent matter impermanent (temporary), but that the soul is immortal and imperishable (eternal). Emanating from the finest ether (ether is the

invisible stuff that souls are made of), these souls become entangled, as it were, in the prison of the body, to which they are dragged down by a sort of natural spell. But once they are released from the bonds of the flesh (after a person dies), then, as though liberated from a long servitude, they rejoice and are borne aloft. They (the Essenes) regard the soul as immortal and so believe that they ought to strive especially to draw near to righteousness.

Every soul they (the Pharisees) maintain is imperishable (eternal), but the soul of the good (the righteous dead) passes into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment. They believe that souls have the power to survive death and that there are rewards and punishments under the earth (the grave) for those who have led lives of virtue or vice. Eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while good souls receive an easy passage to new life.

The Sadducees hold that the soul perishes along with the body (at death). They do away with Fate altogether, and remove God beyond not merely the commission, but the very sight of evil. They maintain that man has the free choice of good or evil, and that it rests with each man's free will whether he follows one or the other. As for the persistence of the soul after death, penalties in the underworld, and rewards, they will have none of them."

Another interesting belief of the Sadducees was that they did not believe in the Oral Torah, or what Yeshua called The Traditions of the Elders. They held that only the written law (the Torah Law, the Law of Moses) was valid and it was to be applied in the strictest possible manner. This of course was opposite of the Pharisees who put the Oral Torah on par with, or really above, the written Torah. But the bottom line for our story in Acts 4 is that the Sadducees denied the possibility of EITHER resurrection of the soul or body; when you're dead, you're dead, and your soul dies along with you. Your existence in any form ceases and there is no afterlife. At the same time the Pharisees so strongly believed in resurrection of the soul and transference of that soul into another body (a kind of reincarnation) that they said that anyone who did NOT believe this doctrine the same as they did had no place in the world to come (in Hebrew, the **olam haba**). Sounds a bit like Christian denominations today, who say if you don't accept most of their particularly cherished doctrines that you might not even be a Christian!

Since it is said that priests, the captain of the Temple police, and Sadducees

were part of the entourage that came to arrest Peter and John, let's talk about them for a moment. The priests are referring to the chief priests. There were a number of them, and they were the most senior of the regular priests who were in charge of the various courses of priests who served in rotation at the Temple. The captain of the Temple police is called the *sagan*. He belonged to one or another of the families of the chief priests. He was of very high rank, with only the High Priest above him, so he carried great authority. The Temple police is the same police group that had arrested Christ on that infamous Passover night a few weeks earlier. The Temple police were not Romans, they were hand picked Levites, although there is evidence that in certain circumstances Roman soldiers might accompany the Levite Temple policemen. The Sadducees were aristocrats of wealthy families; and the High Priests were Sadducees. Further the Sadducees were the top officials of the High Jewish court called the Great Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin consisted of a mixture of Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Great Sanhedrin was the supreme court of the Jews when it came to religious matters. It operated near the Temple grounds in a building traditionally called the Building of Hewn Stones. Of course because of the way Jewish Law worked, religious and civil matters overlapped. Depending on who the current Procurator of Judea was (at this time it was Pontius Pilate), the Sanhedrin tended to deal with most criminal matters provided it was among Jews and didn't involve gentile Romans. It was a group that consisted of 71 men, and modeled after Moses and his group of 70 elders. The High Priest was the head of the Sanhedrin. And then the 70 other members were organized using a seniority system and were seated using a series of benches, much like the way the British Parliament works. That is, you have the most senior members who sit up front. Behind them are less senior members and behind them the most junior members. When a senior member vacated his front bench position, the Sanhedrin member junior to him that sat behind him, moved up to the front bench. When he moved up, the most junior member behind him also moved up to take his seat and then the now empty back bench seat was filled with a new member to the court.

So those who came to arrest Peter and Paul bore the greatest legal authority in Judea other than for the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate, indicating just how seriously they took this matter of resurrection theology and calling on the name of Yeshua especially as one who was resurrected (and to this there were many witnesses). Because it was late in the day, the 2 disciples were put into jail overnight to be dealt with the next day at the convenience of the court. However

we're told that before their arrest came, some 5000 men came to faith in Yeshua; a huge number that indicates just how enormous this crowd had become and it actually justifies the concern of the Temple authorities. In fact, although there is some scholarly debate as to whether this number of 5000 is men and women combined or men only, the word used here is **andron** and it means males, not people in general. So that means that probably double that number (adding in women) came to faith based on Peter's speech and the result of the healing of the cripple.

In verse 5 we're told that rulers, elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem along with some specific priests to hear the case. Rulers, elders, and scribes were names for various classes of members of the Great Sanhedrin. The rulers was an alternate name for the chief priests. Elders refer to Jewish nobility, but they were laymen and not Levites or Priests. Scribes is a bit hazy, because over the centuries the term evolved as it took on various meanings. It seems that in the New Testament era they were a kind of ruling class whose members could come from any one of several walks of life from low order priests, to rich merchants and even artisans. These were men who had attained a social status called **chakhamim**; this Hebrew word was used to denote ordained scholars. So they were well educated and experts in matters of business and law.

The Scribes were highly educated people especially trained in writing skills. What we now know is that while learning and speaking languages fluently, even reading well, was common among the Jews of Yeshua's day, it was seen as entirely different than learning how to write. Few learned how to write because it involved so much more than how we think of it today. The High Priests and aristocrats often couldn't write; thus they hired scribes to do it for them. Scribes of this era had to literally manufacture their own paper and ink. They had to fashion their own writing instruments. So writing involved an entire set of various skills to accomplish; one didn't just go to the marketplace and buy a few sheets of paper, some ink and a pen, and get started. In fact ink in those days didn't even penetrate the papyrus paper; although problematic on the one hand, on the other the ink sat on the surface of the paper so that it could be wiped or scraped off if there was an error. A sheet of papyrus paper could even be wiped clean and reused.

Along with the rulers, elders, and scribes who came to hear Peter and John's case, were other named members of the Sanhedrin: Annas (called the High Priest), Caiaphas, John and Alexander. And as verse 6 says they all belonged to

the high-priestly family. Let's spend a little time talking about the High Priest system in New Testament times.

The first thing to know is that it didn't operate at all the way the Torah prescribed it. Upon the Maccabean Rebellion of 164 B.C., and the subsequent retaking by the Jewish rebels of the Temple from the Syrian army and Antiochus Epiphanies (which, by the way, is remembered by the holiday of Hanukkah), the authorized High Priest was deposed and sent packing. The now deposed High Priest was of the line of Zadok, who was the rightful line of High Priests stemming from Aaron. But the Hasmon family (led by Judas the Maccabee, the hero of the rebellion) essentially took over the civil and religious governing of Judea. The result was that from that time forward the High Priesthood became a political office that could be bought and sold. Even though it was usually occupied by a person of Levite descent, and equally as usual that Levite belonged to one priestly line or another, it wasn't of the proper God-ordained line, the line of Zadok.

The Torah Law makes it that the High Priest is High Priest for life. Then only when he dies, his firstborn son takes his spot, reigns as High Priest until he dies, and so on. So the High Priest office was inherited and not chosen. But now since the Maccabean Rebellion, a High Priest might occupy the office for a few months or years and then decide to vacate and turn it over to another family member (or have it taken from him), or if the price was right, sold to another family entirely. So suddenly there were a number of current and former High Priests living at the same time and they all retained the title of High Priest even though they only served one at a time as the acting High Priest. It is just like it is in America with high political offices. For instance; all former Presidents retain their title for life, even after they've left office. Same for Governors. It's just a political tradition.

Thus in Acts chapter 4 while Annas is called High Priest, he was actually only the Patriarch of the reigning High Priestly family and was not actually the current High Priest. The current High Priest was his son-in-law Caiaphas, and so for Annas High Priest was merely an honorary title. John and Alexander were other members of the High Priest family, but so far as the records show they had not been High Priests up to now. So in the New Testament we'll occasionally encounter words to the effect that the High Priests (plural) did so-and-so. That is not an error; there were a number of ex-High Priests running around who continued to hold high status.

In fact during the few times that Judea was not occupied by a foreign power,

such as immediately following the Maccabean Rebellion, the High Priest was also head of state. That is he was governor of Judea as well as the High Priest of the Temple. Hyrcannus is one such example.

In our story Annas was the 10th High Priest from the time of Herod the Great (who reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.) So High Priests came and went at an alarming rate. Interestingly, Annas was not appointed by a Jewish High Priestly family but instead by the then current Roman governor Quirinius in 6 B.C. So here we see that even control of the religious establishment of Judea (meaning the Temple) came under direct rule of the Romans from 6 B.C. until 38 A.D. when Agrippa was finally able to restore religious rule to the Jews. Annas held the office of High Priest for 8 or 9 years before he was removed by the Roman governor Valerius Gratus. He also appointed Annas' son-in-law Caiaphas as the new High Priest, an office he held obviously at the time of our story, but would be deposed in 36 A.D.

I know that's a lot of history; but my intention was for you to get a good picture of the state of the Temple and the Priesthood and how it operated all during the time of Christ, and how it was during the time of Peter and Paul right up until the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. It is no wonder that Yeshua showed no respect to the Temple authorities, and that the Essenes split with the Temple, labeled the Temple authorities as the Sons of Darkness, and set up shop out by the Dead Sea.

We'll continue with our study of Acts chapter 4 next time.