

The Sequel

Jesus Continued in the Book of Acts

PUSHED OUT OF THE NEST

How the Church Got to the World (Acts 8—10)

A Prep Guide for Session Four

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Open – Our Nature and God’s Mission

How do you arrange your to-do list? And which tasks do you do first and second and third? Time management pros tell us that we tend to put off or avoid altogether the tasks we least want to do. Ring a bell? The same goes for practice habits: in athletics and school studies and musical development we tend to spend a lot of time on the things we’re good at, and not as much on the things we most need to practice. It’s a prevalent human habit. We like the comfortable. Coaches and teachers and good friends call us to get “outside our comfort zone,” but it’s harder.

All of this is may be true about us, but we would never expect it to be true of saints. They must be the ones who do the hard things first, who rise above our frailties, who go where God calls them when God calls them, no matter the difficulty. Could you even imagine that the saints whose images we put on posters and icons, the ones whose names grace our churches, cities, and hospitals (and even the world’s most venerable golf course) – names like St. Peter, St. James, St. John, and St. Andrew – could share this aversion to hard tasks?! Surely not!

As we prayer for our fourth session together on Thursday, let’s take a look.

Part One – The Nest and the Push

Thus far in our study of Acts, we have found the apostles and the earliest Jerusalem Christians to be nothing short of brilliant. In our three short weeks together, we have watched as they have...

- faithfully waited for the Holy Spirit, as Jesus commanded them (Acts 1 and Session One),
- deftly navigated the altogether unscripted wildness of the first Pentecost, patterned their life after an ancient Israelite and Greco-Roman philosophical ideal of shared goods, made a destitute lame man walk and leap, inspired thousands to join them (Acts 2—3 and Session Two), and
- faced down the increasingly hostile Jewish authorities of Jerusalem with a Jesus-like courage that surpasses even the most treasured philosophical courage of their day (Acts 4—7 and Session Three).

The earliest church have been nothing short of remarkable.

Yet, with all of this dazzling faithfulness and growth, we may not have noticed their one glaring omission – a primary item on the “To Do” list Jesus gave them when he commissioned them that they have not even nudged themselves toward. Let’s take a look at this oversight – or their very human-looking procrastination – now.

The Nest

In Acts 1.8, the risen Jesus does tell his apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they “receive power” when “the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” At this, we have seen them succeed magnificently through Acts 1—7. However, in that same commission, Jesus also sends his apostles out to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” If we were crafting Jesus’ apostolic task list for them, then, it would look something like this:

- ◇ Wait for the Spirit.
- ◇ Receive power.
- ◇ Witness for Jesus in Jerusalem.
- ◇ Witness for Jesus in Judaea.
- ◇ Witness for Jesus in Samaria.
- ◇ Witness for Jesus to the ends of the earth.

If we are to take Luke’s numbers seriously, the first seven chapters of Acts feature perhaps the most spectacular expansion of the church in our 2,000 year history. The narrator carries us with breathtaking speed from the original twelve apostles, to an upper-room-sized gathering in a Jerusalem home to 5,000 in each other’s homes, to so many that the leaders can’t figure out the food network to feed their needy. (Acts 1.13-14 to 4.4 and 6.1). Not only because of that remarkable growth in numbers, but also because of the inspiring pattern of loving community those hordes lived out toward one another (Acts 2.42-47), we would imagine that it could be a sort of missional church headquarters. On top of all this, when we factor in the multitude of nations represented in those first Jerusalem crowds, every base seems to have been touched. Jerusalem would be the sending church to a world enterprise.

Not so fast. Even in this local missional wonderland of en-fleshed love and evangelism, we discover an early Christian resistance to looking outward. Some New Testament scholars point out Luke’s tendency to airbrush blemishes out of his subject in the account of the earliest Jerusalem church in Acts. For example, we will see in our next session that Acts 15 makes the council on Gentile inclusion seem amiable and authoritative, but we know from Paul’s letters that even after James’ decision, strong conflict between Paul and the circumcision people continued throughout his ministry. Our author sometimes tends to emphasize the positive.

That said, though, we shouldn't imagine that Luke won't air the dirty laundry. In Acts 1—7 the church has its less-than-savory moments. Peter retells the treachery of Judas the betrayer (Acts 1.16-18), the blatant dishonesty of Ananias and Sapphira and its chilling consequences stand starkly before our eyes in chapter 5, and the office of deacon arose because "the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food." (Acts 6.1) Sweetness and light does not describe all of the community's life together.

Maybe the most significant shadow Luke casts over the earliest Jerusalem church for our purposes is so subtle that we almost miss it. In these first chapters of Acts, the Jerusalem church benignly, but negligently declines Jesus' commission toward the nations.

At the outset of Acts, the resurrected Jesus gives his followers a significant fourfold task: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8)." It is true that in the long haul of this book, the church will obey each specific part of this command. But it certainly takes them a while. Seven chapters into the story, these Jerusalem Christians appear very comfortable simply to fulfill part one – "be my witnesses in Jerusalem" – and call it a day.

As Jesus has imaged it for them in 1.8, the Holy Spirit does come powerfully upon the community not long after he ascends. Immediately, they stream into the streets of Jerusalem and witness to the gathered nations. Peter preaches, the community flourishes, thousands embrace the message and the life of discipleship. The church is a rousing success in Jerusalem, despite persecution. By the time chapter six rolls around, the church has even outgrown their simple infrastructure, necessitating a corps of deacons who will see to the distribution of shared goods. The action is compressed, so we do not know how much time the narrator imagines passing, but numerical and bureaucratic growth imply elapsed time. These first chapters probably tell the story of several years in the life of the Jerusalem church.

The glaring blemish on the church that our narrator never explicitly identifies but loudly implies is the utter failure of any Christian in Jerusalem to initiate a mission beyond the walls of Jerusalem throughout the first six chapters of this story.

We might have imagined that conversation beginning immediately after Jesus' promise – even during the time of waiting before Pentecost. We could imagine Peter turning to the gathered company and saying, "Brothers and sisters, we don't know what this Spirit and power will look like, but whenever it comes, I'll take Jerusalem, Andrew, you take Judaea, John, how does Samaria sound for you? And – we'd better put at least a few of you on that part about the ends of the earth. (Laughter from the group.) May I ask for volunteers?"

We see no such thing. Apart from replacing Judas with Matthias (Acts 1.26), the church shows no strategic or tactical initiative at all in that upper room. They are content to pray and wait.

Or perhaps the initiative outward would have been better placed in chapter four, when we read about new thousands joining the church. “Our growth is a blessing!” one of them might say. “Now we are equipped and ready to take the blessing of Jesus out into Judaea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Again, it doesn’t happen. The organizational instincts do prompt them to consider a new infrastructure for the distribution of their material goods, but “Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth” still do not recur in their conversation.

The Push

As we entered (in Session 3) the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7, the church had enthusiastically embraced only one out of their four geographical directives from Jesus, and these Jerusalem Christians seemed content to leave the other three parts alone. Not until their angry opponents jailed Peter and John several times and then brutally stoned Stephen to death did the Christians of Jerusalem become suddenly very interested in mission!

“That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria (8.1b).”

The specificity of this verse’s last three words and their echo of “Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria...” from 1.8 can hardly be accidental. Like a little bird that needs her mother to shove her out of the nest, the cozy Jerusalem Christians literally had to be scared out of their homes and into the world Jesus commissioned them to reach.

Part Two – Learning to Love Flying

Have you ever experienced this: you resist a task or a move or some other call beyond your zone of comfort – you actually must be dragged kicking and screaming into it – and then, against all odds, you like it? It’s kind of embarrassing. Protest, followed by consent, followed by relish. Stories of this sort abound across human communities and, certainly, all Christian history. The Christian ones begin in Acts 8. When these faithful-but-hesitant folks fled Jerusalem fearing for their lives after Stephen’s martyrdom, brilliant experiences of God’s grace changed their minds. In fact, they discovered that God not only went with them, God made this new life beyond Jerusalem’s walls a blessing. It started with Philip.



Philip First:

North to Samaria

Samaritans were to Jews as Hatfields to McCoys, Montagues to Capulets, Red Sox to Yankees, FOX Newscasters to MSNBCers. These were the people Jews despised. In John 4, when Jesus sits down to chat with a Samaritan woman, the narrator understates, “Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans.” Jesus’ famous “Parable of the Good Samaritan” was meant to break through the bigotry of his audience. It is not news to anyone who has read around much in scripture that Jews mostly hated Samaritans; and, for their part, Samaritans loathed Jews.

This mutual enmity makes Philip’s story especially fascinating. Though Jesus had a disciple named Philip (John 1.44), that’s not our guy here. This is Philip the Deacon, who is named in Acts 6 as one of the original six followers of the Way to hold that office. (Acts 6.5). He served as a deacon alongside Stephen, in fact, so he must have taken his fellow deacon’s death hard. But how did he feel when that death pushed him out...into Samaria?

Luke doesn’t give us many “thought bubbles” for access to the inner musings of his characters, so he does not tell us what Philip thought as he trudged north. But we could imagine something like Jonah’s disdain for the Ninevites. In that great story, upon hearing God’s call to Ninevah, the prophet famously ran the opposite direction, prompting God to fetch him using a big fish. Then when Jonah had been properly chastened, he was willing to preach out of duty, but threw a fit when the Ninevites surprisingly turned to God and were forgiven. Jonah hated Ninevites, and Philip likely felt the same about Samaritans: “Are you kidding me, Lord? Samaria?!”

Or maybe Philip just thought he was on a fool’s errand. After all, God didn’t send Peter and John, the superstars of the Jerusalem church. God sent Philip, whose job it was to distribute food to the needy of the church. This isn’t the back-up quarterback or the understudy, this is the guy from the practice squad or the chorus member in the musical who has never played a speaking part. Maybe Philip was just following orders, with no expectation of success. After all, these were the daft, intransigent, hated Samaritans.

The truth is, we don’t know what went on inside Philip. Luke doesn’t give us access. He only tells us, “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them.” Good for Philip! Then, surprisingly, things went well.

The [Samaritan] crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city. (Acts 8.8)

Philip even outdueled the reputed town magician, Simon, who eventually believed and got baptized. Philip ran the table in Samaria...then God transferred him.

Philip First: South to Judea...and Ethiopia?!

For my money, Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian official along the Gaza road is one of the most brilliant stories in all of scripture. In the flow of Acts, this story is the "Judaea" part of fulfilling Jesus' commission in Acts 1.8 – the Gaza road is 5 miles from Jerusalem. In the larger picture of our reading, though, Philip's encounter with this Eunuch from a distant African land proves once again that Jesus meant for this good news to spill out beyond the apostles and deacons' wildest dreams.

Here are some things to know before we track the action. Conveniently, five things we need to know ahead of time start with the letter P:

1. Place. In the 1st century, "Ethiopia" described the whole region south of Egypt, including present-day Sudan, Eritria, Ethiopia, and Somalia.
2. People. The Ethiopians had black skin. "Ethiopia" comes from two Greek words: *aitho* = burnt and *ops* = face.
3. Person. The Ethiopian was a eunuch and served the queen as a "high official"
 - a. Eunuchs often served female rulers, because (as castrated males) they did not present a sexual threat.
 - b. This Eunuch had great power, being responsible for the whole treasury of Ethiopia.
 - c. He was very fond of Judaism. We will see as we move further into Acts that "worshipper" or "God-Fearer" is for Luke a person who attends synagogue but has not yet been fully integrated in the Jewish people through circumcision.
4. Problem. Our official may actually have wanted to take the full plunge and become a proselyte, but he couldn't. Deuteronomy 23.1 forbids eunuchs from "the assembly of the Lord." This means our guy could hang around the edges and dip his foot in the pool but never swim.
5. Possibility. The prophet Isaiah pictures a glorious day when even eunuchs who are faithful to Torah will be welcomed fully into God's people. (56.3)

Now we're ready to read.

If persecution sent Philip to Samaria, an Angel of the Lord shoots him down to Gaza. Hot off his profound success sharing good news in Samaria, Philip must feel like he's on a roll. And the roll continues. When he lands at Gaza, he spots a handsomely appointed chariot with a well-to-do black-skinned man inside reading a scroll of Isaiah. Just your average, everyday occurrence!

"Go over and talk to the guy!" says the angel, and he doesn't have to tell Philip twice. But here's where the scene gets silly – at least a little. Picture the chariot rolling along at the slow pace of beasts who will be traveling long miles, but rolling, nonetheless. Does Philip run alongside? Should we picture him gasping for breath, like someone who's taken a "jogging" meeting with a fit executive and can't keep up?

There's another detail you should know. Our Ethiopian is not browsing the page quietly. People didn't read silently in the ancient world. They universally read aloud, most often in the company

of other people. We don't know if our Eunuch has company in the chariot. We do know that Philip hears the passage as he arrives.

The relationship starts with a question. "Do you understand what you're reading?" Philip asks. And it turns out that the obviously well-educated official is stumped. "How can I, if I have no one to guide me?"

To be fair, the passage he'd chosen is not the easiest in scripture. It comes from Isaiah 53, where the prophet describes the life of an outcast man.

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.* (Acts 8.32-33 = Isaiah 53.7-8)

His question is natural: "Is the prophet talking of himself or another?"

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus applied this section of Isaiah to himself. As he cryptically describes what will come next after their Last Supper, Jesus quotes Isaiah, "He was counted among the lawless," (Isaiah 53.12) and followed it with, "indeed, what was written about me is being fulfilled." (Luke 22.37) Pronouncements like this made their way from Jesus' disciples into the wider circle of Jerusalem Christians – including deacons like Philip.

The door is wide open for Philip to help the Ethiopian, so "starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." (Acts 8.35) No one knows how long Philip's sermon went, but it worked. This top-of-the heap Ethiopian official had begun the day as a two-time loser. As a foreigner, a Gentile, he would have been a bit suspect to the ethnic Jews of his time. And as a eunuch, he had long ago-been consigned to second-class citizen status by a kind of Judaism that took its orders from Deuteronomy's refusal of eunuchs. Now Philip tells him that God's arms are open wide.

To make God's extravagant welcome clear, Philip may even have quoted another passage three chapters on from this in the Book of Isaiah (56.3-8), where the prophet tells of a day to come when Eunuchs will have a place in God's community. It's no wonder the Ethiopian said yes! "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The rest is beautiful:

He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 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.

And in this moment, the two have moved from reading ancient scripture to fulfilling it.

Peter's Power

Back in Jerusalem, Peter got to preach the first sermon on Pentecost, he healed a crippled man on the steps of the Temple, he boldly stood up to the highest Jewish officials of the Sanhedrin, and he led the church toward their own feats of boldness. It was a good gig! After Stephen's death, though, Peter could become a fish out of water – just a Jerusalem guy. He doesn't.

If Philip took the gospel north and then south, Peter went west, to Lydda and then Joppa. If Philip spoke the good news, Peter acted it out. Maybe Luke figured that we'd already heard one of Peter's sermons (Acts 2), but, for whatever reason, he tells only Peter's works of power in Acts 9. In Lydda, he encountered a certain Aeneas, paralyzed and bed-ridden for eight years. Not any more: Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!" And immediately he got up." (Acts 9.34) The wonder got the people of Lydda's attention, and it even spread beyond the town line. We may not hear Peter's sermon in this scene, but he must have given it and it must have been powerful, because "all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord."

Word got around even beyond Sharon. Peter traveled to Joppa because, when a woman of high character named Dorcas became ill and died, men from the city came to Lydda to fetch the increasingly renowned wonder worker. They hurried Peter to her bedside, where the widows of the community wailed in grief. The encounter was simple: Peter said, "Tabitha, get up!" and Tabitha (whose Greek name was Dorcas) got up. Presumably she went back to doing "good works and acts of charity. Through Christian history many a female child has worn the Christian name "Dorcas" because of what happened in that coastal city called Joppa.

Peter in Jerusalem was a speaker who healed. In Lydda and Joppa, he's become a healer who speaks. In all places, he is a man of powerful words and deeds. His skills translate, and it turns out that the power of the Holy Spirit has no boundaries. Things outside the mother ship aren't so bad after all.

Part Two – A New Character in the Cast

If this session chronicles the grudging movement of the Christians beyond Jerusalem, the Saul who became the Apostle Paul has two major roles: first as the Pharisaic perpetrator of the persecution that chased the church out, and second as the leading out-going Jesus person through the second half of the Book of Acts. One of the most famous, most oft-preached, and most oft-painted scenes in all of scripture is the "Conversion of Saul." Well after his conversion, Paul offers us windows to his former life as a "Pharisee of Pharisees" in two of his letters and (as a character in Luke's narrative) in the Book of Acts.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the

law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Philippians 4b-6)

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. (Galatians 1.13-14)

Paul spoke to the Jerusalem Council, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today." (Acts 22.3)

As a backdrop to the way Paul describes his own life as a Pharisee, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus gives a brief description of that sect's beliefs and practices in his *Jewish Antiquities*.

Now for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the contract of reason: and what that prescribes to them as good for them they do: and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason's dictates for practice. They also pay a respect to such as are in years: nor are they so bold as to contradict them in anything which they have introduced. And when they determine that all things are done by fate,² they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit: since their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a temperament; whereby what he wills is done; but so that the will of man can act virtuously or viciously. They also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them: and that under the earth there will be rewards, or punishments; according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life: and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison; but that the former shall have power to revive and live again. On account of which doctrines they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people: and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they perform them according to their direction. Insomuch, that the cities give great attestations to them, on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives, and their discourses also. (Josephus, Antiquities 18.3)

Paul's life before his conversion to the Way of Jesus involved him in the most rational, law-abiding, afterlife-believing, popular group among the Jewish leadership. This loyalty put him at odds with the Christians, but it also prepared him for his post-conversion belief in Jesus' resurrection (1 Corinthians 15) and his jobs as a missionary ("the Pharisees are able greatly to persuade the body of people") and a worship leader ("and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they perform according to the Pharisees' direction").

We can imagine Paul, the over-achieving student and, then, the zealous Pharisee, becoming a driven persecutor. He no doubt believed with all his heart that the upstart Jesus movement was demonic – an enemy of Israel's God. The vigor with which he worked to thwart the church is evidence, not of his spite, but of his zeal to protect the faithful Jews under his charge. It is also evidence for his potential faithfulness to Jesus. He was a radical and true believer in the religious system he knew.

Then, suddenly, Saul's world turned upside down. Luke reports it first in Acts 9:

Now Saul, still breathing [b]threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." ⁷The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the [c]voice but seeing no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he [d]could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. ⁹And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹²and he has seen [e]in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your [f]saints at Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen [g]instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." ¹⁷So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; ¹⁹and he took food and was strengthened. (Acts 9.1-18)

That was a big and demanding day! I need a nap just reading it. In Luke's story, though, there is no rest for the weary. The very next words in Acts tell us, "Now for several days Paul was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, [h]saying, "He is the Son of God."

If we bring in Paul's report about this time in his Letter to the Galatians, we learn that Luke's account compresses this turnaround time a bit. In his letter, Paul describes a time between his conversion and his missionary career: "I went away at once into Arabia" (Galatians 1.17). But, after a bit of retreat time, Paul launched the missionary career that would take him to Syria, and through present-day Turkey, on to Greece, then ultimately to the City of Rome.

"Elementary" is an American television series that imagines Sherlock Holmes, the product of Arthur Conan Doyle's imagination, in 21st century New York City. The concept is creative. (This Holmes's Watson is not John, but Joan – Dr. Joan Watson, who is a surgeon-turned-addiction counselor.) In one of the first episodes, Holmes notices that in her work as a counselor Joan sets

2 or 3 alarm clocks each night. He asks, “Why do you suppose you hate your job so much? I don’t hate my job. No one with two alarm clocks loves their job.” Holmes then proceeds to tell Watson that he loves his own detective work. It ends up she will too.

The newly-called Apostle Paul was passionate about his old job defending his form of Judaism and its people from the Jesus people and now he becomes even more passionate about his new job as a late-to-the-party apostle for that very Jesus. Nary an alarm clock in sight! In fact he once muses out loud to one of his most challenging churches, “Woe to me if I do not preach the good news!” (1 Corinthians 9.16)

Close – An Increasing Comfort Zone

Are you starting to see how God changed these early followers’ minds about what “the bad world out there” is like? The transition reminds me of the Jews’ experience of life in Babylon. Having lived 400 years or more in the promised land, they absolutely hated a forced move to the East. But King Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers force marched them there, anyway. Then, after initial anger and ambivalence, they took Jeremiah up on his charge to, “Build houses. Plant gardens. Seek the welfare (Hebrew: *Shalom*) of your city, for in their welfare you will find your own.” And lo and behold, Jews found a home in Babylon and thrived there. In fact, so many stayed after they could have returned to their land, that one of the greatest collections of ancient rabbinic teachings is called “The Babylonian Talmud” because it served for centuries a thriving Jewish community there.

Someone has said that providence is best viewed retrospectively. God calls us out of our comfort, circumstances push us out of our nest, and we resist. We complain. We wistfully long for the familiar. Then a new world starts to form, we find out that very God is in the new place too, and flourish offers itself. The early Christians learned this lesson in the weeks, months, and years following the tragic death of St. Stephen the Deacon.

