

16 June 2024

My Dear Theophilus (II): Revolution
Acts 9-12

My Dear Theophilus,

I have not been ignoring your question about how I, a good Greek, ended up in what you consider a Jewish sect. Believe me, the earliest Apostles would have been just as confused as you are by my presence. But I waited to answer you until I got to the place in the story where the Apostles themselves began to deal with the question. Today I intend to write about how the Apostles began to rethink their attitude toward non-Jews, or Gentiles.

Indeed, they've already taken the first steps. In my last letter, I told you how the deacon Philip started a congregation in Samaria, then baptized an Ethiopian, who in turn took the good news to Africa. At about the same time, other believers traveled as far north as Damascus, in Syria, and began a group there. Of course this Damascus church wasn't really an attempt to spread the good news to new people; it was more that Jerusalem had gotten too hot for followers of Jesus. You see, after the crowd stoned Stephen, the Council decided to keep up the pressure. That rabbinical student from Tarsus, whom I mentioned earlier – Saul – began leading gangs of temple guards house to house, dragging any Jesus people he found off to prison.

Eventually, this Saul heard about those believers who had fled to Damascus and decided to follow them there. He obtained letters from the chief priest, authorizing him to arrest any Jesus followers he found and started off, accompanied by a team of enforcers. Not far from Damascus, though, a blinding light filled the sky. Saul fell to the ground as a voice said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

"Who . . . who are you, sir?"

"I'm Jesus. Who else are you persecuting? I'm going to have more to say to you soon, but for now, go on into Damascus and wait. I'll send somebody."

The light disappeared – completely for Saul. He was totally blind. His enforcers, who had seen the light but hadn't heard the voice, led him by the hand into Damascus, where he fasted for three days, praying and rethinking his theology. Meanwhile, a Damascus follower of Jesus named Ananias had a vision of his own, in which Jesus spoke to him. "Ananias, I have a job for you. Go to the street called Straight to a house where a man named Saul of Tarsus is waiting for you."

"Saul of . . . where?"

"Tarsus."

"Funny thing about that. There's somebody with that same name who, we've all heard, has come to Damascus to lock us all up."

"Oh, good. You know him. That's the one. Just go. I have plans for Saul. Yes, he's caused much suffering for my sake; he will learn what that's like himself."

So Ananias went, found the haggard, sightless Saul, told him that Jesus had sent him, then laid his hands on Saul's head and prayed. Something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see. He said, "Will you baptize me? And then, could I have something to eat?"

There was never anything wishy-washy about Saul. As soon as he'd recovered his strength he went to the Jewish synagogue to argue that Jesus was the Messiah and to bear his own witness to his resurrection. Now, in time this Saul would become one of my closest friends, so I can testify that he is a brilliant scholar and theologian. But not even his best friends would call him tactful. Soon, Ananias and the other believers had to lower Saul over the city walls in a basket to keep him from being assassinated by angry Jews. Saul went back to Jerusalem, to join the believers there.

They were – understandably, I think we can agree – suspicious. The last time these believers had seen Saul was also the last time they had seen some of their friends. But one man gave him a chance. It was Barnabas – remember him? the "Son of Encouragement"? He took a chance and sat down with Saul to hear his story. I often wonder what would have happened to Saul – and the good news – if Barnabas hadn't risked everything and trusted Saul before he had proven himself worthy of trust. Through Barnabas's intercession, Saul was received by the Apostles. He immediately began going to the synagogues and arguing that Jesus was risen and was the true Messiah, just like he'd done in Damascus. With the same result. This time it was the Jerusalem believers who smuggled Saul out of town before he could be killed. They sent him home to Tarsus. This was the second time Saul had to slip out of town for his own safety. Since then ... no, I've lost count.

Now we come to the turning point I spoke of earlier. As I said, the earliest believers were all Jews and never imagined being anything else. Their goal was to reform their faith from within, and with that in mind they set themselves to be above reproach as Jews. Yes, the Apostles were hated by the priests, but they assumed that would pass. And yes, they had opened up their group to include Samaritans, but they thought of that as just a solitary exception. They were a branch of Judaism, faithful to the law of Moses in every way.

Well, down the mountain from Jerusalem, on the coast of the great sea is a port town called Joppa, and for a time Peter left Jerusalem and took up residence there. Joppa's about a day's walk south of the Roman garrison of Caesarea, and in Caesarea there lived a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius was what was Jews called a "godfearer" – that is, a Gentile who had been so impressed with the Jews' faith and the holiness of their God that he began praying to that God and supporting the synagogue. One day, as this Cornelius was praying, he had a vision of an angel of God. Terrified, Cornelius asked, "What do you want?" The angel said, "God has seen your gifts and heard your prayers, and he'd like to know you better. Send to Joppa, to the house of Simon the Tanner, and ask the man called Peter to come to you." The angel left, and Cornelius called for two of his servants.

About noon the next day, in Joppa, Peter went up on the rooftop to pray. While he was praying, and starting to think about lunch, he had a vision. A large sheet descended from heaven, and as it neared, Peter could see on it various animals. But they were all animals that the Law of Moses forbade the Israelites to eat. A voice from heaven said, "You're hungry, Peter. Here is food. Kill and eat."

I would wager, Theophilus, that if you know anything at all about the religion of the Jews it is that they don't eat certain foods. It's an obsession with them. The only other laws that come even close, to the Jews, are keeping the Sabbath and having no contact with Gentiles. Peter knew God could never tell him to eat unclean food, so this had to be a test. He replied, "Never, Lord! I have never eaten anything unclean or profane and never will!" The voice replied, "If God says something is clean, it is clean. You do not get to call it unclean." Then the voice spoke again.

"You're hungry, Peter. Here is food. Kill and eat."

It could still be a test. "Never, Lord! I have never eaten anything unclean or profane and never will!"

"If God says something is clean, it is clean. You do not get to call it unclean."

This was getting scary. "You're hungry, Peter. Here is food. Kill and eat."

Peter's voice was less sure. "Never, Lord? I have never eaten anything unclean or profane and never will."

"If God says something is clean, it is clean. You do not get to call it unclean."

Just then Simon the Tanner poked his head up through the trapdoor to the roof. "Peter? It's Simon. I'm sorry to interrupt your prayer, but there are some men here from a Roman named Cornelius who wants you to go visit him. I told them that Jews aren't permitted to go to the homes of Gentiles, because they're unclean, but they insist on seeing you."

"I think . . . I think I'm supposed to go with them."

And so he did. The good Jew went to the home of a Roman, self-consciously went inside, and found Cornelius and all his household waiting. Cornelius told Peter about the angel who had appeared to him and that he'd told him to send for Peter, including exactly where to find him.

"An angel appeared to *you*?"

"That's right. He said God had heard my prayers."

"God heard *your* prayers?"

"Yes. And now we're all gathered to hear whatever God has commanded you to tell us."

His whole life, Peter had been told to have nothing to do with Gentiles, that they were unholy and unclean and unloved by God. "I think . . . I think I've had something wrong for a long time," Peter said at last. "I don't know what I'm supposed to tell you, but here's what I have. You've probably heard of Jesus of Nazareth, who went around teaching and healing and whom the priests had crucified. Well, I'm his friend. And he's alive – more alive than any of us. Let me tell you about that." And so he started to talk about his friend who had risen from the dead, and as he talked the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and all his household, and they began speaking in tongues, and it was Pentecost all over again.

And Peter said, "You're kidding. And now I'm going to need to baptize them, aren't I? Oh, they're going to love this in Jerusalem."

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Here's what I think, Theophilus. You know that every people, every nation, has its own god. There is something within us that knows that there is a reality beyond this world, and so every people tries to describe that god. But of course, we can only describe things in terms of what we know. So Greeks describe Greek gods, Egyptians describe Egyptian gods, philosophers describe philosopher gods, and they all imagine that the gods that they describe are their special possession, always on their side. But in the end, all that just sounds like children inventing imaginary friends, someone just like them but bigger.

But what if there really is a God, one who existed before all people – who created all people? That God would have to be greater than just the collective imagination of any group - neither Greek nor Egyptian nor philosopher – not the sole possession of anyone. That's what an actual God would have to be like, and I know of only one people who worships a God who from the very beginning refused to be exclusively theirs, who has always showed concern for all nations, and it is the God of the Hebrews. And now, in our own time, that God has made it clear through Jesus Christ that he never intended to be just the God of one people, but the God of all people. This is the God I have found, whom I serve. This is the God I write to you about, my dear Theophilus.

Until my next letter, I remain your friend, Luke