

TUTORIAL
9.9

The Narrative of the Church

This tutorial continues to discuss the area of *Identity*, and looks at the second question in that area: ‘Are they learning to see their story embedded in the larger Narrative of the Church, stretching back to Pentecost and forward to Christ’s return?’

Acts 9:1-2: Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord’s followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

We're going to continue on with the whole area of identity. In the passage above, it refers to identity when it calls believers “the followers of the Way”. These followers of Christ were facing persecution, and we see some of that in the narrative in Acts. The Church was just beginning and already it was facing trouble. We also see later on in the epistles that we're to be praying for those who are persecuted as though we're in chains with them. We are reminded over and over again that as believers we're part of this huge church, those who have since passed away and those who are yet to born. We're part of something greater. And it includes all of those who have been, are, and will be followers of the Way.

Last time

We looked at the first question from the WILD outline in the area of Identity. It dealt with the clarity of people’s understanding about their true identity from God’s perspective and if they are able to articulate that to others. In this tutorial we will discuss the second question in the WILD outline in the area of Identity.

Are they learning to see their story embedded in the larger narrative of the Church, stretching back to Pentecost and forward to Christ’s return?

John describes how the church planting team helped the believers see themselves as part of a global fellowship:

So here we had a situation there where this group, who was scared stiff of the church, were now a part of the body of Christ themselves. And we explained to them that now they were God's children, everything could

change. And I think we went back over Phase One again for them, the initial foundational teaching, just to really make sure that they understood it. And then we went back through that material, but from the perspective of them now being in Christ. And this was to give them an understanding of their new identity, that now no longer did they belong to Satan, they belonged to God. No longer were they shut out, but now they're shut in—in Christ, and safe in Him.

We asked Phil how the new body of believers there were impacted by the teaching of the Acts narrative:

I remember as we were going through Acts, and because of the way we did things we went through Acts pretty quickly and went straight from the ascension of Christ right into Acts. We kept going and were getting into the persecutions. And I remember one of the guys saying, basically, "That's going to be us. There are persecutions, people being killed ... that's going to be us. Now that we believe like they do, we can expect the same response from the community at large, which is going to be people who reject us. The religious authorities are going to reject us."

And I just thought it was interesting, not that we've had anything that actually has even reached a level of persecution, but the fact that they would recognise that would happen to those early believers. "Because we're in the same line as them, because we're in the same way of thinking as them, it's inevitable that we're going to be included in those same types of situations." Even from the very beginning going through these ideas, I felt the beginning inklings of the sense of, "Now that we've associated with Christ in the same line, we can expect the same sort of treatment."

Is the shared experience of growing through the teaching of Jesus and His Apostles itself forming a part of their identity as a local body of His disciples?

Bill describes how being part of the Body, "Jesus Clan", didn't displace traditional clan identity but it has become more important in reality:

I think one of the neat things early on before they were believers was they used to help all of their clan relatives in the gardens doing work. They would all get together as clans and they'd work. It was interesting as we were going through Acts and understanding that whole aspect that there are actually just two clans as the Lord looks at it. He sees unbelievers and believers. As for the people in the community from different clans, I think there're about nine different clan groups. It's not like they left their clan, but they started seeing themselves more in this Jesus Clan than they were seeing themselves in all the other clans.

And so we would hear of work teams going out, and they would start cutting a garden. And where we live, it basically takes a bunch of people to get together to clear the ground, dig the ground up, plant everything. And we were hearing of these work teams going out, but the people that were normally in those work teams were different. It wasn't just clans anymore; it was believers starting to work together to do those things.

So that's one way that we saw them changing. I think another way was just this whole idea of, "When a problem came up, who was coming to help?" And one of the beauties of the Christian life really is that the Lord works through our hearts so that we learn to love each other. So when people had problems, there were other believers that were coming to them, helping them through situations. Before, people would just kind of watch things happen, especially if they didn't have any clan responsibilities. But believers started actually loving believers and helping each other out that way.

Philip explains that a distinction for them as a group of churches—in contrast to the religious groups—is their high value for God's Word:

I will just add to what has been said about our sense of identity as a church. We see a real distinction between us and the religious groups around us. We are not trying to be separate, but we don't just go and join in with them for this reason. For us, God's Word has reality in our lives, in the life of the church. Actually, those who are outside see this is something that is distinctive of us as a group. So the centrality of God's Word in our lives has become an identifying factor for the true churches here, and that is exactly the thing that has brought opposition against us from outside. It is really the changes in our lives that God's Word has brought that initiated the antagonism of some in the wider community.

The reality is that Christ's body does stand out as different from the rest of the world, and that creates tension sometimes. And part of our identity is that, though we are all individuals, we come together to hear God's Word, and to participate together in applying God's Word to real life. Then that can be seen in the individual lives of believers. This sense of identity relating to God's Word is seen by the believers, but also by the unbelievers, and it has practical outcomes in the growth of the Christians and how they relate to the wider community.

Do they have access to teaching from the New Testament account that clearly shows how the truth given to the early Church also provides them with all the foundational truth for dealing with their own identity issues?

Phil comments on how important it was to share the life of Christ followed quickly by Acts, because it gave the people real-life, Biblical examples they could relate to:

Going through the New Testament, in particular through the Gospels and into the early history of the Church, it was just so full of rich identity topics. Even when following the Building on Firm Foundations series, the topics or the stories that are covered in that series, which isn't very much in comparison to the whole set of Scripture, just in that narrow set there's already so much material that deals with identity. It deals with them, starting with Jesus and how He's interacting with a broader identity that's around Him, and how He keeps saying all of this stuff that says, "Now you guys are following a system." You can't fault the system per se—it's the Lord that gave the system back in the Old Testament.

So they're following this God-given system, but He's constantly going after them because they've missed the point of the system. So you have religious leaders coming down on Him, rejecting Him, and He's constantly challenging them by saying, "No, you guys are the ones that have actually gone astray. You were getting after me, but you're the ones that have deviated from the true path that God intends." And that was extremely helpful for them, for these believers here, but to see this idea that here's Jesus fighting for this core truth that has been lost by the religious environment that He's in.

So He fights for that, He dies in a sense for that. They kill Him, and yet at the same time there's this constant sense that, even there, the Lord's still parting straight down the centre line of what He intends, and how He wants to work. And then you have His followers coming in. They're afraid of the chief priest. What are they going to do? They're locking themselves in these rooms. They're afraid of what's going to happen. And then all of a sudden, they're coming out and they're taking it to the religious leaders. They're doing these things. The people love the story where the disciples were thrown into jail for speaking the name of Isa, and then the Sanhedrin meets and they're going to call them into court, and they send for them, and there's nobody in the jail. They're right back there where you told them not to be, speaking those very same things that you said not to speak.

And for the amount of identity-rich material that's there, it's helping them to recognise that the broader system isn't and probably won't be conducive to us. It won't be helpful for us, it'll be just like those guys, and they've had to fight through the exact same things that we've had

to. And I think that what was so powerful about it was they're saying, "We're not going through anything that hasn't already happened to those guys back there." We can look to the guys back in the early church and say, "They went through this same thing too." This is part and parcel, this is a normal thing, rejection by the authorities and having to formulate a separate identity out of something that you were a part of previously. And then there's certain aspects of it that you're going to reject, certain aspects of it that you're going to keep and discovering which ones to keep and knowing, "What do we keep doing, what do we not keep doing?" We've had lots of good discussions, lots of which have been prompted through going through the book of Acts, and looking at those different areas where it's like, "Well, look what those guys did. They had the same situation. What we're going through isn't unique in any way, shape or form."

Phil describes how the foundational teaching from Romans and Ephesians has helped to bring a sense of unity, even between former antagonists:

As a group of believers teaching them these days, we're in Romans and Ephesians, which we've done recently. And what strikes me in both of those books is how central the Jew-Gentile message is that Paul's bringing in both of those books. He's trying to take these groups that hate each other, that can't stand each other, that are at complete enmity with each other, that for whom the other group is just completely worthless, and he's bringing them together and trying to form them into this one group that's tied together by who Christ is. And it's been really helpful for us as we're going through that looking at identity, and we get these guys from these two different religious backgrounds.

And seeing them come together and seeing them hear that these guys hate each other, and here they are being brought together and being told to get along, and being told: "Even when your family is upset with you, why are you going and hanging out with those Gentiles? Why are you doing this if you're a Jew?" And if you're a Gentile you're like, "Why are you guys hanging out with those Jews and listening to all of this Jewish Scripture and stuff?" There was still this whole thing where everybody was blaming the Jews. They had to leave because there was so much tension.

So you're talking about these two groups. This wasn't some joke of a little flare-up here and there. They actually had to go. And so it's that sense that these guys who had such enmity with each other were brought together and joined together in one group with a different head and a different system of orientation. That must have just been incredible. So we're teaching through that and talking about that and highlighting that with these guys as we're trying to say, "This is what God's doing with you guys now."

Do they have a growing sense of who they are and why they exist as a group of God's children in that particular place, in ways that tie in with the Church's story, past, present and future?

Kelley talks about how the group they worked with in PNG were known as "the nothing people" but they now realize they have everything in Christ:

I think when you're talking about identity too, on the spiritual level their name means "The Nothing People". And it was really neat when we got to Ephesians and it says that once you were far away, and without hope. And as we translated it, it was, "You were wandering around thinking that nothing would ever come to you." We are The Nothing People, basically. So seeing their identity change from "We are The Nothing People" to, "We have everything in Christ," and seeing that shift from cargo cult into more of the spiritual side of, "We have these things later, we have these things built up in heaven, we have these things that will come to pass later." So on that side it was really neat seeing them pass from the have-nothings to the have-everythings.

Phil recalls how the story of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin inspired a young local Bible teacher facing opposition:

What happened was that, as this young guy was out there teaching, he was finished what would typically be in Phase One. He was going into what we would call the extended part. He was sharing through the Scripture at that stage, and he was in the early part of Acts. And two religious leaders came by that were big foreign religious leaders. They came into the area that he was working in. And they heard that there's a guy here talking about Isa. And they called a meeting and they said to him, "Tomorrow we're going to shut you down. We don't want you sharing any more about this Isa guy. We're going to shut you down." And he had a meeting scheduled that he was prepping for the next day.

So he goes home. He calls us. And he says, "Just so you know, these religious leaders came and threatened that tomorrow they're going to shut us down and kick us out because we're sharing about Isa." So we said, "Do you need somebody to come?" And he's like, "Just pray." Okay, so we're praying for tomorrow. So that evening he goes home, and he's prepping his lesson for the next day. And his lesson for the next day is Peter and John getting called before the Sanhedrin and being told not to talk about Isa anymore, and how they respond and say, "You judge what's best. Should we follow men, or should we follow what God says? For us, we're going to keep sharing. It doesn't matter what your religious leaders want."

So that's the lesson that he was preparing for that evening. And he's going like, "Ha! This isn't new. I'm in a flow. What I'm going through is not unique in any way, shape or form. The early believers went through

the same thing, and they stood firm, and the Lord helped them and provided for them. So I'm going to stand firm too."

In the end, the local Muslim leaders, those two leaders that came in to put a stop to this for reasons that I won't get into here, they were chased out by the locals that night. So the next morning there was no meeting. Nothing came of it, because those two guys were chased away. But when that guy was talking about it afterwards he said, "What I realised then as I was preparing this lesson was that what happened thousands of years ago and what's happening to me is the same thing."

That last story shows how important it is for us to see ourselves as part of something that was founded at Pentecost. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so close and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." That's what that Bible teacher was doing; he set aside the sin and all the other things that were slowing him down. His motivation stemmed from seeing that there are others who have gone before him. Their witness is experienced today and shows that we're all part of this grand Narrative that God is unfolding.



DISCUSSION POINTS

The Narrative of the Church

1. A connection was made in the video between the shared stories or narratives of a group, and their identity. In your own words describe how you imagine the identity of a new group of believers could be impacted by hearing the Acts narrative together.
2. Many new believers face opposition, ostracism and even persecution. If you were working in a situation where that was happening, how would you seek to bring them encouragement from God's Word?