

Acts of the Apostles – Purpose and Overview

New Testament Survey – Lesson 16 (Part 2)

I recently had an opportunity to visit with Willie Robertson on a flight from Florida. You might know Willie from his rise to fame in the reality television show Duck Dynasty. Before returning to run the family duck call business, Willie served as a youth minister. We were talking about his decision to move from a clear vocation in ministry into the business arena. Willie never lost his desire to serve the Lord and advance his kingdom. He merely found another avenue where he could do so.

As I probed him on his decision, we moved into a discussion of how people often wonder what the Lord wants them to do. Willie and I have both been engaged in many conversations about how to know *what* God wants us to decide in the face of life-important decisions. We both agreed that 90 percent of hard-core do's and don'ts are made fairly clear by reading the Bible and applying its maxims and principles, *i.e.*, treat other people the way you would like to be treated. Still, there is a wealth of decisions we need to make along the way that are not so clear. Willie pointed out that there are a group of people who want God to write things on the wall, provide a sign, or speak inside their head in an audible voice. God can certainly do those things, but it does not seem to be the Biblical norm. Instead, we see in the Bible, more times than not, people are making decisions. Willie's concern was for those people who are indecisive by nature. There are people who simply do not like to make decisions. They approach any decision with hesitancy and spiritual decisions are no different. Willie's approach was akin to the admonition and assurance of Proverbs 3:5-6,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

He believes that if people will seek the Lord and in the face of no obvious answer, trust that the Lord will bless their decision, as long as it is in line with God's teachings, in other words, as long as one "acknowledges him."

Fast-forward a few weeks to last night. I was attending a legal event in Chicago. A Federal Judge and I were engaged in a similar discussion. This judge was a "preacher's kid." His dad was a lifelong Baptist Pastor. I was recounting the story of one of my clients who had refused to follow my advice. My client's explanation was that the Lord had told him the value of his case, and he was going to follow the Lord instead of his lawyer. The judge recounted for me one time when one of his father's parishioners had told his father he was going to do some clearly crazy thing. His father said something to the effect of, "Don't do that! It's

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crazy!” The parishioner answered that he was going to because he felt that was what God was telling him to do. The judge’s father replied, “Son, that isn’t God you’re feeling, it’s just a bad jalapeño!”

I like these discussions. Learning how people believe they hear from God intrigues me. I like looking at the Book of Acts the same way. We began our outline of the Acts narrative last week by concentrating on the choices people made. We discussed the deliberate living of the apostles in an age where they had clear purpose and direction before the return of the resurrected Lord. We could have looked at the same narrative through the lens of God’s direction. The apostles were making choices that they knew or believed were the will of God, as opposed to the will of human authority. But even beyond the focus of the choices they made, we can refine our examination into *why* or *how* they made those choices. This is how we continue our walk through the Acts narrative. We will continue to look at choices made, but we will also focus on the why’s of the choices.

Our core outline remains:

1. The birth of the church (1:1 – 5:42).
2. Persecution and the church’s expansion (6:1 - 9:31).
3. Actions of Peter and the entrance of Gentiles (9:32 – 12:24).
4. Paul’s first missionary journey and the Apostolic Decree (12:25 – 16:5).
5. The church grows around the Aegean Sea (16:6 – 19:20).
6. Paul’s unexpected route to Rome (19:21 – 28:31).

We resume with section 3.

The Actions of Peter and the Entrance of Gentiles (9:32 – 12:24)

We ended the last section with Paul converted to the faith, teaching in churches, received into the Jerusalem fellowship, and with a period of peace and comfort for the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.¹ Luke then shifted his narrative briefly away from Paul and back to Peter. Peter was making itinerant mission efforts into the villages and towns surrounding Jerusalem starting with Lydda, slightly over twenty miles west of Jerusalem in the hill country. There,

¹ We should note that Luke does something we do today as well. At times he refers to the churches that were community meetings and fellowships (Acts 15:41; 16:5). More commonly, however, he refers to the church in a singular form, even though he doubtlessly means many different “churches” in our twenty-first century vocabulary. That is what we see here in Acts 9:31 (“So the **church** throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.”) and in many other places (*e.g.*, Acts 5:11; 8:3; 12:1, etc.).

Peter healed a man who had been bedridden for eight years. From Lydda, Peter went to Joppa, a Mediterranean coastal town around ten miles northwest of Lydda. Peter was summoned to Joppa by the fledgling church there when one of their group fell ill and died. Peter arrived and prayed over the woman named Tabitha (meaning “gazelle.” Luke also translates it into Greek as “Dorcas.”) This became known throughout Joppa and many more came to the Lord.

While Peter stayed at the home of Simon the tanner², something was occurring thirty miles to the north in the important Roman seaport town of Caesarea.³ A Roman military cohort was stationed in the town, led by a centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius was,

a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God (Acts 10:2).

Cornelius was not Jewish, but he worshipped the Lord, and lived up to many good Jewish practices. He was, what was often termed a “God-fearer,” someone who worshipped with the Jews, followed many Jewish laws and practices, but never converted to Judaism. Paul would find many of these at the synagogues in the mission field. While it is impossible to generalize why the God-fearers did not fully convert, most scholars recognize that a common objection for the men was the conversion requirement of circumcision.

Around three in the afternoon, Cornelius was praying and he had a clear vision of an angel tell him his piety and prayers were important to God. The angel instructed Cornelius to send men to Joppa to the house of Simon the tanner by the sea. They were to ask for a houseguest named Peter. After the vision Cornelius sent two of his servants a “devout soldier” to do exactly that (the soldier was also

² Some note that as a tanner, Simon would routinely work with animal hides that would, at times, make him “unclean” under Jewish law. Additionally, we read scholars who add that the smells of a tanner would place his location typically close to the sea so that sea winds would disperse the smell. Both of those may be insights Luke intends to convey, Luke will note later the seaside location, and the uncleanness finds importance in light of what is to come, however, we should add that Simon was a common first century name, and Luke was in the habit of identifying people closely enough that his readers could trace back his sources and verify his writings or get more detail should they wish. So the note to “Simon the tanner” in Joppa could just as easily be Luke’s source identified sufficiently for Theophilus to follow-up, should he wish. We see the angel gives this same information to Cornelius so that Cornelius can locate Simon later.

³ This narrative is the longest one in Acts. In it, we read several duplicative accounts. Both size and duplication are indicators of the importance Luke was attaching to this account. We will see this similarly in the conversion of Paul, a story Luke includes three times, each time with a slightly different, yet important emphasis.

likely a God-fearer and Luke notes that Cornelius not only sent them, but informed them of the whole vision.)

At noon the next day, Peter was praying on the rooftop of Simon's house. Peter was hungry, and while Simon's attendants were preparing lunch, Peter fell into a trance. He saw a sheet-like cloth descend from heaven with all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds on it. Peter heard a voice telling him "Rise, Peter; kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). Peter recoiled and declined, adding that he had never violated the kosher eating laws on unclean meat. The heavenly reply was blunt and no doubt startling,

What God has made clean, do not call common (Acts 10:15).

Luke then pointed out that this happened "three times." Now this may be a reference to Peter's hard-headedness, but we should also note that Luke frequently finds the expression of "three" to note a divine touch. There were three men sent for Peter (Acts 10:19), and many other "threes" in Acts (see especially, Acts 2:41; 5:7; 7:20; 9:9; 17:2; 19:8; 20:3; 28:17). After the three times, Peter was "perplexed" when the three men arrived. The Spirit told Peter to go with the three, and he did so, leaving the next morning on the 30-mile trek north, and taking a few other Christian brothers with him.⁴

It took a day for Peter and crew to get to the centurion's house, and when they arrived, Cornelius was ready. He had assembled his entire household, likely including servants and attendants as well as family. When Peter came in, the Roman centurion fell at Peter's feet! Peter reached out and touched the centurion ("lifted him up"), something shockingly "unclean" for a Jew to do! Peter told Cornelius as he helped him up, "Stand up; I too am a man" (Acts 10:26). As Peter saw all the people gathered, and he clearly recognized that they had familiarity with Jewish law and custom, he came to the point bluntly:

"You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me" (Acts 10:28-29).

⁴ Even in this passage we see the hints to Luke's significance in pointing out the number "three." Luke does not number the brothers who went with Peter, he simply say, "Some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him." This draws a measure of emphasis on those times that Luke does always specify the numbers, which he does repeatedly in this Cornelius story. It also emphasizes events like Paul's conversion where Luke retells the conversion precisely three times. We will see in Peter's recounting of the story, that the number of brothers that accompanied him was six (Luke 11:12). For Peter, this indicated a complete set of people going together, for he made seven, a number that stood for completeness.

Cornelius repeated his experience to Peter, and it was as if a light went off in Peter's mind. Peter replied,

“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35).

Peter then recounted the story of Jesus to the gathering, affirming not only his good life, and unjust execution, but his resurrection. Peter closed with the purpose of Jesus' experience:

“...he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:42-43).

At this point, the Holy Spirit fell in a visible and audible way on all those who heard the word. The Jewish brothers that had accompanied Peter were stunned to see the Holy Spirit poured out on Gentiles! Peter declared that God was at work, the Gentiles embraced Jesus in faith, and there was no reason that they should not be baptized, circumcised or not!

Not surprisingly, in our marvelously fallen world, when Peter got back to Jerusalem from this world-changing experience, he received criticism from a number in the church for going to the Gentiles and eating with them. Peter then recounted the specific events, beginning with his prayer vision of the “three times” that he was instructed, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 11:9). After this, even the critical brothers “fell quiet” and glorified God, amazed to see that even to Gentiles God “granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18).

Luke's narrative shifts here. He refers back to the mistake made by the Jews that were persecuting the church. As Luke had already noted, in the Jewish effort to stomp out the church by persecution, the Jews just managed to spread the church as the persecuted believers dispersed into surrounding areas. Luke informed his readers that the persecution spread the church “as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch” (Acts 11:19). Antioch was the third largest city at the time, lagging behind only Rome and Alexandria. First-century Jewish historian wrote that the Jews were especially populous in that cosmopolitan city.⁵ Even in those distant places, however, the church was only spreading among the Jews. A few unnamed men from Cyprus and Cyrene (a coastal city in modern Libya, west of Egypt) did speak to Greek-speakers (“Hellenists”), who were not Jewish. As such, they did

⁵ Josephus, *B.J.*, at 7.45.



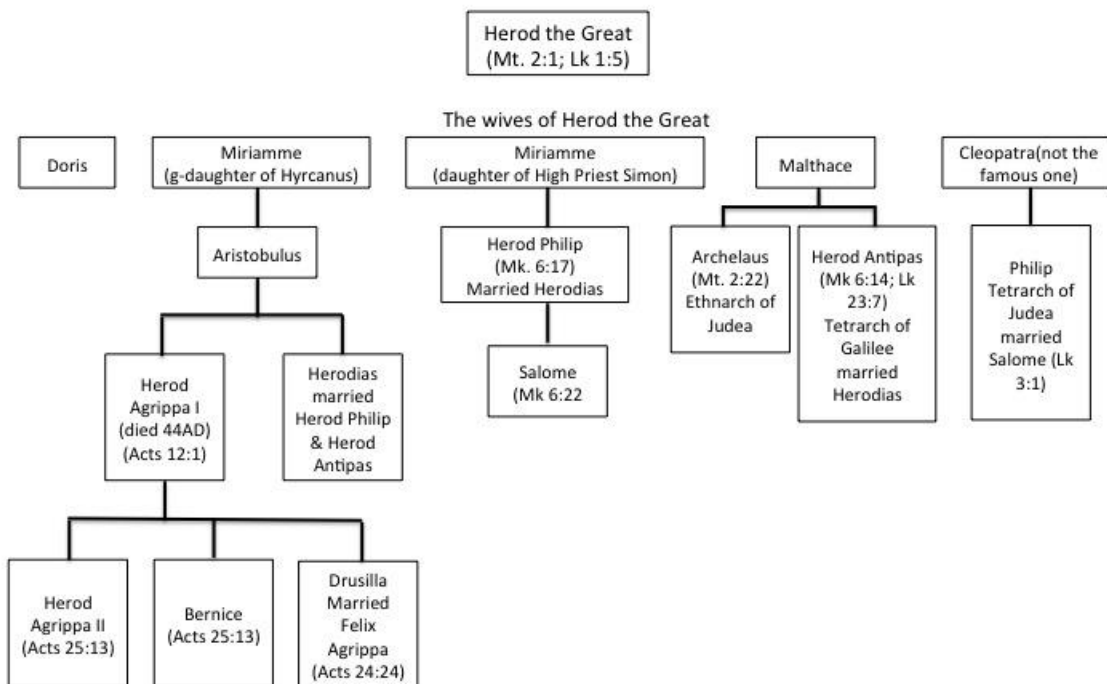
not preach Jesus as “Christ” or “Messiah.” Such would have been meaningless to Gentiles totally unfamiliar with the hope of Israel. Instead, they preached Jesus as “Lord” and “Savior,” both concepts familiar in the Greek world as a need for anyone hoping in an afterlife.

This outreach was effective, and a large number were coming to faith. It came to the attention (and likely shock) of the church in Jerusalem. They took a bold step, and decided to send the Son of Encouragement, Barnabas, to minister in Antioch. Barnabas arrived and was excited over what God was doing there. Barnabas was a natural choice not only as an encourager, but also as a native of Cyprus and a holy man in tune with the Jerusalem church leadership. He made a decision to get some additional help, and his first choice was Paul, who had returned to his

hometown of Tarsus several years earlier (Acts 9:30). Luke has already told us that Paul had successfully argued with Greek-speaking Jews in Damascus, and Barnabas knew of Paul's versatility in both languages and cultures – Greek and Hebrew. Barnabas was not sure where Paul was, but decided to go personally and look for him. He found Paul still in Tarsus, and obviously still faithful to the Lord who had called a decade earlier. Paul chose to go with Barnabas to Antioch and the two of them ministered and taught there together for a whole year. The church roles swelled large, and Luke tells us it was there in Antioch that the word was first coined, “Christians” (Acts 11:26). This is the Greek noun built off the name/title “Christ.” It is roughly equivalent to saying “Christ people.”

The church was separated by miles, by language, and by race, but it was united in the love of Christ. Luke evidenced that when he wrote of a famine that was prophesied in the land, and the “brothers” in Antioch sent aid to the “brothers” in Judea. Barnabas and Paul delivered the aid by hand.

Meanwhile, the church was facing another bout of persecution under Herod Agrippa I. We should add that this Herod was Agrippa I, one of many Herods referenced in the New Testament descended from Herod the Great. With the help of Josephus's Jewish histories, we can reconstruct the family tree and give references to help place the different people in the New Testament.



From five wives, Herod the Great produced a number of ruling officials.

Herod the king executed James the son of Zebedee and brother to John the apostle. James becomes the first apostle to be martyred. Writing almost 300 years later, the early church historian Eusebius preserved a touching early church record about this death:

“Herod the King stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the Church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” And concerning this James, Clement, in the seventh book of his *Hypotyposes*, relates a story which is worthy of mention; telling it as he received it from those who had lived before him. He says that the one who led James to the judgment-seat, when he saw him bearing his testimony, was moved, and confessed that he was himself also a Christian. They were both therefore, he says, led away together; and on the way he begged James to forgive him. And he, after considering a little, said, “Peace be with you,” and kissed him. And thus they were both beheaded at the same time.”⁶

Seeing how it pleased a number of people, Herod then arrested Peter, with plans to kill him as well. This was during Passover, and Herod put Peter under heavy guard in prison to execute him after the conclusion of Passover. Meanwhile, the church was in earnest prayer for Peter. On the night Peter was to be brought out, Peter was sleeping chained between two sleeping guards, with two more guarding the door. An angel came to Peter and awoke him, releasing his chains while the guards slept. The angel had Peter put on clothes and walked him right out of the prison undetected. Peter thought the whole thing was a vision or dream, fully expecting martyrdom like his brother apostle James. Once Peter was free in the city, he realized it was no dream, but was real.

Peter came to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many believers church were on an all night prayer vigil. Undoubtedly Peter was looking over his shoulder the whole way, nervous and anxious to get to a safe place. Peter knocked on the door, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer. Rhoda asked who was there, and Peter affirmed it was him. Rhoda recognized Peter’s voice, but in her excitement to tell everyone, failed to let him in and rushed in with the news. For this reason, I nominate Rhoda as the patron saints of all absent-minded people (dare I say “airheads”?). No one believed Rhoda, but Peter kept knocking on the door until they answered it and found him to be there. All were amazed at God’s answer to their prayers, and Peter shushed them long enough to detail what happened. Peter instructed those there to pass along the news, and he left, going underground to unknown places (apparently to Luke as well as to us!).

⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 2, 9:1-3.

In a classic understatement, Luke recorded that when the day came, the day when King Herod was expecting a big execution,

There was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter (Acts 12:18).

Herod had the whole town turned upside down searching for Peter. Herod put Peter's guards to death for their seeming incompetence, before leaving Judea for Caesarea.

It was while in Caesarea that Herod, an angry and temperamental man upset with the people of Tyre and Sidon, was approached by those people who sought peace. Herod, very oversold on his self-importance, put on royal robes to give audience to those who sought his favor. After delivering an oration, Herod was relishing the likely feigned adoration of the people who cried,

The voice of a god, not of a man! (Acts 12:22).

Luke includes this vignette that stands in stark contrast to Peter, the man who escaped the "god's" clutches. When the Roman centurion bowed to Peter, Peter lifted him affirming, "I am just a man." This Peter walked in God's blessings. Herod, however, allowed the idolatrous adoration and instead of God's blessings, he was struck immediately with an intestinal disease ("worms"), which led to his death! (Acts 12:23). The first century historian Josephus recorded the death this way,

Now, when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Cesarea, ... and there he exhibited shows.... At which festival, a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent at to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another ... that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. ... A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner...his pain was become violent. ... And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this

life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign.⁷

Luke finished this section with the marvelous affirmation that even as the fake god died, and the words of his oration faded into the unknown pages of history, the word of the real God increased and multiplied (Acts 12:24).

CONCLUSION

Choices and decisions – as much as some might want to avoid them, we make them all day, everyday. How do we do so when we want to follow God’s will? What insight do we get from the Book of Acts? If we cannot find determinative rules, can we at least find examples that might be instructive?

On anything like this, we always need to be careful about building theology around examples found in Scripture? Anecdotal evidence has strict limitations. We are never sure if we are seeing a rare example built around unique circumstances or an unusual situation. We saw that in earlier lessons on the Holy Spirit, as we now see it here. In the case of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit fell in a miraculous way on the gentiles *before* their baptisms. Yet this is very rare in Scripture. We can look at Pentecost and see that for three thousand souls, they were told to repent and be baptized with assurance they would receive the Holy Spirit. We are good to keep that mindset when looking at decisions.

Peter went on mission work into neighboring towns without a hint of some special dispensation of knowledge about it. In the rare case of Cornelius, we have an angelic visit, a vision, and a voice from heaven. After that, Peter took others and they reasoned through what they were seeing and concluded the right actions to take. Similarly, we have no reason to believe that some special appearance brought about the mission efforts of the believers from Crete and Cyrene who preached to the Gentiles in Antioch. When word got to Jerusalem, the church sent Barnabas, because it seemed the right thing to do. Barnabas decided to try and include Paul, and went to search for him, not knowing whether he was even still in Tarsus. Paul determined that it was best to go to Antioch as well. One received a prophetic word about a coming famine, and the Antiochian church chose to gather up support and aid to send back to Judea. Peter left prison because an angel appeared and told him to, making the way possible in the process. James was martyred, with no rescue.

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 19:343-350.

Where does this leave us in determining *how* we are to make decisions? I think it safe to say there is no pattern! It seems the normal course of business it to walk holy before the Lord and prayerfully seek to do his will. In the process, we can trust that he will make our paths straight. Are there times where he might present something more dramatic as a direction? Of course, no one can ever fairly say how God will choose to act, as long as the action is consistent with his unchanging character. But those seem to be rare exceptions brought about by rare circumstances. We need to be careful that we not confuse some feeling about God's direction with a bad jalapeño!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Stand up; I too am a man”* (Acts 10:26).

How easy is it to let power, prestige, and position become cause for self-importance. Peter had no such pretense. He actually had a Roman centurion bowing before him, and yet Peter knew that such adoration was misplaced. Peter had the Lord Jesus on the throne of his mind and heart. No one should ever be bowing to anyone else! This helps me recognize that “everyone” is just a human in need of our awesome God, whether President or pauper. We are not to be respecters of person. Similarly, God help us if we ever start to think of ourselves as better than others. We are all fallen people in need of our Holy God!

2. *“Who was I that I could stand in God's way?”* (Acts 11:17).

There is a marvelous Greek word, *koluo* (κολλω) that means, “to hinder, stand in the way, refuse, deny, withhold, or keep back.”⁸ We read it in rapid succession in these integral chapters of Acts. Luke had already used it in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch who asked, “See, here is water! What prevents [*koluo*-κολλω] me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36). Luke then uses it when Peter asked those brothers with him at the Holy Spirit's manifestation among Cornelius's household, “Can anyone withhold [*koluo*-κολλω] water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47). Luke's third usage comes in Acts 11:17 where Peter is responding to his critics over Cornelius's conversion, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way

⁸ “κολλω”, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (U. of Chi. 1979), 2d Ed.

[*koluo-κολλω*]?” God is on the move. God has plans, and he sees to those plans. Shall I be his tool for furthering his plans, or will I be a *koluo-κολλω*?

There is an interesting contrast in Luke’s recounting of the church’s history. For Luke, the Jews *did* try to stand in the way and hinder God’s plans. They tried to persecute the church out of existence. Their actions did not, however, hinder God in the least! In fact, it had the opposite effect. It spread the church throughout the area!

Will I hinder God, stand in the way of his plans, refuse what he wills, deny his instructions, withhold what he wants from me, or keep back what I have to offer? God will win; his will will be done; his kingdom will come – with me or without me! I know what I want to do with the days he has given me.

3. “*There was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter*” (Acts 12:18).

Luke framed the story of Herod’s plans for Peter in contrast to God’s plans for Peter in a tidy Greek language package. In Greek, there are “particles” or words that denote certain inflections, tones of voice, and other things we typically use italics, exclamation marks, bold print, etc. for today. Among these particles are the Greek words *men* (μεν) followed by *de* (δε). These two particles express a juxtaposition between two ideas and events. They are generally translated by the English idiom, “On the one hand... on the other hand...”. It is a linguistic set up like a ring announcer in a boxing match (“In this corner... and in this corner...”). Luke uses this convention in relating the story about Herod and Peter (Acts 12:5). It starts on Herod’s side:

“On the one hand, Peter was kept in prison, chained around the clock and guarded by four quartets of soldiers.”

It then shifts to God’s side:

“But on the other hand, the church was praying earnestly to God for Peter.”

Anyone taking bets would guess who wins in the end. Luke sets up the contrast with Herod’s side first:

“Herod was eaten by worms and died.”

Luke then contrasted God’s side:

“But the word of the Lord kept increasing and flourishing.”

I love to watch the hand of God work. We see the beauty of his handiwork in a world where sunsets can move one to poetry. Yet we also see his hand in the common events of life. Sometimes we decline to see the hand of God, merely writing it off to something we better understand. So Herod could execute the guards for Peter's escape, writing it off to bad soldiering. It is a pity that Herod failed to see the hand of God and fall before him in worship. His end would have been quite different! In our day, we have the same choices. Science can tell us that a baby comes from a fertilized egg. But if we fail to see the hand of God in the process, we are missing an amazing thing of beauty and time of praise. In our scientific age, we can more readily understand many of the ways God works and moves in his creation, yet we have a tendency to ignore God, and pretend that science exists on its own, apart from the Creator who set the dials to the machine of the universe. What a pity! I am resolved to see the marvelous things in the world, knowing and affirming that, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17).