

Acts Chapter 11

As we begin Acts Chapter 11 we are going to open up a whole new world of evangelism. Now that Gentiles were a part of the Great Commission call and accepted as equal, we see the reality play out in the scriptures. Even though the Jewish converts believed themselves to be believers and follow the teaching of Christ and the disciples we see the cultural idea that Jewish people had toward themselves play out. It was not that they chose to be this way, they were raised to believe that the Jewish people were God's chosen people and it was hard for them to rationalize God allowing anyone else to revel in the same blessings He had given them.

Even though some of the same parables were given to them that we read today [Workers in the vineyard, prodigal son, etc.] these were lost on the Jewish believers because culturally they had come to understand the promise of the Messiah being only for the Jewish nation. When we dig into Chapter 11 we see these ideas and deep instilled beliefs play their way out within the body of believers as a whole.

With that, Peter's absence in Jerusalem had allowed concern for his relationship with the Romans to fester into aggravation by the body of believers. When Peter returned to Jerusalem he landed flat into the debate and in the first few verses we see Peter address this problem.

¹ The apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had welcomed God's message also. ² When Peter went up to Jerusalem, those who stressed circumcision argued with him, ³ saying, "You visited uncircumcised men and ate with them!"

To start, this accusation toward Peter that is 100% founded. However, it is not one that is supported with justification for Peter's accusers in the fact that several clear things are apparent. First, the Old Covenant and rules of Jewish law are relevant but not binding due to Christ bringing the New Covenant—Peter will tell his accusers of this in short order.

Second, Peter wasn't simply "wining and dining" so-to-speak with those people he was visiting. Peter was being an effective missionary in the fact that he was living in the world without being of the world. Often, people expect unbelievers just to miraculously accept Christ and change their ways. Further, they feel that they shouldn't have to come outside of their comfort zones in

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order to minister to lost souls, which is a fallacy that has been evident in the early church and sadly continues today in some situations.

⁴ Peter began to explain to them in an orderly sequence, saying: ⁵“I was in the town of Joppa praying, and I saw, in a visionary state, an object that resembled a large sheet coming down, being lowered by its four corners from heaven, and it came to me. ⁶ When I looked closely and considered it, I saw the four-footed animals of the earth, the wild beasts, the reptiles, and the birds of the sky. ⁷ Then I also heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat!’

Before we move forward, we need to understand the accusation in full. First off, we have already seen that Peter knew that it was against the law for him to visit a foreigner in his/her own residence. Peter didn't just visit them, he ate with them and stayed in their home overnight. This Roman centurion was not someone that any Jew would have considered visiting or eating with, much less staying overnight in the guest room! So the accusation against Peter was completely true, and under the old Jewish law Peter was most certainly guilty of breaking the Lord's commands. Peter rebuts the accusation by describing exactly what he went through in the visionary state as well as rationalizing that it took Peter himself some convincing.

⁸“No, Lord!” I said. ‘For nothing common or ritually unclean has ever entered my mouth!’ ⁹ But a voice answered from heaven a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call common.’

¹⁰“Now this happened three times, and then everything was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment, three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were. ¹² Then the Spirit told me to accompany them with no doubts at all. These six brothers accompanied me, and we went into the man's house. ¹³ He reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa, and call for Simon, who is also named Peter. ¹⁴ He will speak a message to you that you and all your household will be saved by.’

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¹⁵“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came down on them, just as on us at the beginning.¹⁶ Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’

Peter does an extraordinary job of calmly and collectively retelling the triple vision that he had in regard to visiting Cornelius and the following account of what had taken place. One of the biggest things that Peter did in his defense was to remain calm and take the accusation head on. There could have been a number of ways that Peter could have responded that would not have went over quite so well. For us as current readers, we must remember the cultural issues that were at play. Even though the Jewish believers fully accepted Christ as Messiah and Peter as an Apostle they were still struggling with balance. The balance of Christianity versus the Jewish faith tradition meant that there were going to be misunderstandings and people were going to still have issues that needed working through. This is one of the examples where Jewish believers had to understand the place God had for them in this new plan of Salvation for both Jew and Gentile.

¹⁷Therefore, if God gave them the same gift that He also gave to us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I possibly hinder God?”

¹⁸When they heard this they became silent. Then they glorified God, saying, “So God has granted repentance resulting in life even to the Gentiles!”

Peter’s rebuttal was enough for the Jewish believers to look past their own ideas and understanding and see God’s purpose. It is here that we can see a true understanding that God is truly aiming to offer this gift of Salvation to the entirety of the world and that the Jewish believers were now a part of something much more significant than they had originally understood and comprehended.

Peter’s largest defense and clear indication of God’s blessing on this was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Cornelius’ household. Peter emphasized the remarkable fact that the Holy Spirit came upon all in Cornelius’ household that believed. This was a clear symbol of God’s acceptance of the Gentile believers into the family that the Jewish believers were also a part of.

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When hearing this and understanding the full gravity and implications of this act those present glorified God in speech realizing that God had granted repentance and everlasting eternal life to the Gentile population as well.

¹⁹ Those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the message to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, Cypriot and Cyrenian men, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Hellenists, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² Then the report about them was heard by the church that was at Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with a firm resolve of the heart, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

Luke picks up on a previous thread of his narrative from which he departed in Acts 8:4, doubling back past events of the previous chapters to follow up on the immediate repercussions of Saul's persecution on the church following the death of Stephen in the year AD 37. By the year AD 40 many of the refugees from the Jewish persecution of Christians in Israel had settled into the surrounding region directly north of Israel.

Here, they settled the areas along the Mediterranean coast, Cyprus, (the sizeable island in the Mediterranean Sea situated between Israel and Asia Minor (and homeland of Barnabas), and Antioch [the Roman capital of Syria, about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem and two hundred miles north of Damascus] (Luke omitted Damascus, because he already made a mention of the believers in that community). These scattered believers carried out a faithful evangelistic witness within the various Jewish Diaspora communities which they had fled, spreading the gospel beyond the borders of Israel as had been commanded by Jesus in Acts 1:8.

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Antioch plays a significant role here in Luke's narrative. In addition to those already mentioned, the Hellenistic Jewish believers from Cyprus and from Cyrene in North Africa had come to Antioch and begun to witness to the Gentiles as well. These Gentiles were presumably "God-fearers" and "proselytes of the gate," those who, like Cornelius, had some frame of reference to comprehend the gospel. Luke indicates an evangelistic emphasis of these spiritual entrepreneurs was the Lordship of Jesus Christ as opposed to emphasizing that he was the messiah, which as previously noted, was a Jewish concept without Gentile context. As God was behind these evangelistic efforts, a great many Gentiles responded to the gospel.

Antioch One of sixteen cities in the ancient world with the same name, this Antioch was often differentiated from the others by the designation "Antioch the Queen of the East," "Antioch the Beautiful," and "Antioch the Great." As it was situated in Syria, on the Orontes river, it was also called by the imaginative "Antioch on the Orontes." With a population of eight hundred thousand it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, continually nipping the heels of Rome and Alexandria for second place. Although it was predominantly populated by Gentiles, there was a significant minority of Jews, comprising about fourteen percent of the populace (almost half again as high as the Jewish population of the entire Roman Empire, estimated to be ten percent).

It is also notable that Antioch is the first place where believers were called Christian. Antioch is sometimes referred to as the "mother of Gentile Christianity" and proved to be an important center of Christian faith and theological development for the following four centuries to come, serving as headquarters for the bishop Ignatius, the coiner of the term "Catholic (universal) church," and later the renowned preacher, John Chrysostom.

It is with the news that mass Gentile conversions reached the mother church in Jerusalem that the apostles responded immediately. Up to this point there were some Gentile converts where the church had absorbed Samaritans, an Ethiopian proselyte, and an isolated group of Roman God-fearers, so there must have been some concern about the church assimilating large numbers of Gentiles into fellowship. Again, there is still that ever-present ideology of the old Jewish customs and law seeping in. The idea and concern must have been that the complexity of the church would change with a large number of Gentiles and would probably have outgrown that of the Jewish believers. The concern would have been what would happen to the Jewish believers as well as their customs and how it would affect the overall mission to take the gospel to the Jewish people.

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This is a point that we will discuss later. However, with the amount of people coming into the church and the area in need of proselytizing growing it became evident that more missionaries would be needed.

Famine Relief

²⁷ In those days some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the time of Claudius. ²⁹ So each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers who lived in Judea. ³⁰ They did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.

In roughly the year AD 44, a delegation of prophets sojourned from Jerusalem to Antioch. Prophets were those individuals gifted to receive direct revelation from God to speak to authoritatively on His behalf. The Jewish rabbis taught that the last prophet was from Malachi, and with his death in the fifth century BC, prophecy formally ceased. As on so many spiritual issues the “Teachers of Israel” were again mistaken. Several prophets are mentioned within the Acts narrative, including Agabus, the entirety of the Antioch church’s leadership, Judas and Silas, and Philip’s four daughters.

The prophetic delegation to Antioch was led by Agabus who delivered the first two prophecies he would make within Acts. Agabus warned the church to prepare for imminent empire-wide famine. Later that year, this prophecy would be fulfilled with the cataclysmic series of famines began which were to continue sporadically for the next five years during the reign of Emperor Claudius. Ancient historians, in particular Josephus, record that the Roman Empire was beset by several severe famines between the years AD 44-49.

It is hear that the Church came together and supplied for those in need. The Antiochian church made a unified effort to systematically collect funds for the mother church’s relief in preparation for the coming famine. In demonstrations of this principle Paul would later articulate in his epistle to the Romans, the Gentile church reciprocated with material benefits for the spiritual blessings they had received from the Jews.

The chronology of Acts 11:30 must be clarified. Luke, who is generally quite conscientious to list events in careful chronological order, seems to have inserted this verse here for thematic

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reasons, but chronologically it should be placed adjacent to Acts 12:25, following the events of Acts 12: 1-24. Some three years later, at the height of the famine, Saul and Barnabas are sent by their church to Jerusalem with this financial aid package. This would allow sufficient time for the church in Antioch to have raised the notable benevolence collection, which Saul and Barnabas delivered to the elders leading Jerusalem church, likely during the Feast of Tabernacles celebration of autumn AD 47.

Another interesting fact is the term “elder” is introduced in Acts 11:30. Apparently, sometime in decade of the 40’s, the leadership of the Jerusalem church was gradually being transferred from Peter and the Twelve apostles to a council of appointed elders. This adoption of church elders in Jerusalem likely indicates that early church government was adapted from similar structures and traditions within the synagogue.

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