

Ministry of Grace Church

The Acts of The Apostles Chapter 11

Preface:

Last week we learned about a devout Roman Centurion named Cornelius. He had seen a vision of an angel telling him to find a man named Peter who was currently in Joppa. As the men he sent were arriving at the place where Peter was staying, Peter also had a vision. Peter learned from his vision that he should not consider Gentiles unclean and that it was okay for him to associate with them. So, when the men arrived and told Peter why they were coming for him, he agreed to go with them to Caesarea.

When they arrived at the home of Cornelius, Peter found that the Centurion had invited his entire family and many of his friends to hear what Peter had to say. As Peter detailed the Gospel message to them, they believed in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit came upon them just as it had on the Jews at Pentecost. As a result, Peter baptized them and then remained for a while, probably to instruct them in the basics of the Christian faith.

Peter Reports to the Church

Acts 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” ⁴But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ ¹⁰This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹²And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ ¹⁵As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If 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?” ¹⁸When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

Notes:

Even in the original church, there were legalists who wanted everyone to adhere to their specific set of rules. After Peter returned from his successful evangelistic campaign among the Gentiles at Caesarea, there were church members who were of the “circumcision” party who were critical of Peter for mingling with Gentiles. However, let’s not be too critical of these Christians. They were new to Christianity and they had entered the brotherhood of faith by way of the door that said “To the Jews first.”

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Romans 1:16)

It is understandable, since most of the early Christians who had been brought up in the Jewish faith would have had a hard time grasping the fact that the Gospel message is for everyone. Jews in the first century believed they were God’s chosen people and they had been brought up believing it was wrong to associate with Gentiles. Now, they hear that Peter had intentionally gone to a house full of Gentiles with the message of salvation. Of course, they would object to this kind of evangelism of the heathen.

Peter’s response was to give a blow-by-blow account of his vision of the great sheet with both clean and unclean animals, including God’s comment that they were not to call unclean something that God had declared to be clean. He also explained that the Holy Spirit specifically instructed Peter to go with these men and to not make a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Peter also included the fact that Cornelius had seen a vision and had been instructed by an angel to find Peter because, as Cornelius had said,

he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household

This is new information to us. In the previous chapter we were told that the angel told Cornelius simply,

And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” (Acts 10:5-6)

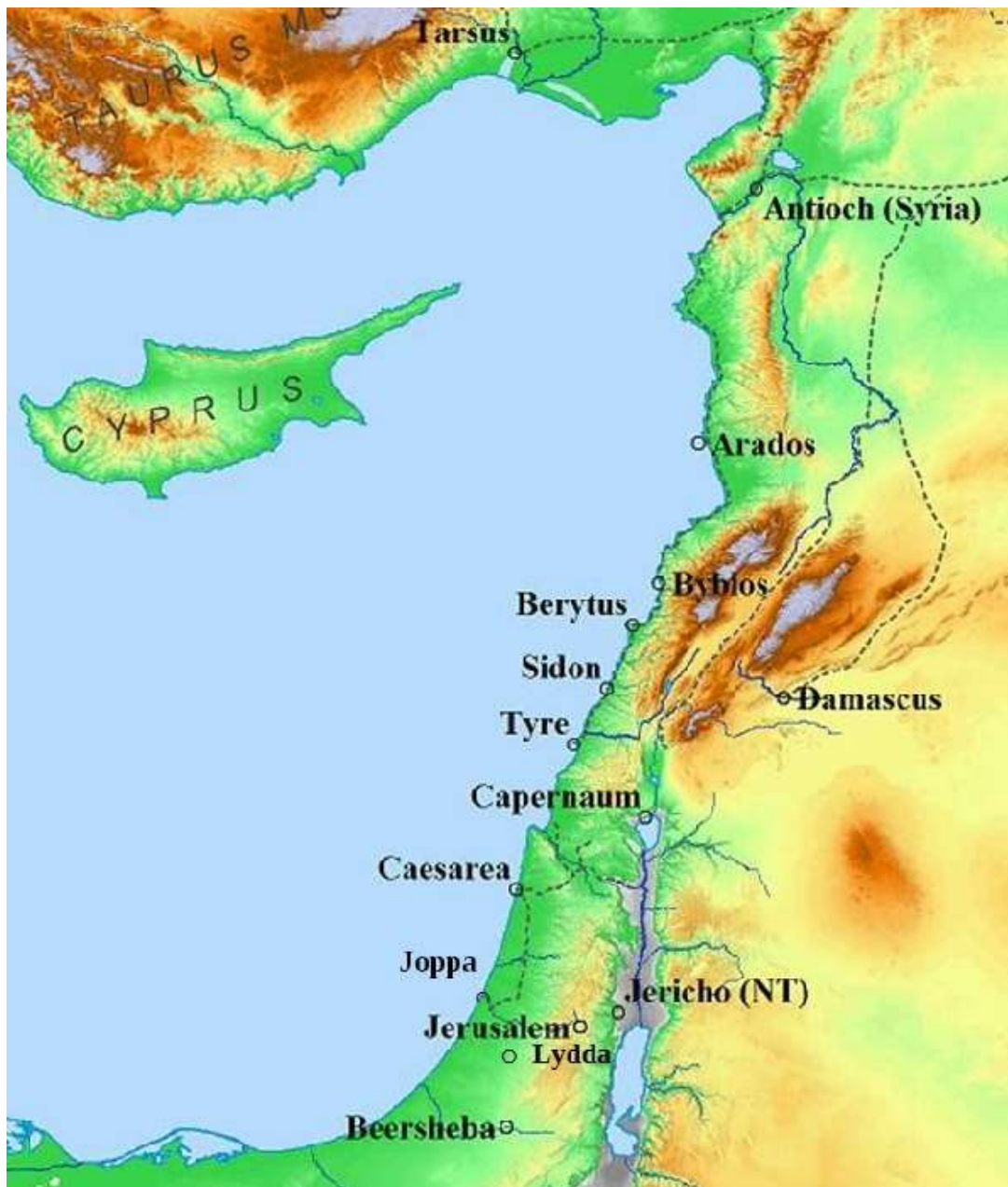
Now we learn that the reason for bringing Peter to Caesarea was so that Cornelius and his family could hear the message of salvation! Please notice that the angel was not permitted to deliver the Gospel message. It had to come from a man. We have a sacred responsibility that even the angels of God do not have. The Good News is ours alone to share with mankind.

And – when they heard the Gospel, they believed and the Holy Spirit came upon them in a very dramatic way, including the gift of speaking in tongues. This is now the third time that this dramatic evidence of the Holy Spirit coming on believers has been mentioned in Acts. The first was at Pentecost, when the Jewish believers received the Holy Spirit. The second was when Peter and John went down to Samaria and laid hands on the Samaritans who had believed the Gospel. Now, as the Gentiles have received salvation, they have also received the Holy Spirit.

Take notice of exactly what Peter said about the Holy Spirit.

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. (Acts 11:15)

There are some churches today that teach that you are not completely saved until you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues. Some churches teach it as a “second blessing” of the Spirit which always results in the gift of speaking in tongues. They believe that Acts shows the gifts of the Spirit, especially tongues, were evidenced throughout the early church. But, if that was the case, then why did Peter talk about the Spirit falling on the Gentiles, “just as on us at the beginning.” If it was a common occurrence, Peter would not have cited the first occurrence of this miracle as if it was something special.



The Gospel Goes to Antioch

Acts 11:19-21

¹⁹Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

Notes:

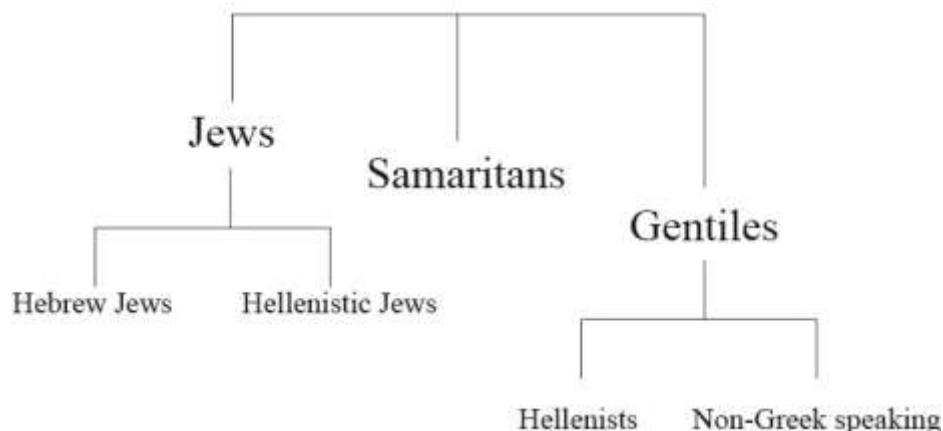
Luke now tells us about another effect of the persecution that arose after the stoning of Stephen. Christians, who still identified themselves as Jews, spread northward along the Mediterranean coast as far as Antioch and also across to the island of Cyprus. But, these Jewish members of the church witnessed only to other Jews.

Some of those who were scattered had originally been from Cyprus and from as far away as Cyrene, which is on the southern Mediterranean coast, east of Egypt in what is modern day Libya. If you recall, we talked several weeks ago about the distinction between the Hebrew Jews, who spoke Aramaic as their primary language, and Hellenistic Jews who spoke Greek as their primary language. These believers from Cyprus and Cyrene were Hellenistic Jews and, therefore, were comfortable talking to other Greek speaking individuals. There is some controversy as to whether Luke means Hellenistic Jews or Gentiles in verse 20 when he says, “**there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also.**” However, since he says in the previous verse that those who were scattered “spoke to no one except Jews,” it implies that the expression “Hellenists” refers to non-Jews. Some translations say, “**spoke to Greeks also.**” This makes more sense, since in the lead-up to this chapter and in the first half of this chapter, Luke is talking about the Gospel going out to the Gentiles.

Another reason for this interpretation is the fact that the church in Jerusalem sent a delegation to Antioch. It is unlikely that they would have found it necessary to send a delegation there simply because Hellenistic Jews were receiving the Gospel. After all, Hellenistic Jews were hearing the Gospel almost from the beginning of the church. If you recall, it was the Hellenistic members of the Church in **Acts 6:1** who complained that their widows weren’t being taken care of by the apostles. However, the Good News was now going out to the Gentiles (non-Jews) and “**the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.**”

Keep in mind, that the church was originally made up only of Jews. They were even considered a sect of Judaism. It was called, “The Way.” It was hard enough for the church to accept the fact that Samaritans, who were only half-Jews, were becoming believers. Now, the Gentiles, who the Jews had grown-up believing were all unclean, were being added to the church.

Members of the Early Church (Christians)



Barnabas Sent to Antioch

Acts 11:22-26

²²The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Notes:

When the church in Jerusalem heard that the Gentiles in Antioch had received the Gospel message, they immediately sent a delegation to verify that what they had heard was real. They chose brother Barnabas as their representative. There were probably others who went with him, but we aren't told who they were. By this point in time Barnabas had established a reputation as a model Christian and an ambassador of the faith. It is said of him that he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

When he arrived in Antioch (a 500-mile journey from Jerusalem), he found that, indeed, the grace of God had truly been extended to the Gentiles. He encouraged the new believers and challenged them to remain steadfastly faithful to the Lord. He obviously was concerned about a large group of new believers who were so far from the apostles in Jerusalem. And, because of this concern for the new believers, he went in search of Saul. Then, having found him, he brought him from Tarsus to Antioch where the two of them spent an entire year teaching the new believers about the Christian faith.

It was here, in Antioch, because of having become steadfast followers of Jesus Christ, that they were called Christians. The suffix *ian* means "belonging to the party of." Therefore, we see that

Saul and Barnabas did such a masterful job of leading this new congregation in the ways of Christ, that all those who knew of them referred to them as Christians.

Prophets Warned of a Famine to Come

Acts 11:27-30

²⁷Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Notes:

First, let me say here that this is the very first mention of a New Testament Prophet. As we have mentioned before, there are two interpretations of the word Prophet. One is “foretelling,” that is, telling of an event before it happens. This is the common understanding of a Prophet. The other is “forthtelling,” that is, proclaiming God’s message to others. This is the most common form of prophecy in the church today. It takes a special gift to be able to effectively proclaim God’s message of sin and judgment.

The prophets spoken of in Acts chapter 11 are the “foretelling” kind of Prophets. They came down from Jerusalem and foretold of a great famine that was to come. This famine actually took place during the reign of Claudius as Caesar. It did not occur throughout the Roman Empire all at the same time, but it did occur in Rome, Greece, Egypt, and Judea over the course of several years.

As a result of hearing of the coming famine, the church at Antioch decided that they would all donate what they could to assist the brothers in Judea. This is the first example given of one Christian congregation assisting another congregation in their time of need. And – who was chosen to deliver the financial blessing? Barnabas and Saul, of course.

So What?

A number of months ago we all took a survey to help us understand what our spiritual gifts might be. I’m sure that more than one of us looked at the results and thought, “Well, I’m not very important.” I don’t know why anyone of us would feel that way, but some people think their gifts aren’t very important. Perhaps your spiritual gifts include Exhortation, Helps, Mercy, Service, Giving, or Hospitality. And – your gifts don’t include Prophecy, Evangelism, Leadership, Teaching, Apostleship, or Healing. So, why do we seem to put more importance on these “up front” gifts and ignore the “behind the scenes” gifts? Probably, because it’s human nature to want to be noticed as someone special by everyone else. But, that not God’s way!

Within the past few chapters, we have been hearing of a man named Barnabas, whose real name was Joseph. To most of us, he’s a rather obscure person who’s only mentioned a few times in the book of Acts. He was just an ordinary Joe, but God used him in a mighty way. I doubt that he knew what his spiritual gifts were. In fact, if you were to have asked him what his spiritual gifts were, he would probably say something like, “Who cares! I just want to serve God.”

So, who was he? Well, he certainly was *not* an ordinary Joe. He was not an apostle, and yet, outside the Gospel accounts, he is talked about individually more than any of the Apostles except perhaps, Peter, John, and Paul. It's quite possible that he had been one of Jesus' disciples, although he isn't mentioned in any of the Gospel accounts.

So, what do we know about Barnabas? He was called Barnabas (Son of Encouragement) because he was obviously someone who was constantly encouraging other people. We know from Acts chapter four that Barnabas was a native of Cyprus and that he had been a Levite priest in the Jewish religion. He was one of the first people in the fledgling church in Jerusalem to sell property that he owned and to give the money to the Apostles to distribute to those in need in the church. Also, in **Colossians 4:10** we are told that Barnabas' cousin was John Mark, who accompanied Saul and Barnabas part way on their first missionary journey. This is the same Mark who wrote the Gospel according to Mark.

We also learned back in chapter nine that Barnabas was the one who brought Saul before the apostles and convinced them that Saul really had been saved, and that he had been preaching boldly in the name of Jesus and had been arguing effectively against the Hellenists.

So, it is no wonder that it was Barnabas whom the apostles sent to Antioch to verify the spreading of the gospel to the Gentiles. And – apparently, Barnabas and Saul had formed a friendship, or at least a mutual respect for one another. Thus, when Barnabas realized that the new church in Antioch needed someone to teach them the fundamentals of the Christian faith, he naturally thought of Saul. Also, as we see in this chapter, it was Barnabas and Saul who took the financial gift to the church in Jerusalem. It was also Barnabas who accompanied Paul on the first missionary journey. And – it was Barnabas who along with Paul argued against the Judaizers who insisted that men must be circumcised in order to be saved.

Therefore – we see that Barnabas was a key figure in the early church. He was not an apostle, he was never referred to as an elder, a deacon, an overseer, or a bishop. He was just an everyday guy who was so sold-out to the cause of Jesus Christ that God used him in many different ways. If I were to put a short description to Barnabas, I guess it would be, “He was a faithful and useful servant for his Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.” It seems that Barnabas was committed to serving God and serving others with little regard for personal gain or personal recognition. A truly humble servant.

Now What?

God is **not** looking for more dynamic, powerful, mega-church leaders. He's looking for more servants. Remember what Jesus told His disciples?

But Jesus called them and said, You know that the rulers of the nations exercise dominion over them, and they who are great exercise authority over them. However, it shall not be so among you. But whoever desires to be great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be chief among you, let him be your servant; even as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (**Matthew 20:25-28**)

From the time of His baptism until His resurrection, Jesus was not here to be the Master, he was here to show what it means to be a Servant. He was the supreme example of what He wants in His

followers. And that's what Barnabas was, a servant. If I were to guess what Barnabas' spiritual gifts were, it would include:

Exhortation, Helps, Mercy, Service, Giving, or Hospitality

My friends, God wants to use you. Yes, you! You, too, can be a Barnabas. He may have been an ordinary Joe, but here's how he lived his faith:

- He was constantly encouraging others
- He wasn't concerned with material wealth
- He was trustworthy and dependable
- He was faithful
- He was humble
- He was devoted to serving Christ

If I knew that God would pattern my life after anyone that I chose, without hesitation I would choose Barnabas. I want to be like Barnabas when I grow up!

Let's pray.

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