

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

A Lesson In Providence

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Acts 11:1-30

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 11.

In the early days of our marriage, Amanda and I would frequently go for walks to develop our five-year plan. Did anyone else have one of those? One of our anniversary traditions now is to set apart some time to laugh at our five-year plan! We planned to live in a cheap apartment and to save voraciously until we could buy a house in cash. For context, when we dreamt that up, you could buy a house for \$200,000. By year five, that same house had jumped to \$400,000! We planned to hold off on having kids until we had more financial security. We planned to put down roots in Stayner. We planned to do anything but pastoring.

In a series of events, God moved us out of our cheap basement apartment and compelled us to buy a house – seemingly months before the market went insane. He moved us to Orillia. He surprised us with children. He called us to vocational ministry. He flipped our five-year plan on its head, and I'm so THANKFUL that He did! Now, we look at where we are today, and we MARVEL at how God led us here! His plan was so much better than ours!

We all have stories like this, don't we? If we look closely enough, we come to see that each and every one of us has been led to this time and place by a series of triumphs, tragedies, plans and problems. The world might call it luck, or blind chance, but the Bible teaches us to recognize our Father's hand. Proverbs 16:9 says:

The heart of man plans his way,
but the Lord establishes his steps. (Proverbs 16:9 ESV)

There is purpose in the process. There is a wise and loving hand placing and removing obstacles.

God, in His loving, sovereign care, orchestrates every detail of our lives. The theological term that we use to capture this mysterious and glorious reality is the word “providence.” John Piper defines it this way:

So in reference to God, the noun *providence* has come to mean "the act of purposefully providing for, or sustaining and governing, the world."¹

As we turn to Acts 11 this morning, this is exactly what we will see. The Jewish and the Gentile Christians are about to come together. Oil and water are about to mix. Barriers that were erected centuries ago will need to come down! This is an impossible task! There is no way that this plan should succeed!

And yet, in Acts 11, we see God purposefully providing for, sustaining and governing His church. Some weeks we zoom in and consider each minute detail of a text, but this week we are going to scale back and consider the entirety of chapter 11 at an overview level where we will find:

A Lesson In Providence

This is a large passage, so we are going to consider it in sections. Look with me first at Acts 11:1-18. There, we will see the way that God providentially prepares His people.

1. God prepares His people

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” ⁴ But 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. ⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and

¹ John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 30.

beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹ And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ And 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; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ ¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ 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?’ ¹⁸ When 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.” (Acts 11:1-18 ESV)

Now, if you look back at the previous chapter and compare it with what we see here, you will notice that almost everything in this passage is a word for word repetition of what was already covered in Acts 10. Two Sundays ago, Matt preached an excellent sermon on Acts 10, and I don't think it would be the best use of our time to simply repeat that sermon this morning. If you missed it, please go to the website, and have a listen². Matt did an excellent job.

By way of a very quick summary, God revealed to Peter that the barriers of the Mosaic Law that made it nearly impossible for the Gentiles to draw near to God had been removed in Christ.

Christ fulfilled the Law – as per Matthew 5 – and brought us out of the Mosaic Covenant and into the New Covenant – as per Hebrews 8. This New Covenant is not like the Old Covenant. Which is why – when Peter repeatedly refused to eat the animals that were deemed “unclean” in the Mosaic Law – God declared:

‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ (Acts 11:9b ESV)

Listen: In this New Covenant, the *only obstacle* for those who would enter in is the obstacle of the cross. No one needs to adopt a new diet. No one needs to book an appointment for circumcision. But everyone who would be saved must take up their cross and follow Jesus.

² <https://redeemercity.org/sermons/the-gentile-pentecost/>. Accessed May 9, 2023.

The old barriers are gone. The door has been opened for the church to go out into the world and to make disciples – even of the Gentiles. That was the lesson of Acts 10. But why, then, is the lesson being repeated in Acts 11? Luke literally just said this.

There are two reasons for that repetition. First, the lesson is being repeated because it's MONUMENTALLY important! When you see repetition in the Bible, it is the author's way of bolding and underlining. The second reason why the lesson is being repeated is because Peter wasn't the only one who needed to learn it. The CHURCH needed to learn the lesson too. And the church is the focus in this passage. Look at their complaint in verse 3:

“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” (Acts 11:3 ESV)

They couldn't believe that Peter would put himself in a position where he would be in contact with unclean Gentiles! The church in Jerusalem needed to learn the same lesson that Peter learned. And they were having an equally hard time with it.

So, Peter patiently explained to the church all that had happened – and he was sure to include his own objections and reservations – and by the end of his explanation, the conversation that started with accusations and suspicion ended with praise. Look again at verse 18:

When 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.” (Acts 11:18 ESV)

If Peter was the only one to learn the lesson – if Acts 11:1-18 hadn't happened – then the story that we're going to read next would have torn the church apart! Tuck that in your cap, because we will be coming back to it.

In your mind now, I want you to imagine that you're watching a movie. Luke has been focusing on this scene in Jerusalem, but now, beginning in verse 19, he cuts to an entirely different scene – a scene that began all the way back in chapter 8. Do you remember when Stephen was stoned to death, and when the Greek-speaking Christians were chased out of Jerusalem? Well, here in verse

19, the camera jumps back to that scene as we follow those terrified new believers in their flight from Jerusalem. Look with me now at verses 19-21 where we will see that:

2. God moves His people

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19-21 ESV)

In this scene, we are following a large group of unknown and unnamed believers as they flee from their homes. When persecution broke out in Jerusalem, it was like the enemy picked the church up like a dandelion and blew. People were scattered everywhere! And, for those people at that time, it must have felt like a terribly, hopeless disaster! But, from where we're sitting, we can see that each of those dandelion seeds eventually landed and took root.

That season of persecution launched the church into mission faster than any mission's board could ever dream!

Most of the people who were scattered only shared the gospel with Jews because – remember – they still understood their faith to be an expression of Judaism. The title “Christian” didn't even exist yet! So, they went to the synagogues, and they explained that Jesus was the promised Messiah that Israel had been waiting for.

But there were some – some unnamed men from Cyprus and Cyrene – who preached to the Greeks in Antioch. Let me read you a little description of Antioch so that we can hear that as we should:

The city was not only known for its sophistication in culture but also for its vices. The beautiful pleasure park of Daphne was a centre for moral depravity of every kind, and the expression *Daphnici mores* became a proverb for depraved living³

³ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 399.

Antioch was sin city! It was the Las Vegas of the Roman Empire! So, in Jerusalem, the church is still breathing into paper bags, trying to catch its breath over the scandal of Peter's dinner date with a centurion. Meanwhile, in Antioch, "unclean" Gentiles are turning to the Lord in waves and the church is setting up shop next to the pleasure park of Daphne! God's lesson through Peter was like a gracious "on ramp" for the church, preparing them for the news they were about to receive!

And so, as the result of tragedy and persecution, a church was planted in the infamous city of Antioch. "Sin City" became one of the central locations for the early church and was instrumental in sending missionaries. Can I tell you something: The missions committee in Jerusalem would NOT have formulated this strategy! This was no one's five-year plan!

But that didn't matter. Because God providentially prepared and moved His people to exactly where they needed to be at exactly the right time.

God prepares His people. He moves His people. And we learn in verses 22-26 that:

3. God equips His people

²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When 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,²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and 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. (Acts 11:22-26 ESV)

When the church in Jerusalem finally caught wind of what God was doing in Antioch, they sent a brother named Barnabas to provide support.

Barnabas was a special man. We caught a snapshot of his character back in chapter 9. When Saul of Tarsus – a former terrorist – attempted to join the church, he was met with skepticism and fear by everyone. Everyone, that is, except for Barnabas:

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ **But Barnabas took him** and brought him to the apostles (Acts 9:26-27a ESV)

Barnabas was an instrumental figure in the early church. His name literally meant “Son of Encouragement.” He had the ability to see past the prejudice and the religiosity that blinded his peers, and he was used by the Lord to build bridges so that disenfranchised people could find welcome in the church. He was exactly the kind of the leader that the church needed in this moment.

So, he went to the church in Antioch, and he saw the congregation of uncircumcised, unclean Gentiles worshiping Jesus and, the text says:

he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. (Acts 11:23b-24a ESV)

He was glad! I love that! He wasn't suspicious. He wasn't annoyed about their diet. He wasn't nitpicking about their dress code. God was drawing lost men and women to Himself, and the Gentiles were coming to Christ, and Barnabas was LOVING IT!

But he quickly recognized that the church in Antioch was outgrowing his capacity.

Just try to imagine the leadership challenges that Barnabas would have faced as these Jewish and Gentile Christians learned how to live and worship together. We have arguments over petty things like music styles, dress codes and personal preferences, but this church was navigating the most fundamental shift in the history of God's people!

Who could lead them through such a season? Who could teach through this monumental shift? Who possessed that depth of wisdom? Who could relate and empathize with both the religious zealots and the unclean outcasts?

Barnabas knew exactly who was needed. He departed on an eight-day, 210-kilometre journey and he found Saul of Tarsus!⁴ In Saul, he found a man who could speak both to the Jews and the Gentiles – a man who was ready to suffer for his convictions – a man who had been humbled.

⁴ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 523.

Ironically and beautifully, Saul was the one who had overseen the stoning of Stephen. The stoning of Stephen scattered the believers. The scattered believers planted the church in Antioch. And Antioch called upon Saul to shepherd them in their faith.

God prepares His people. He moves His people. He equips His people. And, finally, we learn in verses 27-30 that:

4. God unites His people

²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And 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). ²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27-30 ESV)

God used persecution to launch His people into cross-cultural mission. And then, He used a natural disaster to bind His multicultural people together.

There's much that we could say about Agabus and about the gift of prophecy, but we are going to see him again in the coming weeks so this morning we will focus on his message. He sent word that a great famine was coming. This famine would prove to be particularly difficult for the Christians in Jerusalem who were increasingly "on the outs" in their community. The social support in Jerusalem was for proper Jews and would not be extended to the Christian "heretics."

This natural disaster provided an opportunity for the Gentile church to come alongside and support the Jerusalem church in their time of need, and that support served to bind the church together.

Acts 11 zooms back and gives us a widescale view of how God put a plan in motion to build His church and unite Jewish and Gentile Christians together into one united community of faith.

The same God who sent the winds of Pentecost sent the waves of persecution and the pangs of famine. Here's the lesson that we are so slow to learn: God always sends exactly what is needed.

An old Portugese proverb says:

“God writes straight with crooked lines.”⁵

In Acts 11, we see a widescale view of the early church. From Caesarea to Jerusalem to Antioch, God spoke through angels, visions, Apostles and prophets to prepare His people. He sent tragedy and persecution to move them. He sent leaders to equip them. And He sent a famine to unite them. All the while, His plan for His people was NEVER ONCE in jeopardy. God is in control.

That’s the lesson that we learn in this passage. Learning the lesson is one thing, but my prayer for us is that we would not simply accumulate more head knowledge, but that we would learn to apply this lesson.

Applying The Lesson

Do we see His providence in the events that we read about in the newspaper?

Do we see His providence when we look out at the wider world?

If God used the persecution and the famine to prepare, move, equip and unite His people in the first century, then perhaps this 21st century virus that flipped the world on its head was serving a purpose too. Do you see God’s hand in the last three years?

He has exposed some things in the church, hasn’t He? We will never recreate the tension of the first century when the Jews and the Gentiles were brought together as a people, but it felt like we caught a small glimpse of how hard unity can be and how seemingly insurmountable our differences can become.

It is good that we saw that. It is good that we felt that. One might even say, it was providential.

The GREATEST threat that the early church faced was not the Romans, or the famines, or the Jews – no, the greatest threat that they faced was implosion from within.

⁵ Quoted in Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 245.

Fights over doctrine. Unnecessary barriers. Self-righteousness. Prejudice.

Can I tell you something? Implosion from within is the greatest threat that Redeemer faces today.

I love all of you, but you are all very different. You have different preferences. You have different particulars that you are passionate about. And I often lay in my bed and wonder how we will all continue to walk together when we are all so wonderfully and terribly different.

But I'm encouraged by this text. Because it reminds me that God knows how to build His church, and He knows how to bind us together. He is working in each and every one of our lives – in the good, the bad, and the ugly – so as to prepare us for what's next.

Think about the good things in your life. Do you see God's hand in it?

Do you see the growth that He has brought about in you this past year?

Do you see the character development He is working in you because of that new baby?

Do you see the equipping that he has done in you through that Bible study?

He's working in the good. Providentially.

But now, take a moment and consider the bad. Do you see God's hand in that too?

Do you see how that difficult relationship is growing you in patience?

Do you see how that loss has equipped you to empathise with others?

Do you see the mission field that is right in front of you? In your home? In your workplace? In this community? Is it possible that God has closed the doors and ordained the setbacks because He means for you to minister right here?

He's working in the bad. Providentially.

And as hard as it is to see His hand in the bad, it's harder still to see it in the ugly.

Stephen was pelted with jagged stones until his body was unrecognizable. And yet, God was in it. He brought Stephen home to glory, and he launched his church into Antioch where a great revival awaited them. The tears that were shed over Stephen lasted for years. But the shouts of celebration over the revival in Antioch will ring out for all eternity! God was working in the ugly.

I suspect for everyone in this room, there is a circumstance that feels too ugly – too broken – to be a part of God's providential plan. What is it? Can you picture it?

Hear me this morning: God is working in the ugly.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

Now, that doesn't mean that we need to pretend that the ugly is somehow beautiful. The church wept over the death of Stephen and rightfully so. We can and should weep over our heartbreak. But, in our weeping, let's not forget for one second that God is still in control.

He is preparing us for the task ahead.

He is moving us to where we need to be.

He is equipping us for the work in store.

He is uniting us with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The story in Acts 11 is the story of how God providentially builds and unites His church. And that story continues on today. Let's pray together.