

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #26

Acts 11:1-30

This past week I received in the mail a Christian magazine that had a section in it entitled “Ministry Opportunities.” This was a classified listing of jobs that people could apply for in ministry. One of the job opportunities was for an Executive Director to lead a mission agency. One of the main qualifications mentioned for the job was to be a person who was somewhat experienced in overseas travel. There was no mention of the importance of one’s doctrine or beliefs. There was no mention of a need to be a believer in Jesus Christ. You just had to be a person with some experience in overseas travel.

The modern day church has big problems. It has been infiltrated by materialism, secularism, ignorance, humanism, socialism and immorality. It has been filled with blatant heresy and rigid rituals and traditional rules invented by men. **But of all of the problems of the church, the most dangerous of all is a failure to understand the Biblical doctrine of pure grace in salvation. If people miss this doctrine they can end up in hell.**

The story of Peter taking the Gospel to the Gentiles is so important that Luke tells the story in Acts three times, twice in Acts 10 and again in Acts 11. The repetition of the story shows us how critical a moment this was in the plan of God. God wanted His people to grasp the grace Gospel which says this:

ANY PERSON MAY BECOME PART OF THE FAMILY OF GOD BY FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST, AND NOT BY RELIGIOUS LAW, RITUALISM OR TRADITIONS AND THEN IF THAT PERSON PURSUES AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD’S WORD, HE/SHE WILL BE GREATLY USED AND BLESSED BY GOD.

Now people who are hung up on their religious rules and traditions don’t like that message. People hung up in a particular denomination do not like to admit this truth. Any person who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved, and then if they will get serious about understanding God’s Word they will grow to become a powerful person of God. **What you are about to see in this very chapter is that God’s powerful church will move from Jerusalem to Antioch, because Gentiles were being saved and they wanted to know God’s Word.**

PART #1 - When Peter returned to Jerusalem, the other apostles and believers wanted an explanation as to what was going on with the Gentiles. 11:1-3

We may remember when Jesus was on earth He told the apostles that they were not to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans, but only to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 10:5-6). Peter had gone to Samaria and had gone to the Gentiles and that upset the other apostles and believers. He had crossed a major theological line. He had gone to a Gentile city, stayed in a Gentile home, ate Gentile food and ministered to Gentile people.

The idea that Gentiles could have a relationship with God apart from the Mosaic Law and the regulations of the Temple in Jerusalem was totally foreign to these Jews; even those who had believed on Jesus Christ.

They were all hung up in their sectarian way of thinking and they could not believe that God's grace power could go to a world of lost heathen Gentiles. Two facts are given to us about their concerns:

Fact #1 - They had heard that the Gentiles had received the Word. **11:1**

The church in Jerusalem was concerned because they heard the Gentiles had received and accepted the Word of God. We don't know how they actually heard about this, but it is possible that as Peter stayed in Caesarea for a few days (10:48), one of the six Jews who had been there with Peter took off and went to Jerusalem and reported what Peter did.

This shows us how goofy people going to church can become even back in the days of the apostles. When you are a true church, what you hope and pray for is that people will believe in Jesus Christ and love the Word of God. Instead, the church in Jerusalem was worried because they heard this was happening.

George Gardiner told the story of what happened to him in Boston. He witnessed to a madam who ran a house of prostitution, and she believed on the Lord and was saved. The woman started witnessing to the girls and many of them came to faith in Christ so when she would take them to church and would march them right down to the front row, the people of the church were shocked. They couldn't believe that here were sinners coming to church because they wanted to hear God's Word. That is exactly what was happening here.

Fact #2 - They took issue with Peter when he came to Jerusalem. **11:2-3**

That Greek verb "took issue" (διεκρινοντο) means these Christians called Peter into some type of judgmental forum to contend with him (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 108). They were not calling him to a meeting to praise and honor him for his great accomplishment; they were mad. They were upset that he went to Gentiles and ate with them. Think about that. They don't challenge him about Gentiles being saved or receiving the Holy Spirit, they challenge him for eating with Gentiles.

It is interesting that there is nothing even in the Mosaic Law that says you cannot eat with Gentile people. This was a Rabbinical man made rule. So Jewish tradition and man made rules forbade that a Jew eat with a Gentile, and the church was accepting the man made traditions and rules. **They based their beliefs on teachings invented by men, and since eating with Gentiles and staying with Gentiles didn't fit their man made traditions, they were concerned.**

In most churches there are things people believe and do which have been invented by men. For example, in one church they told people that on Sunday afternoon you could eat pot roast, take a nap and go for a ride in your car. But you could not shoot basketballs in your driveway. In another church they were taught you could not possibly be right with God if you mowed your lawn on Sunday afternoon. We must make certain that what we actually believe is based on the inspired Word of God and not the traditions of men.

You are in a very sad spiritual condition when your man-made rules and religious traditions and rigid legalism prevent you from understanding and seeing grace.

PART #2 - Peter gives a sequential explanation of exactly what happened. **11:4-17**

Peter had just returned to Jerusalem from an impacting ministry in which God had used him dramatically. When he gets back to his home church he runs into a buzz saw of criticism. Here he is doing a great work for God, and others who aren't doing much of anything are criticizing him.

As one commentator said, the old Peter would have pulled a sword and started cutting off ears. He could have said, "Get off my back, I'm an apostle called by God to preach grace and I don't have to answer to any of you. You sit here like bumps on a log doing nothing and I am on the front lines of heralding grace to the world."

But Peter didn't do that; he willingly marched the church exactly through what had caused him to change his thinking and take the Gospel to the Gentile world. Peter shows great patience in his presentation to the other apostles and church members.

Sometimes the best thing we can do is to tell others how we came to change our thinking in regard to God's Word and doctrine. This is now the third time we have heard about this vision. He rehearsed four main sequential facts for these Jews:

(Fact #1) - He told them how he was praying and received a vision from God about the clean and unclean animals. **11:5-10**

He told how he saw this vision three times. He saw the sheet with all the animals and how he heard the Lord tell him to eat them and how he said no, and the Lord told him what God has cleansed no longer consider to be unclean.

(Fact #2) - He told them about the three men who showed up from Caesarea to get him. **11:11-12**

Peter said I went because God told me to go and I took six other Jews with me.

(Fact #3) - He told them exactly what happened when he got to Caesarea. **11:13-15**

He said when he got to Cornelius house, Cornelius told him about his vision to get Peter so he could be saved (**11:14**). These Jews were questioning Peter eating with Gentiles and Peter says I am there to present grace so they can be saved.

Peter said in **verse 15** that he saw God send His Spirit on these Gentiles in Caesarea just like He did on us at Pentecost. By the way, notice that Peter says what happened to the apostles happened "at the beginning." At the beginning of what? **The beginning of the Church Age of Grace. The Church Age began in Acts 2 when the Spirit of God launched it.**

(Fact #4) - He told them he remembered the words of the Lord and concluded this was of God. **11:16-17**

Peter's theology and thinking changed. He was beginning to see it and grasp it. It needed to change and it did change. He realized this was more than just John's baptism for the nation Israel; this was God's Spirit baptism on any who believe on Jesus Christ.

Peter said it suddenly dawned on me that they were getting a far better baptism than John's water baptism. Notice from **verse 17** the emphasis of believing on Jesus Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit. Peter said what should I do, oppose God?

Jesus had told these apostles that this baptism was coming (Acts 1:5-6) and He also told them there was a future time when He would build His Church (Matthew 16:18). So it is the Holy Spirit that takes up residency in the believer who builds the Church.

PART #3 - The Jewish apostles and believers respond to Peter's Gentile ministry. **11:18**

Peter laid out the truth and there were three great reactions:

(Reaction #1) - They quieted down. **11:18a**

The truth of God has a way of shutting people's mouths.

(Reaction #2) - They glorified God. **11:18b**

The truth of God's Grace glorifies God and we should glorify God for grace.

(Reaction #3) - They recognized God had granted repentance to the Gentiles. **11:18c**

Don't overlook this point. It is God who grants repentance. We don't earn it or merit it. We cannot in and of ourselves even repent. God must grant it.

PART #4 - The new Gentile ministry needs a new church location. **11:19-30**

Antioch will become the headquarters for the Christian church and right here is the story of how it happened. Antioch was the third major city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. Dr. S. Lewis Johnson said it was a city that was "Syrian in population, Greek in culture, Roman in government" (*Acts* 11:1-30, p. 5). Its population was about 500,000 people. It was a sophisticated city filled with all kinds of religions and all kinds of moral vice. This is the story of how Antioch became the new headquarters of the church.

Reality #1 - Stephen's stoning scattered Jerusalem Jews who preached to only Jews. **11:19**

Notice how this all happens; believers speak the Word. This is how faith is produced, by speaking the Word. Most of the early Jews did not preach to Gentiles. They had become a close-knit society.

Reality #2 - Some Jews started preaching Jesus as the Lord to the Gentiles in Antioch. **11:20-22**

The Greek seems to indicate that they preached a simple message: Jesus is the Lord and He is the Savior and you need to believe in His name to be saved. This was not complicated theology. Peter's Gentile focus had affected other believers.

(Result #1) - God caused large numbers of Gentiles in Antioch to believe in Jesus Christ. **11:21**

Notice the reason large numbers of people turned to the Lord is because “the hand of the Lord was with them.” You and I are not responsible for converting souls. We are responsible to preach the truth. We plant, we water, but it is God who gives salvation increase. Notice there was no carefully orchestrated programs of evangelism. They didn’t go to malls and hand out tracts. These believers just told others about Jesus Christ wherever they went. God blessed their efforts and revival broke out.

(Result #2) - News of this revival in Antioch got back to Jerusalem. **11:22a**

Someone wisely said that the tendency for people who have experienced the blessings of God is to doubt that it occurs somewhere else. Word got back to Jerusalem that God’s Grace was powerfully working in Antioch.

(Result #3) - The apostles sent Barnabas to Antioch to see what had happened. **11:22b**

The other apostles seemed content to stay where they were in Jerusalem and work in the church there, but not Barnabas. Barnabas was not your typical Jew. He defended Saul and he wasn’t afraid to launch out to new Gentile areas.

Reality #3 - Barnabas arrives in Antioch and sees what God had done. **11:23-25**

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch there were five reactions:

(Reaction #1) - Barnabas witnessed God’s Grace at work in Antioch. **11:23a**

Without any O.T. Law, without any Temple, without any man-made traditions or rules, God’s Grace had powerfully worked in Antioch and Barnabas saw it first hand.

(Reaction #2) - Barnabas rejoiced at seeing God’s Grace in Antioch. **11:23b**

Barnabas was happy God was saving and blessing people somewhere else in the world.

(Reaction #3) - Barnabas encouraged the believers to remain true to the Lord. **11:23c-24**

Barnabas was a good believer, one who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith. The traits were: 1) He saw exactly what the truth was; 2) He rejoiced at what God had done; 3) He challenged them to remain faithful.

(Reaction #4) - Barnabas took off for Tarsus to find Saul. **11:25**

The distance from Antioch to Tarsus is about 85 miles by ship and about 110 miles by foot. You can’t just jump in a car and drive this, so quite a bit of effort will be involved in tracking Saul down. Barnabas had not seen Saul for about ten years and we haven’t seen him since Acts 9:30. But that is about to change dramatically.

Now why does Barnabas do this? Why does he go after Saul? Well, we must believe God is leading him to do this and he senses a big need to get Saul, because Barnabas realizes he is not the skilled teacher the church needs. It needs a gifted man like Saul. Barnabas realized that if this Gentile church is to grow to become what God wants it to become, it needs a skilled teacher of God's Word to feed it. Saul had been off the scene for about ten years, but God led Barnabas to go find him.

(Reaction #5) - Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch and they ministered in the church one year. 11:26

Acts 11 opens with Peter going to Jerusalem; it closes with Saul coming to Antioch and then to Jerusalem. There is a change of season in the air. God is about to zero in on Saul.

As soon as Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch, notice the emphasis of their ministry; **“they taught”**. That is the job of one gifted by God. His job is to carefully teach God's Word and God's doctrines. You would think by what is happening in many churches that the job of a minister is to get out of teaching any way you can. But that does not square with the Word of God. The job of a gifted minister is to teach God's Word to the church of God.

This should be the priority of the Church. Somehow the Church has lost sight of this key point. Antioch will become one of the great churches of the world. In fact, believers were first called “Christians” in this church. What this means is that the name “Christian” is a Gentile name given to believers who for the most part were Gentiles. What makes Antioch such a great church is that it was focused on teaching God's Word by those gifted to teach it.

It was not focused on entertaining people or soliciting people or emotionally exciting people; it was focused on teaching God's Word. The priority of the N.T. church should be to teach God's Word. Saul, along with Barnabas taught these believers for one solid year.

PART #5 - The Church of Antioch helps the church in Jerusalem. 11:27-30

Now Antioch was a long way from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was about 300 miles straight south of Antioch. As all these great things in Antioch were taking place, some Jewish prophets, one of whom was named Agabas, came down in elevation to Antioch and predicted there was going to be a great famine all over the world during the time of Claudius (A.D. 41-54). Roman historians claim that a series of terrible harvests and famines did hit about A.D. 46. We are about fifteen years into the Church Age at this point. If Christ ascended into heaven somewhere near A.D. 30, then so far we are tracking the Church Age for the first fifteen years and it is at this point when the Gospel really moves out to the Gentiles.

All believers in Antioch, based on what they had, gathered up money for the saints in Jerusalem and sent Saul and Barnabas to take the money to help the church. Why? Because these Gentiles realized the debt they owed Israel.

By the way, what was the message that Peter took to Caesarea so Gentiles could be saved? The message is found in Acts 10:43. What Peter taught was that “everyone” who believes in Jesus Christ will have all sins forgiven. That is grace; God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin.