

Acts 11

- Having seen the miracle of God opening the hearts of Gentiles to receive the Gospel, we turn to chapter 11 to see the expected result
 - The Jewish people rejoicing in the fact that Gentiles are also turning to the Lord
 - Hardly
 - Rather, they admonish Peter for daring to cross the line separating Jews and Gentiles

[Acts 11:1](#) Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

[Acts 11:2](#) And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him,

[Acts 11:3](#) saying, " You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

- After Cornelius' household received the Gospel, the news spread in Judea among the church
 - The spread of this news was as swift as it was stunning
 - But notice what part of the news interests the Jewish believers the most
 - It was not the miracle of the Gentiles receiving the grace of God
 - It was the fact that Peter went to them and ate with them
 - The Jewish point of view concerning the Gentile was so fixed by teaching and custom that they overlook the miracle of God in bringing them to faith
 - And instead they focus on Peter's audacity in daring to cross the uncrossable line
 - There was a reasonable case to be made against Peter, in this case, in that his actions were likely to provoke the anger of the unbelieving Jews
 - Perhaps Peter's church brethren were concerned that Peter's actions would bring even more persecution upon the church

- Regardless, their criticism ignored the obvious conclusion that God ordained this outcome, so Peter's actions were not only warranted but necessary
- In fact, Peter's actions were according to the direction of the Spirit
 - So his success in persuading Cornelius concerning the Gospel should have been proof in itself to the brethren that this was a work ordained by God
 - Nevertheless, the apostles and brethren were critical of Peter
 - We should take note that even the Apostles were critical
 - But the principle criticism came from the Party of the Circumcision
 - Paul also refers to the existence and negative influence of this faction within the early church in Gal 2

[Gal. 2:11](#) ¶ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

[Gal. 2:12](#) For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.

[Gal. 2:13](#) The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

- Sadly it seems the early church was burdened by divisions and false teaching as it is today
 - The false teaching among the early Jewish believers centered around practice of the Law by a believer
 - The party of the circumcision was given that name because they advocated for the necessity for the church to remain Jewish and to adhere to all Jewish custom and law
 - The challenge to Peter here begins a years-long dispute in the church
- It's also worth noting that the church doesn't seem hesitant to challenge Peter's decision here
 - This would argue against the view that Peter was a "pope" with the kind of absolute authority assigned to the popes of today

- The Church has never had a “pope” or any other single spiritual leader apart from Christ
- Such offices are man-made and ultimately destructive
- Watching this seen, we can certainly see better why it required such a monumental effort on God’s part to move Peter toward Cornelius
 - And this must have been an interesting moment for Peter
 - He was just as reluctant to travel to Cornelius or any Gentile
 - Only after God took extraordinary measures to ensure it happened did Peter cross the line
 - Now he finds himself called to account for doing the very thing he was opposed to doing in the first place
 - Peter’s only recourse is to describe the events exactly as they happened

[Acts 11:4](#) But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying,

[Acts 11:5](#) “I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me,

[Acts 11:6](#) and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air.

[Acts 11:7](#) “I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’

[Acts 11:8](#) “But I said, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

[Acts 11:9](#) “But a voice from heaven answered a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’

[Acts 11:10](#) “This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.

[Acts 11:11](#) “And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea.

[Acts 11:12](#) “The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house.

[Acts 11:13](#) “And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here;

[Acts 11:14](#) and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’

[Acts 11:15](#) “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.

[Acts 11:16](#) “And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’

[Acts 11:17](#) "Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

- Peter wanted to walk his critics through his experience
 - His hope is they will conclude, as Peter did, that taking the Gospel to Cornelius was the proper thing to do
 - The story follows exactly as we saw it unfold in chapter 10, with the added detail that six brothers accompanied Peter to see Cornelius
 - Peter's story climaxes with his retelling of the moment the Holy Spirit descends upon the Gentiles
 - Peter reminds his audience that this experience mirrors their own
 - His point, of course, is that the arrival of the Holy Spirit is proof of the work of God in salvation
 - Paul echoes this same thinking in Romans, when he says

[Rom. 8:14](#) For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are **sons of God**.

- The fundamental definition of a Christian is anyone indwelt by God's Spirit
 - For this is the way one becomes a Christian
 - And it is not an experience shared with unbelievers
- Secondly, Peter draws his listeners' attention to Jesus' own words concerning the meaning of the Spirit's arrival
 - Jesus said the arrival (or baptism) of the Holy Spirit would be an expected experience for all who follow Him
 - Therefore, the arrival of the Spirit upon Gentiles confirms that they have become followers of Jesus just the same
- Finally, Peter makes his conclusion in verse 17
 - If they received the same gift (the Spirit) from the same Giver (God) for the same reason (after believing in Jesus), then how could Peter stand in the way?

- Notice also that Peter recognizes the unique significance of the Holy Spirit's arrival upon these believers
 - Peter says that Cornelius' experience was similar to the one the Apostles had "at the beginning"
 - He is referring to Pentecost
 - His point is that the Pentecost experience has not been continuous
 - It happened only on rare occasions
 - And each occasion was notable because the Spirit gave such clear signs in His work
 - Today, Peter declares that this sign was extended to Gentiles
 - And there can be no other conclusion drawn from the events

[Acts 11:18](#) When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."

- The crowd listening to Peter and they acknowledge the obvious, though remarkable, news
 - That God was granting repentance to the Gentiles also
 - The repentance that leads to life
 - Their choice of words here is important
 - They recognize first this is a work of God
 - This opening for the Gentiles was made possible because God permitted it
 - Secondly, they imply that without God's willingness to grant repentance, the Gentiles would never have come to faith
 - Nor would the Jewish Christians, for that matter
 - Paul again echoes this high view of God's sovereignty in salvation

[2Cor. 7:8](#) For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it — for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while —

[2Cor. 7:9](#) I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.

[2Cor. 7:10](#) For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.

- Paul distinguishes between two types of sorrow
 - Worldly sorrow and godly sorrow
 - The worldly kind is the kind we are all familiar with
 - It is the regret of making a mistake
 - But the regret is self-centered
 - We regret the consequences of our actions
 - We may be truly sorry, but the locus of our concern is within ourselves
 - The Bible talks at times of this kind of worldly sorrow
 - Probably the best example is Esau, as the writer of Hebrews explains

[Heb. 12:16](#) that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.

[Heb. 12:17](#) For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

- Esau felt great sorrow over his mistake of selling his birthright
 - He even cried over the mistake and sought his father's forgiveness
 - But his sorrow was entirely self-centered
 - He regretted losing the inheritance and regretted disappointing his earthly father
- Interestingly, the writer of Hebrews says despite his crying fit, Esau found no place for repentance

- Notice that while Esau was displaying one kind of sorrow, he was denied a different kind of sorrow
 - Obviously, the two type of sorrow are independent of one another
 - It's possible to feel sorry without experiencing repentance, as Esau proves
- The language in Hebrews makes clear that the source of repentance is outside the person
 - Esau was "rejected"
 - By whom we might ask?
 - And he "found no place for repentance"
 - This implies that Esau never arrived at godly sorrow
 - Though he "sought it"
 - The only conclusion we can make is that repentance is a spiritual sorrow that only arrives when it is granted or permitted by God
- Back to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that in v.7:9 that the Corinthians were made sorrowful by Paul's previous letter
 - But Paul was more interested in the way his letter led them to a different kind of sorrow
 - Paul's admonishment made them feel badly, but it also produced a sorrow that led to repentance (i.e., godly sorrow)
 - And then Paul adds in v.10 that this godly sorrow came as a result of the "will of God"
 - This confirms what we read in the letter to the Hebrews
 - Godly sorrow or repentance is a spiritual regret that comes only when the will God permits it
 - And to sum up this principle, Paul says in v.11 that the worldly sorrow leads only to temporary regret that is powerless to effect spiritual change
 - But godly sorrow produces repentance, which is the precursor to salvation itself

- I often characterize the difference between these two types of repentance or sorrow with the terms big “R” and little “r.”
 - Repentance with a little “r” is the feeling of sorrow or regret we experience when we are convicted over our sins
 - This kind of sorrow is common to both Christians and non-Christians alike
 - It’s the normal reaction when we bear the consequences of our sin
 - Repentance with a big “R” is the unique spiritual awakening that the Holy Spirit accomplishes in the heart of a person as a preparation step to receiving faith
 - This kind of godly sorrow isn’t the same feeling as world sorrow
 - It isn’t fixed on a certain behavior or mistake
 - It creates a more profound sense of shame or regret
 - It is long-lasting
 - It is an awakening to a life of sin apart from God
 - It can only come if and when God grants it, because it finds its origins in a work of God in the heart
- So in Acts 11:18, the audience responds to Peter’s testimony with the correct conclusion
 - The response of Cornelius was prima facie evidence that the Spirit of God had “granted” the Gentiles the repentance that leads to eternal life
 - They confirmed that the kingdom of God had been extended to the Gentiles
 - And the proof of this change was the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the speaking in tongues
 - Once again demonstrating that this unique display of the Spirit was reserved for moments when grace became available to a new group of humanity

[Acts 11:19](#) ¶ So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.

[Acts 11:20](#) But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

[Acts 11:21](#) And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

[Acts 11:22](#) The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.

[Acts 11:23](#) Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord;

[Acts 11:24](#) for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.

- Before moving forward with the story of Peter, Luke adds another important detail in the outward movement of the church
 - Some believe this narrative runs parallel to the events of Acts 8-10
 - But I believe Luke is describing events that occur both before and after and as a result of the events of chapter 11
 - Specifically, Luke backs up chronologically briefly in mentioning the persecution of Stephen and the evangelism that followed
 - That persecution caused the outward movement of the Gospel, and we discussed earlier
 - But it was not a uniform movement
 - Most of the disciples were only interested in preaching the Gospel to Jews in the Diaspora
 - But later, after Peter's experience with Cornelius, other disciples went out specifically seeking Gentile converts
 - Their ministry was to the Gentiles
 - This willingness to engage Gentiles was the result of Peter's testimony
 - And their success in finding converts was only possible because Peter had opened the kingdom for the Gentiles in chapter 10
 - Notably, they are preaching "Lord Jesus"

- Among the Jews they preached “the Christ”
- But among Gentiles they taught about the “Lord”
 - The distinction reflects the cultural and religious differences between pagan Gentiles and the god-fearing Jews
 - The Jews knew of the promises of a Messiah, the Christ of God
 - So they received the message that this Christ had arrived in the Person of Jesus
 - The Gentiles knew nothing of the promised Messiah, so preaching a “christ” would have meant nothing to them
 - But they certainly new of worship a lord, as they were required to do in worshipping the Caesar who was their lord
 - Now, they were taught of a greater Lord Who required their worship and offered eternal life
- As a result of this movement, the church in Jerusalem is still skeptical of this response and wants to verify it for themselves
 - So they send our Barnabas, a devout and learned Jew
 - Remember Barnabas was the friend of Saul who introduced him to the church in Jerusalem following Saul’s conversion
 - Since that early encounter, Saul has since returned to his home in Tarsus
 - While Barnabas has remained in Jerusalem in the church
 - Now Barnabas moves outward himself to investigate the reports from Antioch
- Antioch was an important city in its day
 - It was the third largest city in the Roman empire, after Rome and Alexandria
 - It was located about 15 miles inland from the Med sea in modern-day Syria

- About 300 miles north of Jerusalem
- It contained upward of 800,000 citizens
 - About 115,000 were Jews
 - With many Gentile proselytes
- Like many Roman cities, it was also notorious as a city of pleasure-seekers
 - Roman satirists claimed that the city was so corrupt, that its sewage contaminated Rome, which was 1,300 miles away
- It's in this city that the Gentile church first gains a foothold
 - Importantly, Antioch was also near Barnabas' home on the island of Cyprus
 - Which might explain why he was chosen to go to Antioch
 - Secondly, Antioch was only 90 miles from Tarsus, where Saul was living at the time
- When Barnabas arrives, he finds a growing, vibrant, genuine Gentile church
 - And begins a man under the influence of the Spirit, Barnabas receives them as brothers and encourages them
 - But he also must have wondered how the church would begin to disciple and encourage this budding group of believers
 - They lacked the knowledge of the Scriptures and they were heavily influenced by pagan practices
 - Who would care for this congregation so far geographically and culturally from the influence of Jerusalem?
 - Barnabas knew where to find the answer

[Acts 11:25](#) And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul;
[Acts 11:26](#) and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

- As God would have it, the first Gentile church is founded near the Apostle appointed to the Gentiles: Saul
 - And Barnabas must have recognized, by the Spirit, that Saul was the right man for this job
 - Perhaps Saul had confessed to Barnabas that he felt called in that way
 - More likely, Barnabas simply recognized an obvious opportunity based on Saul's close proximity to the new church in Antioch
 - Nevertheless, we know that God has orchestrated these events so that when the keys to the kingdom have been extended to Gentiles, Saul would be in the proper position to begin his ministry
 - Remember, it's been about nine years since Saul's conversion, yet he hasn't yet begun his ministry to the Gentiles in earnest
 - His ministry opportunity awaited Peter's opening of the kingdom for that group
 - Now that barrier has been removed, and so circumstances will lead Saul into ministry in Antioch first
 - And in this place, the term "Christian" is established
 - The name is significant in that it reflects the establishment of a new, distinct religious party or affiliation
 - It was distinct from pagan Gentile and religious Jew
 - By adopting a new name, the Church recognized the fact that the family of God had changed and separated itself spiritually from either of the previous two distinctions
 - Though there were Gentiles in the Church and Jews in the Church, the Church was neither
 - It was an entirely new concept, created by God, and called into existence for a time and purpose
 - We are "Christians" by faith, regardless of our heritage beforehand

[Gal. 3:28](#) There is **neither** Jew nor **Greek**, there is **neither** slave nor free man, there is **neither** male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

- Finally, Luke relates an interesting encounter

[Acts 11:27](#) Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

[Acts 11:28](#) One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.

[Acts 11:29](#) And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.

[Acts 11:30](#) And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

- Prophets come “down” from Jerusalem to Antioch
 - They come to deliver a message from God
 - The church has prophets during this period because the canon of Scripture was not yet complete
 - Until John’s letter of Revelation, the Spirit’s work of revealing God’s word is not finished, so prophets are still available to bring God’s word in this way
 - The prophets tell of a coming famine in the world, and the famine would bring destitution to the brethren in Judea and Jerusalem particularly
 - In a time of famine, and in an age without welfare, people had to depend on family and tribes to get through the tough times
 - But the church in Jerusalem, which was largely Jewish, would have been disowned by their Jewish families
 - So a famine would have been particularly devastating to believing Jews in that city
 - Luke says the Spirit sent these prophets to the church in Antioch to inform them of the need to send support to the church in Jerusalem during this time of famine
- Since we know the Lord is at work in producing these events, we must ask the question why does He do this?
 - God is bringing about circumstances to teach the Gentile church of their responsibility to honor and support their Jewish brethren in keeping with Israel’s pre-eminent role in God’s plan of salvation
 - Secondly, this act of goodwill helps cement the Jews acceptance of the new Gentile church in the family of God