

ACTS 11 and 12

THE TURNING POINT OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Have you all enjoyed looking at the book of Acts? *[Discussion]*

I find it very interesting in studying Acts how God through the Holy Spirit empowers relatively ordinary people to do incredibly extraordinary things. We read about this all through Acts. God uses everyday people from all walks of life.

In the previous 10 chapters a lot has happened. Let me highlight just some of it to draw us to where we will be in Acts today. The book of Acts begins with Jesus getting ready to ascend back to heaven. He takes his eleven disciples up on the mountain. He is talking to them and He says, "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). That statement becomes the outline for the entire book of Acts. After Jesus said this, He returned to His Father. He ascended back up into heaven. The disciples, now called the apostles – meaning "one who is sent out" (based on what Jesus had told them to do; He is sending them out to be His witnesses) – they were told by two angelic messengers that Jesus "will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). So, Jesus is coming back. He will come back the same way that He left. He is going to come back just like He said that He would. The apostles are reminded of that.

The Holy Spirit then came upon Jesus's followers at Pentecost – tongues of fire. They began speaking in different languages proclaiming the mighty works of God. The apostles and Stephen became bold witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem. It cost the apostles some beatings and jail time, but it cost Stephen his life. That was only the beginning of severe persecution. It increased. This persecution drove many believers away from Jerusalem. Despite opposition, the church grew and it flourished. The Gospel message was being preached boldly and many people were coming to Christ. Believers relocated to such places as Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch,

Alexandria and Damascus. As they moved away from Jerusalem, the Gospel message went with them. Philip and Peter witnessed about Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles in Judea and in Samaria. The Lord Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus (the chief persecutor of the church) on the road to Damascus. That encounter completely changed the course of Saul's life.

We have observed the Gospel message being preached in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. The last part of Jesus's statement, "to the end of the earth" will be fulfilled in the rest of the book of Acts starting in Chapter 13. We'll focus on that starting next time with the life of the Apostle Paul. We will look at Chapters 11 and 12 today. We're going to wrap up our study of the Apostle Peter and his ministry in these chapters. The lessons that God teaches the early church in these chapters will effectively chart the course for the church over the next several centuries. That's why I have entitled this lesson "The Turning Point of the Early Church."

Now, last time we observed in Chapter 10 something significant taking place. Do you remember? A large group of Gentiles gathered in Cornelius's house got saved and the Holy Spirit fell on them. What happened at Pentecost to Jewish believers was replicated in Caesarea to Gentile believers. Chapter 11 tells us the church's reaction to this event. The Jewish-born Christians living in Jerusalem are having difficulty processing what happened. It just doesn't make sense to them. Peter who was there when it happened is going to help them to understand, to provide context. He's going to communicate to them the lesson that God has been teaching him. So, here we go – Chapter 11, beginning in verse 1...

READ Acts 11:1-3

Peter receives criticism about what happened at Cornelius's house in Caesarea. Clearly his brothers are not happy about what transpired. It's not as though anything bad happened. I mean, a whole bunch of people got saved! That's a good thing, right? But "the circumcision party," which is a small sub-group of Jesus's followers is outraged over Peter's breach of Jewish customs. To them that is a big deal.

Let me tell you something about churches in general. You may have actually experienced this yourself. Whenever you do anything differently than it has ever been done before, even if it has positive results, you are going to be criticized big time.

I experienced this when I was in high school. We were living in New Hampshire. My dad was in the Air Force. We went to a church that had a beach ministry at Hampton Beach. This was back in the early 1970s toward the end of the hippie movement. There was still a lot of that out there. What do beaches attract? Rebel, college-aged young people with long hair who play guitars and enjoy life. Many were on the fringes of society. They looked and acted differently than main-stream people do. Our church operated a coffee house on the beach front called the Agape Inn. Me and my dad volunteered to help out on certain nights. A group of kids from the church would sing and play Christian music. They served coffee and snacks. The young folks from the beach would just wander on in and many of them got saved. And then they would invite them to church. So, guess who would show up Sunday at our church? You guessed it. There were people in that church that murmured about these strange people in shorts and t-shirts. They were just complaining. And these were kids that were getting saved and God was beginning to really deal with their lives. So, I saw that as a high-schooler and it made an impression on me about how church people can be. They don't like change. They don't like these people who are different than them.

So, Peter, who had been present at Cornelius's house in Caesarea when it all happened, responds by recounting the events from Chapter 10 to his brothers in Jerusalem. "Let me tell you what happened..."

READ Acts 11:4-18

When the LORD does something amazing like He did at Cornelius's house and like He did at Pentecost, we may not fully understand it all, but we cannot argue that it is from God! The brothers in Jerusalem couldn't

help but acknowledge that what had happened was unexplainable. It had to be from God. There was no other explanation. It had to be a God thing.

As you read and study the Bible, what I want you to do – notice how many different ways God works. Many times, it is NOT in a way that anyone expected. Read all the stories. If you have never heard the story before and you are trying to predict how it is going to end, it usually ends up differently than you thought. The Lord truly does work in mysterious ways! We cannot fit God in a box. He is almighty, holy, omniscient, omnipotent and omni-present. God's ways are much higher than ours.

OK, so we see that God has been working on Peter and his prejudice toward Gentiles. And we can also see now that God is working on the prejudice that the Jewish believers have. You would think that the Jewish believers are now ready to start sharing the Gospel with both Jews and Gentiles. Right? Lessons learned. "OK, we get it." Now you would think that. But then you read the next verse...

READ Acts 11:19

Jewish believers (the first believers in Jesus were from a Jewish background) have been scattered to places with predominately Gentile populations. However, the old Jewish mindset is hard to break away from. For centuries the Jews have felt that they were God's chosen people and that the blessings of God were reserved for them and them alone. So then, you have this age-old prejudice to deal with on the part of the Jews. But you also have to basic human nature. The fact is that people in general (including us) feel more comfortable associating with their own kind. It's difficult to be inclusive, especially with those who are different from us – that difference could be politically, racially, culturally, denominationally or whatever. What is going on here during this time is a lot for the early Jewish believers to process and to deal with. It is new to them. As you can see, God has a little more work to do in His church.

I wanted to point out something to you. Antioch mentioned here was at this time a major city up north in Syria. Today Antioch is located in

Turkey. The old city is in ruins, but the new city that was built over it is known as Antakya. The city of Tarsus, where Saul has been living is located to the west of Antioch.

So, the Jewish believers in Antioch are only presenting the Gospel to the Jews.

READ Acts 11:20

The "Hellenists" mentioned in this verse are Greek-speaking Gentiles. So then, the Gospel gets preached to the Gentiles in Antioch. Cypress is an island in the Mediterranean that will be part of Saul's first missionary journey. Cyrene is a city in North Africa (Libya today). Do you remember a guy in the Bible named Simon of Cyrene? He was the one who was told to carry Jesus's cross when Jesus was on His way to be crucified and had fallen down. These believers from Cypress and Cyrene (Libya) travel as missionaries to Antioch. Very interesting.

What happens when the Gospel is presented to these people in Antioch?

READ Acts 11:21

The church at Antioch is established and begins to grow. What is different about this particular church is that it is comprised of mostly Gentile believers. This is something different in the life of the early church – you now have a Gentile church!

READ Acts 11:22

We saw Barnabas before. Remember, he had taken a young convert named Saul under his wing and introduced him around. They called him "the son of encouragement."

READ Acts 11:23-24

Barnabas is mentioned here in v 24 as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Barnabas can see that God is at work in Antioch. He sees what is going on. A lot of discipleship needs to be done with these

new believers. It's one thing to evangelize and to lead a person to Christ. That's certainly important. But just as important is to disciple a new believer so that they will grow in their faith. That is what the books of Titus and First John are all about – the importance for young pastors to disciple the new believers; to make sure they are taught the truth from God's word and not false doctrine. Disciple them so that they can then turn around and they can become witnesses for Christ and grow in their own faith. That is Barnabas's role. That is his calling. We know what an amazing person he is. But this is what he does. He knows from looking around and observing what is going on that he will need some help in the work that needs to be done in Antioch. And so...

READ Acts 11:25

Several years have now passed since Saul was sent by the apostles to Tarsus. Barnabas remembers that Saul is in Tarsus and he knows that Saul can help him to teach the new converts in Antioch.

READ Acts 11:26

Let me talk about this name "Christian." Prior to this the believers in Jesus Christ had been known by several different names – "The Way" or Jesus's followers or Jesus People or Jesus's church or any number of names. But this designation sticks, "Christians." There is something interesting about the word "Christian." We call each other Christians today. And it is a good name. Do you realize that the words Christian or Christians (plural) are found only **three** times in the entire Bible? It is mentioned for the first time here at the end of Acts Chapter 11. It is mentioned in Acts 26:28 when Paul is talking to King Agrippa and the king says to Paul, "You almost convince me to become a Christian." And then it is used in 1 Peter 4:16: "If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed." That surprised me.

READ Acts 11:27-30

Agabus is a prophet God and predicts this widespread famine. God has a purpose for everything, even a famine. The persecution of the church in

Jerusalem resulted in the Gospel being spread to other places. Now a severe famine in Judea and Jerusalem unites the church at Antioch with the church in Jerusalem. This relief effort ties these two churches together. Believers in Antioch reach out to their brothers and sisters in Judea and Jerusalem to get them food. But the famine is only one problem the church in Jerusalem has to deal with.

There is another problem and his name is King Herod. He is actually the third of the King Herod's that is mentioned in the Bible. The first King Herod, Herod the Great, was king when Jesus was born. He is the one who had all those babies in Bethlehem killed. He is famous for all his building projects. The second King Herod, Herod Antipas (Herod the Tetrarch), killed John the Baptist. He is also the one who made fun of Jesus on the day of His crucifixion. The third King Herod mentioned here is Herod Agrippa I. He is the current King Herod. As you will see, he's no better than the other two King Herod's.

READ Acts 12:1-2

This James here is the Apostle James, John's brother, one of the "sons of thunder" and a part of Jesus's inner circle along with Peter and John. He becomes the first of Jesus's disciples to be martyred. Like John the Baptist, James is beheaded. This is what church tradition tells us. Although God is all-powerful, in this case He chooses not to rescue James from King Herod's evil intentions. Instead, God allows James to face a martyr's death. From a human perspective this is a sad tragedy, isn't it? He, didn't deserve to die. He is a good guy. He is a faithful follower of Christ and a bold witness there in Jerusalem. But when you are dealing with death you need to view things with a heavenly perspective. When James died, we know from reading our Bibles that he was welcomed into heaven by Jesus with the victor's crown and the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the eternal joy of your Master!" James went instantly from this life of pain, sorrow, and trials to the place of eternal joy. That is how we have to look at things like this. We do this when we go to a Christian's funeral. We say, "They are with the Lord now."

I like to think that when my life is finished and I go to meet Jesus that I will be told, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Those are words I would love to hear from the Lord. And I am sure you all feel the same way. So don't think of this as a tragedy. It was the path that God took him down. This becomes important as we read on.

READ Acts 12:3-4

Most Bible scholars believe that Herod's plan is to have Peter executed also. Like James, Peter is a high-profile leader of the church in Jerusalem. As such, he is hated by the Jewish religious establishment. Face it. They hated Jesus and they hate the apostles also.

Peter is in prison and what does the church do? Do they go petition for his release? No. They pray.

READ Acts 12:5

The church prays fervently for Peter – "earnest prayer for him" is what it says. God hears their prayer. What are they praying for? It doesn't say. Presumably they are praying that God will spare Peter's life somehow, someday. He might intervene. Keep this in mind be. It's going to be important later on in this chapter.

READ Acts 12:6

Peter is in prison under heavy guard. The quarterly makes this observation which I thought was pretty good: "Normal Roman practice rotated guards for every three-hour watch throughout the night, so the total contingent of guards assigned at night consisted of four squads of four soldiers each. Peter was chained to two soldiers at all times. The other two soldiers in each watch guarded the doors of the prison. They guarded the door of Peter's cell and the iron gate at the exit of the prison."

If you recall from earlier in Acts Chapter 5 the apostles had been delivered from their jail cell and they had gone back out and started preaching again. Well, Herod is going to make sure that this does not happen again. So he beefs up the guard watching Peter.

I couldn't help but be amused when I was reading this because I knew what was going to happen next. And it reminded me of how they tried to guard the tomb to ensure that nobody stole Jesus's body. There was rumor that this might happen. So, the religious leaders did everything they could to prevent that. Remember they asked Pilate to post Roman guards at entrance of Jesus's tomb. But you can't stop God, can you? You couldn't stop Him then and you can't stop Him now. God sends one of his angels – just ONE angel – to release Peter from his prison cell.

READ Acts 12:7-9

Peter follows the angel out of the prison and the whole time he thinks he's just dreaming. What is not mentioned here that you might think is peculiar? How many guards were there? You have a light shining in the cell. You have chains falling off his wrists. You have conversation taking place, presumably a verbal conversation out loud. Where are the guards? It never says. The Bible doesn't say. Are the guards sleeping? That is what most people think, but it never actually say that. Could this be some sort of a time warp where they are frozen in time? Peter thinks he is dreaming, but it is real, isn't it? We know that because we have read ahead.

READ Acts 12:10-11

The iron gate just opened up! Miraculously, Peter has been freed from his prison cell. Standing out all alone on this city street in the middle of the night Peter now realizes that this is no dream. It is the sovereign hand of God! Everybody, including Peter himself, thought for sure he was going to die. But God is not finished with Peter yet.

We have this case where God does not rescue James but He does rescue Peter. You will never be able to wrap your mind around "Why Peter and not James?" You will drive yourself crazy trying to figure it out. Don't do that. God has His reasons whether we know them or not.

So, what does Peter do?

READ Acts 12:12

Peter heads straight for the house where the people were gathered together praying for him. The Mary mentioned here is one of several Mary's in the New Testament. This is Mary the mother of John Mark. John Mark, of course, will later pen the Gospel of Mark. Most Bible scholars believe Mark's gospel is primarily Peter's account of the life of Jesus. Peter was close to his family so that makes sense. Where is Mary's house located? Somewhere in Jerusalem. Peter knew where it was because it was apparently a regular meeting place for the early church.

READ Acts 12:13-16

This is always a humorous scene to me. Notice their reaction to seeing Peter standing at the door. They were amazed. Why were they amazed? Hadn't they been praying for Peter's safety? Why were they surprised when God actually answered their prayer? This is what I think. They had faith. They believed that God COULD answer their prayer. But they didn't think that He really would. So, that's why they were so astonished to see Peter. I am not critical of them at all. I can totally relate to them. I've been the same way myself at times when God answers my prayer. I am frequently surprised at how often God's answers our prayers. And I am so thankful that He does.

READ Acts 12:17

Peter explains everything we just read. Peter requests that the people gathered in Mary's house inform James (the brother of Jesus) and the other apostles that Peter is OK. With his life in imminent danger, Peter is forced to leave the area. We don't know where he goes from here. None of his friends know either. All we know is that, for now, Peter is safe. What's interesting is that, except for a brief mention of Peter in Acts Chapter 15, he completely disappears off the scene. So then, we really have no idea where Peter goes, but he apparently leaves Jerusalem for the time being.

Meanwhile, back in the prison they discover that Peter is gone. And as you might guess, Herod's not happy about it at all.

READ Acts 12:18-19

John Phillips in his commentary on the book of Acts says: "Herod's plans to ingratiate himself to the Jews at Peter's expense had exploded in his face, and his fury knew no bounds." As you can see Herod is not a good guy. Herod heads down to the coast for a little R&R (rest and recreation). But as we will soon see, it is going to be his last vacation.

READ Acts 12:20-23

A gruesome death.

I am going to close with the words I will open up with next time...

READ Acts 12:24-25

Saul, Barnabas and John Mark return to Antioch from Jerusalem. We are going to see as they embark on their first missionary journey next time.

A few applications from our passage today in Acts Chapters 11 and 12:

- The Gospel message is for EVERYONE! Share it. Don't keep it to yourself. Today's technology has opened doors to sharing the Gospel that were previously closed. Even to other countries.
- God doesn't always work the way we expect. For that matter we may not always be aware that He IS working.
- We need to be ready to accept God's plans for us even if they turn out to be completely different from our own plans.
- We need to be like Barnabas. He encouraged new believers and actively sought out those willing to do Kingdom work. Many are willing but just need someone to come alongside and encourage them and mentor them.
- God rescued Peter but not James. This does not mean that God loved Peter more than James. He just led their lives down different paths.
- When we pray together as a church, God can do the impossible.
- God is almighty and sovereign. He can remove the most powerful and proud human leaders. Case in point: In His time, God struck down King Herod.