

Acts – Chapter 11

We find in Chapter 11 three key transition points in the establishment of the early church. They are:

- The realization by the Jewish Christians that Christ died for all – *including* the Gentiles
- The final commandment of the Lord Jesus to the disciples before His ascension as outlined in Acts 1:8 was reaching its third and final frontier of preaching the Gospel
- The grace of God arises to challenge the legalistic religious mentality

Our reading begins with Peter, who back in Chapter 10 came to the realization that Jesus' sacrificial act on the cross to offer forgiveness of sins was not meant solely for the Jew, is called to Jerusalem to give an explanation for what just happened at the home of the Roman Centurion - Cornelius. The notion that God's provision of forgiveness and a desire to have a relationship with the Gentiles was unthinkable. Somewhere along the way in the history of the Jews, all Gentiles – or non-Jews – became unclean, dirty, despicable, and grotesque – they were not even to be approached - they're to be avoided at all costs.

Not surprisingly, they neglected an important verse in Isaiah 42:6: “I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness, and will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the

Gentiles". Judging by the capitalization of the pronouns "You" and "Your", we see this verse is a special treat for us – a glimpse into communication within the Trinity. The Father is speaking to the Son and acknowledging His position – *righteousness*. Romans 3:10 reminds us that there is no one righteous – not one. Therefore, Jesus, the only begotten of the Father and co-member of the Triune Godhead, is the only One who can be called righteous.

The Father then lovingly assures the Son that He will hold His hand and will *keep* Jesus – a sweet promise of protection from a Father to His Son. Who does **Jesus** need protection from? Sadly, we will find out it is **us** because it was our sin that directed Him to the cross. The Father then tells His Son that He will be given as a glorious example of the covenant to the people. What is this covenant and who are the people? The covenant is that of the one that was made to Abraham way back in Genesis. God, speaking to Abram in chapter 12:2-3, promised to him, "I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and will curse him who curses you; and in you **all** the families of the earth shall be blessed." Romans 4:16 reminds us that by our faith in the same God in Whom Abraham believed, **we** are partakers in the covenant, "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to **all** the seed, not only to those who are of the

law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all."

This is why it is so important we know the *entire* word of God. While Peter does not specifically quote this verse in Isaiah, it is there to defend what he has just witnessed. When we encounter situations in our lives that leave us wondering if something is of God or not, the complete Bible is the first place to go to and hold the issue up in the light of what the Scriptures say. Poor translations or abbreviated versions rob us of God's ability to speak *all* of what He wants us to know about Him.

Verses 1-3 indicate Peter is being summoned by the Jerusalem-based Christian Jews to testify to the reality of the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit and his involvement. As we read through Peter's accounting of the events, he almost sounds apologetic - like it wasn't his fault. The fact is that what happened wasn't his "fault" - it was the work of God. When we're challenged by people when we share our faith, it is not *us* who are being challenged but *Who* is being challenged. We just recently heard what the Lord said to Paul on the road to Damascus – the persecutions Saul was instigating – Jesus asked him why he was persecuting **Him**! Think about that – the Lord takes our suffering on His behalf very personally – He identifies our suffering as though it is **He** that is suffering – and He does. Jesus suffers when we suffer – even today. He takes no joy in our pain.

When Jesus was tempted by Satan, the **only** weapon of defense He needed was His Word. When we respond to challenges against our faith, quoting God's Word provides **all** we need - it is then up to the Holy Spirit and that person's heart condition as to whether or not they will come into agreement with our defense. It takes the pressure off of us, doesn't it? We put so much pressure on ourselves for so much of life - we carry burdens that really aren't ours to carry if we know Christ. He can handle everything **and more** of our stuff - it's our pride, need for control, and fear that blocks our faith and trust in Jesus' worthiness to be **Lord** over **all** our lives. We so often think of negative connotations of the concept of "*Lord*", but the reality of being fully submitted to the Lord means He is in charge of **EVERYTHING** - the **good and the bad stuff**. That should bring us peace - does it to you?

Do you recall some of the things your parents or grandparents taught you when you were children? I remember things like, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right!" How about "You need to eat everything on your plate because there are starving children in Africa"? One of my favorites was, "An education is one thing people can't take from you". How do we remember these quotes and exhortations? For me, it's because they kept repeating them over and over again. Don't we do that when we're trying to make a point? We repeat it – to emphasize the importance that the message is sent.

Here in verses 4-17 we see a virtual identical recounting of what was revealed in Chapter 10. During the times when Dr. Luke originally penned Acts, it was written on a scroll. The largest scrolls were thirty-five feet in length – if they were longer than that, they would be too large to handle. Therefore, there was only so much room to write what was to be written. So the fact that this particular vision was repeated twice in the limited space on the scroll, we should pay close attention to the message – the Lord sees it as extremely important for us to understand.

Since Carol covered this story in our last lesson, I'm not going to go over much of it other than one point. Peter has come a long way from his low point of denying Jesus three times. With the power of the Holy Spirit upon him, he has preached sermons that have led thousands to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, and he has healed people. We see in verses 7-9 an exchange between Jesus and Peter as a result of the vision he saw. It begins with Peter saying, “Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ Peter recognized it was the voice of the Lord. Now – notice what Jesus says isn’t a suggestion or ‘why don’t you give this a shot, Peter?’ This was a direct order. Yet, we see in this recounting that Peter is still struggling with his flesh when he replies, ‘Surely not, Lord!

In the position of Lord, which means a person in ultimate authority, there is no denying or questioning a command to those who the Lord has authority over. Therefore, Peter's response to Jesus' order is rebellion. To be fair, Peter is relying on the Law that was given by God Himself. The dynamic here is incredible. Peter is being forced to reckon with the fact that not only is Jesus the same God who gave the law to which Peter so stridently followed, but also that Jesus is now introducing an upgrade to the law – the concept of grace. Moreover, he is learning more deeply the concept of Lordship – meaning he's been purchased by Jesus – meaning he's owned by Him – and, therefore meaning he is to be obedient in ***all*** things that are commanded by Jesus.

Now we see the Lord's response, and what does He do? Condemn? Scold? Express disappointment? No – simply an explanation, “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ God is demonstrating grace here as well – He could of reminded Peter how he failed Him by denying Him or could have thundered, “I am the Lord! How dare you say ‘no’ to Me?” He didn’t, did He? He simply explained the basis of His command, and He repeated it two more times to emphasize the importance of the message. This experience is confirming in Peter's mind and heart the Lordship of Jesus in his life.

Learning to accept the concept of Lordship in the life of the Jerusalem church – not to mention today’s church - means having to accept change from interpretations of religion and tradition. The church has 10% innovators, 80% maintainers, and 10% inhibitors. The innovators are those who are naturally open to change and accept the principle that change is inevitable and requires adjustment. The inhibitors are the ones loaded with rule books - legalists we’d call them. The maintainers are open to change if it is explained (as Peter did in vs. 4), and if they are convinced that God is directing the change.

Going from inhibitor to maintainer to innovator is the process of coming to agreement with Jesus as Lord. Peter completes his process when he acknowledges Jesus’ Lordship when he says, “Who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” When the Holy Spirit achieves this goal, it is like an oil that loosens resistant hearts as it did here in Peter’s story.

Oh, how I pray I would live this acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty in my life all the time. I can come up with a quick list of those times when I knew I was doing something that I thought would keep God from accomplishing His purposes in my life. I’m sure the list is substantially longer – those times I wasn’t even aware my actions were getting in the way of God’s plan out of ignorance. That’s not meant to be an excuse. The fact of the matter is, though, it doesn’t really matter

what I do or don't do – if God wants to get something done, He's going to get it done. Romans 2:11 reminds us He is no respecter of persons. Therefore, we need to think about how much easier life would be for all of us if we were to stop saying, or living, statements like Peter said, "Not so, Lord". It's the ultimate oxymoronic statement. The first transition point of chapter 11 is summed up in verse 18, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life." This is the wonderful news for us – we, as Gentiles, are now cleansed by the blood of Jesus. I believe that's worth a Hallelujah, don't you?

The second transition point speaks to stepping into the final frontier of Jesus' commandment in Acts 1:8, "..you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." In chapters 2-10, the apostles in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria follow the commandment zealously. Here in chapter 11, we find them heading out towards the end of the earth. Verses 19-20 tell us, "¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus."

The persecution verse 19 is speaking of started with the stoning of Stephen and has now picked up in intensity, and the believers are scattering abroad. I love to see how God works. Persecution is a weapon

of Satan to knock down a movement of God, and the *initial* response by the believers achieves the enemy's purposes – to get rid of these people professing the truth of God – that He loves us and wants all of us saved through faith in His Son, Jesus. But God, in His wisdom, uses the scattering of these believers just as a farmer takes his seeds for planting and spreads them in a bigger field. Therefore, the persecution's intent is actually working in God's favor to help spread the Gospel.

The map behind me provides you an idea of how far the people were scattered. We see Phoenicia in Israel on the Mediterranean coast. Cyprus was an island off the coast of present-day Syria. Antioch, located in Syria, was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, and it was dedicated to the Greek goddess, Daphne, who had been seduced by the Greek god, Apollo. Other than possibly Corinth, Antioch was one of the most immoral cities in all of the empire. The fact that Antioch would ultimately become the hub of the early church proves God's concern for even the vilest of sinners. Not surprisingly, legalism is rearing its ugly head at this point - the gospel is only being preached to the Jews. However, we're seeing others in Cypress and Cyrene – a city on the northern coast of Africa – coming to Antioch to preach the Gospel to the Greeks. God honored these efforts and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

The leaders in Jerusalem – having just accepted Peter's accounting that salvation is not just available to the Jews – send Barnabas to

Antioch to check out if what is going on there is consistent with what Peter experienced. We first learned of Barnabas in chapter 4 – his original name was Joseph, and he was a Levite from Cyprus. The apostles give him a new name, and it means “son of encouragement”. It appears all of us are going to be given new names in the Kingdom of God. Going back as far as Genesis, we saw Abram changed to Abraham and Jacob to Israel. In the New Testament, we saw Cephas become Peter and Saul become Paul. I wonder what my name will be? Hopefully none of the names I was called when I was a kid!

Barnabas is one of my favorite characters in the Scriptures. We learned in verse 24a that, “He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” He was also the one who stood up for Paul in chapter 9 to the apostles who were understandably questioning the legitimacy of his conversion in light of his reputation as a persecutor. Barnabas’ response to what was happening in Antioch is presented in verse 23, “When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.”

Remember, this is a Jew by birth, but he is not letting his past belief system become a point of judgment or criticism. He sees the goodness in God by His grace, and is glad! **I** need to remember this – as I see how differently people worship and follow the Lord – I need to put aside my comfort zone and simply rejoice in the grace of God and be glad. Barnabas doesn’t stop with just being glad – he encourages them to be

true to the Lord with all their hearts. He's not encouraging them to be true to the *law* – it's to the ***Lord*** they need to be true.

Jon Courson makes an important point about Barnabas' encouragement in his commentary. Referencing Romans 10:10a, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified", he acknowledges the importance that it is with our ***hearts***, not our *minds*, that we be true to the Lord. I can fully relate to the importance of this point. When I first heard the gospel in my late 20s, it made a lot of sense to me intellectually – in my mind. However, my heart wasn't in it, and my actions would go on to prove it. It wasn't until I came to understand the sin-sickness in my heart at 35 that I truly became a Christian. When our faith becomes a matter of the ***heart***, not just of the mind, the potential for a budding and intimate relationship with Christ becomes real.

With the church in Antioch growing rapidly, Barnabas recognized he needed help. He needed someone who could speak effectively to the Hellenists (Greek speaking Jews), Grecians, and pagans being added to the church. It's now been seven to ten years since he last saw Saul of Tarsus, but he figured he would be the man for the job. Saul agreed to the assignment, and he and Barnabas spent the next year teaching a great number of people. We're then told that the believers in Antioch were the first to be called "Christians". Christian literally means "little Christ". How cool is it when people call us Christians – that they see a little bit of Jesus in us. We should never take being called Christians lightly – it's

a title of honor because we bear the namesake of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Dr. David Otis Fuller has asked, “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the church was, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” Verses 27 and 28 indicate some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them was Agabus. He, through the Spirit, predicted that there would be a severe famine across the entire Roman world. The test of a true prophet of God is to determine if what he/she is prophesying comes to fruition. If it doesn’t, then this “prophet” is a messenger of Satan. Agabus, though, is a real prophet as history tells us a great famine did indeed occur during Claudius Caesar (AD 41-54) when crops were poor for many years. Noted Jewish historian Josephus records that many people died during this time for a lack of money to buy what little food was available.

Warren Wiersbe makes an important point about prophecy, “The purpose of true prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to stir up our hearts to do the will of God.” The final two verses indicate that is exactly what the Antioch church did – they sent help. This is also an indication that the selling everything and sharing everything policy of the early days of the church was failing. It has been wisely said that, “we make a living by what we get. But we make a life by what we give.” The challenge each of us should meditate upon when considering where we are in our hearts in terms of service and giving is

the phrase in verse 29, “as each one was able”. Other versions say, “every man according to his ability”. We need to regularly inspect our hearts and ask ourselves if are we giving to the Kingdom of God according to what we are able or to our ability?

I’ve mentioned the concept of legalism a couple of times in this lecture, and it is the basis of my final transition point of chapter 11 –the grace of God is arising as the key piece of evidence of a new believer in Christ. Adherence to the law was no longer the symbol of a person’s faith or relationship with God – **that** was based on behavior. The grace of God focuses solely on belief – **not** behavior. It’s always been like this – since Abraham. Romans 4:1-3 states, “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

Do we see any behavior requirements in these verses? The fact of the matter is the law wasn’t even in place at the time of Abraham. It was his ***belief*** in God that made him righteous before God – **not** his behavior. Now don’t get me wrong, grace does not give us a license to go berserk. Romans 6:1-2a makes it clear, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? ² Certainly not!” But it is not our behavior that makes us right before God – it is our belief. Our behavior should be the natural ***fruit*** of our belief – not the ***source*** of our belief.

The latter is what legalism is, and we see in today's reading legalism has been at war with grace even since the early church.

Dr. Daniel Brown, in his incredible book, “*Embracing Grace*”, makes this statement, “Legalism majors in guilt and misguided sacrifice – urging its followers to evaluate their relationship with God on the basis of standards and scores for their performance, rather than the basis of love and faith. Legalism condemns people for their deeds-in-the-flesh, rather than celebrating God for His work-on-the-Cross. It points to our insufficiency, instead of God's all-sufficiency.”

I want to spend the last moments of this lecture trying to present the truths of what Scripture says to those of you shackled by the lies of legalism.

Let's begin with the truth that **God is not mad at you**. Isaiah 54:9-10 plainly states, “For this *is* like the waters of Noah to Me; For as I have sworn that the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you.¹⁰ For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,” Says the LORD, who has mercy on you.” This assurance was made to the followers of Abraham, and we saw earlier, we are joint-heirs of the covenant God made to him. Do these verses sound like God is mad at you?

Secondly, because we have chosen to believe in Jesus, **we have passed out of judgment**. John 3:17-18a states, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.¹⁸ “He who believes in Him is not condemned.” Jesus goes on to say in John 5:24, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.” What does this mean? The judgment and condemnation that is the fruit of the legalist is really sour grapes. All of that was nailed to the cross once and for all. Again – do you see behavior in these verses that make people right before God? No – it is *belief*.

Finally, **we are saved from the wrath of God**. Romans 5:9 points out, “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.” The term “justified” in simpler terms means “not guilty”. Our belief in the shed blood of Christ on the cross declares us not guilty of our sin for the rest of our lives. As a result of this, we are spared from God’s wrath, which is reserved for those who are still in their sin.

Dr. Brown beautifully sums up the point of grace over legalism when he says, “God’s primary longing is not to denounce His people and condemn their sin. He wants to deliver His people and forgive sin. God’s overriding passion is to restore our lost relationship with Him.” If you

believe the Father accomplished this through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, then you are the apple of His eye and the object of His desire and affection. He's not mad at you, He doesn't need to judge you, and you don't have to be afraid of His wrath.

My friends, it's just all about Jesus and His grace. It's about what *He* did for you – not what you need to do for Him. The behavior the legalist is looking for will come in time as you open your heart and let the Holy Spirit assure you that the promises of His unending and unfailing love are real and meant for you to heal all the damage that has been done to you. Your actions will become acts of love – not acts of shame-based obedience as the legalist propounds. Let go of the lies you've been hearing all your lives – you're not good enough or you need to do more to make God not be angry with you. The truth is your Divine Daddy wants you to jump into His lap and just let Him love on you. Let's pray for that right now.