

## ***God's mission to the Gentiles***

### **Acts Chapter 11**

This chapter is the 'high water mark' of the Book of Acts. After Peter explains and defends his ministry to some Jewish Christians with 'traditional' views, we see the centre of gravity shifting from the church in Jerusalem to the (largely) Gentile church in Antioch.

The later part of Chapter 11 includes a thrilling account of 'revival' in Antioch, ahead of darker times in Chapter 12...

#### **Peter explains his ministry (Acts 11 v 1 to 18)**

- The greatness of God's work in Caesarea could not be hidden. Besides, there was no reason to hide it, even though many Jewish Christians ('the circumcised believers') would be confused and offended. What criticisms did these Christians have against Peter? Given their reaction, can you see how wise it was of Peter to take six witnesses with him to Caesarea for his meeting with Cornelius?
- Peter's account is a condensation of the story in Acts 10 v 9 to 43. What important aspects of the story are emphasised here? "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (v 9) – if the 'large sheet' represents the Church, how does the vision show that in God's eyes there is no distinction between Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians?
- How does the Peter's conclusion (v 15) show that God's stamp of approval was on this ministry to the Gentiles? How could the Jewish believers withhold their approval when God had given his?
- How does Peter use Jesus' words (Acts 1 v 5) to interpret these events (v 16)? How do Peter's words in v 17 show that he recognised the importance of where God was heading?
- What was the Jewish believers' reaction to Peter's account? How does this passage demonstrate that their prejudices could be overcome by an understanding of God's work?

"The Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning" (v 15) – this conclusion was important. It showed that God's stamp of approval was on this work towards the Gentiles. Peter's point to these Christian Jews in Jerusalem ("the circumcision party", v 2) was clear: they could not withhold their acceptance when God had given his.

"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?" (v 17) – if God was truly reaching out to the Gentiles, who was Peter that he could withstand God? Peter recognized the importance of sensing where God was going and heading in the same direction, instead of trying to persuade God to go in his direction.

It is important to note these Jewish Christians would understand that everything that had happened was in accordance with the Scriptures. They had both the word of the Lord Jesus, recorded in Mark 1 v 8, and the Old Testament promises that Gentiles would come to God through the Messiah, in passages such as Isaiah 49 v 6.

"When they heard these things they fell silent" (v 18) – the Jewish believers in Jerusalem first reacted with a stunned silence. But then they glorified God, because they saw that he was now at work among the Gentiles. This is a powerful passage, demonstrating that the hearts of the Jewish Christians were tender enough to be guided and corrected by God's word and work.

***[MORE OVER]***

## The church in Antioch (Acts 11 v 19 to 30)

Built in 301 BC by Seleucus Nicator, Antioch was a great commercial centre set in a broad and fertile valley, shielded by majestic snow-covered mountains. In 64 BC the Romans took the city and made it the capital of Syria. By the first century AD it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria) with a population of 300,000. As a cosmopolitan city there were both Jews and Greeks. The first Gentile church was founded in Antioch, and this church sent Paul and his companions on three missionary journeys...

- At first Christians who were scattered over the Roman Empire preached only to Jews. But some unnamed disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene began the first mentioned 'mission to the Gentiles' (Hellenists) in Antioch. What was the distinctive feature that from the beginning marked the preaching of the gospel at Antioch, and what were the results?
- The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas, known for his generosity (Acts 4 v 36, 37) and his warm acceptance of Saul after his conversion (Acts 9 v 26 to 30). What part did Barnabas play in the establishment of the church in Antioch? What was his attitude to the evidence of God's work there?
- What do you think prompted Barnabas to go to Tarsus and seek out Saul? Saul had spent the last 12 years in Tarsus – do you think those years were wasted?
- How does this passage illustrate the pattern for church growth described by Paul in Ephesians 4 v 11 to 16? (Church leaders build strong Christians, who grow to maturity and are equipped for ministry, thereby causing further growth of the body of Christ...)
- In v 27 to 30 we see a young Gentile church giving practical help to the older church in Jerusalem. How does this illustrate the Antioch church's vitality, sincerity and love? Does our Christian faith find expression in practical giving to those in need?

"Speaking the word to no one except Jews" (v 19) – at first, Christians scattered over the Roman Empire preached only to Jews. But they eventually began to preach Jesus Christ to Gentiles as well.

"There were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus" (v 20) – these unnamed disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene began the first mentioned 'mission to the Gentiles' ("Hellenists") in Antioch, with amazing results: "the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (v 21).

"When [Barnabas] came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord" (v 23, 24) – there was something in the work and atmosphere among the followers of Jesus in Antioch that made Barnabas able to see the grace of God.

"For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians" (v 26) – together Barnabas and Saul taught a great many people, making the church in Antioch strong.

It was not until these years at the Church in Syrian Antioch that the name 'Christian' became associated with the followers of Jesus: they had been called 'disciples' (Acts 1 v 15); they had been called 'believers' (Acts 5 v 14); they had been called 'brothers' (Acts 6 v 3); they had been called 'witnesses' (Acts 5 v 32); they had been called 'followers of the Way' (Acts 9 v 1, 2); they had been called 'saints' (Acts 9 v 13); now they would be called 'Christians'.

*Prayer: Lord, we praise you that you so loved the world that you gave your only Son, that the world might be saved, and that your love reaches out to people from all nations, cultures and backgrounds. Help us to preach the Lord Jesus to those around us wherever we are, and like Barnabas help us to encourage Christians to continue in their faith. Amen.*