

ACTS: The Gospel of the Holy Spirit

Chapters 11 & 12

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PRAY.

Welcome back. We're going to kind of jump right in as I will be attempting to cover two chapters tonight. Quickly, then, let me remind you where we are coming out of last week in Acts chapter 10:

Peter has a great vision from God that sets the stage the Gospel to no longer be only for the Jews, but for the world. He is sent to Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, to preach the Gospel to him and a crowd that gathered to hear. As proof of the inclusion message, God sends the Holy Spirit upon them.

The next two chapters, let me outline by saying we will try to answer to distinct questions:

Chapter 11 asks the question: "What happens when the Church discovers that God's grace is bigger than our traditions?"

Chapter 12 asks the question, "What happens when the Church faces opposition and persecution?"

With these questions arching over us, I notice 3 themes (movements if you will)

- The Church learns to embrace the Grace of God in all its expansion
- Acts 11:19-30 – The Church recognizes its new, intentional mission
- Acts 12 confronts one of the greatest hinderances to the faith: Suffering and persecution.

READ Acts 11:1-4, 15-18 (NRSV)

Immediately, as Peter returns to Jerusalem, he is confronted with opposition; "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

***NOTE:** Have you ever wondered what all the fuss is about regarding men being circumcised? I mean why are we discussing THAT amidst the Holy Spirit's anointing? Well, let me see if I can give you a bit of background. In those days, women had very little influence or voice. It was just understood that women bore children. Period. Further, it was widely believed that it was men whose seed produced the life and therefore they felt superior; in essence they believed THEY brought forth life on this earth. Women just carried the baby and birthed. So, God in His great wisdom wanted to correct this. He wanted them to understand that HE and HE alone was the author of life. So back in Genesis 17:10-11, God essentially says, "I'm going

to mark you. And I am going to mark you THERE.” And he forms a special covenant through the act of circumcision. I hope that helps. God is a Covenant making God; and sadly, we are a covenant -breaking people. But Covenant was how God established obedience and authority.

Moving on. Notice here that the issue they bring up to people was not whether Cornelius was a believer or not, they were essentially asking, “Why did you cross our boundaries?”

Here is Theological point #1: The Grace of God will always challenge human boundaries.

Peter simply unfolds the events that happened – notice he wasn’t defensive or off-putting! And the significant statement comes at verse 15: **“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.”**

Peter is telling them something we should all take heed to: **“I didn’t initiate this, GOD DID” (emphasis mine)**

So we must understand a valuable and clear principle of our faith: God and His infinite Grace are not limited to any human boundaries we try to set.

- Jewish/Gentile (non-Jews) barriers can not restrict the Gospel.
- Traditions of our culture CANNOT hinder the mission of God
- Our religious customs cannot determine just WHO God can SAVE!!

Relevance: In our current tumultuous, political, social media culture – THIS FACT MUST BE UNDERSTOOD. GOD can reach ALL people, the LGBTQ community, the drunkard, the addict, the impoverished, the sex trafficker, the murderer and any other category we try to invent. Indeed, THE GOSPEL IS MESSY!!!!!!

Too many times, I’ve seen the church act as if it were standing at a door that was closed. And it was closed for these reasons:

- We’ve never done it that way before.
- These aren’t “OUR” people
- They don’t look or act like us
- They come from a much different background

I want you to take a brief moment and think about standing in heaven. Close your eyes and get some image of what you think it will look like. Now picture the other people there. I hope and pray we can all get to the reality that Heaven will most definitely not look all white people, all black people or Asian. **HEAVEN WILL BE THERE FOR ALL PEOPLE WHO CONFESS JESUS CHRISIT AS LORD.**

It's quite easy to set a barrier, isn't it? Hence again, our mission: To transform RELIGION (habits, biases, cultural norms) into RELATIONSHIP with Jesus Christ, one person at a time. This is why you are here, my dear friends.

ACTS 11:18 marks a significant theological turning point for the Church: "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

3 things to note here:

1. Salvation belongs to GOD and God alone.
2. Repentance is ESSENTIAL to salvation
3. Salvation leads to LIFE

You will want to recognize some powerful Wesleyan theology here! Notice, God's grace comes before our response (Prevenient Grace), God initiates, God convicts (Justifying Grace) God calls. Our response is through repentance and faith. (Mission of Holiness – Sanctification)

*NOTE: A word about this idea of repentance. (Ill. Terushavah point)

Theological point #2: Grace and only God's Grace provides a "vehicle", a possibility of responding to God.

READ ACTS 11:19-26 NRSV

So here we have one of the most significant developments for the entire Book of Acts: "The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord." (ACTS 11:21)

Several key points should be observed:

Verse 19 says people scattered because of the persecution. And see how God uses that moment to turn it into a great victory: it becomes a missionary moment!!

Have you ever looked closely at the life of a dandelion? When it turns white, the wind scatters it so that all that is left is its stalk. You might see this as the wind destroying the flower. It's not – it's multiplying it!! The very same thing happened to the early church.

Here is a key theological idea: What Satan tries to scatter, God uses it to multiply.

ACTS 11:26 – "And it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians"

Well now – there is a piece of helpful trivia!! When they left Jerusalem and started spreading the Gospel throughout other regions such as Antioch, THEN they were called Christians. Was does it mean to be a Christian?

- GO. (See Matthew 28)
- Tell others about your faith in Jesus

Take just a minute here to digest what this means. Maybe ask yourselves, when was the last time (maybe the first time) you were able to simply tell someone you were a Christian and why you believe in Jesus Christ? Don't think I don't know how daunting that may be. BUT let's not sugar-coat this reality: According to Scripture, can you be called a Christian without telling others why you are Christian????

(III. Story about my cousin Bill)

So what are the characteristics of Antioch? It is marked by key components:

- Evangelism
- Teaching
- Discipleship
- Diversity
- Generosity
- Intentional MISSION – Apostolic!

Now we are introduced to one of my favorite Biblical characters: Barnabus (The word Barnabus means “Son of Encouragement”. When the news of what was happening in Antioch reached back to Jerusalem, they sent Barnabus there. He rejoiced at what he found as many new believers had confessed faith in Jesus Christ. They described Barnabus as “for he was a good man; full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” Notice what was NOT said, “He was a good man, full of himself and talented more than any other. NOR Rich and powerful with connections to the government, or he was someone who acted favorably toward the Christians. NO!

The useage of a major structural devise here is “Particularization”. This is very intentional by Luke who opens with a General Statement, “For he was a good man” and then identifies exactly what that means in particular: “FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND FAITH” This seeks to identify in detail the qualification Barnabus holds.

Now Barnabus brought “a great many people” to the Lord.

Here is another key principle: **Healthy leaders don't just create ministries, healthy leaders build people.**

One of the many things I love about Barnabus is he is like a bridge builder – he is linking people and places together just like a bridge does.

He connects:

- Jerusalem to Antioch
- He seeks out Saul
- He connects Jews and Gentiles
- He takes new converts and makes them mature disciples

See, the most important people in a ministry may not be the one in the spotlight, rather the one who can connect others to the purposes of God.

A rather abrupt turn of events happens here – they identify a local prophet, Agabus, who predicts a famine will be happening over the entire world. What does this do? A remarkable response from the church occurs and they are determined to send food to the believers living in Judea. Wow. Please notice what the church doesn't do: it doesn't merely say, "We will pray for you." They respond materially – they give according to their ability. And this, dear friends is where we understand a theology of Christian stewardship!!

What God places in our hands is ultimately intended to serve a greater purpose of God.

And this is precisely the very basis of why we give our tithes to the church! It is not a financial decision. It is a committed response to the entire experience of God.

Watch this: Grace is received – Disciples are formed – compassion is expressed and resources are shared. This is what discipleship looks like!!!

Chapter 12: The church under persecution

READ ACTS 12:1-5

Things change quickly for the disciples as Herod begins to violently persecute the Christians. Again, see the use of particularization here: General Statement: "About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church." Particulars:

- He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword.
- Seeing that it pleased the Jews, he had Peter arrested as well.

Peter was placed under arrest and placed in prison with 4 squads of soldiers to guard him. Significantly, this happened during the Jewish festival of unleavened bread.

[*To be sure, this was the festival that remembered the last day in captivity in Egypt where they had to pack their belongings and leave, not allowing enough time for yeast to allow the bread to rise.]

So these events had to have had a very negative and challenging impact on these early Christians. So, does God just leave them to suffer and figure things out! Not hardly.

Look at what happens next. It says, “While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.”

READ: ACTS 12:6-10

This epic occurrence has often raised one of the most important theological questions we have: “Why does God save and rescue Peter, but allow James to die?”

This is not answered easily – a quick, simple explanation is not provided. Yet, looking deeper into this happening, it provides us something much greater:

It gives us a theology of God’s sovereignty in the midst of suffering.

This is why I can easily say to anyone who comes to me (and a very many people have) to ask, “Why is God allowing this suffering to happen?” I can respond from learning this theological understanding:

Faith does not mean that God will always give us whatever outcome we want. If He did, we would simply treat God like He was our magic genie; able to grant our every wish. NO! **Faith means we are to TRUST God regardless of the outcome!**

Imagine that I am called to the hospital as two children from my church have grave illnesses. I pray for both, in person, with the parents/family present. I pray fervently for healing. One receives healing, the other does not. Did one family not have enough faith? Of course not!!! Because that would reduce the power of prayer to a formula. No, **Acts 12 teaches us that God’s sovereignty will NOT EVER be reduced to OUR DESIRED outcomes.** God is sovereign – He is God and He is not manipulated, controlled, or necessarily persuaded. He is enough.

Well, God doesn’t just free Peter – He does something much stronger.

READ ACTS 12:20-23

A pretty gruesome outcome for Herod, to be sure. It is a reminder that God is ALL, not our abilities, and we are to continually give the praise to HIM.

So, the word of God continued to spread and more and more people came to Christ.

This is a theological climax: Herod dies, but the Word continues. Persecution comes, but the Word continues. Peter is imprisoned, but the Word continues. James is killed, but the word continues.

So in conclusion, let’s review the major themes of these two chapters of ACTS:

1. God's Grace is Bigger than our Boundaries.
2. Our mission never happens from our own strength. Mission is driven through the power of the Holy Spirit
3. Persecution can be an instrument of Mission. (Talk about China's underground church)
4. Discipleship is more than just conversion.
5. God's sovereignty does not eliminate human responsibility.
Theology and practice go hand in hand.

Pray & dismiss.