

THE BOOK OF ACTS

CHAPTER 11

THE CHALLENGE OF CHAPTER 11

There is always a tendency for legalism to creep into the church, but we are saved by grace through faith, not through any effort on our part. It is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). We cannot add anything to the gift of our salvation and must guard against becoming legalistic in our relationship with the Lord and others. Our righteousness, achieved through human works is as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6) when compared to the righteousness of God we receive at salvation. Salvation is available to anyone who will receive it. We must ever strive to live in the grace of God in our daily lives.

OPPOSITION TO THE SPREADING OF THE GOSPEL (1-18)

With the rapid spread of the gospel, Gentiles are being born again and filled with the Holy Spirit. The elders of the church at Jerusalem dispute with Peter because he has gone into the home of uncircumcised men and eaten foods forbidden by Jewish law. Peter describes the vision he received when regarding the Jews. This temporarily assuages (lessens the intensity of) their legalism.

The church is now expanding both geographically and racially. What began in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost has now spread, and the elders of the Jerusalem church are becoming legalistic. They do not want other races or cities to receive the gospel. They are trying to combine law and grace, and the “little leaven” is destroying the “lump.”

PETER CHALLENGED

Act 11:1 And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.

Act 11:2 And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him,

The Jews begin an argument with Peter for taking the gospel to the Gentiles. They seem to have forgotten about Jesus declaring the message of the gospel would extend from Jerusalem to “the uttermost parts of the earth.” They have turned their focus toward and begun emphasizing the law of circumcision.

The reaction of these men is typical of many denominations today. They are “religious,” judging spirituality by actions that any sinner could perform.

Act 11:3 Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.

After Peter and his men stayed with Cornelius for a few days, they were free to eat with him and the other Gentile believers. This means Peter has eaten food forbidden under Jewish law. He probably ate some of the meat he saw in the vision on the housetop.

PETER RECOUNTS HIS HOUSETOP VISION

Act 11:4 But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying,

Peter will share the story told in chapter 10 without omitting a single detail. He will describe the events in chronological order so those listening understand the involvement of the Holy Spirit from both sides of the situation.

Verses 5 through 17 recount the salvation and infilling of the Holy Spirit in the house of Cornelius (which would begin the great revival among the Gentiles).

Act 11:5 I was in the city of Joppa praying: and in a trance I saw a vision, A certain vessel descend, as it had been a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came even to me:

Act 11:6 Upon the which when I had fastened mine eyes, I considered, and saw fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.

Act 11:7 And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay and eat.

Act 11:8 But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth.

Act 11:9 But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.

Act 11:10 And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven.

Peter might not have visited the home of the Gentile apart from the vision and the Lord speaking directly to him concerning the vision.

PETER RECOUNTS THE EVENTS OF HIS JOURNEY TO CAESAREA

Act 11:11 And, behold, immediately there were three men already come unto the house where I was, sent from Caesarea unto me.

Act 11:12 And the Spirit bade me go with them, nothing **doubting**. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the man's house:

11:12 doubting, *diakrino* (dee-ak-ree-no); Has two definitions. 1) To judge thoroughly; to decide between two or more choices; to make a distinction; to separate two components, elements or factors; to render a decision; to evaluate carefully. 2) The word also connotes a conflict with oneself in the sense of hesitating, having misgivings,

doubting, being divided in decision making, or wavering between hope and fear. This is its use here.

Act 11:13 And he shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter;

Act 11:14 Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved.

Act 11:15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning.

Act 11:16 Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost.

Act 11:17 Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?

All of Peter's prejudice and religious thinking are gone at this display of the grace and sovereignty of God concerning the Gentiles.

LEGALISM TEMPORARILY DEFEATED

Act 11:18 When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

Legalism is temporarily defeated in Jerusalem. Peter's recounting of the event helps for a time, but legalism eventually creeps back in, destroying the church and ultimately Jerusalem itself in 70 A.D. **As goes the church, so goes the nation.** The men at this conference are silenced by the words of Peter. The love of God that has confronted Peter is now causing a change in the thinking of the legalistic Jews.

THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH (19-30)

A number of the Jews who scattered in chapter 8 have gone to Antioch to start a church. A revival begins with such an impact that even the believers in Jerusalem three hundred miles away hear about it. Barnabas understands the grace of God and sees that grace in operation in the church at Antioch. He is instrumental in bringing Paul to Antioch to instruct the new converts in the Word of God.

Prophets from Jerusalem arrive in Antioch, and Agabus prophesies about a famine coming to Jerusalem. The saints in Antioch take up an offering from the church at Jerusalem in response to this prophecy.

Act 11:19 Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

In verses 19 through 30, the discussion returns to the Jews scattered at the beginning of chapter 8. Part of those scattered travel to Antioch and begin a church.

Act 11:20 And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Some Jews witnessed to other Jews alone (verse 19) while others also witnessed to the Gentiles (verse 20).

SIGNS AND WONDERS

Act 11:21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

When “the hand of the Lord” is mentioned, it is a reference to signs and wonders. The miracles draw attention to the gospel, and many Gentiles are born again.

STRIVING TO MAINTAIN GRACE

Act 11:22 Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch.

From his humble beginnings, when he first gave to the church in Jerusalem (4:36), Barnabas has become a great minister. He understands grace and will later become the leader of the Antioch church and travels with Paul on his first missionary journey

Act 11:23 Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.

Barnabas remains in Jerusalem with the disciples after the stoning of Stephen (8:1). He continues in Jerusalem through the decline of the church and has been disturbed by what he has observed. He knows something is wrong, but has not identified the problem and is praying to discover what it is. God then sends Barnabas to Antioch, and he is so impressed with the attitude of grace he observes in these believers that he exhorts them to maintain it (Galatians 5:1).

Barnabas remains a man of grace, and what is so visible in Antioch is the grace of God. This is a stark contrast to Jerusalem. Peter later discovers the same grace (Galatians 2:11-21).

Barnabas is not legalistic. If he had been, he would have been angry at the freedom he saw in Antioch. Grace always irritates legalistic people. Legalistic people will try to pull others down into their traditions and works. Christians must strive to maintain grace (Hebrews 4:11).

Act 11:24 For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.

For he was a good man (in God's sight), and full of the Holy Ghost (prayed in tongues) and of faith (studied the Word): and much people was added unto the Lord.

When a church emphasizes the grace of God, many people are born again. The church in Antioch became the spiritual center for many years. Paul's first three missionary journeys began at Antioch.

Barnabas recognizes the need for good leadership in the church at Antioch. He does not return to Jerusalem to ask Peter, James, or any other elder in Jerusalem to come to Antioch. Instead, Barnabas travels to Tarsus and finds Paul, the man who had the greatest revelation of the grace of God.

BARNABAS SEEKS FOR SAUL

Act 11:25 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:

Barnabas was not jealous of Paul's superior knowledge and gifts. He was only interested in the growth of the saints in Antioch.

Act 11:26 And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

In his search for Paul, Barnabas is not supernaturally guided as in the case of Peter and Cornelius. Barnabas seeks out Paul for himself. When Paul arrives in Antioch, he teaches the people for one year.

New converts need teaching. The first teachings converts receive should establish them in the grace of God. Teaching and training transforms converts into disciples.

The name "Christian" means Christlike. You do not become Christlike until you become a disciple. The disciples were called Christians, but it was a derogatory term when first used by Gentiles against believers.

THE OFFICE OF THE PROPHET

Act 11:27 And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch.

The office of the prophet found in the New Testament is very similar to the prophet (or seer) of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, God uses prophets to warn of the attacks of Satan and to judge prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:9).

Act 11:28 And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.

Agabus is an accurate prophet. He rises up from among the prophets and prophesies the great famine that would come to the area of Jerusalem, which was fulfilled. This prophecy is probably made before the leaders of the church rather than the congregation. The word is received and an offering started for the saints at Jerusalem.

The drought came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar, two years later. Claudius Caesar was the cousin of Caligula of the Roman Empire and was assassinated after just four years as emperor.

Agabus is the same man who later prophesies to Paul of his impending danger and imprisonment (21:10). He warned Paul not to return to Jerusalem. Paul did not heed his warning.

THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH GIVES

Act 11:29 Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea:

The members of Antioch are not forced or coerced into giving. Each gives according to their ability, which is mature giving, in response to Agabus's prophecy. They also give because the believers in Jerusalem are their spiritual brothers and sisters. Distance is never an issue in the body of Christ. We are all members of the family of God (Ephesians 3:15), and we never leave the family.

Act 11:30 Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

The people of the church give the money to their church leaders who, in turn, give it to the leaders of the Jerusalem church. This demonstrates their maturity. If they had sent the money directly to congregational members of the Jerusalem church, it might have been viewed by the church leaders as trying to "buy" the "sheep" without their knowledge. They trust the elders of the church at Jerusalem to distribute the money fair. Unfortunately, the Jerusalem church does not appreciate their offering and later tries to destroy the church at Antioch.

11:27-30 The Office of the Prophet, PROPHECY. Agabus is an example of the "office" of the "prophet" in the NT. This role differs from the operation of the gift of prophecy in the life of the believer, for it entails a Christ-appointed ministry of a person rather than the Holy Spirit-distributed gift through a person. In the NT, this office was not sensationalized as it tends to be today. Such an attitude is unworthy, both in the prophet and in those to whom he ministers, and is certain to result in an unfruitful end. (Apparently Paul was addressing such assumption's of the prophetic office when he issued the challenge of 1 Corinthians 14:37, calling for submission to spiritual authority rather than self-serving independence. The office of prophet cannot be taken lightly. There is nothing in the NT that reduces the stringent requirements for serving this role,

and Deuteronomy 18:20-22 ought to be regarded seriously. Prophecy is nothing to be “experimented” with, for souls are in the balance in the exercise of every ministry.

Further wisdom may be gained by noting that on biblical terms there is more than one type of ministry by a prophet. While a few exercised remarkable predictive gifts (Daniel, Zechariah, John), other traits of the prophetic office are seen: 1) preaching---especially at a national or international level (John the Baptist); 2) teaching---especially when unusual insight is present and broad impact made in serving God’s people (Ezra); 3) miracles---as remarkable signs to accompany a prophet’s preaching (Elijah); 4) renewal--as with Samuel (1 Samuel 3:21; 4:1), or that called for by the psalmist and by Amos (Psalm 74:9; Amos 8:11-12). The incident of Agabus resulted in effective action by the church’s rising to meet a challenging situation. This is a valid test of the prophetic office. It is for edification and not for entertainment---to enlarge and refresh the body, whether locally or beyond.