

TUTORIAL
2.17

The Church moves outward

The continuing Narrative in Acts tells of an exciting period of expansion of the Church, as the believers take the message of Truth with them to a wider group of Gentile communities. It shows the complexities and challenges for individuals involved in the process, but also the clear guidance and hand of the Lord in preparing the way.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts chapters 11 and 12.**

Last time

We were introduced to a Roman officer, Cornelius, who believed in the God of Israel but had not gone through the process of formally becoming a Jew. On receiving instructions from God, Cornelius sent some men to another city to find Peter. Just as the men were approaching, God was dramatically challenging Peter about how he, like others, had wrongly brought Old Covenant, Jewish perspectives into the new era of Christ's Church. With his perspective changed, Peter gladly went to Cornelius' house and shared the Gospel with them. They put their faith in Jesus, were born again, and clearly were given the gift of the Holy Spirit by God.

The way was now open for the Church to reach out to other ethnic groups knowing that God wanted to include them under the New Covenant as well.

Peter responds to criticism

The news about what happened in Caesarea doesn't take long to get back to the other Apostles and the believers in the Jerusalem area (Acts 11:1-18). You might think that their response would be total excitement that God was also bringing Gentiles into the *Ecclesia*. But that isn't the case, or at least not for the believers who've come from an orthodox Jewish background. We'll see that this conservative faction in the early Church will continue to cause problems and jeopardize the clarity and freedom of the Gospel by trying to impose Jewish traditions on the Church.

Like all of us, they have deep-seated worldview beliefs and values that need to be re-evaluated in light of God's Narrative - all that He has done and is doing.

They need the Spirit's help to put aside assumptions and prejudices so they can have a clearer view of who He is and how He is accomplishing His purposes at this particular time in history.

So when Peter arrives back in Jerusalem, still excited no doubt from what he's been part of, he's immediately faced with criticism. No one seems to have a problem with him sharing the Good News about Jesus with Gentiles or wants to argue about the Spirit coming to live in non-Jews. As is usually the case with people who struggle to grasp God's grace, their disapproval focuses on outward, peripheral things. Peter, we heard that you went into the home of Gentiles...and even ate with them! What were you thinking? Are you forgetting the traditions of our people, God's people, the Jews? And you a leader! What kind of example is that for others? We have to maintain standards... Or words to that effect.

You've got to wonder how the old Peter would have responded. But guided by God's Spirit who's always with him now, Peter doesn't jump to his own defense. What he does is simply describe in detail the things that God has revealed and allowed him to participate in. Luke records that when the others have heard Peter's account of what happened in Joppa and then Caesarea, "they stopped objecting and began praising God". At least for now, even those wanting the Church to hold on to Jewish traditions have had their eyes raised above the horizon of their narrow agendas and prejudice...they've glimpsed the fact that God is doing something far beyond the restrictions they try to impose on themselves, on others, and even on Him.

The Gospel impacts Gentiles in Antioch

Luke continues on (Acts 11:19-21) to describe how the Lord is giving the believers opportunities to share His Truth with non-Jewish ethnic groups in increasingly wider contexts. He refers to the believers who scattered during the time of fierce persecution after the death of Stephen...the violent harassment and arrests in which the young Pharisee, Saul, played a prominent role before Jesus stopped him, quite literally, in his tracks.

Fleeing the heat of opposition, some have gone north to the strip of Mediterranean coast then called *Phoenicia*, in modern day Lebanon. Some had shipped out to Cyprus - the island about 100 kilometers off the coast of both Turkey and Syria. Others have travelled up to Antioch in Syria (called that, to distinguish it from 15 other cities called *Antioch* at this time). Located near the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean, it is the third largest city in the Roman Empire and the western end of the Silk Road that stretches all the way east to the mysterious land we know today as China.

These believers are *Hellenists*, i.e. influenced by Greek, and then Roman, language and culture. They are sharing the Good News that the Messiah has come in these places with other Hellenist Jews. But now the pattern is

challenged. Some of those who escape to Antioch are from families who settled generations before on the island of Cyprus and also in Cyrene, a port city in North Africa, now part of the Roman Empire. Incidentally, we'll remember that this was the home town of Simon who carried Jesus' cross on the way to Golgotha. Having grown up in communities outside Israel, these believers are linguistically and culturally more open. They begin to share the Good News with people in Antioch who are not from a Jewish background. God blesses their witness and a large number of people put their faith in Jesus as the Saviour. The church in that city grows rapidly and in many ways, as we'll see, takes over from Jerusalem as the centre of its outward thrust. The *Ecclesia* has taken another significant step in the task of expansion given by Jesus.

The Apostles send Barnabas to Antioch

At this point Luke reintroduces someone who'll play a significant role in the Acts part of the Narrative - Barnabas (Acts 11:22-24). He mentioned him first as a prime example of the generosity that characterized the early Church in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37), then again as the one who courageously introduced the newly converted Saul to the Apostles when the rest of the believers were suspicious (Acts 9:27). His Jewish name is in fact Joseph, but he's nick-named Barnabas by the Apostles...a Greek word that means "encourager" because that's what this godly, faithful man is known for among the believers.

When the Apostles in Jerusalem hear about the rapid growth in the Antioch gathering, they send their trusted co-worker Barnabas to verify if things are actually on track. Himself from a Hellenized Jewish background in Cyprus, he is a good choice to send to the ethnically diverse milieu that is Antioch. We don't see any evidence of the Apostles creating a hierarchy to rule over the groups of believers appearing in different places now. Under the New Covenant the pattern is one of service to each other rather than a ruling elite. But we do see the Apostles functioning in Jesus' authority and taking responsibility for the integrity of the Good News about Him as it is being shared in new contexts. Also demonstrating a concern that whatever is claimed as part of His *Ecclesia* - His Body - clearly has the hallmarks of the Spirit's involvement. Barnabas finds in Antioch what the Apostles had hoped he would - evidence that God is indeed at work here. He jumps in and gets involved...God uses him to bring even more people to faith in Jesus as the Saviour.

Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch

With so much need and opportunity, Barnabas remembers the young Pharisee scholar, Saul, who'd led the persecution of the believers after Stephen's death...the one who'd met Jesus on the road to Damascus and been so dramatically changed. What an asset he would be to the work here in Antioch! With his knowledge of the Old Covenant Scriptures and understanding of Jewish traditions, he'd be a powerful witness to the Jews. Having grown up in

the Hellenistic environment of Tarsus and being trained in classical Greek logic, he'd also be able to put forward convincing arguments to the Gentiles. And that time in Jerusalem after his conversion he'd shown such courage and commitment to the cause of the Lord Jesus. All he needs is someone to give him some encouragement and direction. So Barnabas sets out to find Saul in his home town of Tarsus, over 200 kilometers away around the bend of the Mediterranean - today a three-hour drive, it no doubt took Barnabas some days of tough travel to get there (Acts 11:25,26).

The Story of the expansion of the early Church is certainly one of dramatic events, of sermons, and miracles, that result in large numbers being converted. But it also describes another quieter but no less powerful contribution: faithful followers of Jesus reaching out to others who are younger or newer in the Faith...seeing their potential, believing in them, carefully equipping and gently guiding, including them in God's purposes, then gratefully working alongside them as co-workers.

Barnabas finds Saul in Tarsus and brings him back to Antioch where they work together in the local group of Jesus' followers - His Church - in that city. They have great opportunities to share the Gospel with many people. Luke mentions in passing that it is here that the believers are first called *Christians* or *Christ followers*...a term probably used by others in mockery.

A famine looms in Judea and elsewhere

Luke describes how some believers come from Jerusalem to Antioch and, with special insights from the Holy Spirit, prophesy that a major famine is coming (Acts 11:27-30). History records that this series of famines hit many parts of the Roman Empire during the reign of the Emperor Claudius. This helps to place the founding of the Antioch church around A.D. 40, possibly 10 to 15 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Understanding that the famine will be particularly harsh in Judea, the believers in Antioch collect gifts and have Barnabas and Saul deliver this practical help to their brothers and sisters in the Jerusalem church.

James is executed but Peter goes free

While the Judean believers are dealing with the shortages and hunger of the famine, they have to face renewed persecution (Acts 12:1-17). This time it comes from King Herod Agrippa...grandson of Herod the Great. Like other vassal kings at the time, he depends on the favor of Rome. It will put him in a good light to inflate the idea of a threat from this 'Jewish sect' of Jesus followers by violently suppressing them. He executes James - the first Apostle to be martyred and the only one directly included in the Acts account.

Herod realizes that his brutality against the Christian leader has also bought him plaudits from the Jewish authorities...their support is important in the

delicate political balancing act he has to play as their territorial king under Roman rule. So during Passover, when the most publicity is assured, he arrests Peter, the recognized leader of the Jesus followers in Jerusalem. But even Herod knows it will be going too far to murder Peter during Passover, so he's put in prison to await trial and inevitable execution. The believers are praying constantly. Their dear brother James is gone, but that must have been the Master's will. If He chooses, He can graciously rescue Peter. Nothing is too difficult for Him. From ancient times He's shown that He can rescue His people.

It's the middle of the night before the trial...Peter is asleep, chained between two soldiers. He feels something hitting his side. What is that? Must be one of the guards turning in his sleep? No, something else. Who's that, someone leaning over telling me to get up? How did I get on my feet...and hey, aren't those my chains lying on the floor, still attached to the guards? Who is that, urging me to get dressed and follow? I can't see too well in this strange bright light flooding the cell. It has to be an angel. This must be a dream, or a vision...I've had those before once or twice when the Lord has spoken to me. No doubt I'll wake up still in chains. Well, nothing to do but go with the flow, follow along. We're out of the cell...here's the first guard post, and there's the second. Why don't they notice anything, sound the alarm? The big iron gates are opening ahead of us...we're outside in the cool air.

Suddenly in the quiet city streets, the angel is gone and Peter is alone. And finally he knows for sure...it's no dream, it's real. God has rescued him from certain execution at the hands of Herod and the Jewish leaders. He realizes he'd better get off the streets. He heads to the house of a believer, a lady named Mary, whose house is used as a gathering place for the church in Jerusalem. Her son, John Mark, is the Mark who we understand wrote the Gospel account of Jesus' life. As it happens, the believers are gathered in Mary's house praying for Peter's release. There is a moment of comical confusion before everyone believes that it is actually their much-loved brother and Apostle who's knocking on the door outside waiting to be let in. Before Peter leaves again, he asks the believers to share what has happened with James and the other Apostles - this James is the half brother of the Lord Jesus who by now is one of the leaders in the Jerusalem church.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. What lesson or principle do you think there is to learn from the way that the Spirit guided Peter to handle the critical

attitude of the Jewish traditionalist believers when he came back to Jerusalem?

2. Thinking “Narratively”, reflect on any links you can see between how God consistently seeks to work with faithful people and how Barnabas related to Saul (first in Jerusalem and then in bringing him to Antioch)?
3. What would you say to someone, hearing this part of the Acts account for the first time, who was troubled by the fact that the Lord allowed James to be executed but chose to rescue Peter?
4. What part do you think the prayers of the Jerusalem believers played in Peter being released, in contrast to James being killed? Did it come down to factors like how many prayed, for how long, and with what degree of faith? Or none of these? How does your perspective on this impact your view and practice of prayer?



ACTIVITIES

The Church moves outward

1. In approximately half a page, note what you consider to be the five most important landmark events in the expansion of the Church so far in the Acts Narrative. Include a brief explanation for each as to why it is so significant.