

The Book of Acts

Lesson 17: The Gospel Defended; the Church at Antioch -- Acts 11:1–30

News travels fast, and not everyone is happy. When word reaches Jerusalem that Peter has gone into a Gentile home and that the Gentiles have received the word of God, some of the believers are scandalized. You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them, they object. It is one of the church's first great controversies, and at stake is nothing less than whether the gospel is truly for all people or only for the chosen nation.

Peter does not defend himself with clever arguments. He simply tells the story, step by step: the vision on the rooftop, the men at the door, the Spirit's command, and then the moment heaven interrupted his sermon and the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles just as He had fallen on the Jewish believers at the beginning. If God gave them the same gift He gave us, Peter asks, who was I that I could stand in God's way? And the objection dies in the room. They fall silent, then glorify God, saying, then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Meanwhile, the gospel is spreading on its own momentum. Believers scattered by the persecution have been preaching as they go, mostly to fellow Jews, but in the great city of Antioch some begin telling Greeks the good news about the Lord Jesus, and the hand of the Lord is with them. A great number believe and turn to the Lord. The church sends Barnabas to investigate, and when he arrives and sees the grace of God, he is glad, and he encourages them all to remain faithful with steadfast purpose.

Barnabas knows this growing, mixed congregation needs a teacher, so he travels to Tarsus, finds Saul, and brings him to Antioch, where together they teach the people for a whole year. And it is here, in this diverse and thriving church, that the followers of Jesus are first called Christians. They bear His name now. When a famine is foretold, this generous young church takes up a collection for their brothers and sisters in Judea, proving that the family of God, Jew and Gentile together, truly cares for its own. A new chapter in the story of the gospel has begun.

Group Discussion: When the believers heard the full story of what God had done, they stopped objecting, glorified God, and concluded that God had granted the Gentiles repentance that leads to life (v. 18). What does it take for us to set aside our objections and rejoice when God works in ways we did not expect?

Personal Reflection: Barnabas encouraged the new believers at Antioch to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose (v. 23). What helps you stay faithful with steadfast purpose over the long haul, and where do you feel your resolve being tested right now?

Read Acts 11:1–30

Study Questions

1. When Peter finished his account, the believers fell silent and glorified God, saying, then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life (v. 18). What does this conclusion affirm about the gospel and about repentance, and how was the matter of Gentile inclusion settled?
2. Peter asked, who was I that I could stand in God's way? (v. 17), recognizing he must not resist what God was clearly doing. Are there ways you find yourself resisting or standing in the way of what God is doing, in your life, your church, or others? How can you cultivate a more yielded heart?
3. The dispute was settled not by argument or tradition, but by recognizing and submitting to what God had clearly done (vv. 4-18). What does this teach about how we should resolve disagreements over what is right, and about the authority of God's revealed will over human prejudice and custom?
4. The believers had to let God overturn a deeply held assumption about who could belong to His people (vv. 1-3, 18). Are there cherished assumptions or traditions of your own that God may be calling you to examine in light of His word? How open are you to being corrected?
5. At Antioch, believers preached the Lord Jesus to Greeks, and the hand of the Lord was with them, so that a great number believed and turned to the Lord (vv. 19-21). What does it mean that the hand of the Lord was with them, and what does this teach about God's part and ours in the spread of the gospel?
6. The church at Antioch was a new kind of congregation, Jews and Greeks together, united in Christ (vv. 19-21). How well do you embrace a church family that includes people very different from you? What is your part in helping your congregation welcome and include new and different people?
7. Barnabas, a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith, saw the grace of God at Antioch and encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose (vv. 22-24). What does it mean to remain faithful with steadfast purpose, and why is this exhortation so important for new and growing believers?
8. Barnabas urged the believers to stay faithful with steadfast purpose over the long haul (v. 23). What threatens your steadfastness right now, drift, discouragement, busyness, or trial? What practices and people help you keep your purpose fixed on the Lord?
9. Luke notes that the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch (v. 26). What is the significance of bearing the name Christian, what does it mean to wear the name of Christ, and how should this shape our identity rather than party or sectarian labels?
10. When a famine was foretold, the disciples at Antioch each gave according to their ability to send relief to the believers in Judea (vv. 27-30). Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to grow, in humble submission, steadfast faithfulness, bearing His name, or generous love, and what is one step you will take this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 10:34-48, the Cornelius account that this chapter defends; 1 Peter 4:16, glorifying God in bearing the name of Christian; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, the rebuke of party labels and division in the body; Hebrews 3:12-14, the call to hold fast our confidence firm to the end; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9, the grace of generous giving among the churches