

The Book of Acts Study Guide

Chapters 11-12

11:1-18

After bringing the Good News of salvation to Cornelius, Peter returned to Jerusalem where he was met with opposition for having eaten with a Gentile. As we saw previously, Gentiles were considered to be unclean according to rabbinic teaching, but not as a direct biblical precept. Since the response of these Messianic Jews, including the other Apostles, is consistent with the way Peter responded when he had his vision in chapter 10, we can see the great influence of culture on the lives of believers, even if it is inconsistent with God's will. We can also see that they made a particular issue of the Gentiles not being circumcised, which will be an issue requiring a more complete resolution at the Jerusalem council in chapter 15.

So Peter recounts his personal experience. His explanation is essentially the same as in chapter 10. But in v. 15 he emphasizes that the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his Gentile household in the same manner as that Spirit came upon the Apostles and other Jewish believers. It serves as a reminder of the importance of not letting ethnicity or denominations or any other superficial characteristic lead us to assume someone cannot be a believer. We have to look for evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life in order to make that determination.

- v. 18 – Peter's explanation was convincing for the Jewish believers and they accepted the reality of God including Gentiles in the kingdom of heaven. Altogether Peter had a key role in the inclusion in the believing community of people who were fully Jewish, Samaritans who were partially Jewish, and those who were fully Gentile. This is the fulfillment of Yeshua's promise: "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My *ekklesia* (church, lit. "called out ones"); and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Mat 16:18). Yeshua was referring to Peter's declaration that He was the Messiah (Mat 16:16), and that is what Peter had been doing effectively.

11:19-30

The first wave of Jewish believers from Jerusalem went to places with large Gentile populations outside of the lands of Judea and Samaria (v. 19). They went to Phoenicia (modern Lebanon), Cyprus (the island off the coast of Lebanon and Syria), and Antioch (on the coast of southern Turkey). But they only reached out to the Jews who lived there.

- v. 20 – Another group of Messianic Jews went to Antioch. They were well-equipped to reach out to Gentiles because they were originally from Cyprus and Cyrene (a Greek city on the North African coast in present-day Libya). They were most likely present on that day in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit came upon the Jews who had come to Jerusalem for Shavuot/Pentecost and became believers. After that, they may have stayed in Jerusalem or had returned to their home towns. Either way, they now went to Antioch, and because they were Jews who had lived in Hellenized communities, they were best equipped to minister not just to the Jews of Antioch, but to the Gentiles (Greeks) who lived there.

They preached "Yeshua as Lord" to these Gentiles. Previously they preached "Yeshua as Messiah" to Jews. They took a different approach because the concept of the Messiah was not meaningful to Gentiles. So using Messianic prophecies was not relevant when

witnessing to them. By using the term, “Lord,” they still communicate biblical principles about Yeshua that He is the Sovereign over the universe, the one who forgives sins, and will judge humanity. This illustrates the importance of witnessing to people using elements of biblical truth that are especially relevant to their existing familiarity and personal issues like felt needs in their lives. Later on these believers could come to understand how Yeshua fulfills the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures.

v. 22-24 – The Jerusalem assembly sent Barnabas to Antioch to see firsthand the success of the ministry to this mixed community. We learn about his personal character as a believer. He is an example of a person in the Bible living up to the name that had been given to him. In this case, his name meant “son of encouragement,” and that is what he did. He was also acknowledged for being a good man, filled with the Spirit and of faith. And previously in 4:36-37 we learned that he was generous, having sold land and donating the money to the believing community. All of these things describe the kind of person God can use in a powerful way. So we can ask ourselves if that describes us as well.

vv 25-26 – Barnabas then traveled about 150 miles west to Tarsus, which is also located in modern Turkey. That is where the Apostles had sent Saul in chapter 9 in order to stop the chaos he was causing in Jerusalem. By the time Barnabas arrives, Saul had been there for about seven years, so he had no doubt matured in his faith. The two of them then went back to Antioch where they discipled that new body of believers for a year. Those new disciples were called Christians for the first time in history.

The word “Christian” (Gr. *Christianos*) literally means “follower of Christ” or “follower of the anointed.” It is used only three times in the Bible, and in the other two cases in Acts 26:28 and 1 Pet 4:16, it is used in a pejorative sense, or a slur. It would be similar to the way that members of the Unification Church have been called Moonies because they were disciples of Sun Myong Moon. Notice that the people *were called* Christians, they did not call themselves Christians. The believing community continued to call itself The Way (9:1-2). and that will be confirmed later in chapter 19. But it is likely that this slur eventually became a term that believers accepted as an honor for being persecuted and willingly began using it.

vv 27-30 – Prophets from Jerusalem then visited the believers in Antioch. That is an indication that God was giving some believers the gift of prophecy, although in this case it was not used to give a prediction of future apocalyptic events or an unfolding of God’s plan for this world like the prophets who foretold the Messiah. This prophecy involved the prediction of a near future famine. We do indeed have a record of such a famine, for the late 1st century/early 2nd century Roman historian Suetonius wrote about a widespread famine during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (*Lives of the Emperors: Claudius* 18:2) and so did Josephus (*Ant.* 20:5). The believers stepped up and provided *zedakah* (charity) for the believers in Judea, who were apparently hit hard by the famine. So this is the first relief ministry in history.

12:1-11

The king mentioned here is Herod Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great who ruled as king over Judea until 4 B.C. After that, the Romans took away full kingship and appointed tetrarchs and procurators (governors) to administer the territory, such as Pontius Pilate. But in 41 A.D. they changed course and the Roman emperor Claudius allowed Herod Agrippa I to rule over Judea and Samaria and the Galilee as king once again. His reign lasted

only for three years until 44 A.D. This account in Acts 12 describes what took place during the middle of his reign, and then picks up the story again at the end of his life. Agrippa was not like his grandfather, Herod the Great, who was greatly despised by the Jews. He consistently practiced appeasement for both the Romans and the Jews, which made him very popular among both groups. So when you read the writings of Josephus and the Talmud, he is depicted in a very favorable way. And that makes sense because he gave the Jewish authorities whatever they wanted as long as it did not conflict with Rome.

The appeasement of Agrippa is reflected in this chapter where he has James, the brother of John and one of the first Apostles, executed (beheaded) in v. 2. And in the next verse we read that this act pleased the Jewish leaders. Then, thinking that he had a good thing going by eliminating the Messianic community that the nonbelievers despised, he went after Peter and had him put in jail.

vv 3-4 – The timing of this incident is significant. It was during the week-long period of the combined holiday of Unleavened Bread and Passover. That meant he couldn't do a quick trial with a predetermined verdict of guilt, followed immediately by another execution. That's the way it had been done a decade earlier with the trial and execution of Yeshua that was rushed because Passover was about to begin. This time it was already underway, so he had to wait until after Passover.

This was not the first time Peter was put in prison (5:17-25). The similarity of these two imprisonments is his miraculous release by an angel. In contrast, however, here he was chained between two soldiers (no doubt as an extra security measure after his first release (v. 6). And this time the people were praying fervently for him, because they undoubtedly realized that their idyllic life had given way to the reality of persecution and death for followers of Yeshua (v. 5). So they responded in the right way—they didn't storm the prison and bust him out—they prayed.

v. 7 – Those prayers were answered when, for the second time, God sent an angel to bring about Peter's release. If the angel could open the door to his cell like the first time, it would be no less difficult for him to open the locks on his chains this time. This story illustrates the importance of asking what chains appear to be impossible to be released in your life, yet trusting God.

v. 9 – Peter wasn't sure if what he was seeing was real or a vision. He had just experienced the vision of the sheet with the unclean animals representing Gentiles, and that must have appeared to be very real. And he was able to engage in actual conversations during the vision and now with the angel. So based on that past experience, he could not be sure what was happening at this time. But that also tells us that a vision will appear the same way that our senses work, so there should be no mystical aspect to them as some religions attest.

v. 11 – Eventually Peter came to realize that it was indeed real, not a vision.

In this chapter a story of tragedy and rescue is evident. Both James and Peter were part of the twelve Apostles. They were both privileged, along with John, to witness the transfiguration of Yeshua. Yet James was martyred and Peter was rescued. This outcome demonstrates God's sovereignty, but it remains a mystery from our perspective.

12:12-17

Upon his release, Peter went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where prayers were

being offered to God on behalf of Peter. When Peter showed up at the door the believers were skeptical that it was him, even though they had been praying fervently. Yet God actually answered their prayers even while they were offering them. It is like the way the Lord answered the prayer of Daniel while he was praying in Daniel 9. So it is important to have faith without being demanding, but also not having doubt that He will answer. It calls for a boldness to ask God to meet our needs, a trust in the Lord to answer as He sees fit in His sovereignty, and then to wait for His answer. This is a mature kind of reliance on God.

- v. 17 – Once they were over the shock of their prayers being answered, Peter requested that his release be reported to James. The James mentioned here is obviously not the apostle James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, who was killed earlier. The other apostle James, the son of Alphaeus (Mat 10:3; Acts 1:13) is also not the subject. The biblical evidence points to him being the half-brother of Yeshua. The other two men named James are consistently identified along with the name of their father. But that is not the case in Scripture for James, the brother of Yeshua, possibly because Joseph had died, and since Yeshua had a heavenly father, it may not have seemed right to use “the son of Joseph” for James (see also Gal 1:19; 2:9). In any event James had become the head of the Messianic community in Jerusalem.

12:18-25

- v. 18-19 – The freeing of Peter got the guards in trouble and they ended up losing their lives instead of Peter. This is consistent with people who approve of killing, like Agrippa. They can easily turn on their own people, as you can see in other groups today.
- v. 20-23 – After resolving a dispute over commerce with the two port cities of Tyre and Sidon, Herod scheduled a speech, where the audience shouted praise like he is divine. Josephus records the same thing and adds that Agrippa did not dispute it and was flattered by their words. Since such praise is due only to Adonai, he was inflicted with some kind of intestinal disease that leads to his death. That is also consistent with the writings of Josephus, who wrote:

“After five days, exhausted by the stomach pain, he died at the age of 53 (*Antiquities of the Jews* 19:8:2).

This story reminds us, as Yeshua taught, “those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword” (Mat 26:52). Or to put it another way, people who practice or live in a culture of death run the risk of dying unnecessarily themselves.
- v. 24 – In contrast people who esteem life will experience the fullness of life.
- v. 25 – Back in the last verse of chapter 11, Barnabas and Saul brought the offering that had been raised in Antioch. Now in the last verse of chapter 12, they went back to Antioch, this time taking along John Mark.