

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 11

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 recounted his personal experience. His explanation is essentially the same as in chapter 10. But in verse 15 he emphasized that the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his Gentile household in the same manner 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. 17- 18 – Peter came to the conclusion that his prior thinking was standing in the way of God and, by implication, had to change. His 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, beginning with those who were fully ethnic Jews, then Samaritans who were partially Jewish, and then those who were fully ethnic Gentiles. This is the fulfillment of Yeshua's promise to Peter in Matthew 16, where we are told that after Peter declared that Yeshua was "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (v. 16), Yeshua responded by saying:

"Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My *ekklesia*" (v. 17-18).

Ekklesia is commonly translated as "church," but a more accurate translation is "assembly or congregation" and it literally means "called out ones." So, we can see that Yeshua had begun building His congregation of believers who are being called out from every tribe and nation on earth, and there is no coincidence that He was doing so through Peter, because He foretold it to Peter first..

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 the island of 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 they 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. Likewise, using Messianic prophecies was not relevant when witnessing to them. By using the term, “Lord,” they were still able to communicate biblical principles about Yeshua, including how He is the Sovereign over the universe, the one who forgives sins, and will judge humanity. This illustrates an important witnessing principle. A key to receiving a favorable response is to begin with terms and concepts that are familiar to people, and then drawing them toward more significant spiritual issues. Later on, a time could come when these people who became believers in Antioch would be able to understand how Yeshua fulfilled 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.

v 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 arrived, Saul had been there for about seven years, so he had, undoubtedly, matured in his faith. The two of them then went back to Antioch where they discipled that new community 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, more precisely, “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.

v 27-30 – Because prophets from Jerusalem visited the believers in Antioch, this 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, given by a man named Agabus, involved the specific prediction of a near future famine. We do, indeed, have a record of the famine cited here. For the late first century/early second century

Roman historian Suetonius wrote about a widespread famine during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (*Lives of the Emperors: Claudius* 18:2) in 45 A.D. Josephus also confirmed it (*Ant.* 20:5). This famine particularly affected the region of Judea. The believers of Antioch stepped up and provided *tzedakah* (charity) for the believers in Judea. So, this was the first relief ministry in history, and it was supervised by Barnabas and Saul. That serves as a reminder of the way that Joseph planned and carried out a relief program in the land of Egypt. This episode in Acts also shows that Saul returned to Jerusalem for the first time in 8 years