



The Book of Acts - Chapter Eleven

III. Acts 6:1-11:30 - The Witness beyond Jerusalem
(continues/concludes)

III.f Acts 9:32-11:18 - Peter preaches in the coastal towns
(continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Eleven

We should not dismiss the significance of the event described at the end of Chapter 10 and here in vv.1-18. For those who were Gentile sinners were in the dark, living in complete hopelessness until this moment shone a bright light into their lives forever. Such historic occasions should be sources of great joy and thanksgiving for all of us who have subsequently benefitted. Firstly, our praise goes to God and then our thanks to the faithful disciples, who were the vehicles God used to make it all happen.

Having stayed with Cornelius for several days, no doubt explaining the Gospel to a captive audience of Gentiles, Peter returned to Jerusalem to inform the church leaders there what had occurred. Initially, he met with opposition as the conservative believers were horrified that Peter had even associated closely with uncircumcised men. But after Peter had explained the full reality of what God had done, they came to realise the full truth of the Gospel message and praised God for his amazing grace.

The story then moves to the growing church in Antioch, where God was clearly building a strong community. When the apostles and elders in Jerusalem heard of the work that was occurring in Antioch, they sent Barnabas there to verify and authenticate the work of the disciples. He found the church there to be very healthy.

Barnabas then travelled to Tarsus and persuaded Saul to accompany him back to Antioch, where the two of them worked successfully for at least a year. During this time, some prophets came from Jerusalem and one of them, Agabus, told of a severe famine that would strike the region. In response to this, the church organised collections in their region and would have Paul and Barnabas take it to Jerusalem to ease the suffering of the poor in that area.

III.f.v Acts 11:1-18 - Peter explains his actions

The final scene of the Cornelius narrative takes place in Jerusalem, where some of Peter's fellow Jewish Christians questioned his acceptance of the Gentiles. Peter defended his action with a detailed recounting of the events of the Gentile conversions, with an emphasis on God's leading. This section is basically a summary of Chapter 10, with only a few added details. It is not surprising to note that the news of the events in Cæsarea, that reached Jerusalem before

Peter had returned to give his report, and that it focused on negative aspects, i.e. inappropriate association with Gentiles contrary to the law, rather than the reality of God's gracious gift of bringing Gentiles into the Kingdom, with equality to those who had first believed in Jesus, and who were chosen from among the people of the OT promises, i.e. Jews.

¹ The apostles and the brothers throughout Judæa heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Acts 11:1

The apostles and the brothers do not seem to have raised objection to the inclusion of Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles. The issue was raised by: <<the circumcised believers>> (v.2), a group of strict Jewish Christians, perhaps of a Pharisaic background, as we will see in Acts Chapter 15 <<Some men came down from Judæa to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved">> (Acts 15:1), and: <<Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses">> (Acts 15:5). They seemed to hold the position that Gentiles who wished to become Christians must first become converts to Judaism, which included circumcision and living by the ritual laws.

² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him
³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Acts 11:2-3

You went into the house of uncircumcised men. The men hearing this would have been horrified as they would consider that Peter and his colleagues had deliberately transgressed the ceremonial law; not in terms of violating OT commands but in the sense of not following the later customs of strict Jewish traditions about uncleanness. Although these men were believers, they had not relinquished the traditions and stipulations of their former lives that had made it necessary for Jesus to come in the first place. The Jewish traditions of purity made it virtually impossible for them to associate with Gentiles without becoming ritually unclean. They adopted a 'holier than thou' attitude toward Gentiles.

God has said that he would remove the barriers set up by those who have opposed his work and continue to do so, allowing former sinners to repent and turn to him through Jesus: <<On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill>> (Zephaniah 3:11).

⁴ Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

⁸ "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

⁹ "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹ “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Cæsarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house.

Acts 11:4-12

Peter gives a full account of what had occurred in his vision including his own short-comings in denying the instruction by saying ‘Surely not, Lord!’

Peter was to have no hesitation about going with them nor must he show any discrimination between Jews and Gentiles.

These six brothers were more than enough for the law stated at least two witnesses would have been required in any trial or hearing.

¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

Acts 11:13-14

A message through which you and all your household will be saved. Some think this implies that Cornelius was saved for the first time here. Others think he previously had saving faith, as a Gentile God-fearer looking forward to the Messiah, but that this meant he would experience the fullness of the new covenant salvation in Christ, when he heard the Gospel message and accepted Jesus as his Lord and Saviour.

As Jesus had said to the woman at the well in Sychar: <<You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews>> (John 4:22), and then to Zacchæus in Jericho: <<Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham>> (Luke 19:9).

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

Acts 11:15

As he had come on us at the beginning refers to the Holy Spirit being poured out on the disciples and apostles at Pentecost, apparently meaning that these Gentile believers began to speak in tongues and praise God, giving convincing evidence that they had received the Holy Spirit in the same sense as did those at Pentecost. See also Acts 10:44-48 and especially the comments made on 10:47. The fact that the Spirit came to Cornelius and other Gentiles, without them having undergone anything in relationship to the Law, is God’s answer to the debate and settled matters as far as Peter was concerned.

¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”

Acts 11:16-17

By stating that God gave them the same gift indicates quite clearly that there is only one Holy Spirit and that we all, Jew and Gentile, men and women from all nations, are one in the same body of Christ.

Oppose God. Here Peter used the same Greek word *kōlyō*, which means withhold, as in the earlier account of Cornelius' conversion in Acts 10:47 <<"Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" >>, and the Ethiopian eunuch used the same word at the time of his conversion: <<As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?" >> (Acts 8:36). As these three examples demonstrate, God was expanding the church to include Gentiles, and no one should try to prevent or stand in the way of that. Although Peter did not explicitly refer to baptism, it was probably implicit in the use of this word. Peter knew he could not refuse to allow these new believers to be baptised and thereby give outward evidence that they were full members of the church.

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Acts 11:18

Praised God. Although it is taken for granted today that Gentiles can become Christians, it was an astounding realisation for these Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life. We were not explicitly told that the Gentiles had repented or declared their faith in Jesus, accepting him as their personal saviour, but it is implied in the description of the Holy Spirit's work and the fact that God: <<knows the secrets of the heart>> (Psalm 44:21b). This move was significant, given the history of tension between Gentiles and Jews, especially in the light of the Maccabæan War. Forgiveness and reconciliation are key themes of the Gospel message. It was also important for Peter to give a full and truthful account of all that had happened in Cæsarea to remove any potential barriers or stumbling blocks for those in his home church.

Paul will later confirm that we receive the Spirit by hearing the Word and not through works of the law: <<I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?>> (Galatians 3:2).

III.g Acts 11:19-30 - The church in Antioch

The Jerusalem church was the centre of the Christian witness to the Gentiles in its earliest days. With the establishing of a church at Antioch and their outreach to Gentiles, the focus in Acts shifts to their congregation. The section concludes with Paul and Barnabas preparing to travel to Jerusalem with an offering from the Antioch church for the poor in Jerusalem and Judæa.

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

Acts 11:19

The persecution in connection with Stephen, recorded in Acts 8:1-4, caused believers to be scattered and led to the spread of the word among Jews in various outlying regions. The Jews had intended 'to disperse and lose them', but God had decided 'to disperse and use them': <<The Lord will extend your mighty sceptre from Zion>> (Psalm 110:2a).

Phoenicia was in the area of present-day Lebanon, its primary cities being Tyre, Sidon, and Ptolemais. For Christian communities in that region we have a brief account recorded in Acts 21:3-7 <<After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples

and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. After saying goodbye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home. We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day>>.

Cyprus is 100 miles or 161 km off the coast of Palestine and was the home of Barnabas. The primary language of these areas was Greek, as it was for Antioch, modern day Antakya, which, in its time, was the largest city in the area and capital of the Roman province of Syria with a population of half a million or more. Only Rome and Alexandria were larger in ancient times.



Regional Map

Antioch was reputed to be the third most important city in the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria. It was the province of Hamath and the city of Riblah in the OT. Some believe that both Luke and Theophilus were Antiochians.

At Antioch, an island bearing a palace and a hippodrome stood in the middle of the Orontes River. Bridges connected the island to the main city. In the 1st Century AD, the main city contained an aqueduct, baths, two theatres, temples to Artemis and to Herakles (or Hercules - the god of Olympus and sport), the Pantheon and the Kaisareion, a basilica dedicated to the imperial cult. Prior to Paul's visit, an earthquake in 37BC had devastated Antioch, but the emperor Gaius also known as Caligula, helped rebuild it. Antioch periodically hosted Olympic-style games. Its great colonnaded and marble-paved road had been sponsored in part by Herod the Great. Gaius was the adopted son of Tiberius and was emperor of Rome from AD37 until his assassination in Antioch in AD41.

Telling the message only to Jews. <<Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it>> (Mark 16:20), and: <<God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will>> (Hebrews 2:4). These people had not yet heard about the events of Acts 10:1-11:18.

²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

Acts 11:20

Men from Cyprus and Cyrene. They were Diaspora Jews, natives of the nearby island of Cyprus and of Cyrene, a Roman province in Libya, North Africa. There is ample archæological evidence of Jewish inhabitants in these areas.

Greeks here means not just people from Greece but Greek-speaking Gentiles who lived in Antioch. We have also encountered similar terms such as Hellenists or Grecian Jews in Acts 9:29, and also the term Hellenists for Greek-speaking Christians in Acts 6:1. Some of the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, who settled in Antioch, began witnessing to the Gentiles.

²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 11:21

The Lord's hand was with them is another reminder that this remarkable expansion of the church came about only by God's power, not by human wisdom, endeavour or skill.

²² News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Acts 11:22

They sent Barnabas to Antioch. When the mother church in Jerusalem heard of Antioch's witness to the Gentiles, they sent Barnabas to validate this new outreach, just as they had sent Peter and John to approve the Samaritan mission in Acts 8:14.

There are a number of reasons why Barnabas was chosen to go to Antioch, the most important would be:

1. To strengthen and encourage the embryonic church as it started to grow. The name Barnabas comes from the Greek *hyios parakleseos*, which some translate as 'Son of exhortation'. Therefore, he would be a natural choice for this role: <<if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully>> (Romans 12:8).
2. To help establish some form of structure to enable the church to grow successfully and still be managed.
3. To ensure that the doctrine and quality of teaching was in line with that taught by Jesus.
4. To help with the teaching. Barnabas was a Levite and was thus used to serving in the Jewish synagogue and was certainly gifted in teaching, as we see in the forthcoming chapters.

What made him especially suitable was he was full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

²³ When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Acts 11:23-24

Full of the Holy Spirit and faith. This does not describe a single experience but a general characteristic of Barnabas' life. The persecution by Herod, recorded in Acts 12:1-19, and Herod's death, see Acts 12:20-23, would have been inserted at this point in the narrative if Luke had been writing everything in exact chronological order, because Herod died in AD44,

see Acts 12:23, and Paul apparently stayed in Tarsus until AD45, when Barnabas went there and brought him back to Antioch (vv.25-26). But Luke here departs from strict chronological order because he is telling the story of the church in Antioch. He continues on this topic until v.30 and then turns to discuss what happened to Herod at 'about that time' (Acts 12:1).

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Acts 11:25-26

Paul had gone to his native Tarsus after his conversion and his persecution in both Damascus and Jerusalem (Acts 9:30). As a Diaspora Jew, he was particularly suited for the Gentile outreach. His whole year of participation in this mission in Antioch was probably in AD45, which prepared him and Barnabas for a much greater mission that would follow.

Just as he had introduced Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem, when others were reluctant to associate with him, so Barnabas travelled along the coast to Tarsus to bring Paul out of relative obscurity to serve at Antioch for at least the next year. Just as with his years in Arabia, we are not told what Paul achieved in Tarsus but by bringing him to Antioch; through Barnabas, Jesus had set the lamp on its stand: <<No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light>> (Luke 8:16).

The fact that the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch probably reflects a label applied by the unbelieving public in Antioch and shows that the disciples were beginning to have an identity of their own apart from other Jews. Other references to Christians come in Acts 26:28 <<Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?">>, and in 1 Peter 4:16 <<However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name>>.

Christians means 'little Christs' and was first used by opposers of the faith as a derogatory term, but the disciples wore it with pride and dignity, as it associated them with their beloved Lord. So it has stuck to this day, fulfilling the scripture: <<The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow>> (Isaiah 62:2). Before that they were called 'Followers of the way', 'the way of life' and 'the Nazarene sect'.

Perhaps intended for the Jewish church, we have: <<You will leave your name for my chosen ones to use in their curses; the Sovereign Lord will put you to death, but to his servants he will give another name>> (Isaiah 65:15).

If we are to call ourselves Christians then we need to ensure we do all we can to be like Jesus in every way. Alexander the Great is reported to have once said to a badly-behaved soldier that bore his name to 'Either change your name or change your manners'.

The Offering for Jerusalem (vv.27-30). Saul and Barnabas represented the Antioch church by conveying its offering to the Jerusalem church in a time of need. This offering may have inspired Paul for his own organising of an offering for Jerusalem sometime later: <<Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made

sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way>> (Romans 15:25-28).

Paul says in Galatians 2:1 that this second visit to Jerusalem in v.30 took place ‘after fourteen years’, presumably 14 years after his conversion, which would place this visit in either AD45, 46, or 47. As discussed in Chapter 9, most commentators believe that these calculations of years were not made according to modern standards of counting, which would require 14 full years, but by ancient inclusive methods, in which part of a year was still counted as a year. Paul’s fourteen years could have been as little as a month or two from the first year, plus 12 whole years, plus a month or two from the final year, giving about twelve and a half years by modern reckoning. Likewise, the ‘after three years’ of Galatians 1:18 could be as little as 14 months.

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Acts 11:27

Christian prophets are mentioned elsewhere in Acts (13:1, 15:32 and 21:9). Their role involved edification and encouragement as they spoke things that had been revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, such prophecies foretold the future, as Agabus did here.

²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)

Acts 11:28

A severe famine. There were several famines in various parts of the Roman Empire during the reign of Claudius (AD41-54), including several in Judæa in the early years of his reign. Historians believe that this famine took place in the year AD45-46 or else AD47.

Over the entire Roman world is a general prediction of the many regional famines that took place during Claudius’ reign.

The Holy Spirit had bestowed the gift of prophecy on Agabus and he gave due warning of a famine that would come upon the Roman Empire and did so during the reign of Claudius Tiberius Cæsar. As a result collections were made to ensure the poor in Judæa were appropriately cared for. Although most NT prophecy is of a different nature to that of the OT, we can still discern true prophets like Agabus in the same way as before: <<If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him>> (Deuteronomy 18:22), and: <<But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognised as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true>> (Jeremiah 28:9). They didn’t have long to wait to test this one as the famine occurred in either AD45-46 or AD47.

However, the effects were felt for longer than this as commodity and food prices remained high for several years, affecting the poor badly. But through this prophecy the church was able to make provision to help, and: <<Happy are those who are concerned for the poor; the Lord will help them when they are in trouble>> (Psalm 41:1 - Good News Bible), and: <<In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty. But the wicked will perish: though the Lord’s enemies are like the flowers of the field, they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke. The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously>> (Psalm 37:19-21). Jesus also advised us to: <<Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys>> (Luke 12:33). One of our motivating forces is explained by Paul: <<Therefore,

as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers>> (Galatians 6:10).

Of course, the Jews of the Diaspora had traditionally sent alms to the poor in Judæa. One well known proselyte was Helena of Adiabene, wife of King Monobaz I. She was well known for providing corn for the poor Jews in Alexandria. Her son Izates II was also a proselyte and he provided much needed aid in Jerusalem. Both these people and several others became Jews due to the work of a well known Jewish merchant, Ananias of Adiabene, around AD30. Dr. Robert Eisenman contends this is the same Ananias who became a follower of Jesus and ministered to Saul in Damascus.

Palestine, once flowing with milk and honey, had become a barren wasteland due to their neglect of God over the generations that led to the exiles recorded in the bible. The land has never recovered the status it once enjoyed when the people walked more closely with God - at least they did so from time to time! The poor have also always had a special place in the Gospel message, for it was to them it was first proclaimed: <<The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor>> (Matthew 11:5).

Prophecy was one of the many gifts given to members of the church in Antioch: <<In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manæn (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul>> (Acts 13:1). And Jesus had said: <<But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come>> (John 16:13).

Agabus would later prophecy Paul's imprisonment: <<After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judæa. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles'" >> (Acts 21:10-11).

²⁹ The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judæa. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 11:29-30

The reference to elders marks a transition in day-to-day leadership of the Jerusalem church. Initially, we saw these duties, in terms at least of the financial offerings, being undertaken by the apostles (Acts 4:35-37), and the delegation of caring for the Greek widows to the seven in Acts 6:1-6.

Barnabas and Saul would take the offerings to Jerusalem around AD45, about 10 years before Paul wrote 2 Corinthians after working in Ephesus for some time. This second visit to Jerusalem could have been the occasion when he had his vision in the temple: <<When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance>> (Acts 22:17), but would not have been the time he was translated into heaven: <<I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know — God knows>> (2 Corinthians 12:1-2), as that occurred 14 years before he wrote to the Corinthians. His translation more likely occurred either during his time in Tarsus or in Arabia.