

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Fourteen
Acts 11:1-30

Day One

11:1 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him 3 and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." 4 Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened:

v. 1 – News spread quickly concerning the events in Cornelius' household. This was monumental news indeed, for Jews did not believe this possible unless Gentiles went through the Jesus "door" to come to God. Now the Spirit had seemingly opened a new door, one that would be debated and assessed for decades to come. It wasn't that God was doing something that was unheard of or unpredicted—this had been foretold throughout the Old Testament. But Jewish culture was so convinced that they "owned" God (or at least the way to God) that the possibility of direct contact with God by a Gentile was unthinkable. **Do you have any of these mental or intellectual "strongholds" concerning what God will or won't do?** God isn't required to honor those assumptions. God doesn't need to adjust to our thinking; we need to adjust to His.

v. 2 – These events weren't cause for rejoicing. Instead, the believers (including the other apostles) criticized and questioned Peter. They weren't there, but they thought they knew better than Peter—and better than the Spirit of God! Notice they didn't ask Peter what happened, they just went into "critical mode." This is so easy to do, and I have done it myself many times. **How about you? Are you open to or critical of the servants of God and God Himself? Do you hold your opinions as edicts from God, defending them and resisting other opinions that are contrary to yours? It is absolutely critical that you not judge people, God or circumstances prematurely. I am working on this tendency in my own life and I have a long way to go.** Help me, Lord! I often think I know better than those who are in the frontlines, even when I am back in the comfort of my own "world." Yet there are servants of God who are doing "weird" stuff, and we cannot talk ourselves out the fact that what they do makes no sense.

For instance, I am tired of seeing the manipulation on Christian television to get someone to give. "If you give such and such an amount in the next 40 minutes, you will receive your end-time blessing." That's stupid! So when I say that, it's not critical, but an accurate assessment of someone who is trying to raise money. **Do you see the difference? Agree with me or disagree?**

v. 3 – What was the crux of the matter? Peter went into the home of a Gentile! And he also ate with them, meaning he must have eaten something unclean, like hot dogs or pork chops. God forbid. It is to Peter's credit that he obeyed the vision and went with the messengers, for it seems that the other apostles would not have done so. Two thousand

years later, we look at this situation and think, “How petty of the early believers!” **What issue will seem the same to future generations when they look back on us?**

v. 4 – Peter then explained to them what happened. At least they were willing to listen and Peter, I’m sure, was eager to vindicate his actions. He told them exactly what happened and his interpretation of the events that had transpired. I’m never offended when someone asks me to explain or defend a teaching or position I hold. It helps me to clarify what I am doing and why. But there are some who won’t listen or be convinced and I am learning not to waste time on such people.

Day Two

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.

vs. 5-10 – The issue here was one of trust. Could the believers trust Peter that he had heard from the Lord? More importantly, could they trust God who gave Peter the vision and led him to Cornelius’ household? Jesus knows how to build His church. He is the leader and He needs no one’s permission to direct and lead. But He does need our cooperation.

I’ve had to come to the realization that no church is “my church.” It’s not my money, my people, my staff or my ministry. It’s all His. I’m only a “hired hand,” a worker who is here to act on Jesus’ behalf. I can have my opinions, but they don’t count for much with God. At the same time, I am to use my gifts, experience and training to build up the body of Christ, not tear it down.

Jesus doesn’t need my permission to do anything in His church. I always try to remember what Peter wrote:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the **Chief Shepherd** appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. Young men, in the same way, be submissive to those who are older. All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:1-7).

I have seen many elders and pastors who act like owners instead of stewards in God's church. I have been guilty of this myself. That is why I prefer to operate without a title and as a consultant, choosing to influence people rather than to direct and control them. Jesus is the Chief Shepherd. His under-shepherds receive their reward when He returns, not before. I think too many leaders are claiming their reward now in the form of honor, money and power. They say that a leader's honor really is God's, but they are receiving it on His behalf. God needs to intermediary to broker His honor; He can handle it Himself.

Yet I have also seen God's servants used and abused, so that isn't correct either. **What can you do to honor God's workers and at the same time honor God above all else?**

Day Three

11 "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea 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. 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.'

vs. 11-14 – I am wondering why Luke would repeat everything he had already written about this encounter just a chapter earlier. Could it be that it was still a controversial issue years later when he wrote Acts? Or did Peter possibly request this when Luke interviewed him, wanting everyone to know that he didn't act on his own accord when he went to Cornelius' home?

Another reason could be that Luke wrote primarily to a Roman and Gentile audience, and he wanted them to know that God was with them. He could have wanted them to know that they weren't an afterthought, but a main emphasis in the work of God at that time. And then again, this story is worth repeating, for God orchestrated quite an event to bring together Peter, a Jew, and Cornelius, a Roman military man.

We do find out from this account that there were six others with Peter when he went down, so he had plenty of witnesses to corroborate his story. But at least Peter had a chance to tell his story and explain what God had done. Contrast this with the Sanhedrin, who didn't even investigate how the angel released the apostles from the prison in which they were locked and secured.

How open are you to listening to what God is doing in other people's lives? How open are you to read, investigate or study something new, which you may not have been open to in the past? It has often been said that the greatest opposition to the current move of God is the previous move of God. When you look at history, you find that this has been true more often than not. Can you be part of a current move of God and still be open to the next move of God? That is a great challenge. More importantly, do you believe that there are "moves of God," outpourings of God's

Spirit on certain people or a strong emphasis on certain aspects of God's work and nature? If not, then you may not even be part of a current move, let alone open to His next move.

Day Four

15 "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized 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?" 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."

vs. 15&16 – Peter then let us in on his thinking and notice that he was the one who had to come to the correct conclusions. Too many people check their brains at the door of the church and then forget to claim them before they go home! They are waiting for God to speak to them before they make a move. I believe God speaks to people and I am not discounting or mocking that phenomenon. But we can easily over-spiritualize the guidance process. God spoke to Peter, but then God brought what Jesus said in the past to his remembrance. Then Peter used his common sense to connect the past with the present and made a decision that was Spirit led, but not “the Spirit said.” Does that make sense to you?

We are partners with God in His work. It's not all the Lord, but we are involved, too. I am intrigued by Luke's introduction to his gospel:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, **since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you**, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4 emphasis added).

Notice what Luke doesn't say: “The Lord directed me; I felt led to write; This isn't me writing, but God.” No, Luke said he thought it was a good idea to write to this man. The Spirit was leading and inspiring him, but Luke just saw it as an orderly account, in letter form, to a man named Theophilus (which means “lover of God). **So do you have any good ideas? What are you doing with them?**

v. 17 – Peter clearly understood the Holy Spirit to be a gift, which was given first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. **Do you see the Holy Spirit as a gift? What are you doing with the Holy Spirit? Do you realize that the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead lives in you? You have resurrection power living in you? Is that power reflected in your work, business, ministry and family? Why or why not?**

What can you do to release even more Holy Spirit power? Remember, the Spirit is a gift; you can't earn it, but a gift is under the control of the one to whom it is given. So exercise some of your decision-making ability and release the power of the gift that you have been given.

Many people are afraid of the Spirit, afraid that they will lose control of their lives. And in some sense, they are correct. But someone once said the only way to manage change is to initiate it. They think the only way to "control" the Spirit is to use the Spirit according to your gifts and purpose. Otherwise, the Spirit may very well intervene to spur you into action and that may move you out of your comfort zone. So I think it is best to move yourself and not wait for the Spirit to do so. Do you agree or disagree?

Peter had more wisdom than the leaders of his people, who had no problem opposing God. Peter saw what God was doing and decided to cooperate with it. Not everyone makes that same decision, believing that what they think is correct is in line with what God thinks:

These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face (Psalm 50:21).

Ask God if there is anywhere where you think you are in agreement with God, but you aren't and write down what He shows you.

v. 18 – Fortunately, this explanation satisfied the listeners, who then rejoiced that God had decided to move among the Gentiles. It's amazing what God can do when we cooperate with Him and not try to control Him. There was no central authority, no Sanhedrin, and no ruling council at this time. Yet the church grew and the message spread. What are we doing wrong today? Could it be that we have too much central authority, a number of mini-Sanhedrins, and a whole lot of ruling councils?

I meet with many elders who are infected with what I call an ownership mentality. They truly believe that they own their church, or understand it well enough that they can vote on whether to approve or disapprove of what is going on. No one is that smart, nor will God consult with such men before He saves, bestows gifts, or directs His people.

I have said to many people that Jesus is coming for His church—now! He wants it back from all those who have commandeered it for their own purpose, even if well-meaning. The Spirit must be in control and we must cooperate, lest we be found to resist God—and that isn't a wise thing to do, as Peter noted.

Day Five

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 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. 21 The Lord's

hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

v. 19 – While Peter was meeting in Cornelius’ home, the Spirit was busy at work in other regions. I don’t believe that Peter’s involvement with Cornelius was the first contact that believers had with Gentiles. I think it was the most significant contact because it confronted the hesitancy of the apostles to actively seek Gentile converts. You can see this hesitance in this verse, for other Jewish believers were scattered by the persecution and witnessed only to Jews. Jewish bigotry against Gentiles went deep and was reinforced by a biblical interpretation that supported such bigotry. It’s amazing to me that bigots almost always turn to Scripture, just as slaveholders did in the South prior to the American Civil War. And it’s also amazing that they can misconstrue enough verses to justify their bigotry.

v. 20 – It wasn’t the Jerusalem Jews that went to the Gentiles first in this verse. It was Greek-speaking Jewish believers from the islands of Cyprus and Cyrene. Once again we see someone using their brain. These men spoke Greek; they were believers; so they preached the gospel to others who understood Greek, whether they were Jews or not. Do you see how natural this was? We have no evidence of a supernatural intervention to get them to do this. The only supernatural intervention was with Peter who had refused to do this without it. **Do you need supernatural intervention to do what God wants you to do? Are you so afraid of doing the wrong thing that you do no thing? If so, what are you prepared to do about it?**

v. 21 – The results of their faith in preaching to the Gentiles? God was with them! God helped them and saw God’s favor. When did they know that they had done the correct thing? Before or after they had done it? It was after when they saw God’s blessing. Too many people are waiting on God’s timing and that timing often isn’t revealed until after we try something. Then we can say, “Oops, too early” or “Yes, God was in it!” **Are you guilty of waiting for perfect timing? Then stop waiting and start experimenting!**

v. 22 – The apostles heard about the revival in Antioch and to their credit, they didn’t try to control it. They cooperated with God’s work and sent Barnabas to help. It’s a bit curious to me that they didn’t send another apostle, but maybe there were preoccupied with the work that was breaking out all over the Gentile world. But they sent the Son of Encouragement, who seemingly was open to such moves of God. Plus Barnabas was from Cyprus and the workers who had started this were from Cyprus. Perhaps he had a relationship with those men.

Day Six

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. 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.

v. 23 – It’s interesting that the apostles chose to send Barnabas. Perhaps they didn’t want to go to the Gentiles themselves or perhaps Barnabas’ ministry style was more needed. Barnabas given name was Joseph, but the apostles gave him a nickname that meant “son of encouragement.” And what did Joseph do when he arrived? He encouraged the new believers! That was Joseph’s purpose and he remained true to his purpose no matter where he was or what he was doing.

Barnabas saw the evidence of God’s grace. There is usually tangible evidence when God works. There is peace, growth, and harmony; in short there is what’s known as the fruit of the Spirit when the Spirit is present and allowed to work and rule:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Gal 5:22-24).

If Barnabas came to visit your life, family, work, or church, would he “see” the grace of God and be glad? What can you do to produce evidence of such grace?

v. 24 – Luke inserted this quick endorsement of Barnabas. I wonder if that wasn’t meant to picture him in a positive way since he and Paul would have a dispute and part ways later in chapter 15? It would be easy to see Paul as the “good guy” and anyone else as off base if there was a dispute. But here we clearly see that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Spirit and faith. We also see that he was instrumental in a number of people coming to know Jesus. The implication here is that God was with Barnabas when he ministered.

What would people say about you if you could read their comments?

A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold. (Proverbs 22:1).

Integrity is so crucial for at the end of the day, it’s the only thing you have in business, ministry or family. There is one psalm that I believe sums up integrity as it is lived out in real life:

LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the LORD, who keeps his oath even when it hurts, who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.

Why not study this psalm and do some sort of integrity inventory of your own life? How do you measure up? What would Barnabas say or, more importantly, what would Jesus say to summarize your life in one sentence?

vs. 25&26 – Barnabas wasn't finished encouraging. He took off from Antioch and went to Tarsus to seek out Brother Saul. Because he knew that Saul's purpose was to work with Gentiles, Barnabas came to get him to work in Antioch. It pays to know your purpose and to tell others what that purpose is. When the need for who you are arises, then those people will help open doors for you. Barnabas knew what Paul was created to do and helped him connect with the right opportunity at the right time.

What were you created to do? Have you told others? There is nothing wrong or inappropriate with telling the truth about what you can and cannot do. So let others know who God made you and stop being concerned that you are being proud when you do so.

Do you know the purpose of others? Are you doing all that you can to help them find opportunities to fulfill their purpose? One of the great joys in my life is helping others find their purpose and then find how to fulfill it. You should try it some time.

After Saul came to Antioch, he and Barnabas taught the people and helped create a church body, although it wasn't called the church yet. The believers were first called Christians or "little Christs" in Antioch. This was probably a derisive reference, but it stuck and today is still an explanation for a follower of Jesus.

Day Seven

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 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.) 29 The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

v. 27 – The subject of prophets is usually a controversial one. Do they still function? What role do they play? Many people believe that prophets foretell the future, which is only part of what some of them do. Prophets do still operate in the Church and they tend to speak for God about the things of God. Nothing more, nothing less.

Notice the phrase, "came down from Jerusalem." Even though Jerusalem was south of Antioch, the prophets "came down." That is how Jerusalem was viewed—as a peak spiritual experience, thus complicating the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and causing the early church to "look down" upon everyone who wasn't in the Holy City.

v. 28 – God wanted to give the Church advance warning on what He was about to do. You don't think God would cause a famine? Then read this:

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He called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food; and he sent a man before them — Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true (Psalm 105:16-19).

God uses major global and regional events to work for His purposes in the nations.

vs. 29&30 – The church in Antioch responded to the word of the prophets and sent money to the church in Judea. That is how we should treat prophets and the words they bring. We should judge the word and if we deem it to be true, we should respond immediately. I know some people who collect prophetic words like they would stamps or coins. They pull out their “words” every now and then and look at them, like they would an old picture album. The word of the Lord doesn’t come for our amusement or entertainment. It comes to stir us to some godly action. **Do you have any “words” over your life right now? What can you do to prepare for their fulfillment? What role do you have to play in their coming to pass? If you have a word, for instance, that you will go to a certain country, do you pray for that country? Are you learning about that country? Its language and culture?**

Do what the early church did when they received a “word” – they acted on it. You must act on your words, too, or else you will be guilty of a sin of “omission,” which is a sin of not having done something wrong, but not having done something at all.