

The Acts of the Apostles

Acts 11:1–30 — Week 17

Dr. Rob Covell

Introduction

Acts 11 marks another significant transition in the expansion of the early Church. The chapter contains two major movements:

1. **The Jerusalem Church learns that the Gospel is for the Gentiles.**
2. **Apostolic revival begins to flourish in Antioch.**

Peter must explain why he fellowshiped with Gentiles, revealing that the Church was still wrestling with deeply rooted cultural and religious prejudice. Through Peter's testimony, the believers recognize that God has granted repentance and salvation to the Gentiles.

The second half of the chapter introduces **Antioch as a major apostolic center**. Believers scattered by persecution begin preaching the gospel to Gentiles, and the Lord's hand produces significant fruit. Antioch eventually becomes a strategic center for prophetic ministry, leadership development, missionary sending, and apostolic expansion.

Acts 11:1–3 — Confronting Religious Prejudice

The apostles and believers in Jerusalem hear that Gentiles have received the Word of God. Rather than immediately celebrating, some criticize Peter for entering the homes of uncircumcised Gentiles and eating with them.

The controversy reveals how deeply cultural and religious traditions had shaped the early believers. Even though Jesus had commanded His disciples to make disciples of **all nations**, some still believed salvation was primarily for Israel.

The Church would continue wrestling with this issue for generations. Paul later confronts the same legalistic tendency in Galatians, while the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 addresses it directly.

Key principle: Religious tradition can become a barrier to God's purposes when it causes us to exclude people whom God is welcoming.

Acts 11:4–17 — Peter Explains the Gentile Breakthrough

Peter recounts everything that happened at Cornelius's house. He explains the vision, the leading of the Holy Spirit, the angelic encounter, and the coming of the Gentiles into faith.

Peter's testimony demonstrates that God Himself initiated the process. Peter was not abandoning Scripture; he was responding to a new revelation of God's purpose through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The salvation of the Gentiles was therefore not merely Peter's idea—it was **God's initiative**.

Acts 11:18 — The Church Receives the Revelation

The Jerusalem believers accept Peter's testimony and recognize that God has granted repentance leading to life to the Gentiles.

This is a significant breakthrough. The Church begins to understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not restricted by ethnicity, culture, or nationality.

The Gospel of the Kingdom is therefore **global in its scope**, bringing freedom, healing, restoration, forgiveness, and salvation to all who receive Jesus as Lord.

Acts 11:19 — Persecution Becomes a Vehicle for Expansion

The believers scattered because of the persecution following Stephen's death continued preaching the gospel.

Their scattering took them into regions including **Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch**. What appeared to be persecution and loss became an opportunity for gospel expansion.

The Church demonstrates an important kingdom principle: **what the enemy intends to scatter, God can use to multiply**.

The dividing wall between Jew and Gentile was beginning to come down as the Spirit formed one body from many peoples.

Acts 11:20–21 — Antioch Becomes an Apostolic Revival Center

Some of the scattered believers began preaching Jesus to the Greeks. A significant number believed and turned to the Lord.

Antioch was strategically located in the Roman Empire and was a wealthy, influential city with extensive trade connections. God would use this strategic location to resource revival and missionary expansion.

The church at Antioch would eventually become one of the most influential apostolic centers of the early Church, producing prophets, teachers, missionaries, and church planters.

“The Hand of the Lord”

Luke says that **the hand of the Lord was with them**.

The Greek concept of *cheir* communicates God's activity, power, agency, and assistance. The fruitfulness of their ministry demonstrated that God was actively working through them.

Leadership principle: When God is moving, spiritual fruit, growth, power, and kingdom impact become evidence of His activity.

Acts 11:22–23 — Barnabas Discerns the Grace of God

The Jerusalem Church sends Barnabas to Antioch to investigate what God is doing.

When Barnabas arrives, he does not criticize the revival. Instead, **he sees the grace of God and rejoices**.

Barnabas encourages the believers to remain faithful to the Lord.

This reveals an important leadership characteristic: mature leaders recognize and celebrate God's activity even when it is occurring outside their own immediate environment.

Barnabas also recognizes that revival needs encouragement, strengthening, and healthy leadership.

Acts 11:24 — The Character of Barnabas

Barnabas is described as:

- **A good man**
- **Full of the Holy Spirit**
- **Full of faith**

His character and spiritual fullness become catalysts for greater revival.

After Barnabas arrives, even more people are added to the Lord.

Leadership principle: God uses people whose character, faith, and fullness of the Holy Spirit create an atmosphere where others can flourish.

The right person in the right season can add significant momentum to what God is already doing.

Acts 11:25–26 — Barnabas Finds Saul

Barnabas goes to Tarsus to search for Saul.

The Greek word for “look” carries the idea of **diligently searching, hunting for, or seeking someone out**.

Barnabas recognizes Saul's potential and sees that God has a purpose for his life. He intentionally brings Saul into the Antioch community.

This demonstrates the importance of **prophetic leadership**—seeing God's destiny in people and helping them become what God has called them to be.

Saul and Barnabas spend significant time teaching and strengthening the church.

The Church Is Called “Christians”

It is at Antioch that the disciples are first called **Christians**—literally, people identified with Messiah.

This marks an important development in the identity of the Church. The believers are increasingly recognized as a distinct community centered on Jesus Christ.

Antioch also demonstrates that powerful ministry is not built around one individual. It develops through a **collective of leaders** working together in unity and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 11:27–28 — The Prophetic Ministry of Agabus

Prophets come from Jerusalem to Antioch, including **Agabus**, who prophesies about a coming famine throughout the Roman world.

The prophecy demonstrates the practical nature of prophetic ministry. The revelation was not given merely to predict the future—it provided an opportunity for the Church to prepare and respond.

The famine eventually occurred around AD 45–46 and is historically associated with the reign of Emperor Claudius.

A Principle for Prophetic Ministry

The notes emphasize that Agabus **reported what the Holy Spirit revealed** rather than simply attributing the famine itself to God.

Negative prophetic words should be handled carefully. Prophetic revelation should ultimately serve God's redemptive purposes and help God's people respond wisely.

Acts 11:29–30 — Prophecy Produces Action

The Antioch believers respond to Agabus's prophecy by taking practical action.

They determine that each person should give according to his ability and send relief to the believers in Jerusalem.

Two characteristics of the Apostolic Church emerge:

1. Obedience to Prophetic Revelation

They hear what God is saying and respond.

2. Generosity and Unity

They use their resources to care for believers in another region.

This is a powerful picture of **apostolic community**: revelation produces obedience, obedience produces generosity, and generosity strengthens unity within the Body of Christ.

Barnabas and Saul are entrusted with carrying the gift to the elders in Jerusalem.

Major Themes from Acts 11

1. God Is Breaking Down Barriers

The gospel crosses ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. God's heart is for all peoples.

2. Persecution Cannot Stop the Gospel

The persecution that scattered the believers actually became a vehicle for gospel expansion.

3. Antioch Models Apostolic Community

The Antioch church demonstrates the power of diverse leaders working together in unity, spiritual gifts, teaching, prophecy, generosity, and mission.

4. Barnabas Models Spiritual Fathering

Barnabas recognizes potential in Saul and intentionally creates space for him to develop into his apostolic calling.

5. Prophecy Should Produce Action

Agabus's prophetic word led to preparation, generosity, and practical ministry.

6. The Apostolic Church Was Generous

The believers did not simply pray about the coming crisis. They responded with tangible resources and sacrificial love.

Group Discussion Questions**1. Breaking Barriers:**

Where might cultural, religious, or personal assumptions be limiting your ability to recognize the people God is inviting you to reach?

2. Apostolic Leadership:

What can we learn from Barnabas about recognizing, encouraging, and developing the God-given potential in other people?

3. Faith in Action:

How can we become a community that responds to God's revelation with practical obedience, generosity, and kingdom action?