

# Acts 11 • A growing and flourishing Church

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As we study through the New Testament here on Sunday morning and right now through the Book of Acts, we're in the 11th chapter. Last week, you'll remember that we talked about how Peter had received a vision from the Lord that helped him to understand that the gospel was intended to go also to the Gentiles and not just to the Jews.

And we talked about what a challenge that was for Peter, having been raised a Jew and believed all his life that the Gentiles weren't capable of being saved. And here now the Lord says, I want to save them. I want them to hear the gospel and Peter obeyed the Lord. As a result, we read last week how a Roman centurion and his entire family came to faith in Jesus Christ.

But whenever something radical takes place, there's always going to be some pushback, always going to be some pushback. always going to be some pushback. And that's what we read about in the first part of chapter 11.

Look with me in your Bible as we start there. I'm reading out of the ESV. It says, *“Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.” (ESV)* The Word got back to the church in Jerusalem.

*“<sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party (take note of that) criticized him, saying, <sup>3</sup> “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.””* Stop there, please. Let me just explain so that we can get some background and understanding.

The Jews referred to themselves as, the circumcision, and that was a reference to the covenant sign that God had made with their father, Abraham. And so they were referred to always as, the circumcised, or, the circumcision. And the Gentiles, instead of calling them Gentiles. Well, they had lots of names actually for the Gentiles, none of which were very nice. But they referred to them also as, the uncircumcised, and so that was just a simple way of referring to all Gentiles.

And when Peter got back to Jerusalem, after sharing the gospel with a household full of Gentiles, he was criticized by those who belonged to, the circumcision party. That's what Luke tells us. And the circumcision party was a group of Jewish Christians. They're Christians, right? But they were those who were clinging very closely to the law, to the Law of Moses. And they believed strongly that apart from circumcision, a person could not be saved, bottom line.

And the reason they believed it was simply this, they believe that since God had shown His favor to the Jews and the Jews were favored among all other nations on earth, and that God had made His covenant with the Jews. And that covenant sign was circumcision, they believed that in order for anyone to come to God, they had to enter into the covenant of the favored people, right?

They had to be circumcised to show that they had converted to Judaism. In other words, they believe that in order to be a Christian, you had to go through Judaism. You had to become a Jew and the circumcision party was very passionate about this belief. And there you go. These are the ones who are criticizing Peter.

Now, we're going to read as we go through this chapter that Peter deals with it. And the situation appears in this chapter to be really little more than a minor convenience. But you need to also know that there's going to come a time a little bit later when this very group is going to tangle with Paul, the apostle. And they're going to have some serious words about this particular belief.

And in fact, what's going to happen eventually is that the circumcision party is going to start following Paul around. And he's going to go to a place and he's going to share Jesus, and he's going to start a church, and then he's going to move on, and then the circumcision party is going to come after him.

And they're going to start telling the people, yeah, well, everything Paul said was all good and fine, but he didn't give you the whole story. You got to be circumcised. You got to become a Jew. Remember something, they would tell people, Jesus was a Jew. All of it goes through the Jewish race. You must be circumcised to be saved.

Do you know that the entire reason that Paul wrote the Book of Galatians, and by the way, there was not just one church. Galatia was a region and there were several churches in that region. And Paul wrote that letter to simply combat the message of the circumcision party among the Christians. And he had some very strong words to say to the church or churches in Galatia about the circumcision

group. Let me put this on the screen for you from Galatians chapter 1. This is how he starts the letter. He says,

**Galatians 1:6-9 (ESV)**

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.*

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you (and he's talking about the circumcision party here) and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.*

That is strong language and that is Paul laying it out for all to hear. This gospel that they are bringing to you, which isn't a gospel at all, is a distortion of what we brought. And wow!, there you go. Now, it's like, okay, Paul, tell us how you really feel. No he's laid it out very clearly.

Let's keep reading verse 4, “*But Peter began and explained it to them in order: (and he's going to basically relate the whole thing that we studied last week)* <sup>5</sup> “*I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. <sup>6</sup> Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ <sup>8</sup> But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’*”

<sup>9</sup> *But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ <sup>10</sup> This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. <sup>11</sup> And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. <sup>12</sup> And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.”*

Now remember something that was unlawful for a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile. Not according to God's law, according to Jewish tradition. All right. Notice he says that we went in the house. Oh, and not just me, but these six brothers that I took with me, they're Jews, they went in the house too. But I want you to keep reading here cause this gets really interesting.

Verse 13, *“And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup> he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’”*

Now, this is really interesting. Do you notice what Peter did here? He says, and this man saw an angel. Guess where the angel was? Standing in his house. You think it's unlawful for a Jew to go into the house of a Gentile? Well, I got news for you, an angel went in. The holy one of God, yeah. That's on purpose, by the way. I'm absolutely sure.

Verse 15, *“As I began to speak, (he’s sharing the gospel with them) the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>17</sup> If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?”*

Look at verse 18, very important. *“When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.””*

And so what we read here is that with the testimony that Peter gave that day to the believers there in Jerusalem, they realized that it was God Himself who had orchestrated this outreach to the Gentiles. And that being the case, no further objections were heard at the time. And I say at the time, because we know again, that the circumcision party, they're going to... They basically couldn't say anything at the moment, but they're going to go home and they're going to think about it, and they're going to decide now that's not good enough. And they're going to stick to their legalistic guns and they're going to begin to make trouble in the church.

Anyway, here's interesting insight that you may not really be aware of. Beyond the fact that Peter's testimony brought a sense, at least for most of the Christians, a sense of unity about the fact that the Gentiles are going to be part of the church. Like it or not they're in, the Gentiles are in. This bringing in of the Gentiles into the church is going to cause some serious problems for the

Christians as it relates to how they got along with other Jews that had not come to Christ. In other words, Jews that continue to be ,what they call temple worshipers.

And at this particular time, the church was getting along with Judaism pretty well. It had heated up, you'll remember when Saul of Tarsus later to become the apostle Paul, when he was persecuting the church, things got very hot, and very violent, and so forth. But after Paul got converted to Christ, everything died down. That whole persecution and stuff just really settled out and Christianity was actually getting along with Judaism.

The Jews, for the most part, we're just saying, well, this is just a sect of Judaism. And they were willing to, even if they didn't embrace what the Christians believed, they were willing to get along with them at this point. Okay. Because they were like, well, okay, they believe this Jesus guy was the Jewish Messiah. All right, big deal. And it really honestly wasn't a major issue for them.

Now the Gentiles are going to start coming into the church in large numbers. That's going to be a problem for the Jews living in Judea. Once the Gentiles started to be embraced by the Jewish Christians, well, all bets were off at that point. And they had, from that point on, a very different opinion about these Christians and this Christian church.

In fact, we're going to find out in the very next chapter, when we get to chapter 12, that this hostility is going to spill over. And it's going to result in the death of a very much beloved disciple of the Lord and the imprisonment of another. Anyway, we're going to get into that as we do. That's a little preview of coming attractions.

As we go on, we're told in verse 19, if you look with me, *“Now those who were scattered (in other words, those who had been scattered earlier) because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.”* At least initially.

In a sense, we're going back in time just a little bit. We're going back to that period of time of the persecution that arose after the martyrdom of Stephen. And it says they began to spread and we know that they spread north. In fact, let me put a map up. I'm going to do actually a little series of maps up on the screen for you. The first is this area that is referred to as Phoenicia.

Now, if you look at this red box on the screen, right below that is Jerusalem. All right, so you can get a sense of where Israel is related to everything else in this

picture. But that little strip of land right along the Mediterranean coast, that is Phoenicia. And there were several cities that were involved in that area of Phoenicia. This was a land that was famous for paganism, famous for Baal worship. Yeah, this is where Jezebel was from. She was a Phoenician princess, and now the gospel is going to this area.



You can see on the map that they're heading north. They're going into this area of Phoenicia and it says that they also traveled as far as Cyprus.

Let me show you, we'll circle the island of Cyprus. Okay. That's where that's located. And then they also made their way up to an area called Antioch. We'll circle that on the map for you. It's right there on the right.

And there, by the way, there are several cities. Antioch was a very common name for towns back in, there were lots of Antioch's, so it's easy to get confused.



But this is one that was about 15 miles off the Mediterranean coast. It was referred to at that time as Antioch of the Orontes. And this is the city, and the reason I'm pointing this out for you is, this is the city that's going to become the center of Christianity toward the end of the first century. All right.

Now that's going to shift as time goes by. It obviously all started in Jerusalem, but it's going to move northward. And Antioch is going to become literally the epicenter of where things are happening and where growth is taking place in the body of Christ.

Let's keep reading verse 20. Look with me in your Bible. It says, *“But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, (and by the way, Cyrene is modern day Libya, which is just west of Egypt) who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.”*

The word, Hellenists is used here to describe Greek speaking Gentiles. Originally it said they, the gospel went north, but only to Jews. But then some men came from Cyprus and Cyrene who were starting to share the gospel with anybody who would listen, including the Gentiles. And what happened.

Verse 21. *“And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.”*

This is cool. The gospel is going out. It's getting preached. People are getting saved. People are coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And it's great and it is causing a growing church.

Verse 22. In fact it grew so much that a, *“...report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, (it says) and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.”*

And obviously, they need some leadership up there. That's what they're thinking. A lot of people are getting saved. In other words, they've got a lot of evangelists out there sharing the gospel. And evangelists are great, we need them in the body of Christ. If you have a gift of evangelism, we need you in the body of Christ, but we can't just leave it to the evangelists because evangelists aren't teachers, right? And so evangelists...

Think of evangelists as people who love to run into a burning house and save people and just pull them out. And they're still smoking by the time they come out, but they're just like, yeah, they got them safe. But that's where really the work of the evangelist begins and ends.

Now there needs to be something more. And so Barnabas gets sent up to Antioch and he realizes there is an explosion of growth going on here. And so I want you to notice what it says in the next couple of verses.

Verse 23 and 24, it says, *“When he came and saw the grace of God, (meaning the growth of the church) he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,<sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.”*

What's Barnabas going to do about all this growth? He realizes people are getting saved right and left. Well, this is where he acts in verse 25. *“So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ...”* And you'll remember that Tarsus is where Saul/Paul was originally from.

*“<sup>26</sup> and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. (and look at this) For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”*

This is great, isn't it? What do we got going on here? We have an incredible time of growth and how cool would it have been to live in Antioch at that time?



And just, the church is growing wildly and Paul and Barnabas are the main teachers. And what are they doing? They're teaching because when people get saved, that's wonderful, but you can't just leave them there at the place of their salvation, they need to be taught.

And so they begin to teach them the Word of God so that they might grow and mature in their faith. And then we're told that this is the place where the believers were first called Christians. And whenever you add -ian- at the end of a particular word or name, that means, literally, belonging to the party of. And so Christ-ians are those who belong to the party of Christ. All right. It just is a simple way of referring to them as followers of Jesus Christ.

The chapter ends by explaining then how the Lord warned the early church about a future time of difficulty. Verse 27 says, *“Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.”* And again, the reason it says they came down is because Jerusalem is higher in elevation. And so they had to walk down to go to Antioch doesn't mean that they were going south.

Anyway you have believers here. It says some prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. These are believers who have a spiritual gift of a prophetic utterance, specifically a word of wisdom or a word of knowledge.

You guys might remember, if you studied through first Corinthians, chapter 12, Paul outlines the spiritual gifts given to the church. And among the utterance gifts are the word of knowledge, and the word of wisdom. The word of knowledge means the ability to know something without having any prior knowledge or prior understanding of something. In other words, it's a supernatural impartation of knowledge. I know something, I either know something is going to happen, or I know something about you or something like that.

A word of wisdom is a directive that comes through supernatural means. Okay. In other words, the Lord would say to you. You need to go to this place and talk to so and so in other words, it's giving a specific directive. That's a word of wisdom. All right? We're going to see what is going on here.

It says in verse 28, *“And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit (in other words, through the Holy Spirit) that there would be a great famine over all the world (and then Luke tells us parenthetically that) (this took place in the days of Claudius).”* Meaning that during the reign of Claudius Caesar, that this famine actually took place in the area.

Now, what are we talking about here? This is a word of knowledge. In other words, Agabus was given the knowledge of knowing that something was going to come to pass in the future. And so he stood up, it tells us in the assembly of believers, and he simply spoke this word given to him through the Holy Spirit.

The Lord says, there's going to be a famine in the land, and also forth. And by the way, we know essentially when that famine took place, because we know that Claudius Caesar reigned from approximately 41 to 54 A.D., so that's when it happened.

Here's the reason this whole thing is being told. Look at verse 29. *“So the disciples (and remember, these are mostly Gentiles up in Antioch, okay) determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.”* Who of course is later going to be known as Paul.

What are they doing? They're basically putting together a relief package because apparently some of the famine was more severe in the area of Judea and surrounding Jerusalem. So the believers in Antioch, which again are mostly Gentiles, after hearing this word from the Lord made the decision, you know what we need to send a care package down to the believers there in Judea. So they're going to send it and give it to the elders in Jerusalem, but they're sending it by the hand of Barnabas and I'll just call him Paul, since we're going to be dealing with that name here very soon.

I want you to get the gist of really what's going on here, because for the Jews in Jerusalem to receive a care package from the Gentiles is an incredible act of the Lord. These are people who just a short time ago, the Jews didn't believe could even be saved. And not only are they now saved, they are proving their salvation. They are walking out the beauty of what it means now to simply be the family of God. Regardless of racial, and cultural divisions, because racial and cultural divisions are, well, good grief. There still a big deal today. And they were a big deal back then.

And yet, what do we see here in the early body of Christ? We see those cultural divisions being wiped away, literally erased. Why? Because Jew and Gentile are now together in the family of God. This is a pretty powerful passage. I mean, it speaks powerfully, I think, even to what we go through today or what we hear about today.

I don't know how much racism and prejudice and stuff affects you or your life, or how much you deal with it on a regular basis at all. But, the world that we all

live in, they recognize, I mean, they don't have their head in the sand from the standpoint of understanding that racism exists. They just don't have a clue what to do about it.

They know there's hatred. They know that there is prejudice. They know that there is all the negative things that go along with racism. But what they think is that the way to deal with racism is to highlight it. And we're going to create days and observances where we're going to highlight certain races and cultures. And we're going to talk about celebrating racial diversity.

But what they don't realize is that all that focus only brings all of our differences into sharper. Focus the more the world focuses on the different races, the worse it becomes you guys. Why do you think racism is still unchecked? We've never, in our culture today, we've never been more sensitive about racism. Never. In fact, in days past, racism was just like, yeah, right. I'm superior and you're inferior. Live with it. Deal with it.

Well, now that's obviously, nobody goes around saying that unless they want to, you know, get beat up or something like that. We're just, we're very sensitive about racism, but we haven't solved it. In fact, I believe we've made it worse. I really do. I think when we focus or when we fixate on a person's skin color or cultural background or any of those other things, we highlight those differences and we make it worse. If we really want to celebrate, we should celebrate what we have in common, what I believe we have in common. Now, this is my personal opinion. You can disagree with me if you want. I think there's one race, the human race, and that's the only one I care about. And you know what? That's the only one God cares about. He doesn't give a rip about what color your skin is or where you've come from or what language you speak or anything.

He doesn't care. God doesn't care. The Bible says it straight out, man looks at the inside or the outside. God looks at the heart. It's man who fixates on the outside. And what does that get us? More racism when we fixate on all the externals. We got to start getting to the point where there are, there's no such thing as a black man and a white man. There's just men and women. Right? It's like, who cares?

Let's here's what's interesting. Here's how does God deal with racism? We see it here in this passage. He brings people to the cross. That's God's solution for racism. It's the cross. You know why? The cross is the great equalizer. When you really get into the gospel, when you understand the gospel, you understand that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, right?

There's no one who stands above another. When you come to the cross, we are shoulder to shoulder at that point, and there's no greater, there's no inferior, there's just people who need to be forgiven, amen. And the cross reminds us that all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Irregardless of where you're from and what particular shade of brown you happen to be. What a dumb thing to fixate over when we talk about skin color and all these other things, how ridiculous. One day we're going to stand before the throne of God, and we're going to know just how stupid that really was.

But for now, we Christians have the ability to look beyond the stupidity, and to look at the cross, and to say, this is it. This is how we come together. This is how we become brothers and sisters. This is how we become family. It's through the cross. It's through the cross.

I know that our team that's right now in Kenya, they're experiencing a vastly different culture than the one they live in. And the people there look quite different than the people they hobnob with on a day to day basis. But I trust that every single one of our team is going to come back and they're going to say, oh, I met my brothers and my sisters in Jesus there. I met my family there. I went to Kenya. I went to another land and I met my family. They were waiting for me. And we had the cross in common. It is just so beautiful.

Back in Paul's day, there were really only two groups that the Bible ever designated, and they were just Jew and Gentile, as we've already been saying. And, Paul wrote about this coming together and the doing away with these cultural racial barriers. I want to show you this from Ephesians. We're going to end with a couple of passages. First from Ephesians 2, Paul writes this. He says, remember, and he's talking to Gentiles here. Okay. He's writing to Gentiles. He says,

**Ephesians 2:11-14 (ESV)**

*...remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...*

*...remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, (that is you were) called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, (the Jews) which is made in the flesh by hands— (I want you to) remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and (guys, you were) strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...*

See, again, we think of all of the racial barriers that stand in between people today. Again, in Paul's day, it was just Jew and Gentile. That was the racial barrier. And what has Jesus done? He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. How? Through His flesh, by dying on the cross for all of us together. And for those who receive Him, they come to a saving knowledge. And it even gets deeper than this, you guys. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, here's what he said. I want you to really get this through your heart. He said,

**Galatians 3:28 (ESV)**

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, (in fact) there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

You see all the distinctions, all the barriers, all the limitations, all of the things that this world fixates over, in Christ, you're just a child of God. That's it. And we're all family. And I'm not greater than you and you're not greater than me. We're just family and that's it. That's all. That's what He has made us. And I'm so glad that He has made us family. Aren't you? And we can just push away the racial ridiculousness of the world and just go, you know what? I am just so glad that in the body of Christ, we're just believers. We're just children of God. And so let's start acting like it, amen.

Let's stand together. We'll close in prayer.

If you need some prayer this morning for whatever's going on in your life, we'd be happy to pray with you.

Father, we thank You so much for the love that You have poured out through Jesus Christ. And the fact Lord God, that you You've taken care of the problem of the racial divide by bringing us all to the cross that we might know what true

family is. It has nothing to do with skin color, cultural backgrounds, or language that is spoken.

Our connection is Jesus, the cross of Christ, and I thank You so much for that.

And Lord, I just pray that we would act like the family of God, that we would love one another deeply from the heart. That we would put aside all worldly prejudice and feeling and just focus on Jesus and the cross.

And we thank You so much for loving us, even though we don't deserve it. For saving us, even though we could not be saved by ourselves by being good.

You saved us, Lord. You saved us through Your mercy, and we thank You for it.

We open our hearts to You in the name of Jesus, our Savior and King, and all God's people said together, amen.

God bless you.

Have a good rest of your Sunday.