Evidence God is Working

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Preacher: James Ross

[0:00] Now at this point we're going to hear a Bible reading.! Katrina is going to come and read the first section of Acts chapter 11 for us.

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.
So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.
Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story. 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. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds.
[1:22] Then I heard a voice telling me, Get up, Peter. Kill and eat. I replied, Surely not, Lord. Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.

The voice spoke from heaven a second time. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.
This happened three times and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.
Right then, three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. 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. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter.
He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.
[2:36] Then I remembered what the Lord had said. John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?
When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, So then even to the Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.
Amen. Abel's once again to Acts chapter 11. We're going to pick up the reading at verse 19. So that's on page 1105 if you're using a church Bible.
And in this chapter, we're going to see evidence that God is working. Acts 11 verse 19. Now, those who'd been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.
[3:49] 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. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.
He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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. So the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

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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.
[4:54] The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Amen. This is God's words. Question. When was the last time you paused in order to wonder? Maybe, if you happened to be outside any time yesterday, maybe that's what made you stop to pause, to wonder, to see the power of a storm, perhaps.
We were up in Fort Rose up north last week. We took a walk in the nighttime. We were on a particular path, and there was a moment where there was no streetlights, and we looked up, and there's this wonderful carpet of stars.
A great moment to pause and to wonder. It may be something huge and dramatic. It may be a peacefully sleeping baby. It may be the change that we see in our own life or someone else's.
[6:04] But when God puts His wonderful works on display and we see them, it's good to stop, to wonder, and to worship.

And I want to suggest that that's Luke's goal for us. In Acts chapter 11, he wants to show us that God is working, and He is doing wonderful things.
He's bringing the Gentiles into the story of salvation. We're discovering that the rescuing love of God through Jesus, it spreads all around the globe.
And He shows us that so that we might worship. He takes us back to the Cornelius story. We were in it a couple of weeks ago. This vital moment in the mission of Jesus.
And it becomes crystal clear, as Peter gives us a recap, that this is God working by His grace and for His glory.
[7:05] It's a great chapter. It's a chapter, actually, that can help us to answer some questions that you may be asking or some questions you may have asked. Sometimes it's asked in history.

Well, what explains the growth of Christianity within the Roman Empire? The initial signs don't seem very promising. You have Jesus, and He is crucified, and that seems humiliating.
There is this small group of 12 ragtag disciples. And they face a lot of opposition and persecution.
And yet, within 200 to 300 years, it spreads and dominates the empire.
And today, there are hundreds of millions of people who proclaim that Jesus is Lord. The deepest, most foundational explanation to all of that? God is working.
But it helps to answer the question at the personal level as well. When perhaps we're asked, well, what difference does Jesus make to your life anyway? What difference does it make to a group of people to have Jesus as their Lord?
[8:12] Acts 11 gives an amazingly positive answer. Because we begin to see there is in the gospel, the good news of Jesus, the power to begin the ending of prejudice.

We have, with the reality of the risen Jesus, the courage to go on mission to spread His good news. And we see this wonderful capacity, when people love Jesus, to love one another across difference, and to share good gifts.
So, Jesus is building His church. The global kingdom is crossing barriers. A multicultural family of God is being born. And we have an opportunity to stand back and to worship our God.
So, let's see three things. Three evidences that God is working. First of all, the ending of prejudice.
And this takes us back to the Cornelius story. We looked at it in detail a couple of weeks ago.
But here, back in the first four verses of chapter 11, we see what's happening. So, we're told that these Gentiles, so non-Jewish people, have received God's Word.
[9:25] They have been saved by Jesus. The gospel has crossed the great dividing line, the great barrier, in that day. And we might expect celebration to break out.

But instead, what does Peter meet? When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him. You know, today, this would be Peter coming back and discovering this firestorm of protest, that Twitter is blowing up.
Peter is being threatened with being canceled, because he's gone to eat with people from another culture. Peter is being threatened with people from another culture. The people of God had always been marked out by food laws and by circumcision.
And they were told to avoid others who didn't share that, that they were considered unclean. And so, we see that this, over time, had become a prejudice that had blurred people's vision to the reality that God always wanted His kingdom to be global.

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And so, we have these Christians who cannot celebrate the fact that God's Word has come to another people group. And they're suspicious of Peter because they think he's broken the rules. [10:41] And so, it's really important for Peter to tell the story in order to show this is God's work, this is God's plan. And so, Luke takes the time to repeat the Cornelius story so we do not miss how big and important this is, that Jesus has come to be a Savior, not just for some people, but for all people.

So, again, just to very briefly kind of see it in verses 5 to 10, he tells them of that vision from God that Peter had. There was the blanket that came, the sheet that came down.
There was clean meat, there was unclean meat. Peter is told to take some. He says, no, I've never eaten anything that's unclean. And God says three times, do not call anything impure that God has made clean.
I want us to think about that sheet with the mixed meats being a bit like the church. That by God's design, the church is going to be made up of all different kinds of people.
And that mix-up, that's all part of God's plan, and it's good news because it shows the power of God's grace. Well, after the vision comes the direction from God.
[11:53] Look at verses 11 to 14. You find God has directed these servants of Cornelius to arrive at Peter's house, and then the Spirit speaks to Peter, telling him to go with the men to visit Cornelius.

And notice verse 14. We get some new information, important information. Sent to Joppa for Simon who's called Peter.
That's what Cornelius is told. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved. So Cornelius needs to hear this message about Jesus so that he might be saved.
Last time we met Cornelius, we discovered he's very religious, he's very devout, he's doing the right things, he's worshiping God. But that's not enough. It's not enough for us to be religious people.
It's not enough for us to attend church services. It's not enough for us to read our Bibles. We need to personally know Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We need to personally turn away from sin to place our trust in him.
[13:02] And that's what Cornelius does as he hears the message. Verse 15 and 16. We discover the action from God.

That after Peter begins to speak, what do we hear in verse 15? The Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. And Peter reminds those listening, this is just as the Lord Jesus promised.
This is God's plan of salvation working. And so Peter's conclusion is very direct. So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?
They believed the same gospel, the same good news, because they're believing in the same Jesus as Lord. And now they've received exactly the same gift, because God's Holy Spirit has come on them.
And so Peter is left with two options, isn't he? He can either oppose God, or he can worship God and participate. And that's what he does. And when they hear this, verse 18, no more objections.
[14:15] Instead, they praise God, saying, So then even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life. This is when criticism stops and praise begins, because it becomes blatantly obvious that God has been working.

And so hearts are being softened. And isn't this something that we need in our world today? Don't we see and hear so much of the dark stain of prejudice?
Whether we hear about the undercover reports of the views of politicians, or whether we're watching on our screens violent protests against migrants, whether we see, hear, or experience racism, or sectarianism, where we recognize a growing intolerance of people with different views and backgrounds, we recognize we need something better.
And that something better is the power of the gospel. And what we see in Acts chapter 11 is that God's grace works. God's grace has the power to make very different people one in Christ Jesus.
That those other identity markers that we might have, that we might place on ourselves, or we might place on others, they are not as important as belonging to Jesus.

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[15:40] It's what enables a diverse church family to be established. No barriers to accepting others in Jesus.

So this week I read of Palestinian Christians and Messianic Jewish Christians praying together. And they issued a statement affirming their unity in Christ Jesus, even as they were wrestling with deep political and social differences.
That's evidence that God is working. I read this week that in Nigeria, there are Christian church members who have led people belonging to Boko Haram, the fundamentalist group, leading them to Christ.
Having the courage to open their homes and their churches to former persecutors. That's God's grace at work in people's hearts.
[16:46] And that's what we see in Acts 11, God working to soften hearts to make enemies friends. And it's so important at the local level too. We have a vision here in our church to be a multicultural church.

We want this church to be as diverse as the city in which we live. We want anyone to be able to come in here and to feel at home, to feel a welcome in Jesus' name.
And for that to happen, we need God to work in our hearts all the time. We need our identity always to be built on Jesus first. That's how I think about myself.
I am saved. I am a new creation. I have a new family. We need to let that define how we see ourselves and how we see one another. And we need to ask for that grace to make us ready to cross our own boundaries and barriers.
Maybe that's age and stage. Maybe that's getting to know people from another country. Maybe it's mixing with people from different status, different education backgrounds, because we want to show in a real way the love of Jesus to one another.
[17:53] So there's the first evidence that we have. God is working to end prejudice and to promote peace in and through the gospel. And when we see it, we praise God for it.

And we pray to participate in that. Second evidence that God is working, verses 19 to 21, the spreading of good news.
Let me read verse 19 into verse 20. Now, those who've been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.
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. So again, this week, so I use an app on my phone called Prayer Mate.
If you want help to pray regularly, I find that a really helpful one. And I get daily prayer feeds from different mission organizations. So again, this week, there was prayer requests from Iraq and Pakistan, places where believers are losing their jobs and losing freedoms because they are publicly following Christ.
[19:03] But you know what their prayer was? Help us to keep going. Help us to keep serving Jesus. In Saudi Arabia, teenagers becoming Christians are facing hostility from their own family members.

And do you know what they're praying? Lord God, give us strength to be salt and light, even when our families oppose us. So humbling.
These aren't super Christians. They're ordinary Christians wanting to live for Jesus and talking about Jesus in really difficult circumstances. It's exactly the same context as Acts 11, isn't it?
Why were these people on the move? They were scattered because they were being persecuted because they're trusting in Jesus. But as they go, what are they doing in verse 20?
They're speaking about Jesus. So on the one hand, you could look at them and say, well, these guys are, they're refugees. But in another sense, in a very real sense, they're acting as missionaries because wherever they're going, they're taking Jesus with them.
[20:12] And so the mission of Jesus is going on because the focus of their life is not their external circumstances. It must be the joy that they have of knowing Jesus and that sense of privilege that they had of making Him known.

It's amazing to see in verse 20, you know, Luke highlights that some of them, they cross barriers of culture. They go to the Greeks to tell them the good news.

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And then in verse 21, we see God's response. How does God feel about that? Verse 21, the Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.
God is absolutely for this. He's behind this and He's pleased to act in power to save many. You know, if the gospel is a feast, there is room for many at the table.
And so the invitation is, come and join the feast. What was their message? Well, they were sharing the good news about the Lord Jesus. Maybe they followed Peter's example that we read in chapter 10, reminding us about Jesus being announced as good news of great joy for all people, announcing to the world that the one who would save from sin, He has come, that Jesus is none other than God with us.
[21:39] Maybe they were telling people that Jesus was anointed as God's true King who had come to set up His kingdom, that to look at Jesus, we discover what God is like, that Jesus goes around doing good because Jesus truly is good.

Think about His healings. Think about the welcomes that He offered. Think about the forgiveness that He extended. And Jesus too came to defeat the powers of evil and darkness.
And ultimately, that would take Him to the cross. They would absolutely have told them that Jesus was crucified and then He rose again. That Jesus went to the cross to take on Himself the curse that should fall on us because we have rebelled against God.
We have turned our backs on God. And we deserve condemnation. Jesus in love took that for us. Jesus on the cross goes into spiritual battle on our behalf.
He goes to defeat sin and death and the devil. And the resurrection shows that He won that great and decisive victory. And now Jesus, having won that victory, having returned to heaven, He rules as King.
[23:04] And He will return one day. And as Peter reminded his listeners, He will come one day as our judge. Inviting the question, what have we done with Jesus?

Am I trusting in Jesus as Lord? And when Jesus comes back, He will unite heaven and earth in the new creation, establishing a perfect world and a perfect kingdom that lasts forever.
In Jesus. Jesus who is our peace. Jesus who brings God's forgiveness. Jesus who brings God's salvation.
And so they went with that good news saying, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. Whoever you are, wherever you're from. It's good to stop and pause and reflect.
Who's this group of ordinary Christians and they're hated because they love Jesus. But they won't stop talking about Him. And God honors them in that.
[24:12] And God is honored as He brings salvation to many people. And isn't this a message that we need to hear to remember that God loves to save people?

And that's why He sent Jesus. Because sometimes it can be easy to give up. Don't we need to be reminded that God loves to save all kinds of people?
Because sometimes we can easily place limits. We might imagine that some people are beyond God's help. And don't we remember that, don't we need to remember that God loves to use ordinary Christians in their ordinary witness for Jesus to bring Him glory?
Because sometimes we might feel like our lives are not that big, not that significant. We might feel somewhat weak or useless. But God is pleased for His own glory to use people like us.
Came across an interesting statistic this week. There was a survey done, I think it was four years ago. And they were polling, I think it was 16,000 Christians.
[25:24] And all of those, of those who'd become Christians in their adult years. So not those who had sort of grown up in Christian homes and become Christians when they were kids.

For people who became Christians as adults, 33% became Christians principally because of the influence of a friend or a family member.
Somebody who invited them to read the Bible. Who answered their questions. Who took an interest. Shared Jesus with them. Took them to church.
Think about that. Ordinary people going about their business, talking about Jesus. God uses it. Some of us, that's our story.
And again, if that's you, if you can think, I am so thankful for that family member or that friend who took the time to answer my questions and to share Jesus. Give thanks to God. And maybe take some time to give thanks to them as well.

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[26:32] And then on the flip side, for those of us who are here who are Christians, let's ask ourselves and let's ask God to guide us. Who can you and I be that kind of friend to?

To make room for people and their questions and to pray for the courage to introduce Jesus into our conversations for the sake of people's eternal welfare.
To do that, I think we need to discover or to recover some of what we see in the book of Acts. We need that gospel confidence that Peter had and these first Christians had.
That the good news about Jesus, it's true. He really did die and he really did rise and he really does save from sin and he really does give eternal life. Are we convinced of that?
Are we convinced that the good news is powerful? That the gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to all who believe? Do we recognize that the good news is for all people and that all people need to know Jesus?
[27:42] We need gospel confidence and we need gospel courage. We need to be made bold, not by our own boldness, but we need to be made bold by God's grace to be captivated by Jesus so that we're ready to live differently in our classrooms, in our workplaces, in our homes.

that we be ready to give the reasons for the hope that we have, to be ready to say this is true and you do need Jesus. Let's pray for one another this week in that regard and while we pray for ourselves here, let's remember to pray for the persecuted church and for their ongoing witness.
Last piece of evidence that God is working and it's here in verse 22 onwards, it's in the sharing of good gifts. So when we see generosity within this new family of God when different resources are shared to meet needs.
So we're introduced in verses 22 to the end to two gifts that come from two different places, two different resources, but one God is working. Let's think first of all about the gift that comes from Jerusalem to Antioch.
Look at verse 22. Who is the gift? News of this reached the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas new church needs.
[29:09] They need Saul who's called the apostle to the Gentiles. And so in verse 25, he sends for Saul. And so Saul and Barnabas for a year are in this church and they're teaching these new Christians all about Jesus, that he came from God.

They would have taught about his life of love and obedience. They would have taught about his death and its significance as the sacrifice, Jesus as substitute who takes the penalty that we might be forgiven.
They would have spoken of the glory of his resurrection, of the gift of the Spirit, of his return to heaven, that Jesus is Lord. The rest of the city is saying Caesar is Lord.
The Christians are saying Jesus is Lord. And it makes a huge impact. The people in the city are taking notice. Did you see that at the end of verse 26, that little sentence? The disciples were called Christians first to Antioch.
The city gives the church a new name. Christian means loyal to Christ. They could see this group of people were living differently.
[30:19] Different way of life, different loyalty, so they give them a new name. So Jerusalem gave spiritual blessing through Barnabas to Antioch. But what about the second gift?

Going in the reverse direction. That's what we read about in 27 to 30. So we meet a prophet called Agabus. And he predicts a severe famine.
And this famine actually happened 46 to 48 AD. The Nile flooded back. It's something we see in our own days. So imagine that the Nile flooded really badly, the Nile Delta.
So their crops fail. And when such a large crop fails, what does that do? It puts the prices up. And it also means resources are scarce.
And in those shortages, famine came. But the wonderful response in preparation is that the family of God here in Antioch, these Gentile Christians, the disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea, freely and generously, giving of their resources.
[31:34] They'd never met these Christians back in Judea. Previously, they'd been regarded as unclean enemies of the people in Judea. But God is working.

And hearts are being changed. They've received spiritual blessings. And one way that they're responding is by giving material gifts back. And we're getting a little insight into the beauty of gospel partnership.

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Hearts are being opened. Homes are being opened. Wallets are being opened. God's grace is bridging the gap. And there's this eager desire to be a blessing to others near and far.
And so, Luke, in the book of Acts, he gives us this chapter so that we might pause and we might wonder and we might worship.
As he shines the spotlight on the mission of Jesus, which is going to the ends of the earth, showing us the grace of God, the free, unmerited, loving kindness of God that flows far and wide in the good news of the Lord Jesus.
[32:48] He's showing us something about the transformation in the people of God. Here are Jews and Gentiles and they're drawn first to faith in Jesus. Now they're drawn together and they're acting and living like loving family.

And Luke shows us the work of God so that God gets the glory for what happens in Cornelius' family and God gets the glory for what happens in the city of Antioch and God gets the glory as church members are giving generously.
So as we close, two things that we can do in response, at least two. One, simply that we would join in praising God.
In this week ahead, let's look together for evidence that God is working. That that would lead us to worship Him. And secondly, let's join in His mission.
Let's trust in Jesus. Let's trust in His good news so that we might help others to get to know Him too. Let's pray together.
[34:01] God, our Father, we thank You that in our busy lives, You give us times to stop and worship. And thank You that You've given us Acts chapter 11 so that we might stop and reflect on Your work in people's lives, in households and in cities, ending prejudices and showing people courageously sharing the good news and people lovingly, generously giving gifts to one another.

And Lord, that You are honoured in all of that and it helps in the mission of Jesus. Lord, we pray that You would impress these truths upon our own hearts and help us to be on the lookout for where You are working and also where You would have us to be involved in Your work.
Help us to love Jesus. Help us to be assured that the gospel is true and that it's good news for us and for everyone.
Help us to be dependent on You, to be led by Your Spirit, to be dependent in prayer and give us chances, we ask, to be involved in Your mission in this coming week.
For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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