

AM Acts 11:1-30

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[0:00] I'd like us to read from the Holy Bible, from the book of Acts, chapter 11.

When I was here about three weeks ago, we looked at Acts, chapter 10, which recounts the conversion of Cornelius and his household.

And Cornelius, the first Gentile, that's the first non-Jew that we read of, coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

So chapter 11 is very much following on from chapter 10. So we're going to read the whole chapter. Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

[1:26] But Peter began and explained it to them in order. 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. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air.

And I heard a voice saying to me, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But I said, By no means, Lord, for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.

But the voice answered a second time from heaven, What God has made clean, do not call common.

This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment, three men arrived at the house in which we were sent to me from Caesarea.

[2:38] 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.

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. He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved.

You and all your household. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John, baptize with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

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?

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.

[3:54] Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.

[5:07] For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. Now in these days, prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

And one of them, named Agabus, stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world. This took place in the days of Claudius.

So the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

May God bless to us that reading from his word. Let's join together again in prayer. I'd like us to turn back to Acts chapter 11, on page 1108 of the Church Bible.

And if you want a title for this morning's sermon, we could call it Broken Walls and Open Doors.

One of the great themes of the book of Acts is how Jesus Christ and his good news breaks down the walls that divide different groups from each other.

[6 : 36] Of course, the greatest wall to be broken is the wall between human beings and God. The wall that is there because of our sin, our rebellion against God.

And that wall is torn down by the work of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. And so often in the messages, in the preaching and acts, they proclaim the forgiveness of sins that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

So that is the greatest wall of all. The wall of our sin is broken down by Jesus Christ. But also, and kind of as an extension of that, the walls that are there between different humans, different human communities and nations, is also broken down by Jesus Christ, by his gospel.

In the first century, one of the great divides, the great walls, was between Jew and Gentile. And in this chapter, and also in the previous chapter, we see that wall being demolished, being broken down, almost as if it's brick by brick, the wall being taken down.

In fact, this isn't quite the end of it, because in chapter 15, we will return to this issue. But chapter 11 really continues very much on the theme of the breaking down of that wall between Jew and Gentile.

[8 : 13] But then that also leads to open doors, opportunities to spread the good news of the Lord Jesus to all kinds of people, no matter what their background is.

And so as we look at the chapter, this chapter 11, there's really two parts. The first part is verses 1 to 18, which is really the continuation from three weeks ago, which is more wall demolition, the breaking down of the wall.

And the second part in verses 19 to 30 is about an open door in Antioch. So in verses 1 to 18, we have a summary of events that took place in the previous chapter, chapter 10.

And it's presented as a report given by Peter. In fact, that kind of indicates the importance of this event. I think there's two particular events in Acts that are repeated three times.

One is the conversion of Saul, of Tarsus, or where Saul meets the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. And that's recounted in chapter 9, and then again in Paul's own words in chapters 22 and 26.

[9 : 34] And the conversion of Cornelius and his household is also recounted three times. So the event, as it actually happens in chapter 10, and then here in chapter 11, Peter's recounting of those events, and again he does the same in chapter 15.

So the context is set in verses 1 to 3. The apostles and the believers throughout Judea hear what has happened, that the Gentiles have received the word of God.

So Peter goes to Jerusalem, which is the sort of, that was the center, the headquarters, if you like, of the church, still at that time.

And we read that the circumcised party, that the circumcised believers, criticize him for going and eating with those who are uncircumcised.

Now, there's two possibilities here. One is that, and this is, I suppose, the kind of shade that comes out in our translation, that this was a particular party, a particular group within the church who were called the circumcision party.

[10 : 47] Maybe almost like a sort of a campaign group who were very, very keen on applying the law of Moses. And they're the circumcision party.

Maybe people from Pharisee backgrounds. Or the other possibility, it's just basically the whole church. Because the whole church at this time are circumcised.

Or at least their males are. They are Jewish. And so it could be just, basically this is the whole church that is criticizing Peter for eating with those who are uncircumcised.

And chapter 10, which this is kind of in the aftermath of, it recounts really two conversions, as we saw three weeks ago.

There's the conversion of Cornelius and his household, which is a conversion to faith in Jesus Christ. But also there's a conversion of Peter and his six companions on that occasion, who were Jews.

[11:48] And the conversion in them is not to faith in Christ. They're already believers in Christ. But it's to an understanding of God's purposes, that God's purposes include, not just those who are Jews, those who are circumcised, but the Gentiles, the nations, people from all nations.

And that is a radical change for Peter and his Jewish companions. Last time we looked at how there were these food laws in the Torah, in the early part of the Old Testament, the books that we associate with Moses.

And these food laws had been given by God. They had been given to the Israelites. And they were, I suppose, symbolic of the Israelites' separation and distinction from the other nations.

And I suppose just even having to eat a particular diet made it more difficult to mix with people from other nations who didn't have those dietary requirements.

But what Peter and now the whole church in Jerusalem have to learn, have to learn is that that was only a temporary measure.

[13:01] It was not meant, it was never meant to be permanent. It's like a child needs greater supervision and restriction than a young adult.

So a child of three, it's appropriate for an adult to say, you know, hold my hand while we cross the road. When the child is 16 or 17, that's not usually necessary anymore.

And that's kind of like what these greater restrictions were in the Old Testament. It was while the people of God, the church of God, was in its infancy.

John Calvin uses that illustration a lot. That while it was in its infancy in the Old Testament, greater restriction was necessary. But with the coming of Christ, with the coming of the kingdom of God, those, the church has reached a level of maturity where those things are no longer necessary.

And this is part of the process that is unfolding in the book of Acts. Now I think Peter and the rest of the Jewish church at that time, they had heard Jesus talk about, you know, preaching the gospel to all nations, making disciples of all nations.

[14:15] But what I think they assumed was that the nations would become Jewish. Their males would be circumcised. They would become Jews. And as Jews, they would follow Jesus.

And Peter's conversion is realizing, and now of course it's the whole church that has to go through this process, is that God's purpose is not for the world, the nations, to become Jewish and then follow Jesus.

It's that God accepts the nations as they are in Christ. Now this issue is not fully resolved until the council of Jerusalem which takes place in chapter 15.

So that's a bit later than this. But here in verses 4 to 15, Peter recounts what happened in chapter 10.

So he recounts the divine activity, how he himself had this vision of the sheep with loads of different animals in it being let down and being told to get up and kill and eat.

[15:24] And then the Holy Spirit speaking to him, telling him to go with the visitors who had come from Cornelius' house. He also recounts how the angel had spoken to Cornelius to tell him to send for Peter.

And then culminating with the Holy Spirit coming down on all these Gentiles, the household of Cornelius, just in the same way that he had come down on us Jews at the beginning.

That's speaking of referring to Pentecost, which we read about in Acts chapter 2. So in verses 16 and 17, Peter speaks of his own conclusion.

He says that he remembers, I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. That's Acts chapter 1 verse 5 where Jesus says that to the disciples.

And then in verse 17, Peter reasons, if then God gave the same gift to them, that's to these Gentiles, these non-Jews, as he gave to us Jews when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

[16:41] So, in other words, God's giving these Gentiles, these non-Jews, the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's God demonstrating as clearly as possible that he accepts them as they are, as Gentiles, without having to become Jews, and that he accepts them on an equal level with the Jews because the exact same gift that the Jewish disciples had at Pentecost has now been given to these

Gentiles in the household of Cornelius.

And therefore, to refuse to eat with them or to refuse to accept them on an equal level as fellow disciples of Christ, fellow members of God's people, would be to stand in God's way, it would be to oppose God.

Well, in verse 18, happily, the Jewish believers, including, if it's a separate party, even the circumcision party, they accept this and they rejoice.

They glorify God, saying, then to the Gentiles also, God has granted repentance that leads to life. So then we come to the second half of the chapter to verses 19 to 30, which is an open door in Antioch.

And it really kind of picks up something that was, where we left off back in chapter 8. In chapter 8, verse 1, you can turn back to that.

[18:16] So chapter 6 and 7 deals with the martyrdom of Stephen, who was the first martyr of the church. And at the beginning of chapter 8, we read that there arose on that day, that's the day of Stephen's martyrdom, a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. So, the believers in Jerusalem, they're scattered, across Judea and Samaria.

And here we read that they were scattered actually even further than that. That they were scattered as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.

And if you're like me, you like to see where these places are on a map. So I've got a map of this, which I'm not sure if you'll be able to see from where you're sitting.

But that's, can you see that at the back? If that's, I could come a bit nearer. So that's the eastern part of the Mediterranean. So it's this sort of area that we're looking at and then that's a bit closer up.

[19:29] So Jerusalem is down here. So that's Samaria. Judea's sort of around Jerusalem and Samaria's a bit further north. So that's the initial place where people were scattered.

But then some are scattered further north to Phoenicia. So that's in modern day Lebanon. And then also to Cyprus, this island here. And to Antioch, which is in Syria today, up here.

And Antioch was a huge city. It was the third city of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. So believers are scattered there and those who are scattered speak the word to no one except Jews.

So they spread the good news but only to fellow Jews. And of course at this time there were Jews living all over the place. So every city, every place they would go, they would find other Jews.

And they spread the word. They share the gospel with them. And their sort of attitude in doing that, in only restricting their evangelism to fellow Jews, it's basically, it's the same attitude that we found in Jerusalem.

[20:48] That they believe that God only accepts those who are Jews, who are circumcised and part of the Jewish faith. Perhaps also they had the outlook, well, you know, these Gentiles, they've got no background, they don't know the scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, they don't know about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and David and the Psalms and all of that, they just have, they're completely ignorant of that.

How can we share with them about Christ? And maybe we today also have, we think of maybe certain groups of people or even just certain individuals and we just think, oh, there's absolutely no way that they would ever become a Christian.

There's no way they would become, that they could come to faith in Christ. And we just can't imagine it. And yet, we will see that people do, from Gentile backgrounds, come to faith.

And we shouldn't think of any, whether it's a group of people or any individual, and think, oh, those people, there's just no way they could become a Christian. There's no way they could become a follower of Christ.

Because the Holy Spirit is the one who does that work. And the Holy Spirit can change any life, any community, any family, any society. Well, we read in verse 20 that some kind of break out of that.

[22:13] It says, but there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists, also, that's the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus.

So these are people who are, the Hellenists are Greeks, or at least Greek-speaking people, who are Gentiles. So Cyprus is the island of Cyprus.

Cyrene is in modern-day Tunisia in North Africa. So these were people who had come from those places, come to Jerusalem and Judea, maybe settled there, but then had been scattered by the persecution.

And perhaps because they had come originally from the non-Jewish world, they were more accustomed to, they understood Gentiles better and were more accustomed to relating to them. But they speak to Greeks also, the good news of the Lord Jesus. And we may wonder, well, had they heard of the conversion of Cornelius and his household, what we've been looking at? [23 : 22] And possibly not, because they were scattered after the martyrdom of Stephen, they'd left Judea, they'd left the area.

So they may not even have heard of Cornelius' conversion and then the acceptance of the Jerusalem church of that. So they go and it's as if there's almost something sort of uncontrollable about this news that they have, this news about the Lord, Jesus.

Jesus. And so they share it with their Gentile neighbours. This barrier, this wall between Jew and Gentile is again broken down.

These people ignore the barrier and they share the good news anyway with the Greeks. It's as if the gospel for them, it's uncontrollable.

It's like the image Jesus uses of new wine bursting out of old wineskins. Christians, they can't keep in this news that they have of the Lord Jesus.

[24 : 27] And I think what's also really interesting about this is that these were ordinary disciples. They're not apostles, they're not preachers, we don't even know the names of these people, it just says some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene who tell the Greeks the good news about the Lord Jesus.

And that's really important because spreading the gospel, spreading the good news, is not just something for professionals, it's not just something for preachers and evangelists, but it's a job for every believer.

And if you are a believer in Christ, God has placed you in a unique situation. The people that you know, the people maybe in your family, in your neighbourhood, at your workplace, in the classroom, that this is a unique place that God has placed you in.

And it's as if you are God's ambassador. Christ's ambassador in that particular situation. And we should seek and pray for opportunities to share about the Lord Jesus.

Now, of course, we have to do that in a way that is sensitive, a way that is appropriate. And, you know, we have to pray for that and pray also for the wisdom to take those opportunities when they come.

[25 : 47] But we should pray for opportunities to share our faith with the people that God has placed us among. It may be that you are the only person who is a believer that those people know.

So the good news is to be shared. It's like if, you know, you have good news in your life. If you pass an exam or if a baby is born, you know, you want to tell people.

It's just the natural thing to do. And this is the best news of all. The news that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is the saviour of the world. It is the best news in the world.

And we should desire to share that with others. But then it's not just a matter of, you know, of them and what they do. Because in verse 21 we read that the hand of the Lord was with them.

And a great number who believed turned to the Lord. So the Lord is active through their speaking and the Lord uses their words, their witness, to bring people to faith in himself, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 00] Again, going back to the beginning of Acts chapter 1, verse 1, Luke talks about his first book, the Gospel of Luke, being about what Jesus began to do and to teach until he was taken up to heaven.

Implying that this second book, Acts, is all about what Jesus continued to do after he was taken up to heaven. And the Lord Jesus continues to work through his people, through these ordinary believers.

And of course that is true today too, that as we seek to go in his name to live out our faith and to share our faith with others, then the Lord Jesus works through that.

And our prayer is that the hand of the Lord would be on us too. Well then, in verses 22 to 24, the report reaches the church in Jerusalem and they send Barnabas to Antioch.

And Barnabas has appeared before in Acts at the end of chapter 4. He's a Levite from Cyprus who sells property and brings the proceeds to the apostles for distribution among the poor and needy. [28:16] And Barnabas comes and he encourages everyone or exhorts them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

Reminds us that discipleship is not just about beginning, it's not just about an experience, an initial experience, but it's a lifelong journey of following the Lord Jesus Christ that requires perseverance. And Barnabas exhorts them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose with all their hearts, with wholehearted commitment and love for the Lord.

And then we read of Barnabas' own character in verse 24. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. So Barnabas' encouragement to the people is not in word only, but by the example of his life.

They could see Barnabas, they could see the integrity of his life, how he was good, how he was filled with the Spirit and with faith. And through his ministry also people are added to the church, added to the Lord.

[29:34] And so a large crowd comes to faith in Christ, a large group of people, through Barnabas. Well then in verses 25 and 26, Barnabas goes to Tarsus to look for Saul and to bring him back to Antioch to help in the great work that was going on there of preaching and teaching the word of God.

And they spend a whole year meeting together and teaching large crowds of people. And I think here we also just get an insight into the character of Barnabas.

Barnabas has a great ministry going on in Antioch. He's teaching, he's preaching, he's building up believers and people are being added to the church.

The church is growing. And Barnabas could have had the attitude, well this is great, you know under my leadership this church is really going places, it's growing, it's vibrant, and he could have been tempted to sort of build up his own reputation, his own empire in that.

But he doesn't. He knows that Saul has gifts that maybe Barnabas himself lacks, maybe gifts in terms of teaching, preaching, as a thinker who can apply the gospel to the Gentile world.

[30:58] And so he goes to Tarsus to seek out Paul and to bring him back. And very much what happens, what develops in the ensuing chapters is that Barnabas, from a human point of view, looks like he's playing second fiddle to Saul, while Saul is the main preacher and speaker.

And Barnabas, he doesn't care about that, because it's not about Barnabas, it's not about him, it's about the Lord Jesus and his fame. And that is such an attractive model for us, that our concern should not be for ourselves, it's not about us, it's about the Lord and his glory, his fame, the spread of his word.

And then also we see God's sovereign control in this. This church in Antioch was started as a result of believers being scattered from Jerusalem because of the persecution that broke out after Stephen's martyrdom.

who was the main persecutor? Who was the chief persecutor? Well it was Saul of Tarsus. And now just the irony and the humour of God, Saul is there teaching and building up this church in Antioch. Well then we're told that, this is in verse 26, that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. And the word Christian, obviously from the word Christ, meaning Christ followers.

[32:31] Seems to be in a name that was given by other people, by outsiders. And the word Christian only appears three times in the New Testament and it always seems to be what others call the disciples.

Up to now they've been labelled as disciples, believers, those who belong to the way, the saints, brothers and sisters. But of course the term Christian has stuck down to the present age.

And I think part of the need for this was because in the ancient world you had different ethnic groups. You would have Greeks, you would have people from Egypt, from Rome, and each ethnic group had their own gods that they would worship.

And of course included in that there were the Jews and they had their own god, the one god that they worshipped. But religion was kind of ethnic. It was the gods you worship or the god you worship was tied to the particular ethnic group that you were in.

But here was this new phenomenon. Here was this group who were not just one ethnicity, they were from different ethnicities and yet they met together and they worshipped one god.

[33:50] they worshipped the lord Jesus Christ. And so a new term was needed for them. Well then just finally and briefly verses 27 to 30 we read of prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

One of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world. And this took place in the days of Claudius. This was actually in AD 45 there was flooding in Egypt and Egypt was the bread basket of the Roman Empire.

It supplied the empire with much of its grain. And in that year because of the destruction of crops it meant that grain prices just rocketed in the following couple of years.

AD 46 and 47 and so that meant that there was a great deal of hardship. Jerusalem Judea was probably a poorer area of the empire than Antioch was and so people were really suffering there. And so the church in its generosity decides to send aid to the church in Jerusalem and in Judea and they send it by the hands of Barnabas and Paul.

[35:14] And this kind of emphasizes I suppose just the fellowship of Christ's people. So the church in Antioch which is a mixture of Jews and Gentiles they had come into existence initially by Jewish believers sharing their faith and so Gentiles came to faith in Christ.

The Jews had shared the good news of Jesus. But now this church in Antioch it responds by sharing their material resources with the believers in Judea.

And we see this fellowship this brotherhood spanning the geography and ethnic and cultural divisions because now they are brought together in Christ.

So just in closing just to ask for ourselves how does the gospel affect us? Does it move us to love, to fellowship, to generosity, seeking to share with other believers of all backgrounds both near and far?

And is it a love that also moves to embrace the outsider and seeks their blessing and their supreme blessing of coming to know the Lord Jesus?

[36:34] Well may God bless his word to us. Let's conclude with a second