



The Church Expands to Antioch but Experiences Persecution in Jerusalem Acts 11 - 12

Introduction

Two events paved the way for the gospel to spread to the Gentile world. The first was the persecution following Stephen's martyrdom, causing the believers to scatter far and wide (Acts 8:1). The second was Peter's vision and subsequent visit to Cornelius where the Pentecost experience was extended to the believing Gentiles. However, it is important to note that the Jewish believers had not separated from Judaism. They continued to meet in the synagogues and adhere to the Jewish ceremonial laws and this made it very difficult for them to accept the Gentiles into the church. In fact, there had been no preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles prior to this time.

But now, by the grace of God and to His glory, the Gentiles were accepted by the Jerusalem church and the disciples preached the gospel to Gentiles for the first time in the notorious city of Antioch. The church in Antioch grew quickly, supported enthusiastically by the Jerusalem church, and the believers at Antioch graciously returned support when their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem suffered a time of need.

As will be seen in future chapters of Acts, the Antioch church will continue to grow and prosper, but the Jerusalem church will decline in prominence as the gospel spreads to the Gentile world.

Outline of Acts 11 - 12

- I. Inclusion of the Gentiles - Acts 11:1-18
- II. Preaching to the Gentiles - Acts 11:19-26
- III. Generosity of the Gentile Believers - Acts 11:27-30 and 12:25
- IV. Persecution of the Apostles - Acts 12:1-24

I. Inclusion of the Gentiles - Acts 11:1-18

The news of the Gentiles responding to the gospel reached Jerusalem before Peter.

A. Complaint against Peter - Acts 11:1-3

When Peter arrived in Jerusalem, he was immediately criticized by the Jewish believers (*those of the circumcision*), not for preaching to the uncircumcised Gentiles, but for eating with them. Peter had set aside the Jewish ceremonial law to associate and eat with the Gentiles, shocking Jews who were steeped in their traditions and rituals.

B. Peter's explanation - Acts 11:4-17

Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning.

1. A retelling of Cornelius' conversion - 11:4-15

Peter simply told them what had happened: about his vision of the sheet containing the unclean animals and the voice commanding him to *kill and eat* (11:5-7). He told of his refusal and the answer, *What God has cleansed, you must not call common*. He impressed upon them that the vision had been repeated three times (11:8-10). He told about the Holy Spirit instructing him to make the trip to Cornelius' house where he learned that Cornelius had been told by an angel to send for him to receive words of salvation (11:11-14). He explained that as he began to preach, the Holy Spirit had come upon Cornelius and his household in the same way it had come upon them at Pentecost.

2. An appeal to the word of the Lord - 11:16-17

Besides connecting the Gentiles' reception of the Holy Spirit with Pentecost, Peter also connected it with Jesus' words recorded in Acts 1:5, *You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit*. The Jewish believers had been baptized with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2). The Samaritan believers had been baptized with the Holy Spirit in Samaria (Acts 8). Now the Gentiles had also been baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10). Since God had given them the same gift He had given to the Jewish and Samaritan believers, Peter could not refuse to accept it. He rested his case on what God had done rather than defending his own actions.

C. Glory given to God - Acts 11:18

Peter's explanation convinced the Jewish believers that the conversion of the Gentiles was real and that it was from God. They could not contradict what he had said, so they gave glory to God who had *granted to the Gentiles repentance to life*. God had shown His grace and mercy to the Gentiles by turning them away from sin which leads to death and giving them eternal life with Himself.

II. Preaching to the Gentiles - Acts 11:19-26

The encounter with Cornelius' household marks the first time believers took the initiative to preach the gospel to Gentiles!

A. Scattered believers continue to preach - Acts 11:19-21

As a result of Stephen's martyrdom, the believers had scattered from Jerusalem and the gospel had gone out to Samaria (8:4-5). Now that scattering had even more far reaching effects as the gospel spread to Gentile lands; north along the Phoenician seaboard, west to the Island of Cyprus, and then further north to Antioch in Syria. Although these areas were predominantly Gentile, there were large Jewish communities and that is where the gospel was preached. The scattered believers did not yet understand that the Gentiles were to be fellow-heirs of the grace of God.

1. Preaching to Gentiles in Antioch - 11:19-20

Antioch in Syria was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria). It was a beautiful commercial city and center of Greek culture situated on the Orontes River, about 15 miles from the sea. It was also a *vile city with gross immorality and ritual prostitution as part of the pagan temple worship*" (The Bible Knowledge Commentary, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Ed.). Some of the scattered believers who arrived in Antioch were Hellenists from Cyprus and Cyrene, and being Greek-speaking Jews, they more easily associated with the Gentiles of the city and even preached the gospel to them.

NOTE: The New King James and some other versions of the Bible say that they preached to the Hellenists, but it is more properly understood that they preached to the Greeks, the Gentiles.

The message they preached was *the Lord Jesus*. They did not preach Jesus as Christ (Messiah) because this would have been meaningless to Gentiles. Instead they preached Jesus as Savior and Lord. As Savior, they called the Gentiles to replace their allegiance to the lords of the Greek pagan cults with allegiance to Jesus as Lord of their lives.

2. A great number believed - 11:21

The *hand of the Lord* was at work. The disciples did the preaching, *but God gave the increase* (1 Corinthians 3:6). The Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

B. Barnabas in Antioch - 11:22-24

The Jerusalem church received the news that the gospel had been received by the Gentiles in Antioch. They sent Barnabas to validate what had taken place and to supervise the establishment of a church, much like Peter and John had done in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17). Barnabas was a good choice because he was from

Cyprus (4:36), as were those who had shared the gospel in Antioch. He had also previously demonstrated his generosity in encouraging and helping others (4:36-37 and 9:26-28). Luke records here that he was a *good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*. In Acts 14:14, Barnabas is also referred to as an apostle.

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he saw *the grace of God* and was filled with joy at what God had done. Then the *son of Encouragement* (4:36) lived up to his name by encouraging all the new believers to remain firm in their new faith. The result was that even more people put their faith in the Lord Jesus.

C. Barnabas takes Saul to Antioch - Acts 11:25-26

Barnabas sought out Saul to tell him about the door of opportunity which had opened at Antioch. He talked Saul into going to Antioch to minister with him. They worked there together for a year, teaching *a great many people* in the church. It was in Antioch, during this time, that the disciples were first called by the name *Christian*. The *ian* ending on a word means *follower of* or *belonging to the party of*. The new name recognized the believers as followers of Christ. The designation of this name showed that the believers were now recognized as a distinct group, totally separate from Judaism.

III. Generosity of the Gentile Believers - Acts 11:27-30 and 12:25

And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. The prophets may have been sent to Antioch by the Jerusalem church, or they may have left Jerusalem due to persecution by Herod (Acts 12).

The word *prophet* in the Greek, is made up of two words, one meaning *to speak* and the other meaning *in front of* or *in behalf of*. Prophets are men gifted by the Holy Spirit to speak forth God's word to His people. *Prophesying of the New Testament prophets was both a preaching of the divine counsels of grace already accomplished and the foretelling of the future purposes of God* (Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, W. E. Vine).

A. Prophecy of famine - Acts 11:27-28

One of the prophets, Agabus, was inspired by the Holy Spirit to predict a *great famine* which would be *throughout all the world*, meaning that it would be widespread. Both Jewish and Roman historians record a series of severe famines which occurred in various parts of the Roman Empire during the reign of Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54). One such famine occurred in Judea between A.D. 44 and 48.

B. Relief to Jerusalem - Acts 11:29-30

The Christians at Antioch gathered a collection to send to the church in Jerusalem and each gave according to his ability. The money was sent with Barnabas and Saul to the elders (referring either to church officers responsible for the organization of the church or mature men) of the Jerusalem church. This is the first mention of elders in the church.

C. Return of Barnabas and Saul to Antioch - Acts 12:25

Luke records the completion of Barnabas' and Saul's mission after his account of Herod's persecutions at the end of chapter 12. On returning to Antioch, they took John Mark, Barnabas' cousin (Colossians 4:10), with them.

IV. Persecution of the Apostles - Acts 12:1-24

Since Saul's conversion, Luke has not reported persecution by the Jewish religious rulers in Jerusalem. However, persecution now arises from the governing authority, King Herod.

A. Herod harasses the church - Acts 12:1-4

The Herod referred to here is Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great who had been king at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod Agrippa had been raised in Rome and was accustomed to an extravagant style of living. He had returned to Palestine when the Roman emperor appointed him king of Judea and Samaria. Later Galilee and Perea were also added to his jurisdiction and he ruled until his death (12:23) in A. D. 44. Herod was part Jewish and ascribed to the Mosaic law and therefore popular with the Jews. He also went out of his way to court their favor.

The acceptance of the Gentiles into the church had undoubtedly caused the anger of the Sadducees and Pharisees to be rekindled against the apostles. (Remember Acts 5:33 where *they were furious and took counsel to kill them.*) Hoping to please the Jews, Herod *stretched out his hand to harass* (more literally to torment or oppress) *some from the church.*

1. James' martyrdom - 12:1-2

Herod had the apostle James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee (Matthew 20:20-23), put to death by the sword. James was the first apostle to be martyred. Matthew Henry, in his Commentary, notes here that, *The first preachers of the gospel were so well assured of the truth of it that they sealed it with their blood.*

2. Peter's imprisonment - 12:3-4

Herod saw that killing James had pleased the Jewish

people, so he decided to establish his popularity by arresting Peter. Previously, the religious authorities had not dared to openly punish the apostles because the people held them in such high esteem. Even the unconverted Jews had accepted the Christians. But now they did not. Perhaps this also had something to do with the acceptance of the Gentiles into the church.

a. The arrest - 12:3-4

Peter was arrested and put in prison under guard of four squads of soldiers. A squad of soldiers was four men, meaning that Peter had sixteen soldiers assigned to guard him. They probably rotated shifts with four soldiers guarding Peter at one time, two chained to him and two at the prison door (as in 12:6). Peter would not be allowed to escape as he and all the apostles had previously done (5:17-20).

b. The delay - 12:3-4

Peter's arrest took place during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, also referred to here as Passover. The two feasts together commemorated the night that God took the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. The Passover was always celebrated on the fourteenth day of the first month of the year, followed by the seven Days of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:1-20). This was one of the three annual feasts of the Jews when men were required to go up to the temple at Jerusalem (Exodus 23:14-17), so that many devout and zealous Jews would be there. However, the days of the feast were not appropriate for an execution, so Herod had Peter held in prison until after the celebration. That would be an opportune time to bring Peter out for trial and pronounce his death sentence before the crowds of people.

B. Peter freed from prison - 12:5-19

This was Peter's second escape from prison and the second time an angel had come to help.

1. Prayer by the church - 12:5

While Peter was in prison, the church was constantly and earnestly praying for him, unaware their prayers were being answered.

2. Peter awakened by an angel - 12:6-8

On the night before his trial, Peter slept, chained between two guards with two more at the prison door. An angel of the Lord appeared and suddenly the darkness of the prison cell was filled with light. The angel struck Peter on the side, lifted him from the ground, and told him to get up quickly. The chains which shackled him to the soldiers fell off his hands. Peter obeyed the angel's instructions to put on his sandals and his outer garment.

3. Peter's confusion - 12:9-10

As he followed the angel, Peter, probably still half-asleep, could not believe that what was happening was real. He thought it must be a dream because it was just too good to be true! He continued to follow the angel past the first and second guard posts and through an iron gate which opened for them to pass through to the street and freedom. Then the angel left Peter.

4. Peter comes to himself - 12:11

Out on the streets of Jerusalem, Peter realized that the strange and surprising events that had happened were real. God had sent His angel and the opposition had been overcome. Herod and the Jewish people would surely be disappointed in their expectation of the public spectacle planned for the next day. The main attraction would not be there and the show could not go on.

5. Peter proclaims his escape - 12:12-17

Peter went directly to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where he apparently knew the disciples would be gathered praying for him. He knocked on the door which led from the street to the courtyard of the house and a girl named Rhoda went to answer. When she heard Peter's voice, she was so excited that she forgot to let him in and ran to tell the others that Peter was outside. They didn't believe her! They thought she had only heard his personal guardian angel. (See Matthew 18:10 and Hebrews 1:14 for doctrine concerning angels.)

Peter continued to knock until they finally opened the door. How astonished they were to see him! They had just been praying for Peter but they could not believe that God had actually answered their prayers.

Peter explained the miracle of how the Lord had brought him out of prison. He then asked them to pass the news on to James, Jesus' half brother, who was head of the church at Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19) and to the rest of the church there. The answer to prayer should be shared so all could praise God together.

Peter then left town. He would not take the chance of being arrested again.

6. Fate of Peter's guards - 12:18-19

The soldiers were in confusion as to what had happened to Peter. By order of Herod, they searched for him but could not find him. According to Roman law, the guards were responsible for the life of their prisoner and if the prisoner escaped, the guards received his punishment. Those who had guarded Peter were put to death.

7. Herod's departure - 12:19

Herod left town in shame, going to Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea. He had wanted to make a show of Peter before the Jews and now his pride was defeated.

C. Herod Judged - Acts 12:20-23

We're not told the reason for Herod's anger against the people of Tyre and Sidon, but they were anxious to make amends because they depended upon Galilee, which was under Herod's jurisdiction, for their food supply. They had probably bribed Blastus to set up a meeting for them with the king.

Herod was arrayed in all his pomp and glory as he received the representatives from Tyre and Sidon. The Jewish historian, Josephus, writes that Herod's robe was made entirely of silver and that it shone and glittered brightly in the sunlight. Herod spoke to the people and they shouted over and over again, *The voice of a god and not a man!* Herod reveled in their flattery. Foolish people value others by their outward appearance, and even more foolish people value themselves by the opinions of those who judge them by outward appearances. In his foolish and sinful pride, Herod allowed himself to be set up as a god rather than giving glory to God and God judged him. Luke writes that an angel of the Lord struck him, that he was eaten by worms, and died. Josephus records that after his oration, Herod was struck with a violent pain in his stomach and carried to the palace where he suffered for five days and then died. *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall* (Proverbs 16:18).

D. Church prospers - 12:24

In spite of the persecution, the church continued to grow and multiply.

Applications

1. One of Herod's problems was that he was a man-pleaser and not a God-pleaser. Are you more interested in pleasing and impressing other people or God?

2. When others praise you, do you remember to whom the glory belongs and let it be known?

3. When God answers your prayers, do you always remember to thank Him and give Him the glory? Do you share answers to prayer with others?

4. As the church continued to grow in spite of difficulties, do you continue to grow in spite of difficulties in your life? How can you make adversity in your life help you grow nearer to God?