



The Church Experiences Both Expansion and Persecution 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. It is important to note that the Jewish believers had not separated from Judaism. They continued to meet in the synagogues and adhere to 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.

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

The Antioch church continued to grow and prosper, but the Jerusalem church declined in prominence as the gospel spread to the Gentile world.

Outline of Acts 11 - 12

- I. Explanation to the Jerusalem Church - Acts 11:1-18
- II. Preaching in Antioch - 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. Explanation to the Jerusalem Church - Acts 11:1-18

The news of the Gentiles responding to the gospel reached Jerusalem ahead of 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 his actions in order, and from the beginning.

1. Retelling 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*" (Acts 11:5-7). He told of his refusal and the response, "*What God has cleansed, you must not call common.*" He stressed that the vision had been repeated three times (Acts 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 directed by an angel to send for him to receive words of salvation (Acts 11:11-14). He explained that as he began to preach, the Holy Spirit had come upon Cornelius and his household just as had occurred at Pentecost.

2. 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 the Gentiles 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 Peter 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 in Antioch - Acts 11:19-26

The encounter with Cornelius' household marks the first time a believer in Christ took the initiative to preach the gospel to Gentiles! It was just the beginning.

A. Scattered Believers Continue to Preach - Acts 11:19-21

As a result of Stephen's martyrdom, the believers had scattered from Jerusalem, taking the gospel message to Samaria (Acts 8:4-5). Now the 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 further north to Antioch in Syria. Although these areas were predominantly Gentile, there were also large Jewish communities and that is where the gospel was initially preached. The Jewish 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, it was about fifteen 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 since they were Greek-speaking, 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, meaning 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. They preached Jesus as Savior and Lord. 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 God was at work. The disciples did the preaching and God gave the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6). The Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

B. Barnabas in Antioch - 11:22-24

When the Jerusalem church received news that the gospel had been received by the Gentiles in Antioch, Barnabas was sent 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 (Acts 4:36), as were those who had shared the

gospel in Antioch. He had also previously demonstrated his generosity by encouraging and helping others (Acts 4:36-37 and 9:26-28). Luke records 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. The *son of Encouragement* (Acts 4:36) lived up to his name by encouraging all the new believers to remain firm in their new faith. This resulted in even more people putting their faith in the Lord Jesus.

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

Barnabas traveled to Tarsus to tell Saul about the opportunity God had opened in Antioch and persuaded Saul to go there with him to minister. They worked in Antioch together for a year, teaching a great many people in the church. It was in Antioch 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, a distinct group, 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. These 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 persons 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...throughout all the world*. Both Jewish and Roman historians record a series of severe famines which occurred in various parts of the Roman Empire during the reign of the 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. 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 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 arose from the governing authority, King Herod.

A. Herod Harasses the Church - Acts 12:1-4

The Herod in this passage is Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great who had ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod 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 (Acts 12:23) in A. D. 44. Herod was part Jewish, he ascribed to the Mosaic law, and was, 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 Saducees 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 of the twelve apostles to be martyred. Matthew Henry, in his Commentary, notes 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 Jews, 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 Acts 12:6). Peter would not be allowed to escape as he and the other apostles had previously done (Acts 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 delivered the Israelites from 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). Many devout and zealous Jews would have been there. However, the days of the feast were not appropriate for an execution, so Herod planned to have 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 came to help him.

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 even as they interceded.

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. It was just too amazing to be true! He continued to follow the angel past the first and second guard posts and through an iron gate that 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 the strange and surprising events that had transpired 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. He apparently knew the disciples would be gathered there to pray 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 she forgot to let him in but 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 the door was finally opened. How astonished the disciples were to see him! They had just been praying for Peter but they could not believe God had actually answered their prayers so quickly.

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 deflated.

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 him for their food supply. They probably bribed Blastus to set up a meeting 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. 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 was 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

The church continued to grow in spite of persecution.

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? Pearl Hamilton, the founder of Disciplers Bible Studies, was a gifted Bible teacher. Whenever she was complimented or applauded, she always smiled quietly and pointed upward, indicating to whom the praise should go.
3. When God answers your prayers, do you always remember to thank Him and give Him the glory? Do you joyfully share answers to prayer with others?
4. Just as the early church continued to grow in spite of difficulties, do you continue to grow in spite of difficulties in your life? How is adversity in your life helping you draw nearer to God?