

### The Church Experiences Both Expansion and Persecution Acts 11 - 12

#### Introduction

In studying the book of Acts, we have seen two main causes that spread the gospel to the Gentile world. The first was the persecution after Stephen was martyred. It caused the believers to scatter far and wide (Acts 8:1). The second was Peter's vision and visit to Cornelius. There, the believing Gentiles experienced what the believing Jews had experienced on Pentecost. Remember, though, that the Jewish believers had not separated from Judaism. They still met in the synagogues and kept the Jewish **ceremonial** laws. This made it very difficult for them to accept the Gentiles into the church.

#### 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 the ears of the believers in Jerusalem even before Peter returned. Once he arrived, he was **criticized** by the Jewish believers. They were not upset that Peter had preached to the Gentiles. Instead, they disapproved of Peter having eaten with the Gentiles. Peter had chosen to ignore the Jewish ceremonial law which did not allow Jews to associate and eat with the Gentiles. The Jews were shocked by Peter's actions because they were in the habit of keeping their traditions and rituals. You may think this sounds strange and unreasonable. But, you have rituals that you would have a hard time changing too. Every morning you wake up and brush your teeth. (I hope!) If there was a new invention that sealed teeth and made it unnecessary to brush daily...some people would find it hard to change a habit that they

had done every day for as long as they could remember. Likewise, the Jews had a hard time accepting change to what they had known all of their lives.

Peter understood the Jews and how they felt. He explained his actions and told the events in order. He wanted to show them how God had helped him to change his own way of thinking.

He began with his vision of the sheet that had the unclean animals and the voice commanding him to *kill and eat* (Acts 11:5-7). He told how he had refused and the answer, *What God has cleansed, you must not call common*. He emphasized that the vision had been repeated three times (Acts 11:8-10) and that the Holy Spirit had instructed him to go to Cornelius' house. Once there, he learned that an angel had told Cornelius to send for him and receive words of salvation (Acts 11:11-14). Peter said that as he began to preach, the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his household just as it had at Pentecost. Since God had given the Gentiles the same gift (the Holy Spirit) that He had given to the Jewish and Samaritan believers, Peter said he could not ignore the facts.

Peter's explanation convinced the Jewish believers that the Gentile's conversion was real and from God. 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 believers had scattered from Jerusalem after Stephen was martyred. That is how the gospel message reached Samaria (Acts 8:4-5). As the gospel spread into Gentile lands, believers would be scattered even farther.

There were Jewish communities in the Gentile nations and the gospel was preached there first.

The message they preached was that Jesus is *the Lord*. They did not preach Jesus as the Christ (which means Messiah) because that would not have had any meaning to Gentiles. They did not know about the Old Testament prophecies that God would send a messiah to be King. Instead, believers preached to the Gentiles that Jesus was and is the Savior and Lord. Gentiles were told to repent from their allegiance to the **pagan** cults and turn to Jesus as the Lord of their lives.

When the Jerusalem church heard that the gospel had been received by the Gentiles in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to verify that the news they had heard was true. He was also sent to supervise the start up of their church. Remember, Peter and John had done this with the new church in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17).

Barnabas went to Antioch and was *glad and encouraged* all the new believers. He then travelled to Tarsus to tell Saul about Antioch. Saul agreed to go back to Antioch with him. They worked there together for a year and spent their time teaching many people in the church. The believers were first called Christians in Antioch. The “ian” ending after the word Christ means “follower of” or “belonging to the party of.” So Christian means a follower of Christ. Those who believed in Judaism but also believed in Christ could now be called Christians. This title would explain how they were different from followers of Judasim that did not believe in Christ.

### 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). Prophets are men gifted by the Holy Spirit to speak forth God’s word to His people.

The prophet Agabus predicted a *great famine.... throughout all the world*. Today there are records from Jewish and Roman historians telling of many famines in different parts of the Roman Empire during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54). One famine happened in Judea between A.D. 44 and 48.

The Christians from Antioch took a collection to send to the Jerusalem church. The money was sent with Barnabas and Saul to the elders of the Jerusalem church.

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

Ever since Saul’s conversion, Luke has not reported persecution by the Jewish religious rulers in Jerusalem. However, persecution now rose up from King Herod.

King Herod Agrippa the First was the grandson of Herod the Great who was king when Jesus was born. He was raised in Rome and liked a luxurious lifestyle. He returned to Palestine when the Roman emperor made him king of Judea and Samaria. Later, Galilee and Perea were added to his kingdom and he ruled until his death (Acts 12:23) in A. D. 44. Herod was part Jewish and kept the Mosaic law which made him popular with the Jews. He also went out of his way win their favor.

The acceptance of Gentiles into the church surely made the Saducees and Pharisees angry with the apostles again. (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.*

Herod had the apostle James put to death by the sword. [James was the brother of John and son of Zebedee (Matthew 20:20-23)]. James was the first apostle to be martyred.

When Herod saw that killing James pleased the Jewish people, he decided to arrest Peter and put him in prison under guard of four squads of soldiers. A squad of soldiers was four men,

so Peter had sixteen soldiers guarding him. They probably rotated shifts with four soldiers guarding Peter at one time. Two were chained to him and two were at the prison door (as in Acts 12:6). Peter would not be able to escape as he had done before (Acts 5:17-20).

Peter was arrested during Passover. This was one of the three annual feasts when Jewish men were required to go up to the temple at Jerusalem (Exodus 23:14-17). Many devout and zealous Jews would be there. However, it was not appropriate to hold an execution during these days, so Peter was held in prison until after the celebration. Herod planned to bring Peter out for a trial and give his death sentence before the crowds of people returned to their homes.

While Peter was in prison, the church was praying constantly for him. 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 chains fell off his hands and he followed the angel through to the street. Then the angel left Peter.

Peter went directly to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where the disciples were gathered 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 that she forgot to let him in and ran to tell the others that Peter was outside. They didn't believe her!

Peter continued to knock until they finally opened the door. How surprised they were to see him! They had just been praying for Peter, but they could not believe that God had actually answered their prayers. When you pray, do you pray with belief that God will answer you?

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 prayers should be shared so that all can praise God together. Peter then left town. He would not take the chance of being arrested again.

Herod left town in shame. He went to Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea. He didn't get to make a show of Peter's death, and now his pride was deflated.

God had a different plan for Herod. Two countries which Herod was upset with were anxious to get back on his good side. Their food supply depended on it. They set up a meeting with the king. Herod was dressed up in all his glory. He spoke to the people and they shouted over and over again, *The voice of a god and not a man!* Herod enjoyed their worship and saw God's judgment. Luke writes that an angel of the Lord struck Herod, he was eaten by worms, and he died. †

### Prayer

Ask God to strengthen your faith to believe that He will answer your prayers according to His will.

### Memory Verse

Acts 10:42 *When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."*

### Vocabulary

**ceremonial** - keeping the system of rules and procedures set by a religion

**criticized** - disapprove; find fault with someone or something

**pagan** - of false gods

**commentary** - notes or comments of explanation or interpretation

**QUESTIONS FOR ACTS LESSON 10**

All questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

**DAY ONE: Review last week's lesson and notes.**

1. Write down something you learned from:  
Barnabas in Antioch

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Peter's escape from prison

\_\_\_\_\_

Herod

\_\_\_\_\_

**DAY TWO: Read Acts 13:1-12.**

2. a. Name the first missionaries.

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b. If you have a map in the back of your Bible, trace the missionary's route.

3. a. Where did the missionaries go to preach to the people?

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b. From Romans 1:16 and 10:1, why would they have chosen this place to preach?

4. a. Who did the missionaries meet in Paphos and what do you learn about each of them?

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b. How did the lives of each of these men change after meeting Barnabas and Paul?

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c. What can you learn from this to help you in your own life?

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**DAY THREE: Read Acts 13:13-25.**

5. a. If you have a map, trace the missionaries' continuing journey.

b. Who left and returned to Jerusalem?

c. Where did Paul preach next?

6. a. Acts 13:16-41 is Paul's sermon to those in the synagogue. In verses 17-25, he gives a lesson on Israel's history. Find something in each of the following passages that God had done for the people of Israel.

verse 17

verse 18

verse 19

verse 20

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verses 21-22

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verses 23-24

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verse 26

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b. From your answers in 6. a., what has God also done for you?

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**DAY FOUR: Read Acts 13:27-43.**

7. a. Underline the statements below, from verses 26-29, which were true about the people of Jerusalem and their rulers?

They did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah.      They did not recognize the voices of the prophets.

They found no cause for crucifying Jesus.      They asked Pilate to put Jesus to death.

They fulfilled all the prophecies concerning Jesus.

- b. How did God overrule what the people of Jerusalem had done?
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8. a. From verses 33-37, what important things do you learn about Jesus?
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b. What two blessings came through Jesus (see verses 38 and 39) that could never come through the Law of Moses?

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9. a. What warning did Paul give in closing his sermon?
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b. How did the people respond?

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**DAY FIVE: Read Acts 13:44-52.**

10. a. How many went to hear Paul on the next Sabbath?
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b. How did the Jews respond to Paul's preaching?

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11. Why did Paul and Barnabas say they would now go to the Gentiles? Give three reasons.
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12. a. From verses 48-52, describe the different reactions of the

Gentiles

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Jews

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disciples

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b. Which of these groups of people would you rather be like? Why?

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13. a. What did Barnabas and Paul do as they left Antioch in Pisidia?

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b. From Luke 9: 1-5 and 10:10-11, why might they have done this?

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