

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Nine – Acts 11:19-12:24
Growing Pains

God works in strange ways. At a time when it would seem good for the church to be together, to grow and mature, to enjoy fellowship, they are scattered all over by persecution. What were the results? The spread of the gospel. The greater the opposition the greater the expansion of the church.

There is a tendency in many of our churches today for us to want to “stay together.” Mature. Become more of who we are and ignore the rest of the world. We also see that the principle that “the greater the persecution the greater the expansion” seems to apply today also.

OPEN

- When have you seen painful circumstances in your life produce good results?

STUDY

- *Read Acts 11:19-30.* Luke ended his previous section with the words “God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (v. 18). It was an epoch-making declaration by the conservative Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church. The inclusion of the Gentiles is to be Luke’s main theme in the rest of Acts.

1. What good resulted from believers’ being scattered by the persecution that was connected with Stephen?

The Gospel was taken to countries that it might not have otherwise made it to. The Gospel was taken to Gentiles in Antioch. A great number believed and turned to the Lord.

Luke now shows how the outward movement of the gospel expanded in two ways, geographical and cultural. Geographically, the mission spread north beyond “Judea and Samaria.” Culturally, the mission spread beyond the Jews to Gentiles. Some speculate that Luke himself was one of these converts.

2. What different efforts were made to nurture the new believers in Antioch?

The scriptures were taught each day so that the believers could grow in faith and understanding. They were exhorted to remain faithful to the Lord.

3. What does it take to remain “true to the Lord” with all your heart (11:23)?

It certainly takes submission to the Holy Spirit, constant immersion in the Word of God, the communion of saints, and prayer.

4. What do these efforts say about the importance of discipling young Christians?

Discipleship of young Christians cannot be championed enough. Without discipleship, new Christians will flounder in their faith, not growing and maturing. They will remain spiritually immature and biblically illiterate.

5. Why do you think Luke makes a point of mentioning the predicted famine (11:27-30)?

Because it was an opportunity for the churches to unite their efforts and send relief to other churches. It’s a model for us today.

Summary: It is not an accident that the Jerusalem recipients of Antiochene relief are called “brothers” (11:29). More important still, this brotherhood or family included both Jewish and Gentile believers, and the fellowship between them was illustrated in the relations between their two churches. The church of Jerusalem had sent Barnabas to Antioch; now the church of Antioch sent Barnabas, with Saul, back to Jerusalem. This famine relief anticipated the collection which Paul was later to organize, in which the affluent Greek churches of Macedonia and Achaia contributed to the needs of the impoverished churches of Judea. Its importance to Paul was that it was a symbol of Gentile-Jewish solidarity in Christ.

6. *Read Acts 12:1-24.* What do we learn about Herod in the first four verses?

He laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James with the sword and arrested Peter. He was utterly opposed to the work of Christ.

7. Try to put yourself in Peter's sandals. What do you think it was like to be led out of jail by an angel?

It must have been a surreal event. Verse 11 says that Peter "came to himself," so I wonder if he was led out in some sort of trance or spiritual vision. However it happened, it would have been amazing to be in jail one minute and free the next minute.

8. How did the Christians who had gathered to pray for Peter (and who knew about James' death) respond when he appeared at the door (12:12-17)?

They didn't believe Rhoda when she told them about Peter being at the door. They thought she was crazy. When they finally saw him, they were amazed.

9. What was the cause of Herod's death (12:21-23)?

An angel of the Lord struck him down, but it was because "he did not give God the glory" (v, 23). Herod raised himself up as a god instead of humbling himself as a servant of the true God.

10. What are the similarities between the cause of his death and those of the death of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-10)?

Both occur as divine punishment. Both occur because humans fail to submit humbly to the Lord but instead try to put themselves *over* God.

11. What does Herod's death tell you about God?

God is passionate about His own glory. He will not stand for idolatry. He will not stand for His *creation* being worshiped instead of the *creator*.

Summary: Indeed, one cannot fail to admire the artistry with which Luke depicts the complete reversal of the church's situation. At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage—arresting and persecuting church leaders; at the end he is himself struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free and the Word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish his own in their place. Tyrants may be permitted for a time to boast and bluster, oppressing the church and hindering the spread of the gospel, but they will not last. In the end, their empire will be broken and their pride abased.

APPLY

- What efforts are you—or could you be—making to nurture young believers?

What have you learned from this passage about how God uses suffering?

Who or what encourages you to remain true to the Lord with all your heart?

PRAY

- Ask the Holy Spirit to use the church of Jesus Christ to grow. Reflect on what it might cost you for that prayer to be answered.

All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.