

Peter had been convinced that Gentiles were welcomed into the community of the redeemed. By bestowing the Spirit upon the Gentiles, God Himself had demonstrated beyond dispute that they had entered into the New Covenant on equal grounds as the Jews.

The inclusion of the Gentiles is Luke's main theme throughout the rest of the book of Acts. In Chapter 13 he will begin to record Paul's missionary journeys to the Gentile world; however, before he does this he tells of the expansion of the church to the north and the persecution of the church by King Herod Agrippa.

11:19 *So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.*

11:20 *But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.*

11:21 *And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.*



Verse 19 takes us back to the stoning of Stephen in Acts 8. Stephen's death resulted in the church being scattered from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. Now, in 11:19, we are told that some of them also made their way to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the Gospel as they went.

Phoenicia is modern Lebanon; it was an area that stretched for about 150 miles north along the coast starting from Mount Carmel. It averaged only about 15 miles wide. Tyre and Sidon were two of its main towns.

Cyprus was an island and the home of Barnabas (4:36). It was the first place evangelized by Barnabas and Paul when they went out together as missionaries (13:4-12).

Antioch, the capital city of the Roman province of Syria, was the most important place for the future development of Luke's narrative. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire with the population estimated at about 500,000.

Cyrene was an important Greek city in Libya, North Africa (it is west of Egypt, south of Greece, and not visible on this map). "Jews from Cyrene were among those present on the day of Pentecost. Their city appears as one of the important points in the wide circle of the Dispersion described by Peter in his

sermon on that occasion (Acts 2:10). Cyrenian Jews were of sufficient importance in those days to have their name associated with a synagogue at Jerusalem (Acts 6:9). And when the persecution arose about Stephen, some of these Jews of Cyrene who had been converted at Jerusalem, were scattered abroad. . .“ (ISBE).

As Stott points out, the 'also' in verse 20 is important; the evangelization of the Jews must not stop, but the evangelization of the Gentiles must begin (Stott, 200). As Paul later wrote in Romans 1:16, the gospel is for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

The spread of the gospel was moving outwardly both geographically and culturally. It was moving further away from Jerusalem, and also reaching out to non-Jews.

11:22 The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.

11:23 Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord;

11:24 for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.

According to verse 21, large numbers of Gentiles were coming to faith. When news of this reached the church in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to Antioch - possibly to assure themselves of the Gentiles salvation, but also to nurture them in their faith. The church in Jerusalem felt a responsibility to not leave these new believers as orphans.

When Barnabas arrived he immediately saw evidence of the grace of God at work in the lives of the new converts. He didn't just see new converts; he saw God's grace. In other words, he saw the undeserved kindness and mercy of God in the lives of people who had become worshippers of Jesus Christ and was glad. He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord in their hearts. "It was an exhortation both to perseverance and to whole – heartedness" (Stott, 204). When people met with Barnabas they would leave gladdened.

He did this for "he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." What Barnabas did flowed out of what he was. The hallmark of someone filled with the Spirit is encouragement. The Holy Spirit is called the "encourager" or "comforter;" He is the parakletos (παράκλητος – Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). Barnabas manifested the Spirit's character; he encouraged (parakaleo - παρακαλέω).

It should also be observed that Luke tells us three times in these few verses that the church had grown in number (vv. 21, 24, 26). God is not indifferent to how many people have experienced His grace. This great number was "added to the Lord" (11:24, NASB "brought to the Lord").

As MacLaren states, "Whatever may be our differences of opinion as to Church order and offices, they need not interfere with our firm grasp of this truth. 'Preaching Christ,' in the sense in which that expression is used in the New Testament, implies no one special method of proclaiming the glad tidings. A word written in a letter to a friend, a sentence dropped in casual conversation, a lesson to a child on a

mother's lap, or any other way by which, to any listeners, the great story of the Cross is told, is as truly-often more truly-preaching Christ as the set discourse which has usurped the name."

11:25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul;

11:26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Barnabas went to Tarsus (eastern Turkey) to look for Saul. Tarsus was Saul's hometown to which the Jews in Jerusalem sent him when his life was threatened (Acts 9:28–30). Barnabas must have known of Saul's calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles (9:15, 27) or perhaps the Gentile conversions reminded him of Saul. Once he found him, they went to Antioch and for a whole year they instructed the church together.

It was in Antioch when followers of Christ were first called Christians. "Christian" simply means someone loyal to Christ (the word follows the pattern of "Herodians" - those who were loyal to Herod). "The followers of Christ called themselves disciples (learners), believers, brethren, saints, those of the Way. The three uses of Christian in the NT are from the heathen standpoint (here), Ac 26:28 (a term of contempt in the mouth of Agrippa), and 1Pe 4:16 (persecution from the Roman government). It is a clear distinction from both Jews and Gentiles and it is not strange that it came into use first here in Antioch when the large Greek church gave occasion for it" (A.T. Robertson, RWP).

11:27 Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

11:28 One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.

11:29 And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.

11:30 And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

It was at this time that some prophets came down from Jerusalem and one predicted a severe famine over the Roman Empire. In response, the believers in Antioch decided to provide help for the Christians living in Judea – evidently providing resources so that they could store up for the upcoming lean times. They all gave according to their ability. There was a mutual care among the body of Christ: Jerusalem sent prophets, Antioch sent offerings to help the poor in Judea. This is a biblical principle: we are to meet the needs of others as we are able. This act of charity no doubt helped the solidarity in Christ between Jews and Gentiles.

This is the first time that elders are mentioned (11:30). They function alongside the apostles.

The word of God is spreading out in concentric circles. Although Luke is leading up to the great missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas, he must first tell about a serious setback in the death of James and the imprisonment of Peter. The story that follows contrasts the destructive power of Herod to the saving power of God.

12:1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them.

12:2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.

12:3 When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread.

12:4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people.

Although it's difficult to understand how the following story fits into the overall flow of Acts, it may be inserted to tell how Peter was forced to leave Jerusalem and hand over the leadership of the Jerusalem church to James, the brother of Jesus.

As Paul and Barnabas were teaching in Antioch, King Herod began to persecute the church. This is Herod Agrippa I. Herod's grandfather was Herod the Great and his uncle was Herod Antipas, who had known and tried Jesus (Lk. 23:7ff.).

Herod was raised as a Roman and was hated by the Jews. By observing the law and persecuting the church he hoped to gain their political favor. First, he had James, the brother of John, beheaded. When he saw this pleased the Jews, he had Peter arrested. Herod could not execute Peter immediately because the Jews were celebrating the Feast of Unleavened Bread which followed directly after Passover. His intent was to bring Peter to a public trial (12:4) and then execute him following the feast.

12:5 So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

12:6 On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.

12:7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands.

12:8 And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."

12:9 And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

12:10 When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

12:11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

The imperfect tenses ("was kept" . . . "prayer . . . was being made") in verse 5 indicate that Peter's imprisonment and the church's prayers must've lasted for several days (Marshall, 221). Luke wants his

readers to see that the release of Peter is connected to the earnest prayers of God's people on his behalf.

James had been put to death and Peter would expect the same, but he was at peace, sleeping, when the angel appeared. It appears that he was so tired that the angel had to arouse him from his sleep, and even then Peter wasn't sure if he was dreaming or not. It wasn't until he was completely free that he realized he had been delivered by the hand of God.

12:12 And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

12:13 When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer.

12:14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate.

12:15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel."

12:16 But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed.

12:17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place.

Peter immediately went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who is also called Mark (who was the cousin of Barnabas – Col. 4:10); this was probably a well-known meeting place for the Jerusalem believers. Although it was the middle of the night, many people had gathered there and were praying. When Peter knocked on the door a servant went to answer it. When she went to find out who it was she heard Peter's voice. Leaving him standing outside she returned and exclaimed that Peter was there.

Ironically, the group that had been praying for Peter's deliverance thought she was out of her mind. When she kept insisting that it was him, they concluded it must be his angel, following the Jewish belief that individuals have guardian angels.

Finally, after hearing Peter's continued knocking, they opened the door to see him standing there. After telling them what had happened, he gave them a single instruction, "tell James (the brother of the Lord, who is ready to be recognized as the leader of the church in Jerusalem- 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9) and the church in Jerusalem what had happened." Then he left.

Perhaps the most important statement of the whole narrative is in verse 17: "the Lord had led him out." The whole story emphasizes this. Peter did nothing to secure his release. He was asleep; the angel had to nudge him to wake him; the chains fell off; he was ordered to get dressed; he passed by the guards, and the prison gate opened automatically. Peter did not know if it was a dream or reality. It was the Lord who had led him out.

12:18 Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.

12:19 When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

On the day that Peter was to be tried and executed there was a great commotion among soldiers for their prisoner was nowhere to be found. Herod searched for him and questioned the guards. He then ordered them to be executed.

12:20 Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country.

12:21 On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them.

12:22 The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"

12:23 And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.

12:24 But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

Although Peter had escaped, Herod himself was still a threat to the church. Therefore, Luke describes Herod's death.

Herod was having problems with the people of Tyre and Sidon, being furious with them, but they were seeking reconciliation with the king. Therefore, Herod dressed in his royal robe to address the people. According to Josephus (the Jewish historian), as the sun reflected off of his silver threaded robe the people began shouting that his voice was the voice of a god and not of a man. Herod basked in their praise and Luke says that an angel of the Lord struck him down. He was eaten by worms and died for taking glory for himself and not glorifying God instead. Josephus records that severe pain arose in his belly and became so violent that they carried him into the palace where he died five days later.

Luke adds one more statement: "But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied."

At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on a rampage to destroy the church; by the end of it he's dead and the word of God keeps spreading.

12:25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.