

# Session #11: Acts Chapters 11 & 12

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In the same way that we heard of St. Paul's conversion experience (Chapter 9) and will hear of it again for a total of three times, we will see the discussion of whether Gentiles need to conform to Jewish rituals as a part of their baptism into the Christian faith a total of three times. We read of St. Peter's vision and conversion of Cornelius in chapter 10. Today we will read of St. Peter being confronted upon his return by the Church for baptizing Gentiles. We will once again explore this controversy/conversation at the Council of Jerusalem in chapter 15.

## **Baptism of the Gentiles Explained 11:1-18**

The Peter and his group returns to Jerusalem but what happened with Cornelius and his household precedes Peter's arrival. The Church in Jerusalem is scandalized. So, Peter must explain to them what happened and how he was led by God to his actions. He then replays the account of his vision. As we listen be aware that this telling differs slightly from his original experience. St. Peter makes the connection (in chapter 11) between his experience in Caesarea with his experience of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. (See verses 15-16) Also, this will be the first time the phrase *baptized in the Holy Spirit* will be used (verse 16) and it comes from the lips of St. Peter.

**11:2 *circumcision party*** This "party" or group are those Christian believers (converts from Judaism) who will stand firm in the need for circumcision for Gentiles when they become Christian. This belief will last long after the Church takes an official stand in Chapter 15. Here they were completely against this action of Peter's. This is a good time to reflect on those today who maintain that the Church, in its wisdom to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the 1960's with the Second Vatican Council, were wrong for not maintaining old practices (such as wanting the Latin Mass back or the bells at the consecration...). While we all have a right to our own spiritual preferences and practices if we believe that the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit then an openness to the conversation should be maintained.

**11:12 *six brothers also went with me*** We learn the number of Christian companions St. Peter had with him on his journey to Joppa.

**11:17 *when we came to believe*** It is interesting to note that St. Peter is basically implying that the Apostles and those gathered, while they believed in Jesus the fullness of belief did not come until the gift of the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. The idea scholars offer to explain this is that the Apostles' discipleship, their faith participation in the life of Christ while Jesus was with them, was not yet fully established and only came to full commitment until Pentecost. (Could offer an interesting reflection on when is the appropriate time to offer the sacrament of Confirmation.)

***the same gift*** The conversation continues. St. Peter appeals to his Jewish companions (the circumcision party) by arguing or pointing out that the gift given to them at

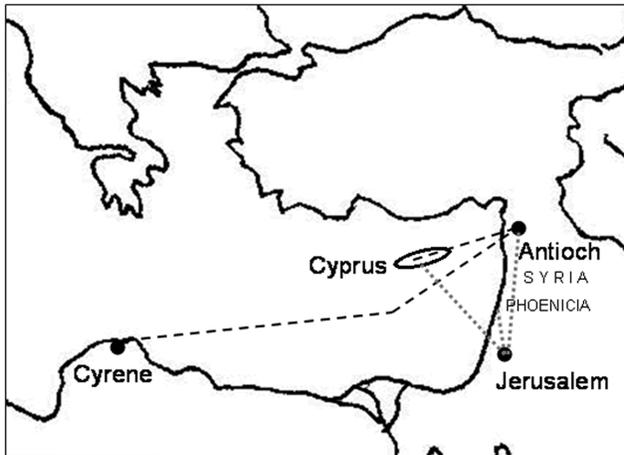
Pentecost, the Spirit of God, was given to the Gentiles of Cornelius' household as well. Who is he (Peter) to deny this confirmation by God. Both groups have received the gift of God into their lives.

**11:18 repentance unto life**

This confrontation ends with all giving glory to God and celebrating the truth that through the sincere desire to reform their lives, to conform their lives to Christ has gained them everlasting life. Scholars offer that this ascent is more than just a personal agreement but could be seen as the official acceptance of Gentiles by this group into the faith community without the expectation of circumcision.

**The Church at Antioch 11:19-26**

What we read next is St. Luke's showing that this decision to accept Gentiles into the faith community was a successful "experiment". Antioch is a community that is both Jewish and Gentile converts who have gathered in Antioch after the persecution (Refer to Acts 8:1-4). Most of the Jewish converts, we can assume, come from Jerusalem and are now settled in their new homes. As the course of their daily life they bring into the fold any and all who are willing to listen and believe.



Notice that we will hear no names which means the evangelizing that is going on is the response of *everyone* in that community

**11:19 traveled as far as Phoenicia... Cyprus...**

**Antioch**

In looking back to chapter eight we have the persecution of the followers of Jesus by Saul and the Sanhedrin of the Temple. In verse 8:1 we read that the believers were scattered about Judea. Three of the primary communities they went to was Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. These cities become the three

cities of primary concentration of Christians. Antioch was the chief city of the Roman empire of Syria and one of the most prominent in the Roman Empire, which means it was a large metropolis.

**11:20 Cyrene**

By looking at the map to the left we can see that Cyrene was a city on the northern shore of Africa and also the home of the Christian Church.

**Lord Jesus**

The use of the word "Lord" is a statement of believe not as a title. The use of "Lord" as a title was and still is prevalent in some countries (England for example). It is a title of power, position and respect – Lord Byron as example. Here and throughout the scripture, while there is an element of use of power and respect when calling Jesus Lord, it is always an acknowledgement of Him as God and Lord of All creation.

**11:22 News...came to the ears of the Church in Jerusalem**

Just as the Church in Jerusalem had heard of the growing faith in Samaria (8:14) they now hear of communities of believers growing in these cities. The Church in Jerusalem sends out a delegation, headed by Barnabas to investigate that this group is truly following the path set forth by Christ.

## Session #11: Acts Chapters 11 & 12

**11:25 Barnabas went to Tarsus** Back in chapter nine we read that Saul/Paul fled to Tarsus in fear of his life. While in Tarsus, scholars believe Saul/Paul was deep in study and prayer which would prepare him for his later missionary work. Barnabas goes to Saul/Paul in hopes of bringing him back to work with the Church in Antioch which is now fertile ground. The relationship between this Church in Antioch and St. Paul will be productive. Antioch will become St. Paul home and from here will launch a total of three mission trips that will spread the Gospel throughout Asia Minor, Greece and to Rome.

**11:26 the disciples were first called Christians** Who coined the name, scholars don't know for sure but some suggest it was Paul and Barnabas themselves who, upon living with this church were so impressed with their faith that easily identified them with the one they were following – Christ. By the way, “Christ” is not Jesus' last name as some of my 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students believe. The word “Christ” comes from *christos*, a Greek word meaning “anointed.” It is the equivalent of the Hebrew concept of Messiah. So, to be the Christ, or Messiah, is to be “the anointed one of God.” How wonderful these early believers must have been that they were readily identified as believers in the one they followed. One scholar suggested that it was the group who named themselves such because they were a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles and this name would make them stand out from the other communities calling themselves “The Way”. A title which, if you remember, has ties to the Old Testament.

**By the Way:** The title “Catholic” was used first by Ignatius of Antioch in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It was used first to describe the Christian community. The word is a Greek word and means universal or a part of the whole. It was in the third century that it became the title of our faith community.

### **The Prediction of Agabus 11:27-30**

What scholars don't know is if Agabus received this prophecy while he was with the Christian community in Antioch or whether he had received the foresight while in Jerusalem and then came up to Antioch looking for help. Most believe the second option as the probable happening. Historians of that era do tell of a famine that happened mid to late 40's A.D. What St. Luke is most likely pointing out is the charitable nature and response of the Christians to those in need, which continues to this day. What organization is one of the first to offer relief in the face of disaster? Catholic Church primarily through the organization Catholic Charities.

**11:28 Agabus** This is a gentleman who originates from Jerusalem and we will meet again in chapter 21. There he will foresee the arrest of St. Paul. There are those who suggest that Agabus was one of those disciples in the upper room at the feast of Pentecost but there is nothing in scripture to back up that theory.

**Severe famine** Historically speaking this famine affected Greece, Syria and Palestine as well as Rome since Rome relied on the fertile soils of these lands for goods.

**Claudius** He was the Emperor of Rome from 41-54 A.D.

**11:29 to send relief from the brethren** The first relief efforts offered by the Church is sent to Jerusalem to help those in the midst of a famine. This relationship between the outlying Christian Churches offering relief funds for those in Jerusalem will continue for a variety of reasons.

**11:30 presbyters** Another Greek word (remember St. Luke is writing this in Greek) which means elders or leaders. Another word to define presbyters would be priests but throughout the New Testament the word priest would not be used except to identify those of the Temple.

### **Herod's Persecution of the Christians 12:1-19**

So now, under the direction of St. Luke our minds turn back to the persecution. Notice this movement in these last chapters goes from growth of the church to persecution back to growth followed by persecution. These were the two realities that sat side by side in the early Church. Yes, there was much persecution. Many would die as martyrs of the faith. But at the same time there was great growth in the early community as well. The persecution that we will read about in this section is directed at the leadership who have been somewhat safe up till now.

#### **12:1-5**

**12:1 King Herod** This is Herod Agrippa who ruled Judea from 41-44 A.D. It was his grandfather who called for the death of the Innocents at the birth of Christ and likely his uncle who sat at the audience of Jesus as Jesus faced death. The Ignatius Catholic Bible study reports: *(Herod) was a sophisticated type of person, a diplomat, so bent on consolidating his power that he had become a master of intrigue and a total opportunist. For largely political motives he practiced Judaism with a certain rigor.*

**12:2 had James...killed by the sword** This is the brother of John, the Sons of Zebedee also called the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17). We are given no explanation as to the reason for this execution. Maybe it was done to show Herod's support of the Jewish Temple leadership. Historians date James death as 44 A.D. and he is the second recorded martyr mentioned in Acts. In fact all the Apostles but John (who was given responsibility for Mary, Mother of God) died as martyrs. To be killed *by the sword* means that James was beheaded.

**12:3 arrest Peter** This is actually the second time we will hear of Peter's arrest.

(Chapter 4). St. Luke will note the time of year that Peter was arrested: feast of Unleavened Bread. Some scholars suggest that St. Luke uses this name rather than Passover out of his own ignorance of the difference in the two feasts. All scholarship points to the fact that Peter was arrested at the same time as our Lord.

**feast of Unleavened Bread** The feast of Unleavened Bread is the seven-day period after the feast



## Session #11: Acts Chapters 11 & 12

of Passover. Passover is a celebration of God acting in the History of the Israelites liberating them from slavery in Egypt. The feast of Unleavened Bread is the extension of that celebration for seven days after reminding Jews of the afflictions they endured, the haste in leaving Egypt and their need for purity before God. As Passover ends, those in the household search out and remove all items that contain leaven in it. This is a search that continues for seven days. Leaven is yeast or an agent of yeast that creates a chemical reaction that changes the substance. Example flour, salt with yeast rises to become bread. This action is taken as a symbolic experience of seeking to remove sin from our lives. Yes, you can throw the bread out but is all yeast/leaven or sin gone? When leavened foods are off-limits for religious reasons, any food made with wheat, rye, barley, oats or spelt in addition to yeast can't be eaten. These foods would include Beer, alcohol, crackers, doughnuts, pancakes, waffles and some types of breakfast cereal might also contain yeast. Any foods with baking powder or baking soda would have to be eliminated. (Resourced information from [www.hebrewforchristians.com](http://www.hebrewforchristians.com))

### **12:4** *four squads of soldiers*

In first century Roman military understanding this was maximum security. There would be four groups of four soldiers who stood watch over the prisoner. And if any one soldier were to fall asleep on duty that meant death for all four of that squad so they would not only watch the prisoner but also watch each other. The extent to which Peter was guarded makes his escape all the more miraculous.

### **12:5** *but earnest prayer ... was made... by the Church*

St. Luke is suggesting here that God intervened bringing Peter safely out of the prison because of the intercessory prayers of the Church in Jerusalem. Interesting how some, in the face of difficulty complain and become negative and others fall to their knees. *Please read Catechism of the Catholic Church on Intercessory Prayer Catechisms #2364-2366*

### **12:6-19**

#### **12:7** *an angel of the Lord appeared*

This is now the third-time Peter has been put into prison (4:3 & 5:18) and the second time he has been rescued by an angel (5:19). As we reflect



on this moment of liberation for Peter we would be wise not to miss the analogy or comparison of this moment with the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. Peter is in complete bondage: *bound with two chains* (12:7) surrounded by soldiers and behind a locked door. In the same way the Israelites in Egypt believed their freedom was impossible. Peter will later describe that he was *rescued from the hand of Herod* (12:11) which is similar to the Israelites being *rescued from the hand of their enemy* (Exodus 3:8). And in verse 17 that Peter was *brought out of bondage* (Acts 12:17) which is the same language used in Exodus regarding the Israelites (Exodus 12:51). And the Angel of the Lord addressed Peter and told him *Dress yourself and put on*

*your sandals* (12:7) reminding us of the command of the Angel telling the Israelites how to prepare for their leaving Egypt (Exodus 12:11).

**12:12 *the house of Mary, mother of John...Mark*** This is the young Mark who would later become a companion of Paul (Acts 13:5) and later Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and would write the Gospel of Mark. Some scholars suggest that Barnabas was Mark's cousin. It is popular tradition (meaning belief but not substantiated in the scriptures) that Mary, the mother of Mark was a substantially rich widow who had become a follower of Jesus and later it was her home that was one of the primary places that the early church gathered. Some believe that it was in Mary's compound that the Upper Room, where the Last Supper was held.

**12:15 *his angel*** This "his" we do not know if she meant Peter's or God's; either way there are angels watching over each one of us.

**12:17 *Report this to James*** This is not the James, the brother of John and Apostle of Jesus who were called the brothers of thunder (Mark 3:17). Remember in verse two of this chapter we read of James, the brother of John, being put to death at the hand of Herod. This is also probably not James, the son of Alphaeus mention in Acts 1:13. Most scholars believe that this James is likely to be one of Jesus' step-brothers (Jude 1:1). (There is the probability that Joseph was widowed with older children by a first wife as he prepared to marry Mary.) The James identified in this verse would become the first Bishop and head of the Christian Church in Jerusalem when Peter leaves as stated at the end of this verse.

***Then he left and went to another place*** The most obvious explanation is that Peter went into hiding. Some scholars suggest that is was at this time Peter left for his own mission work eventually ending up in Rome where he was martyred for the faith.

*The Church historian Eusebius puts him in Rome about 42 A.D.; Luke puts him back in Jerusalem about 49 A.D. (Acts 15:7); Paul puts him in Syrian Antioch soon after this (Galatians 2:12); and Christian tradition is generally agreed that he later returned to Rome and was martyred there in the mid 60's.*

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While we do not know the exact destination of this "other place" we know that Peter understood that he was not safe in Jerusalem and that his mission and destiny was not complete. We will meet Peter only one more time in the book of Acts and that is at the Council of Jerusalem in chapter 15.

**12:19 *put to death*** The penalties of misconduct in the Roman armies were quite severe. Because they allowed this important prisoner to escape, the penalties for failure in their duty was death.

As we bring a close to chapter 12 there are three transitions that scholars point out in the writings of St. Luke.

1. First, while a small thing is important to note so there is less confusion later on – we read/studied the death of the Apostle James and the identification of James, the brother of

# Session #11: Acts Chapters 11 & 12

Jesus as the primary leader in Jerusalem. The persecution continues in Jerusalem but now the community has grown and, for the first time, the primary leader in Jerusalem is not one of the original 12 Apostles.

2. We began chapter 12 with tales of Herod. Now we will read of him as being worshipped as a god and as we finish this chapter we will read of his death.
3. Finally, as we began our study weeks ago, while those who were followers of Jesus were not appreciated they were somewhat tolerated by Rome and by the Temple leadership. Over the course of the chapters read we have watched that toleration turn to persecution. We have read in 12:3 that the death of James the Apostle was *pleasing to the Jews* showing the growing hatred.

Through these transitions we can understand that as we move into chapter 13 and those that follow the time and experience of the early Church has changed. That while God is still in control (demonstrated by the great escape of Peter and other miracles to come) the experience of the early Christians has changed.

## **Herod's Death 12:20-23**

In these short few verses we hear about the final days of Herod. Herod died in 44 A.D. His death was understood by most of the era as divine retribution for living an evil life.

**12:20 *people of Tyre and Sidom*** We are not given enough information to understand or know why the communities of these two towns are coming to Herod. Most scholars surmise that they are here to ask for food in the midst of a famine, or asked for food and are now coming to show their appreciation. Tyre and Sidom are two Phoenician cities northwest of Galilee

**12:21 *attired in royal robes*** The historian of the first century, Flavius Josephus reported on this event and recorded that Herod received the delegation wearing a silver garment that *reflected the light of the sun*.

**12:23 *an angel of the Lord struck him down*** The historian of the first century, Flavius Josephus also recorded Herod's receiving the delegation and subsequent death. He wrote: *and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another (although not for his good) that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, or reject their impious flattery. ... A severe pain also arose in his belly and began in a most violent manner... and when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life (Antiquities of the Jews, 19.8.2).* As stated above Herod's death is understood as his punishment for an evil life culminating in his accepting praise for being a god. Since Herod's son was too young to assume rule the governing of Judea reverted to Rome.

### **Mission of Barnabas and Saul 12:24-25**

This final verse of chapter 12 signals a transition and we will now be moving away from the early community in Jerusalem and the stories of St. Peter and turn our focus to the missionary work of St. Paul.

**12:25 *Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem*** This is the “relief mission” discussed in Acts 11:30 and is probably the visit that St. Paul refers to in Galatians 2:1-10.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. When Peter returned to the faith community after baptizing Cornelius and his family and friends, the community confronts Peter asking the question why he did what he did. When people are unhappy with how we handle something, how do we respond? How do you think God would have us respond?
2. In the 1970’s a comedian Flip Wilson had a character who would justify her actions by saying “The Devil made me do it!” What do you think of Christians who justify their actions by saying that they were “commanded by the Holy Spirit.” Do you think the Holy Spirit acts in the lives of Christians today? If so, how?
3. Have you or anyone you know been helped out of a seemingly impossible situation by something miraculous?
4. What are your thoughts about the Church’s teaching on Guardian Angels?

### **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**Gifts of the Holy Spirit: 799-810**

**Domestic Church: 1655-1666**

**Prayer of Intercession: 2364-2366**

**Angels: 331-336**

### **Bibliography:**

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- Agape Bible Study: Gospel of Luke by Michal Hunt. Agapebiblestudy.com
- Acts: The Spread of the Kingdom by Jeff Cavins and Sarah Christmyer