

# Acts 11

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[ 0 : 00 ] I was speaking at some meetings yesterday and what happened is what always happens when I go to speak at a meeting.

! I finished speaking, singing the final hymn, I go and stand somewhere, people come and talk to me. And one of the first questions I'm asked is, Levy, it's a Jewish name, are you Jewish? Are you Jewish?

And the answer to that question is I don't really know, yes and no. The Levy family tree is a bit of a mystery. We don't really know where the kind of Jewishness comes from but it's certainly there at some point.

And I wonder if you've ever done any work on your family tree. And lots of us are interested in our ancestors, aren't we? We like to know the stories of our family.

We like to know where does our name come from. And Acts chapter 11 verse 26 tells us that it was in the city of Antioch in the middle of the first century AD that the name Christian was first used.

[ 1 : 11 ] So Acts chapter 11, here is a piece of our heritage. That word is used, isn't it, all over the world today. And it's used for those who follow Jesus Christ.

We are Christians and we meet with Christians all across the globe today. And that name is traceable back to a certain time and a certain place in Acts chapter 11.

And so this is a chapter, Acts 11, that should have some historical significance for us. But I want to suggest to you it has far more significance than that. Because this chapter not only tells us where our name comes from, but it tells us where our faith comes from.

And where our life comes from as Christians. And it gives us vocabulary to talk about. Vocabulary is so important, isn't it?

How you speak about something. What you describe something as. And we're going to think about what vocabulary this chapter leaves us with this morning. The chapter is in two halves.

[ 2 : 18 ] And then I want us to look at the major theme and then trace out the implications. So verses 1 to 18 of Acts chapter 11. Is the work of God in Peter. Chapter 10, do you remember that?

It tells us the story of Cornelius coming to faith in Jesus Christ. And receiving the spirit of God along with his whole household. And this was significant precisely because Cornelius was a Gentile, a non-Jew.

He wasn't a Jew. And so chapter 10 is like a Gentile Pentecost. It's like a rerun of Acts chapter 2. Because the receiving of God's spirit in Acts chapter 10 marks the beginning of the next stage of Jesus' mission.

The gospel is not only going to be for Jerusalem and Judea. But through Samaria. And as we get to the ends of the Acts, we'll see it goes out to the ends of the earth.

And chapter 10 though is not the story just of one conversion, is it? But it is two conversions. It is the story of how Peter, the apostle, his mind was changed.

[ 3 : 27 ] It was changed in terms of how a Jew like him was meant to relate to a Gentile like Cornelius. Previously, Peter wouldn't associate with Gentiles.

Wouldn't go into their homes. Wouldn't eat with them. But chapter 10 tells us that God persuaded Peter. And he started to live and think differently. Because the gospel, the good news of the Lord Jesus, was being received by the Gentiles.

And since they were receiving the spirit of God as well, the Jews needed to receive the Gentiles. And so, the first half of chapter 11, Peter retells the story.

And he does so for a specific reason. Because his actions were now being criticized by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Do you remember when Peter first saw that vision of a sheet coming down from heaven?

And all sorts of animals on it. He's told, get up, eat the unclean animals. And his response was, surely not, Lord. Well, that is exactly how the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem are reacting to him. [ 4 : 31 ] You're eating with uncircumcised Gentiles in their homes. Surely not, Peter. Listen again to chapter 11, verse 1. Now, the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God.

So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him. saying, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them. Circumcision party is a group of people. It's not an event. Alright? It's a far better joke than I was giving credit for. It's a terrible party to go to. Right. At this point, Peter sympathizes, doesn't he, with his critics. Completely. And when they articulate their criticism of him, it's exactly where he was a short time before. His mindset has changed. They're still there. Their mindset was his mindset until very recently. So, he knows that he needs to explain to them how his mindset's changed. That's exactly what he does. [ 5 : 36 ] Look at verse 4. Peter began and he explained to them in order. He told them about the threefold vision that he had. And then the three men from Caesarea. And then he told them about the meeting he had with Cornelius.

And the coming of the Spirit to the Gentile household. And all that text that we have from verses 5 to 15 is really a repetition of what chapter 10 is. Except this time it's from Peter's perspective. But when we get to verse 16, there's a little bit of new information. He says, I remembered the word of the Lord, the Lord Jesus. How he said, John the Baptist baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And so, Peter is saying, what happened in chapter 10 was in fulfillment of what Jesus had predicted. He's come to see that the baptism that matters most is not the baptism with water, but the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Which God performs.

[ 6 : 39 ] And water baptism is a sign of that Holy Spirit baptism that God brings to every believer. It was the coming of the Spirit to these Gentiles that really clinched it for Peter.

And now he's hoping that that will clinch it for his critics too. So in verse 17, he says this, if then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who am I to stand in God's way?

Do you get Peter's logic? Right, he's saying, if the Spirit of God has come upon these people, then the whole thing is from God and who am I to object to it?

And when Peter says that, it's actually pretty pointed, isn't it? Because he's not just saying, is he, who am I to stand in God's way? He's speaking to his fellow leaders in Jerusalem and he's saying, who are you to stand in God's way?

That's his explanation to those who just couldn't fathom that he started eating with Gentiles. He says, God has showed him that he needed to stop keeping his distance from the Gentiles and so does every other Jewish believer.

[ 7 : 54 ] And of course, Peter's explanation has exactly the effect that he desired. Verse 18, and when they heard this, they had no further objections. They praised God, saying, so then, even Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

This is the fruit of Peter's explanation. The other Jewish leaders, they are persuaded that God has granted life to the Gentiles through repentance and there's no room for any Jewish person to prevent them from being welcomed as part of the family of God.

And not only did they accept this new conviction, they praised God for what he had done. As one writer puts it, their criticism ceased and their worship began.

That's the first half of the chapter where we see the work of God in Peter and it becomes the work of God right the way through the Jerusalem elders. But then in the second half of the chapter, the focus shifts to the work of God in Antioch.

The work of God in Antioch. It's a largely Gentile city and in order to set the scene for what happens in Antioch, Luke first has to go back to tell us how the gospel got there in the first place.

[ 9 : 09 ] Do you remember the martyrdom of Stephen? It's recorded in chapter 7 and what followed in chapter 8 verse 1 is we're told that as a result of Stephen's death, the believers are scattered. They're terrified.

They run. They're scattered all over Judea and Samaria. They fled and they escaped from Jerusalem and they ended up in other places and what did they do when they got there?

They shared the gospel of Jesus with people who hadn't heard yet. Once again, can you see the sovereign wisdom of God that he even uses the persecution of his people to spread the news of the Lord Jesus?

What Luke tells us here is that these scattered believers turned up in cities as far away as Antioch and these scattered believers told other Jews about the Lord Jesus and some of them even started telling Greek people about the Lord Jesus.

So verse 19, can you look there? Now, those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch speaking the word to no one except Jews but there were some of them.

[10:26] Men of Cyprus and Cyrene who weren't coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists, the Greeks, also preaching the Lord Jesus. Well, when the Jewish leaders, when the Christian leaders in Jerusalem got wind of this back in headquarters, they are not particularly happy.

and so they send a delegation. They send one of their own. They send, verse 22, a man called Barnabas down to Antioch to investigate.

And Barnabas is an interesting choice. I'm not sure if you've heard the language that people use to respond to innovators in technology.

And so a new piece of technology comes out and how do people respond? There's different responses, aren't there? So some people, when it comes to new technology, a new iPhone or new iPad or something comes out, some people are said to be early adopters.

And they love, don't they, trying out new gadgets. There's people like that here. And they love trying out new ways of doing things. And then there's another group and people talk about the early majority.

[11:36] They get on board with some technical advance once that technology has gained a little bit of traction. And then there's another group that are called the later majority. They don't embrace technology until pretty much everyone else has.

And then at the other end there are those who are the phobics. And they are the people who are generally allergic to any kind of technological change.

There's the early adopters, there's the early majority, there's the late majority, and then there's the phobics. And the reason I'm telling you that is because when it comes to what God is doing in this period of history, the new thing that God is doing, Barnabas is an early adopter.

Remember, do you remember he was the first one to put his arm around Saul? When he came to Jerusalem and all the other Jewish leaders are terrified of Saul, Barnabas accepts him.

And now he goes down to Antioch to see what's happening with the Gentiles there. And instead of being sceptical or phobic, he is delighted. He embraces their newfound faith.

[12:51] And verse 23, it says, when he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad. And he exhorted them, encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

And then Lucas tells us why he was an early adopter. It was because he was in tune with God's purposes. Verse 24, he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and a great many people were added to the Lord.

And as that ministry amongst the people of Antioch grew, soon people realised he couldn't do it all on his own. So he heads off to Tarsus and he brings Saul along.

He brings him back to Antioch. Verse 26 tells us they spent a year together teaching the church in Antioch. And as the church grew, people came up with a new nickname.

These believers are Christians. The people of Christ in Christ ones. And then Luke tells us there's a third arrival in Antioch after Barnabas and after Saul comes.

[13:57] There's a prophet from Jerusalem called Agabus and he predicts a worldwide famine. A famine that Luke tells us did take place in the years that followed. But the significant thing is how do the believers in Antioch respond to this?

To the prophecy that Agabus brings? And we read about it don't we in the last two verses. Verse 29 the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

And they did so. Sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. They give generously. The church in Antioch gives to the church in Judea.

They want to help their brothers and sisters. They are connected. There is a formal connection there. And so they pull together and they send money with Paul and Barnabas. And as they head

back to Judea it's a wonderful moment in the story isn't it?

The Gentiles whom the Jews at the start of the chapter wouldn't even spend a meal with are now caring for the very people who wanted to exclude them.

[15:08] It's a stunning reversal isn't it? And it's another example of the pattern we've seen a few times in Acts of God's people caring for one another in need.

Except now it includes the Gentiles as well. Gentiles loving and serving Jews. It's an evocative picture of what the mission of Jesus has accomplished. The unity of Jewish and Gentiles in fellowship and love all together.

At the end of the first half of the chapter the Gentiles are receiving a gift the gift of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the second half of the chapter the Gentiles are the ones giving a gift. And the two are inextricably linked.

Because what happened in Antioch was the work of God. Just like what happened to Peter was the work of God. And what happened to Cornelius and what happened to those Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who did a complete 180 degree turn it was the work of God.

And that I think is the big theme that ties together Acts chapter 11. The work of God. We hear about it in the first half of the chapter with Peter.

[16:22] The work of God and then in the second half of the chapter we hear about it in Antioch. The word of God that people are speaking.

People speaking to seeking to persuade others. People praying. People going. But what is accomplished here is accomplished under the Lord's hand.

And I want to remind you of how Luke underlines that. So track with me through this chapter. What is it that Peter explains the 180 degree that he has done with respect to the Gentiles?

He talks about the vision that he received from God. And then he talks to us about the messengers that were sent to him by God. And then he talks about the spirit of God who told him to go with these men and the voice that he heard was the voice of God.

And he tells the circumstances in which God was revealing himself to Peter while at the same time working in another city to reveal himself to Cornelius before bringing the two together.

[17:35] God's divine purpose. And then he tells about the spirit falling on Cornelius. The spirit who unmistakably came from God. He makes the point very explicitly in verse 17.

He says that God gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. All the events that Peter describes are the work of God. And then when the Jerusalem leaders reflect back to Peter what they've just learned, listen to the language they choose.

Look at verse 18. They say even the Gentiles God has granted repentance to. And when they heard these things they fell silent and they glorified God.

Saying then to the Gentiles God has also granted repentance that leads to life. It's a pretty interesting way to speak about repentance. Repentance means when you turn away from your own sins and you turn back to God.

You turn away from going your own way to God. It's what every Christian must do to be a Christian. The command is to repent.

[18:45] It's an action isn't it? It's a choice to make. And yet the Jewish leaders in the way that they describe it here they describe it as a gift of God.

The repentance of the Gentiles they say has been gifted to them granted to them by God. Their repentance their turning was a gift of divine grace and favour.

And the language is very deliberate. Vocabulary matters. And then listen to how Luke describes what happened in Antioch when Jewish Christians first turned up there with the gospel.

There were believers teaching in Antioch and responding of course but once again Luke chooses his language really carefully and he focuses on the way that God's power was at work.

The vocabulary matters. Look at verse 21 and the hand of the Lord was with them. And a great number of people who believed turned to the Lord. By the hand of the Lord the people turned to the Lord.

[19:52] It was God who changed their hearts and their lives. And then finally look how Luke describes the reaction of Barnabas when he turns up in Antioch and he finds all these Christians there.

He came and he saw verse 23 the grace of God and he was glad. It doesn't say Barnabas arrived and he saw the scattered Christians what they'd managed to achieve through their ministry.

He doesn't say Barnabas arrived and he saw what the people of Antioch had done by turning to Jesus. He says Barnabas arrived and he saw the grace of God.

What God had done. He chooses his language very carefully. Vocabulary matters. And we find this language being used over and over and over again and it's carefully chosen at every point because Luke the author of Acts wants you and I to understand what this story is about.

this book is known isn't it as the Acts of the Apostles but we know that it should be known as the Acts of God because the mission of the Apostles is the mission of Jesus and the birth of the early church is the work of Jesus and the spread of the gospel throughout the known world at this time is the plan of God fulfilled by God in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of his son Jesus Christ.

[ 21 : 21 ] What Acts 11 tells us and what in fact the whole book of Acts tells us is that God is at work in people's lives and this chapter is at pains to point that out.

This chapter chooses its vocabulary really carefully it's a chapter about the work of God and the work of God continues to this day and it continues here and all over the world.

It continues in our lives in the lives of people around us so how do we respond to it? I want to finish with four applications alright they're on your sheet actually I wrote them under the sermon because you won't remember them.

Four suggestions on the significance of this chapter for you and for me. First of all believing and repenting that is the fundamental work of God in someone's life and Acts 11 reminds us of that look again at verse 18 when they heard these things they fell silent they glorified God saying then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Verse 21 and the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. If you are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ this morning if you would call yourself a Christian if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ then this work of God must have taken place in your life and given it is a work of God you should thank him for it.

[ 22 : 59 ] God granted you repentance and you must resist that temptation to think that your relationship with God is something that you've initiated you've created you deserve and of course the other implication is a sobering one that if you've never believed the gospel if you've never turned from your sins then you cannot rightly call yourself a Christian because this is at the heart of what a Christian is someone who turns away from living from themselves in order to live for God somebody who realises that they need the Lord Jesus that God sent to save us and so if you're here this morning and you're still considering what it will mean if and when you are ready to become a

Christian what it will mean is it will mean believing and repenting it will mean trusting and following the Lord Jesus and turning away from living for yourself and given that this is the work of God the best thing that you can do this morning the best way that you can move in that direction is praying this morning God please give me repentance and faith secondly through trusting and praying because if Acts 11 suggests that people becoming Christians is a work of God then those of us who want to see people become Christians need to make sure that we don't get too big for our boots and we need to remember that we may well try and explain the gospel to others and we may try and live in a way that shows people the love of the Lord

Jesus and we may really want people to love to share our faith I hope that's true but it is God alone it is God alone who can ultimately make that happen and so we need to trust him for his work and it makes a lot of sense for us to pray about it because prayer what is prayer prayer is articulating that we depend on God to change people prayer is our admission that we can't change a person's heart prayer is our plea that God would do that and God alone would do that and so if you want people in your life and I hope you do to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus pray for them ask God to work in their hearts and if as a church we want our church to grow for more people to come and join us for more people to grow in their faith to trust the Lord Jesus we need to pray you may or may not be aware of this but there are thousands and thousands of books written about what they call church growth strategies every

Christian wants to see churches grow and in the UK at the moment there is lots of ink being spilled on the way you grow churches is actually by being better organised and lots of structure in place and lots of things like that but I want to remind you that here at IPC and we have one primary strategy for growth and everything else is secondary to that that is we pray we pray because we are convinced that people becoming Christians is the work of God and we trust him to do it thirdly

seeing and praising I hope you notice that's what Barnabas did in this chapter he saw and he praised and he took time to observe the work of God and when he looked at the lives of the people that he met he was filled with joy and he worshipped

God do you remember that when he arrived in verse 23 he saw what the grace of God had done and he was glad and he encouraged them all and so surely part of what the work of God in our church means is that we'll do likewise it means I think that we'll actually slow down enough to see what God is doing by his grace and I suspect when we do that we won't be able to stop being glad because one of the privileges of being part of a church like this is that there are examples of the work of God all around you this morning and that should thrill your heart one of the thrills of being part of a church family is seeing the signs of God's grace and I certainly find that thrilling so for example we have a couple in our church who in the midst of great heartache and sadness have kept loving the

[ 28 : 26 ] Lord God do you see what the grace of God has done we have people sitting here in front of me who've come from a background that saying it would be dysfunctional would be putting a very positive spin on it but with God's grace and help they've put their lives back together and they're living for God do you see what the grace of God has done there are people here who've managed to forgive with God's strength there are people here whose marriage is hard and it's often hard but they've continued over many years to faithfully serve Jesus and keep trusting him and stay together do you see what the grace of God has done we have a man in our church who a number of years ago was completely ignoring God and he needed a hand over control of his life to Jesus and he did he repented he believed and he continues to believe and God continues to give him victory over his temptations and addictions do you see what the grace of

God has done we have women in our church who would love to be married but God hasn't opened that door and they feel lonely at times but they haven't become bitter they've devoted themselves to serving and loving God's people do you see what the grace of God has done we have people in our church who struggle with chronic anxiety it's a very heavy burden to bear at times and at times it's been overwhelming but they've surrendered their life to the lordship of Jesus and they trust in him to get them through every day to keep persevering in all the ups and downs to keep growing to keep looking to serve others in whatever way they can do you see what the grace of God has done we have teenagers who are in school and have been unashamed of the lord Jesus but they are outsiders and they don't fit in and they're given a hard time but they bravely stand for him do you see what the grace of

God has done we have those for whom grief is a daily painful companion and yet they keep reading their bibles and praying and trusting in the lord Jesus who is the resurrection and the life they are just examples there are plenty more stories sitting around you there are as many stories as there are people sitting next to you and what I'm trying to what I'm trying to communicate is this to you sometimes we just need to open our eyes to see like Barnabas did and I'm trying to teach you that language matters vocabulary matters because if we get the vocabulary right seeing who has really done these things amongst us it will lead us to respond rightly with praise see what the graces of God has done fourthly and briefly and finally remaining true remaining true

I look at verse 23 this was Barnabas's message for them keep going stand firm having seen the grace of God in that city he urged them to never depart from that grace instead he pleaded with them be loyal to Jesus with all of your hearts I think it's when we see how gracious God has been to us that our desire to stick with his grace grows and so the risen and exalted Lord Jesus urges you this morning in the same way that Barnabas urged them in Antioch where they were first called Christians our spiritual forebears saw the work of God and they responded as they should and you and I bear the same name we have the same responsibility and the same joy and having seen God work in our lives having seen that our repenting and our believing is actually

God's gift to us having seen his initiative the fruit of his power having seen his grace and tasted just how sweet it is he calls on us to stay close to him to stay true to his grace as verse 23 says when he came and saw the grace of God he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose let me pray for us