

Acts 11:1-18 - Peter's Defense of the Gospel

The Jewish Christians in Acts, the “circumcision party,” understood that Jesus was the Messiah. They understood that he was the fulfillment of all that the prophets foretold. They also understood that he was Lord and Savior, and the very Son of God. These Jewish Christians, however, did not understand that salvation was not only for the Jews who had waited for hundreds of years with great expectancy, but also for the Gentiles. If we disregard Israel’s long history and the serious call to holiness represented by circumcision, we may be tempted to believe that these Jewish Christians in Acts 11 were exhibiting nothing more than unwarranted and ugly prejudice. That reading, however, is not only unfair to these early Jewish Christians, but it also misses the point of the biblical text. There is something a lot more than racial prejudice here. There is a great, deep, and moral aversion that, while wrong, was not wrongly motivated.

Acts 11:19-30 - The Church at Antioch

The persecution following Stephen’s death (7:58–8:3) continues to have the opposite of its intended effect, as God uses it to spread his gospel abroad. The triumphant march of the gospel expands to the Gentile city of Antioch, as it becomes clearer that the Way is not merely a Jewish sect but a multiethnic work of God.

Acts 12:1-25 - Peter Rescued from Prison

Having executed James, Herod plans to put Peter to a similar end, before God intervenes and foils his plot (vv. 6–19). Here is a blatant opponent to the work of God, not motivated as Saul was by religious zeal but by the desire for acclaim (v. 3). This idolatrous desire proves to be Herod’s undoing. Herod accepts the praises of the crowd, attributing to him divine eloquence. Compare this with Peter’s swift denial when Cornelius seeks to worship him (10:26), or Paul’s vehement protests when the people of Lystra mistake him for the god Hermes (14:11–15).

The Old Testament consistently teaches that when a person exalts himself, or allows others to exalt him, God will bring him down (Gen. 11:4; Isa. 14:12–15; Dan. 4:19–27). This is a large part of how God’s wrath and justice work. Conversely, it is also how his mercy and grace work: the humble, lowly, and needy are lifted up! Such is the glorious paradox of the gospel.

With Herod’s death, “the word of God increased and multiplied” (Acts 12:24). God directly intervenes to eliminate another obstacle to his plans, proving that no human can stand in the way of his redemptive work. The world may bring distress and mourning, but it cannot ultimately shake those who have been touched by the power and grace of the resurrected Christ. They pray fervently amid persecution, threat, and suffering, and God works beyond even what they can ask or imagine (v. 15).

Acts 13:1-41 - Paul & Barnabas at Antioch

With the coming of Christ, forgiveness of sins is now available (Acts 13:38). The law of Moses gave temporary provision for forgiveness by instituting priests to mediate between God and his people, but the law could not lead to eternal and ultimate forgiveness (Acts 13:39). The law serves only to heighten our understanding of our own sin, not to lessen its reality (Rom. 7:7–12). Through Christ we can avail ourselves of a power that the law never had. The law hung over us as a

ministry of death, threatening to kill us for our sins; the Spirit of Christ delivers us from the bondage of sin, guilt, and death into new life (2 Cor. 3:6–7). What the law was powerless to do, because it was “weakened by the flesh,” God did by “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” to be a sin offering (Rom. 8:3).

God’s grace is overflowing and abundant (Rom. 5:15, 17; 6:1; 2 Cor. 4:15; 8:9; 9:8, 14). It is also powerful: grace motivates changed lives, as Paul writes: “The love of Christ controls us!” (2 Cor. 5:14). The law threatens and demands, but in itself cannot produce the love true holiness requires (Matt. 22:37–38). This is not to discount the value of the law. The law of God is “perfect . . . true, and righteous altogether” (Ps. 19:7–9) and “holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12). We live in accord with the law to demonstrate love for the One who gave it for our good and his glory. But the law has no inherent power to produce the life it requires. The apostle Paul writes, “If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law” (Gal. 3:21). Law does not empower us to do what it mandates—only grace can do that (Matt. 10:8; Rom. 2:4; 6:14; Titus 2:11–12).

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Read back through Acts 11:1-18 - Notice that those who had been critical of Peter (v 2) fell silent (v 18) and then “glorified God.” They were willing to change their minds and retract their opinions based on Peter’s testimony regarding God’s word. When was the last time you changed your mind on something important to you and how you live, based on what you saw or were shown in God’s word?
2. Herod was not God and, Luke tells us, having been struck down, he was “eaten by worms” (Acts 12:23). This narrative detail may seem disturbing, but it stresses the frailty and finitude of even the greatest kings in comparison to the glory and grandeur of God. In what ways are you tempted to treat the powers of this world as though they could affect or prevent the outworking of God’s plan?
3. How would you define “fellowship”? What part can you play in your church enjoying the kind of fellowship we find in Acts 13?
4. Acts 13 reveals the significance of our response to the gospel. How might this affect your evangelism and your presentation of the gospel?
5. In Acts 14 Paul dismantles the pagan worldview and offers a theological corrective. What theological confusion do you meet in your community or culture? How do you need to adapt the way you explain the gospel, in order to help people understand what you are saying?