



ACTS 11-12 CONCEPT RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH, ANTIOCH, PETER RESCUED

As we begin this crucial chap. 11 of Acts, where the foundation is laid for what will be taught in the future about Christianity and God's law, it is sadly one of the most misunderstood parts of Scripture.

From this section come some of the notions for not keeping the Old Testament law, including the Sabbath and food laws. It is based on a fundamental mistake of *not* distinguishing *which part* of the Old Testament law is being addressed here. Was it about the Ten Commandments? They are never mentioned in this context. What we do see is the issue of the Old Testament laws *dealing* with *circumcision and the ritual laws*--as they were then strictly interpreted by Pharisaic oral traditions.

So after Peter and six Christian brethren visited Cornelius' home, they witnessed how these Gentiles received God's Spirit *without the need* to be circumcised or be ceremonially purified, and thus *first appears* the concept of righteousness by faith *through Christ's sacrifice* and not works (ritual law).

Luke writes, "Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, *those of the circumcision* contended with him, saying, 'You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!'" (11:1-3). Again, what part of God's law was being dealt with here? *It was the law about circumcision and ritual practices*, which considered eating with Gentiles as rendering a Jew *ritually impure*. This was the accusation against Peter, and not of breaking any other biblical law!

Who was making these accusations? Robertson, in his *NT Word Pictures*, identifies these brethren as, "Literally, those of circumcision (*on the side* of circumcision, of the circumcision party)...All the disciples in Jerusalem were Jews so it can hardly mean the whole body [of Jewish Christians]. In Gal. 2:12, the phrase has the *narrower sense* of the *Judaizing or Pharisaic* wing of the disciples (see Acts 15:5) who made *circumcision necessary for all Gentile converts*. Probably here by anticipation Luke so describes the *beginning* of that great controversy...Peter is at once put on the defensive as the contention went on. It is plain that Peter was not regarded as any kind of Pope or overlord."

So Luke is identifying those Jewish Christians who would insist, despite God's new revelation, that

those Gentiles must be circumcised so they can keep the requirements of the ritual law to be saved. In fact, only *after* being circumcised *could* the ritual law be practiced to be purified. So those were the aspects of the law in question, but *the rest of God's laws still needed to be kept*. Peter then explains how God had told him not to worry about them being uncircumcised Gentiles, for they, nor their food, (being God fearers, they didn't eat pork) were *not* now considered ritually unclean and he could in good conscience eat with them. This was startling! They were purified and justified by other means than rituals—later to be called justification by faith.

Peter thus concludes, "If therefore God gave them the *same gift* as He gave us *when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ*, who was I that I could withstand God? When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles *repentance to life* [meaning toward eternal life]" (Acts 11:17-18).

They did not conclude they could now eat pork, but slowly realized the law of circumcision, and the rituals related to it, were no longer necessary for salvation. So a novel way--justification by faith in Christ's sacrifice will now *substitute* the ritual laws. Hence, this divides the Church into three groups—(1) the Jewish Christians who accepted the revealed truth from Peter; (2) those who didn't, called "those of the circumcision," still requiring circumcision and ritual law for Gentile believers, a concept later called "works of the law"; and (3) the uncircumcised but baptized Gentile brethren. This issue will be resolved at the Jerusalem Conference.

Luke then connects this new truth of justification by faith, not works, to other uncircumcised Gentiles being converted in Antioch, the third greatest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria.

He states, "Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to *Antioch*, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19-21).

Did they preach to Hellenist Jews or to Greek Gentiles? *Expositors Commentary* notes, "At Antioch, however, some of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians 'began to speak to Greeks also.' Some manuscripts read *Hellaenas* ('Greeks') while others read *Hellenistas* (possibly 'Grecian Jews'). The external evidence for the text is somewhat difficult to weigh at this point. But while the textual evidence may be somewhat indeterminate, certainly the contrast drawn between the 'Jews' of v. 19 and those who receive the gospel here in v. 20 makes it all but impossible to understand those referred to in v. 20 as anything other than Gentiles. Thus it is necessary to read the text as meaning 'Greeks' and as probably originally using the word *Hellenas*."

Having heard what had happened with Cornelius in Caesarea, and now having Gentiles entering the Church in Antioch, the leaders in Jerusalem became concerned, and with good reason, for they were still unaware of the new concept of justification by faith and not by rituals.

Luke notes, "Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord" (11:22-24).

Expositors relates what was happening, "News of the situation at Antioch was of definite concern to believers in Jerusalem. With the conversion of Samaritans, the conversion of some Gentiles in Caesarea, and now the report of a mixed congregation in Syrian Antioch, many in Jerusalem were doubtless fearful that the Christian mission was moving ahead so rapidly as to be out of control. The Jerusalem church, therefore, as in the case of the Samaritan conversions, decided to send a delegate to Antioch, probably in order to regularize whatever had gone awry and report back to the mother church. The man chosen for this task was Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus who had gained an outstanding reputation for piety and generosity among the believers at Jerusalem. In all likelihood, it was the fact that Barnabas was both a Diaspora and 'Zionistic' Jew coupled with his piety and generosity that qualified him in the eyes of the Jerusalem church for this mission to Antioch. In addition, the

high esteem in which he was held made it certain that both his counsel and his report would be received with all seriousness. The Jerusalem church could hardly have selected a better delegate...His generous spirit was gladdened by what he saw of the grace of God at work among the believers at Antioch, and, true to his nickname 'Son of Encouragement,' he 'encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.' Here was a crisis point in the history of the early church, for much depended on Barnabas's reaction, counsel, and report--not only at Antioch itself, but also at Jerusalem and in the later advance of the gospel through Paul's missions...As a result...the work that was started at Antioch was enabled to go on."

With so many Jewish Christians and Gentiles entering the Church, Barnabas needed more help. He remembered the dynamic Saul, who was sent to Tarsus to avoid bringing more persecutions in Jerusalem. Luke records, "Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:25-26).

What is the impact for the members of the Church to be called Christians? Again *Expositors* has an excellent comment, "All the early believers at Antioch, whether Jews or Gentiles, may well have been related in some way to the synagogue. Thus in the eyes of many Jewish Christians, the conversion of Gentiles who had to some extent come under the ministry of Judaism before they believed in Jesus would not have been thought exceptional.

"But others within the city--evidently nonbelievers who were more perceptive in this matter than the church itself--nicknamed this group of Jewish and Gentile believers 'Christians' (*Christianoi*, i.e., 'Christ followers,' or 'those of the household of Christ'). They saw that the ministry to Gentiles and the fellowship of Jews with Gentiles went beyond the bounds of what was usually permitted within Judaism. They also voiced an insight that the Christians themselves only saw clearly later on: Christianity is no mere variant of Judaism. The new name doubtless helped develop the self-consciousness of the early Christians, despite its having first been given in derision. Later the early Christians accepted it and used it of

themselves along with their earlier self-designation of 'the Way.' But the use of the name 'Christian' posed two great problems for the church. For one thing, Christians began to risk losing the protection Rome gave to a *religio licita* (i.e., a legal religion), which they had enjoyed when considered only a sect within Judaism. Furthermore, being now in some way differentiated from Judaism, Christians were faced with how to understand their continuity with the hope of Israel and the promises of the Jewish Scriptures. As we shall see, these problems were to loom large as the Christian mission moved onto Gentile soil." Yes, justification by faith, and not by circumcision and rituals, was the key concept.

Luke then relates, "And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:28-30). This drought during the reign of Claudius Caesar (A.D. 41-54) was attested by Roman historians and also Josephus. Notice to whom it was sent for distribution – to the elders in Jerusalem – and not to any one man in charge.

Luke then shifts the scene to Jerusalem, as *Expositors* brings out, "Divine activity on behalf of the Gentiles, Luke appears to be insisting, does not mean divine inactivity on behalf of Jewish Christians or unconcern for Jews--which is a heresy that has often afflicted Gentile Christians and resulted in horrendous calamities." This is so true.

Luke states, "Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church" (Acts 12:2-5). Herod Agrippa (born in 10 B.C.), was the son of Aristobulus, one of Herod the Great's sons...he grew up in Rome close to the

imperial family and eventually, ruled over all of Israel, including Judea and Samaria, until his death in A.D. 44. His policy was to keep the Roman peace at all cost and viewed the Jewish Christian movement as divisive and dangerous. So he arrested some of the believers in Jesus and had James, one of Jesus' original disciples, beheaded by the sword, following the rules of the Jewish Mishnah for such cases.

Expositors adds, "Finding that this pleased the Jewish leaders, he then took Peter during Passover Week ('the Feast of Unleavened Bread') and imprisoned him till he could bring him out for public trial after the Jewish holy days. While in prison, the apostle was guarded by 'four squads of four soldiers each,' probably on shifts of three hours each, with two soldiers chained to him on either side and two standing guard at the inner entrance to the prison. Evidently Agrippa planned to make of Peter a spectacle and warning at a...show trial."

Yet, God protected Peter. Luke says, "Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, 'Arise quickly!' And his chains fell off his hands. Then the angel said to him, 'Gird yourself and tie on your sandals'; and so he did. And he said to him, 'Put on your garment and follow me.' So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter had come to himself, he said, 'Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.' So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer" (Acts 12:7-14).

Then Peter entered and comforted the shocked brethren, "And he said, 'Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.' And he departed and went to another place" (12:17). Thus Peter was miraculously spared from an untimely death!