

ACTS 11; SEEING THE GRACE OF GOD: WHAT A GAME – CHANGER!

Thinking back over my life, I can remember certain events that changed the projection of it. There was my salvation, my marriage, the birth of my children, words spoken to me at the appropriate time, even a particular book – all things that were game-changers for me. Some of them were shocking, other, not so much. But regardless of how “shocking” they were, they changed the course of my life, nonetheless. And I’m sure, if you were to take the time to reminisce, you would find similar things that changed the projection of the course you were taking.

And that is what we will see in Acts 11. We can easily read the Bible in a “flat” way, if we aren’t careful. I want to encourage to you, when you are reading your Bible, to read it as if you were reading fiction. It is definitely not fiction, but we need to read it as if we are reading fiction. “Why?” you may say? Because when we read fiction, we intuitively look for things in the text that are there to set up the situation. When we read the Bible as if it just a bland account, if it is just “reportage” then we tend to read it “flat” – as if it were a newspaper article. If we read

it as if we were reading fiction, (though it isn't fiction) then we will pick up on more of what is in the text, and we will connect the chapters together in a way that we may not normally do. The book of Acts is a story. It is history, though a selective one, but each and every chapter and periscope is one in which Luke uses to set up what is coming next. Each chapter builds on the preceding one. If we don't see that, then we will, once again, read the text in a "flat" way.

In chapter 10, we saw Peter get a vision from the Lord. We saw that Cornelius also heard from the Lord. All of this had to do with the inclusion of Gentiles into the family of God. In chapter 11, we will see some of the out-workings of that. What we read in chapter 10, actually causes a problem in chapter 11. And though the problem seems to have been remedied, and I believe it was, at least for a time, we will this issue crop up again from time to time, not only in Acts, but in Paul's writings also. Why is that? Why can't they just get their acts together? Why can't they just see that God has reached out to the Gentiles in order to reclaim those who were "put out" in Genesis? Well, the answer is not that simple. If only things could be that simple – but unfortunately, life is more complicated than that. We will see, if we look at the context, that this issue, or at least, the

underlying issues, are still with us today. And they cause just as much of a hassle within the church now as they did back then. So, let's get to the Bible – shall we?

1 Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. 2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, 3 saying, “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!”

We see that straight out of the gate, when Peter got back to Jerusalem, he was confronted by, “those of the circumcision.” And we see why he was confronted. Now, while this isn't the first time we have read of Gentiles coming to saving faith, it is the first time we have details about them coming en masse. So, what was it that got “those of the circumcision” so riled? If we look carefully, we will see that it wasn't the inclusion of Gentiles. Once again, that had been seen and accepted before. **Peter was accosted because he went into the home of Gentiles and ate with them!** This betrays one of the underlying issues.

First, define “those of the circumcision” and show where they pop up again.

They were most likely Pharisees who had believed. So, they were a “pressure group” within the church. (We read of them in Acts 15:5 and Gal. 2:12, et al.)

At this time, Gentiles could be accepted as believers, but as we shall see throughout the NT, there were some who thought this meant that they should now “become Jews” – and all that entailed. Paul will go out of his way throughout his ministry to make it clear that this is not so. Faith alone, was all that was necessary.

But “we Jews” have kept the Law all our lives!
Doesn't matter.

Shouldn't the Gentiles be made to be circumcised? (Hence the “name” of the group.)
This was a two- way street, and still is. Shouldn't or why can't the Jews now become like Gentiles? (leaving all their Jewish culture behind. Dietary restrictions)

These were two different cultures that normally dealt with each other at arm's length. Now they were being combined into one family! That can be a problem. Think of how awkward it can be when someone in your family marries someone from a different part of the country – let alone a different culture or a different country altogether!

Examples: Inner city vs. suburban; rural vs. city-folk; white and black, or Hispanic; American vs. European or Asian.

Think of the political ramifications: conservative vs. liberal. There were political issues between these groups. The Gentiles, particularly if they were Roman citizens, didn't have much issue with the Roman Empire, but the Jews did. How would this effect the family, known as the church? How would they now deal with all of this? These things figure into "church politics" today.

Now, maybe we can see what undergirds all of this. It wasn't just a simple issue. And it isn't so simple today either.

Peter, as an answer, told them what happened. And what we read is essentially a re-telling of what we read in chapter 10.

Question: Why would Luke "waste" precious space in the book to repeat something he had already written?

Answer: When you see a repletion – a doublet, you concentrate on the differences, not the similarities.

4 But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me. 6 When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.' 9 But the voice answered me again from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' 10 Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven. 11 At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. 12 Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, 14 who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered the word of

the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 17 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?”

What were the differences?

1. In verse 14, Peter tells us that what he had to say to Cornelius would result in his household being saved. We didn’t read that in chapter 10. Luke didn’t suppose that Cornelius was already ‘saved’ and that the message of Jesus was just an addendum to a ‘salvation’ he already possessed. We talked about that last week.
2. In chapter 11, Peter emphasizes that the Holy Spirit fell on the people as he was speaking. So, he brings emphasis to the sovereignty of the Spirit as He worked in the hearts of the hearers – particularly, in this case – Gentile hearers. I imagine this was necessary, being that he was confronted in such a manner. He passed the buck to God!
3. He mentions the words of Jesus in Acts 1:5, which are quoted in verse 16. He reminds his accusers of how Jesus said this very thing would happen in short succession to what was experienced with John’s baptism.

Peter is bringing up things that help him to make his case in the faces of those confronting him. He needed the ammo – all of which was true, in order to make his case. Once again, none of these people live in a vacuum. And neither do we. This is life! So, what was the reaction?

18 When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”

In verse 17, Peter posed the question, ‘If God chose to accept them, who was I to argue with Him?’

That was sound logic. And we read in verse 18, that no one could argue with him. Now, this issue will rear its ugly head again, but for now, while in the honeymoon period, it seems to be put on the shelf. Why is that? We shall see if we continue on in the text. But for now, Luke turns our focus to things happening Antioch. Don’t forget the verses we have just read, or the context behind them. They are an important set – up for this section. And this section will answer the question as to how the issue in Jerusalem can be handled when we run into it ourselves.

19 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. 20 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. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

22 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. 23 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. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Back to the dandelions – toponyms, outliers.
“If the saints are scattered, and if they are Spirit-filled, they do but scatter the seeds of the Kingdom, which is the Word of God.”
G. Campbell Morgan

Phoenicia and Antioch, important for eschatological reasons, but we won't worry about that right now.

Antioch – Syrian Antioch, not Antioch in Pisidia, (Acts 13:14). There were at least 16 cities with the same name at that time, spread around the Empire. This Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria. Its main street was 4 miles long, with marbled columns along each side, and was the only city in the empire with a street lit up at night. It had a port and was a crossroads for trade. It was thought to have had a population at the time of around half a million people, with approximately 1/7th of the population being Jews. A large contingent for a Greek city. This was a major anchor – point for the Gospel. Think, “location, location, location!”

Hellenists defined here – juxtaposed with ‘Jews’ in the preceding verse. Most likely Gentiles and not ‘Hellenistic’ Jews as we have seen in prior passages.

Many ‘Hellenists’ believed! A revival was taking place in Antioch, so Barnabas was sent to check on things.

But why Barnabas? While he wasn't an apostle, he was a man from Cyprus. And this evangelistic

campaign was begun, as we read, by men from Cyprus. They had something in common. It just made good sense, for cultural reasons. Can you see the logic here? But there were other reasons Barnabas was sent. Look at his qualifications.

23 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. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith! His name means, 'son of encouragement.' Besides having something in common with those who had begun the work, in a cultural sense, he was qualified because he was a Spirit-filled man of faith. This led to him being seen as a good man by others. And his demeanor was one of encouragement. The filling of the Spirit led to all his other attributes. Think about that. He was also a humble man and quickly realized that he couldn't do what needed to be done, alone. So, he went for help. And who would be best qualified to help anchor a work like this? Well, let's see.

25 Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 26 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.

Saul had been in Tarsus for about 10 years now. Presumably teaching and debating friends, family and leaders of the local synagogue.

Barnabas was able to spot Saul's gift and saw that he would be able to move in both Jewish and Gentile circles, due to his education and background.

He and Barnabas taught there for a year, bolstering the young church there.

"Christians" – (After all, that is all they talk about...) most likely a pejorative at first. But it stuck, and eventually, the church wore the once derisive term as a badge.

27 And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 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. 29 Then the disciples, each according to his ability,

determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. 30 This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Agabus, the first prophet mentioned in the NT economy. (Not talking about OT prophets being quoted in the NT)

He predicted a famine, which did occur and was at its worst in Palestine. We are told about the famine by Josephus who said it reached its zenith around 46, 47 AD. (Quotes like this show the reliability of the NT.)

What the reaction of the people? They immediately determined to give, each “according to their ability.”

Their concern wasn't for themselves. They didn't run. They didn't hoard. I'm sure they were prudent, but their first reaction was to send money, ahead of the famine to those who would have been most vulnerable – those in Jerusalem.

Barnabas saw the grace of God!

How/ what did he see?

1. He saw the believing Jews accept the Gentiles – and that entailed.

2. He saw them encourage the Gentiles.
3. He saw the Gentiles come out of their pockets for the believing Jews. (Remember all the tension that would naturally have been between them? Cultural political, etc.?)
4. He saw them, the believing Jews, receive help from the Gentiles.

The only way, and I'm not saying it is easy, especially in the polarized, political days in which we live, to get along with believers who don't necessarily have the same culture or political views we do, is to see them/ us as all being in the same family. That is not easy! I know! I have my political opinions and believe I can back them up with reams of facts. But that doesn't mean all other Christians will agree. I have my own cultural quirks. And those can be off-putting to others, as their quirks can be for me. But the only way, as we have seen here, to get past these things is to see our fellow Christians with whom, on some things, we may disagree, as Christians first of all! That is what quieted those who jumped in the face of Paul. And it is the only thing that can unify the church in times like these. Most any issue is worth discussing. There are some that may even be "hills to die on." But nothing of a non-essential nature should be allowed to disrupt the unity that is brought by the filling of the Spirit, as we

are all brought into the same body, as a family – the Body of Christ!