

Acts 04-01-30a

This is Friday, the 30th of January, 2004. We continue our study beginning in Acts chapter 11, verse 1 tonight, and as we do so, let's take a moment at the beginning to focus our attention and our concentration and go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, thank you for preserving us and allowing us to come to this moment in our lives where we can lay aside, at least for a time, the pressures and cares and concerns of our existence and refresh ourselves through the truth of your Word.

We pray that God the Holy Spirit will make it clear to us and help us to remember it and see its applicability as we continue to seek our path in the light and through the narrow gate that leads to life. We pray it in Jesus' name, amen.

Well, at long last we have arrived at Acts chapter 11. We took a few steps forward and a few steps back, but here we are. Peter went down there to Caesarea at the request of Cornelius and delivered a great sermon. He saw the vision of the animals let down in the sheet.

Then he worked his way back toward Jerusalem. This is where we pick up in chapter 11. Now, the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the Word of God.

When Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him. This is a harbinger. This is a foreshadowing of trouble to come.

Those who were circumcised took issue with him. Who are the ones who are circumcised? In our great view of the world there, we know that these are Jewish people, and specifically these are going to be the Hebrew of the Hebrew types, right? Those of the circumcision. These are ones about whom the Apostle Paul will write in other letters when he says, "Those who seek to circumcise you, I wish that they themselves even were cut off."

It's very strong language. But so far, when you think of events in Jerusalem—Day of Pentecost, Peter preaching—those who were gathered recognized Christ. There is a response to the message that Jesus was indeed the Christ. Many people are added to the church. It grows. It expands.

Ananias and Sapphira. There's a little bit of a correction there. And about as many people as are going to accept Christ in the Jewish community in Jerusalem specifically have done so.

But remember, these are people that have a lot of baggage. They have a lot of history. They have a lot of ingrained belief coming from their upbringing in the Law of Moses.

So, apostles and brethren throughout Judea—Jesus said, "You shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, Judea, and in Samaria until the end of the age." Well, this is the Jerusalem-Judea enclave. Apostles and brethren throughout Judea heard.

Now, isn't this the way it always is? Something unusual happened down there with Cornelius and these Gentiles. And there were some witnesses. There were three Gentile messengers that came up and collected Peter. There were six brethren who went back down with him.

Well, when I was growing up in Oklahoma, they used to say, you know, there's telephone, telegraph, and tell a woman, and that's the fastest way to broadcast information was these. It's a quick way to get something thrown at me. But, you know, gossip tends to travel as fast as electricity is the idea behind that.

Well, obviously, the word preceded Peter back to Jerusalem that he had fellowshiped with Gentiles. He had preached the Word of God to Gentiles. He had entered their house, broken bread with them. And, of course, the full story didn't make it back. It was just this hot news, this controversial, electrifying news that here, this foremost of the apostles had been having truck with Gentiles.

And so everybody is jumping to conclusions. And, well, what's this going to do to the church? Big controversy. If they'd had six o'clock news, this would have been on it. If they'd had 20/20 or Nightline, it would have been all over the Jewish community. That's how it was.

So, by the time Peter gets to Jerusalem, there's already this thing boiling. Those who were circumcised took issue with him. Now, the word translated “took issue” in the New American Standard, or “contended” in the New King James, verse 2 in chapter 11, is an interesting word. It's a compound word formed from the preposition *dia*, which is through, D-I-A, and the word *krino*, which means to judge.

And the idea here is to judge through or to judge thoroughly. If you go through something, you've pretty well gotten it from A to Z, from top to bottom or whatever. So they've already sort of drawn it. There's a foregone conclusion. There's an opinion that's already formed. They have a prejudice that has formed.

Now, it says contended, but it's really quite a bit stronger than that. This is, they've sort of already been judge and jury. “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

In Greek, this is ones having uncircumcision. The ones from the circumcision said, “You came in to men having uncircumcision and you ate with them.” But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying, now, we're going to get a review.

It doesn't just say Peter explained what happened in chapter 10. It gives us all the details. Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet.”

It's not an object; it's a vessel, *skeuos*. Let down from heaven by four corners, and it came to me. When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things. This is *herpetos*, the word we get herpetology from, lizards and reptile-type of things. That's what the creeping things is translating there.

And birds of the air, literally birds of the heavens, *ouranos*. The same word is used. See, I wish they would just be consistent. He says it was let down from heaven, that's *ouranos*. And then it says birds of the heaven, but they changed it to birds of the air. There's no word for air there. It's birds of the heaven.

And I heard a voice saying to me, “Rise, Peter”—this is an aorist participle—“having risen, Peter, kill and eat.” But I said, “Not so, Lord, for nothing common or unclean”—common there is *koine*, by the way, the same word we use for Koine Greek—“nothing *koine*, nothing unclean, has at any time entered my mouth.”

You know what I find interesting about this? Do you remember back in the Gospels when Jesus and the disciples were under the scrutiny of the Pharisees and the scribes? What were they accused of? “Your disciples eat with unwashed hands.” Remember that?

And Jesus gave the lecture about it's not what goes into a man that defiles him, it's what comes out. But they were accused of being defiled and of defiling themselves by eating with unwashed hands by the Pharisees back when Jesus was in their midst.

But Peter says to the Lord, “Nothing unclean or common has at any time entered my mouth.” And so he understood and believed what Jesus told him, that it is not what goes in that defiles, it's what comes out. But he had been accused of that in the past.

“Nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth. But the voice answered me again from heaven, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.”

Why, by the way, would the sheet be let down from heaven and drawn up again into heaven? Why didn't it just appear and disappear? You have to ask yourself these questions. It could have come just suddenly: behold, I saw. But it comes down from heaven and goes back up into heaven.

Why is that? Why does it come down three times? Why not four times? Why not twice? I asked myself. Well, three, of course, is a number of completeness with emphasis on the divine. It's the number of divine perfection.

Seven is the number of perfection on earth. Four is the number of man. You add the perfect number of God and the number of man together. When they are in harmony and added together, you get seven, which is the number of perfection or completeness on earth.

Three is also the number of witness: in the mouth of two or three, things established. So three times—we saw this with the messengers sent by Saul to slay David in our 1 Samuel study—three times they came. Three times the Spirit hit them and they prophesied. And the first time you could say it's a fluke. The second time you could say it's a coincidence. But the third time you have to say this is divine intervention.

So Peter gets this same exact sequence three times. It is a message from God that is emphasized by the fact that these unclean animals and reptiles and things come down from heaven. Now, nothing can come down from heaven unless it's holy. So not only does the voice say God has cleansed these, but they come down from heaven and they go back up into heaven. And everyone knows that there's nothing in heaven but what is holy. Right?

So this is another confirmation. The voice testifies to their holiness. The descent from heaven testifies to their holiness. The ascent into heaven testifies to their holiness.

Jesus Himself is said to have descended and ascended. Remember, I think it's in Ephesians where it says, "And who is he that ascended but he that first descended into the lower parts of the earth?" And people say, well, the lower parts—He went to Sheol, Hades, or something. No, lower parts. We're living in the lower parts. Compared to heaven, this is the lower parts.

And who is he that ascended but he that first descended into the lower parts? That is the earth. There's whole huge tomes and doctrines and big long discussions about how this verse supports Jesus going down and it ties in with preaching to the souls. None of that.

The whole idea is, you ought to understand him ascending because he's the same one that descended. Now, if on the day of ascension they went out to the Mount of Olives, and then Jesus said to the disciples, "Now watch this," and a great hole opened up and he went down to Hades, and then he ascended from Hades, then it would make sense. "Who is he that ascended from Hades but he that first descended into Hades?" You see the parallel there? The descent and the ascent are paralleled.

Who is he that ascended from the Mount of Olives into heaven but he that first descended from heaven to the earth? It's the same trip. It's a round-trip ticket is the idea.

Boy, heaven help you if you're a male and traveling in the airport and you don't have a round-trip ticket. You just better wear loafers because you will have to take your shoes off. They will put the wand on you. You will have to take all your luggage apart. And that's one of the criteria for you getting the pink card or whatever it is that makes you go through the long security, is one-way ticket. Round-trip ticket, they figure, well, you've got plans. You're not going to blow yourself up, I guess. That's what I was told by a security guy at the airport.

So, three times it is witnessed in the vision. Three different aspects of the holiness of these formerly common and unclean animals: the voice testifies, the descent from heaven, the ascent to heaven. So, you have two different sets of three here.

"At that very moment, how many men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea?" Three. Three Gentile messengers from Caesarea. "The Spirit told me go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover, these six brethren"—and Peter motions to the six men next to him.

By the way, how many Jewish men from Caesarea slash Joppa does that make testifying in Jerusalem? Seven. You have seven total: Peter plus the six. These six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.

You have three Gentiles. You have six Jewish men mentioned. There's twice as many Jewish men as there are Gentiles. I don't know if it's significant or not, but I always think of the time before Jesus as being 4,000 years, the time after Jesus as being 2,000 years. Twice as long for the Old Testament age as you have for the New Testament age. You have twice as many Old Testament guys standing there as you had New Testament guys coming up from Caesarea. It may or may not be valid to see that there, but it's interesting.

These six brethren—why do you say these brethren accompanied me? Why does it mention the number? The number six. They accompanied me. We entered the man's house. Of course, you could also wonder if Peter is spreading the blame. Like, it wasn't just me. These six guys went in there with me also. Don't throw rocks at me. If you hang me, you have to hang us all.

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, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.” And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them as upon us at the beginning.

What is the beginning? Beginning of the church age. When did the Holy Spirit fall? Day of Pentecost. If anybody wonders, when did the church age begin? Peter says the beginning is when the Holy Spirit fell on us. That's the day of Pentecost.

Now, does it make sense why God attached temporary sign manifestations to the presence of the Spirit in the early days of the church? When you and I got saved, the Holy Spirit suddenly came and accomplished His five-fold salvation ministry of regeneration, baptism, sealing, filling, and indwelling, right? But to my knowledge, none of us went into any kind of a jibber-jabber or spoke a foreign language or healed anyone. We didn't see a tongue of fire sitting on our head, right?

But this happened in the early days. Why? Well, one good reason is right here. Look at the testimony. The Jews had no doubt that the Holy Spirit fell on them because of those manifestations. And they had no doubt that the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles because the very same manifestations signaled the coming of the Spirit on the Gentiles.

And it was necessary that there be a visible manifestation. You can't just have Cornelius saying, “I feel the Spirit,” and the Jews say, “Yeah, right. You're a Gentile. You don't get the Spirit.” He says, “But I've got the Spirit.” Well, how do we know? So you say, well, there is no doubt because of these sign manifestations.

So the Holy Spirit fell upon them as upon us at the beginning. Then Peter says in verse 16, “I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”

Now, there's more to this than meets the eye. What was the baptism of John? It was a baptism of change of mind with a view toward sin. Gospel of Mark, first chapter, and the other Gospels as well. John baptized with water, change of mind with a view toward sin.

Was it Jews or Gentiles getting dunked in the Jordan by John? Jews. John baptized with water. You, plural, shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit. The you, plural, that Jesus used there, Peter is implying, would seem to encompass more than just Israel. John's baptism only encompassed Israel. Baptism of the Spirit has obviously been broadened to go beyond Israel.

“If therefore, verse 17, God gave them the same gift 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 with a view toward life.”

What does it mean that God has granted repentance? A Calvinist will say these depraved, hopeless, helpless, useless, always choosing sin, impossible to choose God people, have been injected with efficacious grace which has enabled them, and indeed caused them, to choose for God. This is the Calvinist view. This is the Reformed view.

God has granted to the Gentiles repentance with a view toward life. The reason I translate that as with a view toward is because of the preposition *eis*, which literally means into, but quite often means unto, or with a view toward. It is the very same word that is used about the baptism of John: baptism of repentance with a view toward the forgiveness of sins.

Here, instead of the forgiveness of sins, which was attached to the baptism for Israel, which was a restoration for believers, a return to God for the wayward and apostate, here, these are Gentiles who are alienated from the life of God, as Paul puts it, enemies of God, without hope, without God in the world, and they are repenting with a view toward life.

John's baptism is not with a view toward life; it is with a view toward forgiveness. This is the operational forgiveness that believers need when they fail.

So, they acknowledge, they are forced to admit, because of the supernatural testimony that God gave to Peter, and to all of those—He's got six witnesses, two times three—to the fact that the Spirit fell on the Gentiles. So,

they are forced to admit God has granted to the Gentiles the opportunity. The idea here is repentance with a view toward life. This is the opportunity. God has opened the door.

It doesn't mean He has forced it on them, that He has coerced them into it, or that He is the cause of it, but He has granted them the opportunity. This is like the Powerball Lotto they've got here in Texas. It's a multi-state lottery that has been opened up so that people in Texas can play this Powerball Lottery.

So you could say, well, the Lottery Commission has given the citizens of Texas the Powerball Lottery. Well, they haven't given it to me, but the opportunity has been opened up for people to do that, if they're silly enough to do so. Same idea here.

So, what is the upshot of these first 18 verses? What God has done is a *fait accompli*. It is marked out with divine testimony. Whenever God is doing something new, He accompanies it with signs that indicate that this is authentic. It is a verifiable action of God changing the dispensation, changing the rules of the game, if you will. And it is undeniable. Even those who are loathe to admit it are forced to do so.

But you'll see that these of the circumcision are not going to go very far down this road. We're going to see some backlash from them in the not-too-distant future.

Now, verse 19. 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.

Now, these people, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, this is the first ripple of the wave of the dispersion that Peter is going to write specifically to in his epistles. And when you go to 1 Peter 1:1 and 2, you see the wide variety of places to which the Jews of the diaspora, or the dispersion, have been scattered.

Here, these Christians scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word only to the Jews. 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.

These are Jewish Christians, but they are from, just like Paul is from Tarsus, these are from Cyprus and Cyrene. You remember Simon of Cyrene? There is a fairly large Jewish presence in that area, as well as Cyprus and Tarsus and other places. So when these people go back and hook up with their old communities, they not only preach Christ to fellow Jews, but also to the Hellenists.

Who are the Hellenists again? These are the Greekified Jews that are kind of on the fringe. They are almost considered like Samaritans on the part of some, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Verse 21: "The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord." 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.

Why Barnabas? He is also a Greekified Jew. They figured, you are a Greek-speaking guy, you are a cultural Greek guy, you will be the best man to go. You can communicate with them.

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. Of course, encouraging is his middle name. Barnabas literally means son of encouragement.

So he is encouraging them that with purpose of heart, they should continue with the Lord. And if there is one thing that we ought to encourage one another to, and encourage ourselves to, it is to continue with purpose of heart with the Lord. We don't always understand. We don't always have everything lined up in neat rows and columns. But it is a matter of purpose. It is a matter of perseverance.

I think about that lady that was swimming the distance between—was it Florida and Cuba?—and the fog set in, and a little rain squall came over. And she was swimming and swimming, and had a little shark cage around her, dragging along. She swam and swam and swam and swam, but it was dark and she couldn't see. And she didn't know how much further there was to go. And she finally gave up and crawled into the boat. And they were like only just very close.

If she had known how close she was, she would have finished. I forget how close she was. It was 200 yards or something. It was really close. Another little bit, and she would have been there. But because she didn't know, and she got discouraged, so then she went back a year later and swam the whole thing. A little better conditions that time.

And you know the old saying, it's always darkest before the dawn. But what I find as more comforting is that God knows exactly what the distance is, and He knows that we can swim it. There's no testing that befalls us but what's common in man. We're never tested above what we're able to bear.

And if there's one thing I learned as a midshipman, it is that I can bear a whole lot more than I think I can. There are innumerable times, and maybe you've had a similar experience, where you're in sort of a forced situation. I would say the epitome of that is when I was in an eight-oar shell rowing crew. And there is an 11-mile row that goes up the Severn River. It goes up five and a half miles and goes around an island and comes back down.

Well, you're in this boat, and you've got to pull your weight, one-eighth of the weight of the boat and the coxswain and so on. And once you start, I mean, there is no stopping. You can't say, "Oh, I'm tired," and ship your oar and let the other seven guys row you around. I mean, you have to keep going. You have to stay exactly synchronized. You have to row no matter what.

Well, you know, I did fine the first five and a half miles up there and going around the island and a couple of miles back. But then toward the end, the coach says, "Okay, now we're going to take up the stroke rate to 34 or 35 or 36 or 37." And when you get up in the 30s, I mean, you're doing better than two strokes—I mean, it's fast. And I mean, it's like a stroke every two seconds or better, a stroke in less than two seconds.

And the racing rate is up in the high 30s. And at a sprint, you even get up over 40. And you have to be perfect. You cannot be off by an inch or your oar will catch and it will fling you out of the boat, which has happened to me.

But if you think halfway back that last five and a half miles, when for me, being an inexperienced oarsman, all of the skin was gone off my hands and I was down into the meat and there's blood on my oar handle—the blisters long ago formed, popped, and left—and now we're getting down into serious sensations of pain. Of course, the salt water of the Chesapeake is splashing up into it. That doesn't help any.

But you cannot quit. And you say, "I don't think I can take another stroke," but you have to. What are you going to do? Stop and have seven guys and the coach with it? The coach has got his blazer and he's in the little motorboat going along beside. He's got his ball cap and his whistle and he's having a good time. But it's the eight guys rowing.

And anyway, the point is you find out that your mind starts telling you to quit long before you actually need to quit. This is true if you're running. It's true if you're doing almost anything. Laundry can do that to me. I can decide I'm not sure I can finish the laundry.

But the same is true in our spiritual life. We can do a lot more than we think we can. And it is only when you get into that area beyond what you think you can do and before where you actually can't keep going, this is where growth takes place.

When you push beyond your strength, lifting weights, when you push beyond your endurance when you're running, this is what you spend all your time getting to. You push yourself to get to that point because that's where you make your money. That's where your endurance builds. That's where your strength builds.

You don't build. You're just barely doing maintenance if you stay in your comfort zone. It's when you get beyond your comfort zone that you build muscle, that you build endurance, that your cardiovascular strength and everything else. And it's equally true in the spiritual realm.

So what's the point here? These people who have been scattered and now they're being preached to, and the word comes back in Jerusalem. The Son of Encouragement, he says, "Continue with the Lord." Yes, you've been scattered. Yes, you've been persecuted. Maybe you've lost property. Maybe you're still in fear for your life. Continue with the Lord.

Even if you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, don't give up. This is where you're making your money. This is where you're building your strength. Anybody can operate in the comfort zone. But you start finding out who has the endurance that reaps a reward when you get into this area.

He encouraged them all 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 guess what? When you and I are full of the Holy Spirit and we are full of the faith, whether you ever say a word, you are an encouragement to others.

Wouldn't it be great to have your name in the immortal, eternal Word of God as a good man or a good woman full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith? I cannot think of a higher accolade ever than the one Barnabas receives right here. God's Word, the mind of Christ, says he's a good man full of faith and full of the Spirit.

And a great many people were added to the Lord. God made sure that he was in the right place at the right time. He's gifted in the area of encouragement. He didn't go seeking a ministry. He didn't start Barnabas Ministries Incorporated. He just was a good man full of faith in the Holy Spirit. The church recognized that and sent him because he was obviously the man for the job.

And many, many people are encouraged. Many, many people are going to persevere and receive their reward in the face of persecution, in the face of uncertainty, because of his faith and because of what God can do through him.

Well, then in verse 25 it says, "Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul." Well, now this is a turn, and that's what we're going to pick up with when we come back from the break.

But let us be encouraged just like these others to maintain a purpose of heart to continue with the Lord. There's a great old song that says, "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. Our trials will seem so small when we see Christ. One glimpse of His dear face all sorrows will erase, when we have run the race, when we see Christ." And there's a great biblical principle in that song.

Well, let's pause here and take our break. When we come back, we'll pick up in verse 25.