

BIB204 NT2 Early Church

Unit 3d

Evangelization of the Gentiles

Presented by the



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So we dealt in the last segment with the significance of Peter's action. So if we contextualize it then, stepping back from the narrative of it, Peter receives his vision. It occurs three times. He is primed by that vision, by his conversation with the Lord at a trance, to use the key of the kingdom of heaven. He goes to Cornelius, acknowledging the highly unusual nature of the interaction of a Jew and Gentile, in the Gentile's house, no less. He preaches the gospel. He exercises the key. The Gentiles believe. The Holy Spirit falls on them and demonstrates to the Jewish believers who are there, in their minds, unlawfully, that Gentiles also will receive life eternal, validating what Jesus said in his ministry, as recorded in the gospels, when he healed the servant of a centurion at Capernaum, where he said, "Many will come from the east and the west and will sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom will be thrust into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And I want to get you that particular reference so that you can look at it later at your leisure. And that is in chapter 8 of Matthew. And I'll give you the verses. It is Matthew 8:5-13, just so you have the reference.

So we are now here in Acts 11 and we're going to start with verse 19, the ramifications, the aftermath of Peter's use of that key, resulting in the conversion of a Gentile household. "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word to no one except Jews." What that tells us is they were preaching the gospel, but they were preaching it to diaspora Jews. They were preaching it to Palestinian Jews. But they weren't preaching it to Gentiles. The message was culturally focused, culturally restricted at this time. Notice what Luke does in his narrative. He juxtaposes this description beginning in 11:19 with what Peter just did in Caesarea, which was right next door, practically speaking, to Joppa.

But then you read in verse 20 of chapter 11, "But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus." The term Hellenists is what the modern versions often use because the manuscript evidence for 'the Greeks', which is the variant reading, is late. The manuscript evidence is late. However, in context, what textual critics call internal evidence, 'Hellenists' is probably not the word that is used here. What Luke probably wrote, when one weighs the evidence externally and internally, is some men from Cyprus and Cyrene, those would be Hellenistic Jews. Those would be diaspora Jews. They live outside of Palestine. They are close. Cyprus is in the Mediterranean. It's an island. Cyrene is on the mainland. It's adjacent to the province of Syria where Tarsus and Cilicia were found in the 1st century. Tarsus being the home of Saul. So these men do not live in Palestine proper. They are Hellenized. They are exposed to Gentiles on a regular basis.

So something happens. At first, the message of the gospel is culturally focused. It's given to Jews only. But at some point, these Hellenized Jews begin speaking to Gentiles, Greeks. The term Greeks is often used in context in the New Testament as a synonym of sorts for Gentiles. So the way that the term is used here in Acts, according to Dr. Luke, when you see the word Greeks, you'll find that in the King James and the New King James, I believe. The term Greeks is used, not Hellenists. Most of the versions use the term Hellenists, but it doesn't fit contextually, so I take the reading Greeks and I take that to mean Gentiles. So these Hellenized Jews begin to speak to Gentiles.

And the point that I want to raise with this is that what Peter does in exercising, in using the key of the kingdom of heaven here is it causes a sudden shift. There is a corresponding shift in the outreach of the gospel where those who are scattered from Jerusalem are concerned. It's almost as though if you think

of the body of Christ, (it's a ready-made metaphor for us in the New Testament), the body of Christ suddenly is in conformity to what happened in Caesarea via the apostle Peter's ministry to uncircumcised Gentiles. All of a sudden, or at least Luke puts it together for us that way, so you can see the connection at the very least, with Peter's action, all of a sudden, the door is opened for the evangelization of Gentiles.

Now, of course, it is entirely possible that verse 19 begins sometime after the confrontation in Jerusalem that we read about in verses 1 to 18. At which point, "Oh, well, Peter evangelized Cornelius, so it must be okay for us to evangelize Gentiles." And so they go ahead and do that. That's entirely possible and the text can be read that way and there's no harm done. But it is also equally possible to read the text in the way that I proposed at first, which is that Peter's action causes a corresponding change, kind of like changing a cell in an Excel spreadsheet causes a corresponding change all across the spreadsheet. Change one item; everything else changes. So Peter's action opens the door to the evangelization of the Gentiles. So these men suddenly start speaking to Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus.

"And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch." From Jerusalem. So they heard about this. "Oh, yeah, Gentiles are getting converted." Not everyone in Jerusalem is against Gentiles coming to faith in Christ, the Messiah. So the ears of the church in Jerusalem, that means the apostolic council, Peter and James and John at the very least, arguably the other apostles. And they go, "Well, yeah, Peter, I mean, you evangelized... It's clear that God has opened the door for Gentiles, so let's send Barnabas so that he can come back with a report as to what's going on. He can exercise a stabilizing influence." Perhaps they said something like that. They sent Barnabas to Antioch, which is a province of Syria in the north.

"When he came and saw the grace of God (verse 23), he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose." So he encourages them. "For he was a good man (verse 24), full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord." So people were coming to saving faith. So what does Barnabas do? Barnabas is the one who introduced Saul to the disciples. And as we find out from Saul, from Paul's description in the Galatians' letter, it's just Peter, James, and John. So Barnabas knows of Saul, certainly. So what does he do? He travels north. Well, for him, it would be traveling westward. From Antioch in Syria, he entered into Tarsus, which was in Cilicia. And he found Paul, called Saul at this time, and brought him back to Antioch. And that's what we read in the next verse. He brought him to Antioch when he had found him. "For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christianoi or Christians." Like Christ. People like Christ.

"In those days (verse 27) prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. Barnabas was sent first, and now you have prophets going down to Antioch. They are sent over there, probably to establish a church, to exhort them, to encourage them. "And one of them (verse 28) named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine all over the world." All over the inhabited world, that is. "This took place in the days of Claudius Caesar." Now, Claudius Caesar reigned from 41 to 54. And after he died in 54, Nero Caesar took over and reigned from 54 to 68. So the subsequent chapters, chapter 12 in particular, we read about the death of Herod. That would be Herod Agrippa I. And so what we have here then is a prophecy that there would be a great famine and it happened in the

days of Claudius. So verse 29, “The disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.” Jews and Gentiles. Antioch is the first church where Jews and Gentiles are combined into one body. So they all decide to send relief because they know Judea will be hard-hit. “They did so, sending it back to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.”

Now, what we know historically, and this was actually a PhD thesis done by an individual by the name of GAPP. I think around 1934, he wrote this thesis for Harvard Divinity School. And one of the items that he treated in this thesis was the famine in that part of the world, which apparently was caused by the Nile overflowing its banks and thereby over-irrigating crops, grain in particular. Whenever that happened, the grain would be destroyed. It would die. At that point, Egypt was effectively the breadbasket, or at least a breadbasket, for that part of the known world. And so the Nile overflowed its banks sometime in the year 43, so this fits quite well within the reign of Claudius Caesar, early on in his reign. And that’s the significance of that historical note that Luke makes. So the Nile overflows its banks, and when that happens, it causes a cascading effect. Egypt is in the south, and so the loss of grain means that grain won’t be exported. And so Judea, which is the closest part of Palestine to it, would not receive the normal supply of grain. That would spread upward through Samaria, which is in Central Palestine. It would spread northward and then it would spread outward towards Rome. So once it passed the northernmost tip of Palestine, it would just spread throughout the inhabited world. It would now turn westward and it would affect people all the way up to Rome, the inhabited world. Now, of course, those who were of means, the wealthy, would hardly feel the loss of grain because they could afford to purchase all of the available supplies of grain as a group, *en masse*. So they would hardly feel it. They would just spend a bit more money. But for people who were of limited means, who were lower middle class and below, it would be catastrophic. And that is the historical background behind what eventually happens as a result of Agabus’ prophecy. And so they realized this in Antioch. And they are in the north, in Syria, and so they determine to help those in Judea who are not people of means. And they send it to the elders. That’s a catchall term, the elders, in verse 30, for apostles and teachers at Jerusalem, but primarily apostles. They send it by the hand of Barnabas himself.

That takes us into chapter 12. We read, “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.” That would be Herod Agrippa I, again. And we find in verse 2 that he killed James the son of Zebedee with a sword. “When he saw that it pleased the Jews...” So there’s opposition in Jerusalem. That’s the first thing that you see just by reading that little part of verse 3. “It pleased the Jews.” So there’s opposition there. The persecution that broke out with the martyrdom of Stephen is still there, curdling under the surface, breaking out every now and then. “It pleased the Jews, so he proceeded to arrest Peter also.” Peter being the de facto leader at Jerusalem. He arrests the leader. “This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.” So assuming that this is... And this is probably in AD 44. So the Nile overflows its banks in 43. The effects are being felt in 44. This is a general portrait that’s being painted. It’s a reconstruction, of course. And Peter is arrested. James has been beheaded. According to Josephus, he is beheaded. You also have that record here in verse 2 of chapter 12.

So Peter is put in prison (verse 4). He is delivered over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, with an intention to display him after the Passover. So Peter is kept in prison, but the church at Jerusalem is praying for him earnestly. Herod is about to bring him out (verse 6). On that very night, Peter is sleeping between two soldiers. He is bound with two chains. There are sentries before the door guarding the prison. So he’s covered. And all of a sudden, an angel of the Lord stands next to him (verse 7). A light shines in the cell. He strikes Peter on the side, gets him up. The doors of the cell swing open. The two

guards don't pay any attention to him. They don't see anything. If you look at it, verse 8, the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." That's after he got up and the chains fell off his hands (prior verse). He said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." Verse 9, "He went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but he thought he was seeing a vision." Verse 10, "When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city."

Keep in mind, these first and second guards standing by the door do not see this event take place, which is remarkable. They're standing there and they do not perceive that an angel is leading Peter out of there. For all intents and purposes, they're standing there and this event just occurred and they were not cognizant of it. That is remarkable. They passed through the first and second guard. They came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened of its own accord. They went out, went along the street, and immediately the angel departed. And so Peter comes to himself. Apparently, he's in a special state of mind and he suddenly becomes aware of his surroundings. Something normalizes in Peter's experience and he says, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." "Now I am sure." In other words, it felt like a dream, but now, "Oh, this really happened." Very interesting. Remarkable.

"He realized this. He went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying." So that's a focal point for prayer. He knocked at the door of the gateway (verse 13). A servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. She recognized Peter's voice, but she didn't open the gate because she was so overjoyed. He ran in and reported that he was standing at the gate. Verse 15, they say to her, "You're crazy." No. They said, "You are out of your mind." She kept insisting that that was the case, and they kept saying, "It's his angel!" The meaning of that is basically, to make a long story short, to basically be brief about it, "It's his ghost you're seeing!" So they had some beliefs that they had to work through too. That's another subject well beyond the scope of our study. Peter continued knocking, and then they opened it, and they saw him (verse 16) and they were amazed. But he motioned to them to be quiet. So all of this is happening undercover. "And he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, 'Tell these things to James (the Lord's brother) and to the brothers.' Then he departed and went to another place." And chances are, it's probable that this is where he departs Jerusalem and he goes to Antioch and Syria. In other words, he gets completely out of Palestine because Herod Agrippa I does not have jurisdiction over the Syrian province. Someone else does. So he gets out. He has to leave Jerusalem.

Verse 18, day came. There was a major disturbance among the soldiers. There was no little disturbance. Major disturbance over what had become of Peter. Verse 19, "Herod searched for him and did not find him. He examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death." Because he didn't understand what happened and he probably thought they were lying, that they had been paid or something, so he accuses them of malfeasance and he kills them. "Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent some time there." Caesarea, which is where Cornelius and his family and his friends were converted. We read in verse 20 that "Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord. They persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, and they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food." He had no jurisdiction over Tyre and Sidon, which was outside of Palestine. He went from Caesarea, outside of Palestine, and it was basically a state visit to another province. And these people wanted to make nice with Herod Agrippa I because they needed the export. This is all in light of the Nile overflowing its banks, and so on and so forth.

So “Herod puts on his royal robes (verse 21) on an appointed day. He takes his seat upon the throne and delivers an oration to them. And the people were shouting, ‘The voice of a god, and not of a man!’ And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory. He was eaten by worms and breathed his last. Josephus records the event for us. Apparently, Herod Agrippa I was clothed in a garment that was silvered, had a silver aspect to it. So when the sun hit it, he looked magnificent. His oration was of such a magnitude, such impact and effect that he overdid himself. He outdid himself and the people that were listening to him were inordinately impressed with the speech. And in all likelihood, and truthfully (this is the word of God), some people likened him to a god because of his oration, because of the quality of his voice, because of the effect of his voice. And God struck him dead. According to Josephus, he was suddenly stricken with stomach pains, and within five days, he was dead.

Verse 24, “But the word of God increased and multiplied.” So Herod basically tries to stop the church in its tracks by killing one leader of the church, beheading him, and imprisoning another, intending to execute him also, to strike fear into the church and to restrict their movement, to hamper them. But in the end, it works out that he himself dies of stomach ailment where he decays from the inside out. He is eaten from the inside out. He has worms and dies. But the word of God increases and multiplies. No Herod Agrippa is going to stop the spread of the gospel. And Peter escapes. He goes to Antioch in Syria. And then you read verse 25. “Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.”

So verse 25 is interesting in the sense that it implies very strongly that Barnabas and Saul were there for the events that we just read about. So 12:1 to 12:24, Barnabas and Saul are there, which means that they are probably at the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name is Mark (verse 12 of chapter 12). Many have gathered together and praying. They were probably praying for Peter too, which means that you have to go back to chapter 11 then and you need to look at verse 30. They sent the contribution to the brothers living in Judea by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. But about that time, Herod killed James, imprisoned Peter. So this may have happened when Barnabas and Saul got to Jerusalem. At the moment they get to Jerusalem, James is martyred. Peter is taken into prison. Or James may have been martyred and then they get to Jerusalem. Peter is taken prisoner. They come into a situation where they find out Peter is imprisoned and they join with the church at Jerusalem to pray for him. Either option is fine. Either option will work. But they get there, and while they’re praying, they distribute the contribution that is given to them.

Galatians also sheds light on this because it tells us... And I’m going to take you to Galatians, if you would. Please come with me to the letter to the Galatians. And that will be in chapter 2, I believe, at the beginning of 2:1. “Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles.” So 14 years after his conversion, you have to roll in the three years prior in 1:18. That is included within the 14 years. It is not an add-on. So it’s not 17 years. It’s 14 years. So 14 years after his conversion, Paul goes up to Jerusalem. Assuming that... I lost my train of thought. How about that? Let’s see if I can regain it by looking at the text. Yes. Assuming Paul’s conversion takes place early on. I suggested some dates. It wouldn’t be AD 32. It’s probably AD 33 or AD 34. That means that we’re looking at a date ranging anywhere from AD 46, 47, 48. The dates are suggested dates. Nothing has been nailed down. I need to make that note for you. The dates are not nailed down. These dates are debated in the field. So these are estimates. But the

picture is true enough. It's a portrait that we are painting here in terms of reconstruction. So this is 14 years after his conversion, so this is AD 46 to 47 thereabouts. He goes up to Jerusalem with Barnabas. That's where they take the contribution to the saints. So this is where Galatians 2 sheds light on the requisite passage in the Book of Acts that we are studying. And as it turns out, Titus went with them and Titus is a Gentile. He's an Antiochene Gentile, uncircumcised. He wasn't compelled to be circumcised. That's the matter that's dealt with in Galatians.

So back to the Book of Acts. So Acts 11:30, they go to the elders at Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul, and apparently Titus. And then you have this insertion in chapter 12, 12:1-24. Herod martyrs James, imprisons Peter. Peter is released, rescued by an angel from on high. He gets to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark. He tells the people there that he's all right. He gives further instructions and he goes to another place. The next day, Herod is nonplussed, not to mention the guards. They are nonplussed. They don't know what's going on. They've been put into a very bad position. They are executed. Herod has a state visit to Tyre and Sidon because the people have invited him over because they want to honor him so that he does not cut off provision from his own country to theirs. They need it desperately. Economics. He gives a speech that is memorable, and some assume and declare that he is like a god. He dies five days later. Stomach ailments. "But the word of God (verse 24) increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark." What's unspoken there in verse 25 is that Titus returns with them.

So 12:1-24 is sort of like a parenthetical insertion. It is placed there by Luke between 11:30 and 12:25, which would then imply very strongly that Barnabas and Saul were there for some or all of the events that are described in 12:1-24. And they returned to Antioch when they complete their service. Which leads us into chapter 13. And I'm just going to look at verses 1 to 3, and that will end the unit for today. "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul." So they are there. Prophets and teachers are there. "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting (verse 2), the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."

This commences the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Saul. Of course, as time goes on, the second and the third missionary journeys will be done by Saul and some other individuals. Timothy will effectively take the place, over time, of Barnabas. Effectively. But it could also be said that Saul flies solo. He has an apostolic party with him. Initially, however, after the breakup with Barnabas in terms of missionary evangelism, Titus will end up going with Paul back to the Galatian region where the first churches were founded. But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. We just want to focus on the first three verses. So here at Antioch, there is a worship service that's taking place. Some personages are named. And the Holy Spirit declares to that entire congregation, primarily the prophets and the teachers, a word from the Lord arrives, primarily to the prophets. That's why it says "prophets and teachers." And they know that the Lord is speaking to them. The Lord said, "Separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work that I have called them to," or "to which I have called them." So they fast and pray, and they lay their hands on these men, setting them apart for this work that the Lord has called them to.

And of course, if you remember last unit, we talked at length about Paul, Saul's conversion in chapters 9 and 22 and 26, correlating all of those chapters, bringing in the letter to the Galatians regarding his conversion and the implications, the ramifications thereof. And we've just studied in this unit today the aftermath of Saul's persecution, the gradual settling in of the church, the multiplication of the church because there is no longer any directed persecution. The arch-persecutor has now become a convert. It takes him three years to make his way to Jerusalem, to show himself. In the meantime, Paul is going back and forth. He's visiting other churches since the church has been scattered throughout. He sees conversions as a result of the healing of a bedridden man, the raising the dead of a believer who died of an illness. And from that, via communication from heaven and via vision in a trance and a directed voice of the Holy Spirit to him, he goes to the home of an uncircumcised Gentile by the name of Cornelius. He preaches to that whole household. The Gentiles are now included in the body. He suffers a bit of criticism, but he clarifies his position by explaining what happened, leading to their acceptance of the fact that Gentiles have now been judged as recipients, are now accepted as recipients of eternal life, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

All of that causes the sudden or parallel, sudden preaching to the Gentiles in the northernmost part of Palestine and beyond. But now with this church that is founded at Antioch, you now have a settling. You now have this church being established that's comprised of Jews and of Gentiles. And into that settled environment of worship, fasting, and prayer, God moves. And what we see in Acts 9 and 22 and 26 is that Paul's call, which he heard during that shadowing experience on the road to Damascus, now comes full circle. It is contextualized for him. He has known for years that he is going to be sent to the Gentiles. He was told by the risen Lord. He was told by Ananias who put his hands on him and restored his sight. And now here we've come full circle. The Holy Spirit says, "Separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them." And so Saul will now begin to embark on the specific work that he was called to.