

Notes on Acts 11–20

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Chapter Eleven

Gentile people had now received the word of God, however some at Jerusalem were concerned that it would threaten the purity of Israel's faith. It was important for Peter to recount the whole story in detail so that it would be apparent that God himself had brought about this inclusion of Gentiles among the people of God. It was important also, that the church receive this new revelation of the broadness of God's mercy, because God has a purpose, as Paul explained later, to reconcile all things to himself through Jesus Christ and the preaching of the gospel.

It was God who gave Peter the vision. It was Peter who objected. It was the Lord who said, 'what I have cleaned you are not to call unholy'. The vision was given three times and the Spirit was the one who told him to go. For verification and for fellowship he took six people with him. When the Spirit fell on the believers he recognised its validity in the prophecy that had been first fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Here was another Pentecost that included Gentiles.

In this story, the mystery of Israel's Messiah now working his wonders amongst the Gentiles was revealed and the church embraced it. Gentiles too could change their mind and know the life of Christ. The gospel continued to spread, particularly as persecution scattered people afar. Some, who went to Antioch, preached to Gentiles as well, and they were converted. Barnabas was sent to minister to them and when he saw how broadly the gospel was opening out amongst the Gentiles, he knew that Saul was needed.

By the word and the Spirit and by the grace of God, a new community had arisen for which the world needed a new name, and so, for the first time, Christians were identified as separate from Israel. Essentially, they were the true Israel, or Gentiles grafted into Israel. The Spirit gave opportunity for the unity of the church to be demonstrated. He gave a vision to a prophet from Jerusalem who had visited Antioch to warn of a widespread famine. The Gentile church responded with a gift for their Jewish brothers.

Prayer

Father, by your will and your grace and by the proclaiming of the gospel and by the directing of your Holy Spirit, you have raised up a new people who, above all else, belong to Jesus Christ. Father grant that your whole church gathered to you now from many nations may know and live in this unity. May love and good works abound for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter Twelve

Herod Agrippa 1 was a political opportunist like other members of the Herod family. He killed James, the first apostle to die. The Apostles, and the church, may have been sure of the triumph of the gospel, but they remained vulnerable and uncertain as to how this would work out in the world. So, the church's prayer was urgent. Both Peter and the church, at first, could not believe what was happening. God was taking pleasure in the people who relied on him.

The harshness of Herod's reign when he needed to protect himself contrasts sharply with the gentleness of Christ's reign amongst his people. The cruelty of the Jews and their expectation that they would be able to crush the church, contrasts sharply with the expectancy of the church which could not plot its course, but remained in anticipation of all that Christ would do to reveal himself and care for His people. Herod tried to keep people in awe of him by the use of power. He did not understand that God alone has power and that his own office was meant to be a service done on behalf of God.

God brought Herod Agrippa 1 to his end but the work of the church and of God continued to grow. This incident seems to have happened while Barnabas and Paul were in Jerusalem. As they returned to Antioch, their hearts must have been warmed by the fellowship in suffering that they had experienced with the church at Jerusalem.

Prayer

Dear Father your Son has appointed that we live in this present world as His servants. Like him we know that our life derives from you. Grant Father that today, in the midst of the uncertainties that we feel, our faith, hope and love may remain and increase. Grant that our life may be a witness to the gracious reign of your Son, Jesus Christ, in this world, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Chapter thirteen

At Antioch there was now a church where Gentile conversions had been occurring. Saul of Tarsus had been brought in to participate in this new work. Five of the Church leaders were stirred by the Spirit to minister to the Lord in prayer, perhaps aware that they could not know the mind of the Spirit in any other way. The Spirit was clear in his word: 'send out Saul and Barnabas. I have work for them.' The Church concurred and they were sent out.

In Cyprus Paul began, as Christ had purposed, with the Jews, speaking in their synagogues. Here he encountered a false prophet but was also summoned by a proconsul whose ethnic background we don't know. Paul acted as a true Old Testament prophet and rebuked the false prophet so that the light that was to shine out from Israel would reach the nations. Again, it was the Spirit that filled him for this ministry and one local leader was converted.

Paul moved on to Asia Minor, effectively, as a travelling Rabbi, and was asked to speak at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch.

Paul shows us how the bible should be read. First, he noted the acts of God: making Israel, making them great, leading them, enduring their unfaithfulness, destroying

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their enemies, allotting their land and giving them judges, and then, a King, and then King David. Saul did not speak of the greatness of the people but of their disobedience during the wilderness wanderings. All of this history of Israel led to the Davidic King, Jesus, who would be a Saviour for the people. This is the message he brought to the people: 'This Christ has come!'

Israel should have realised that it was not their piety that bound them to the Lord. The Scriptures prophesied that Israel's Messiah, like all other deliverers sent by God, would be rejected. This had happened at Jerusalem when Israel killed their Messiah without any reason for doing so.

Here is Paul's gospel. God's grace has triumphed over our evil by raising His Son from the dead and giving him to us as a Saviour. David was a man after God's own heart but still a sinner. God's Son has born our sins and been raised up from death and will fulfil all God's purpose. This is the victory that Psalm 2 and Isaiah 55 and Psalm 16 had anticipated. Now because Jesus Christ has defeated death, and defeated the sin that had brought about this death, forgiveness is proclaimed in his name, a freedom from sin that the law could never provide. Habakkuk had looked forward to this day and warned Israel not to stumble over the grace that would be shown to them, but to receive it gladly.

Many in this Asian Antioch town received Paul's word with great joy, but most of the Jewish community rejected it. That would mean the end of the security they had built for themselves outside of God's promise and grace. They had turned the law into a screen for their sinfulness, rather than a searchlight to reveal it. They could not be a light to the Gentiles. Paul knew that this was Israel's calling, and so, began to preach the gospel to Gentiles. They received it gladly. Those who turned to the Lord were not second in importance to Israel for they also were called by the Lord. While Jews hardened their hearts against the gospel, that same gospel kept God's true people vibrant in hope and strong in rejoicing as they went further afield proclaiming the word.

Prayer

Holy Father, you have raised up your Son whom we killed, and you have poured out your Spirit so that we may live in the blessing of Christ's reign and proclaim him to all nations. Grant that we may see in all the Scriptures the sureness of your purpose being worked out amongst your people. Grant too that we may not be discouraged when we experience the reticence of many to receive your grace and your word. Lord let the grace and the freedom that Christ has brought through his cross and resurrection be known in all the earth. Free our hearts from all cares and make us a blessing among all your people for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter fourteen

Those who were grateful for the grace of God now became separated from those who were threatened by this new power. People who had previously been united by culture, whether Jew or Gentile, now gathered on either side of Christ's reign which was being revealed in the healings and preaching done by Paul and Barnabas. Some were drawn to love and others to hatred, and some to superstitious regard for the apostles as gods. Paul said they should not be confused. God had always been

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doing good to the nations and they should have rightfully ascribed this miracle to the world's Creator. God had permitted idols to demonstrate their own futility. The nations should now repent.

Paul's near death is passed over quickly. Suffering, he said, is a necessary accompaniment of preaching and entering the kingdom of God. In fact, the community of God living under his reign was firmly established in the area, and, seeking God's guidance, leaders were appointed to care for the church and continue the work. Paul and Barnabas returned to their home church with a remarkable story of God bringing Gentile nations to faith in himself, true inheritors of the promises given to Israel.

Prayer

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the story of your love for the nations continues to unfold. Grant to your church and her leaders, that by deeds of love and power and by preaching of your word, they may fully declare your grace. May the nations be persuaded to leave their idols and be joined to you and your Son. This we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Chapter fifteen

Christ had come and was now proclaimed among Gentiles as Lord. Only through him could anyone be saved. But some said that the only way to please God and be saved from his judgment was inside the community of Judaism, represented by the initiation of circumcision. Paul and Barnabas knew this to be false, both as a doctrine, and because they had seen the Spirit come on so many who had not been circumcised.

It was not all of the Church at Jerusalem but those who still held to their background in the Pharisee sect who pressed this matter. Paul, like Peter before him (chapter 11), declared what God had done in cleansing the hearts of non-Jews (and not just ceremonially) through faith in Christ. He reminded them that the law had never been truly kept by Israel and that it was not to be handed on to others as a burden. Both Jews and Gentiles had been saved by the grace revealed in Christ. The whole church had one salvation. The church was saved by bearing the yoke of Christ (Matthew 11:28–30), not the yoke of the law.

James, possibly the half brother of Jesus and now leader of the Jerusalem church and writer of the letter James, stood up and recalled what Peter had said earlier about God taking Gentiles for his people. He also quoted Amos who foretold the day when Gentiles would be called by God's name (Amos 9:11–12), a privilege previously reserved for Israel (Deuteronomy 28:10). He was only eager that the continuity of the church with Israel should be publicly respected so that the good which Israel's witness had been would not be scorned. Some of these restrictions would fade with time (for example: had food really been contaminated by idols?) but were readily accepted as sensible restraints in these early days.

The whole church agreed with this understanding of the Spirit's leadership of the church. Godly men were chosen to convey this message directly from Jerusalem. In this way, the people who were upset by the dispute were settled and their faith in Christ was encouraged. The Jewish and Gentile church was, in fact, one church.

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So, the scene was set for a further journey by Paul, to see that the new believers were progressing in faith, hope and love. Paul would not accept John Mark as a companion, having been let down by him before. Barnabas could see this differently, and later, Paul acknowledged John Mark as a valuable companion (Colossians 4:10; II Timothy 4:11).

Prayer

Father, the matter has been settled: our hearts are cleansed through faith in your Son and we are full members of your family, bearing your name. May we always remember your grace to Israel when they broke your law, grace sufficient to give up your Son for them. May your good commandments, and our failure to keep them, always lead us again to your Son and to faith in him alone. Father, where your church has been divided because of trust in other systems and doctrines, have mercy, and grant that your Spirit may lead its leaders back to the truth. We ask this so that your glory may be seen, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter sixteen

Paul wanted to know how those who had believed in Christ were getting on and desired to strengthen them (15:36, 41). The instructions from Jerusalem would assist in this strengthening, not just in their grasp of the grace of God being for all nations but in the credibility of their witness in the community (cf. 15:19–21). The churches themselves were increasing in size as people saw the truth of what these new communities were about.

The Holy Spirit still had a very particular path for Paul and Silas and they could not turn away from it. The vision of someone calling them to Macedonia (and into what we now call Europe) is linked with the writer saying 'We . . . ' rather than 'They . . . '. Luke has joined the travelling party, and together, they recognised Paul's vision as God's call to preach there.

There seems to have been no synagogue in the first city they stopped in but they found a meeting place where Jewish prayer was practised. Paul found Lydia ready to believe and regular teaching ensued. Paul saw no need to be diverted from this teaching until he was thoroughly annoyed by a demon possessed women, and then the exorcism led on to more dramatic events. The town appears to have been anti Jewish and they gave Paul rough 'justice'. But the Spirit who had lead them there filled them with joy, brought the jailer to faith and, through Paul asserting his Roman citizenship, established a credible witness among the civic authorities. It was Paul, not the authorities, who had behaved in an exemplary fashion.

Prayer

Lord God, you have hemmed us in so that we cannot turn from the path in which your Spirit leads. Lead us on to the service we are to render and grant that there will be those who turn to the Lord. Keep us in the joy of your salvation and abounding in hope, through Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

Chapter seventeen

Paul continued his custom of going first to the synagogues. Israel had not been able to recognise a Messiah full of grace and truth, and certainly not one who was crucified. The resurrection and the preaching of the apostles gave Israel opportunity to rethink. More Greek God fearers than Jews believed this at Thessalonica but the unpersuaded Jews were jealous of the following that Paul took from them. The low tactics the Jews employed to move them out of town shows how far they had fallen from being a light to the Gentiles. The Berean synagogue gave Paul a better hearing and many Jews and Gentiles were converted before Paul was hounded out of the place again.

Paul began at Athens in the same way, at the synagogue, but also in the market because he was provoked by the local idolatry. He seems to have proclaimed the same message in both places: Jesus was Israel's Messiah; he had been shown to be so by being raised from the dead; it was necessary to turn from all other trusts because Jesus would be judge of the earth.

The particular elements that have become famous in this speech are not a change of message but an appeal based on Israel's knowledge of God as covenant Lord. No one should ever have presumed that God was other than Father. Therefore Gentile ignorance, like Jewish ignorance, should now be put aside because Jesus had been raised from the dead. Everyone would be judged by him, because, only in him could anyone stand before God's judgment.

Prayer

Father, we see how you have appealed to all nations by raising your Son from the dead. How wrong we have been, to think that our Deliverer would not have to die. How stubborn we have been, not to recognise that you have raised him from the dead to give repentance to us all. Father, we know you have always cared for this world, and now, we acknowledge that you have loved us with an everlasting love. You have not spared your own Son but given him up for us all. We bless you for Christ, risen from the dead, and ask that we may always faithfully trust in him, and know you as true Father. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Chapter eighteen

At Corinth, Paul began his now familiar pattern of visiting the synagogue and arguing that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Nothing would be gained until this point had been made. Israel had received God's promises and the fulfilment of the promises needed to be conveyed to them first. But if they refused, God had others who would believe.

For the second time (13:46 and here), Paul said he would not persist with those who refused his message and that he would spend his time with Gentiles. Although one of the synagogue leaders had believed, and although a place to meet had been found next to the synagogue, Paul was far from settled. A vision from God was needed to comfort him and to keep him at his task. In his letters to Corinth, he speaks of trembling at the task of proclamation (I Cor. 2:3; II Cor. 7:5). Elsewhere, Paul said, 'Who is sufficient for these things . . .' (II Cor. 2:16). The gospel is the message of the love of God and this love can only be conveyed in the context of weakness and

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suffering. Paul did not sail through his task because of natural strengths but endured because of constant comfort from God and the encouragement of other Christians.

Paul had been careful not to receive money from the church at Corinth (I Cor. 9:18) but may have been freed for full time preaching by a gift from Philippi brought by his friends (Phil. 4:15).

Jews who tried to stir up the Roman leader Gallio against Christians, met more than they bargained for. Gallio was not interested in their quibbles. Neither was he concerned when a mob took the synagogue leader and beat him up. It is not clear whether this violence was done by Jews, who were angry because the new synagogue leader had become a Christian (see I Cor. 1:1), or because Greeks took this snub of Jewish issues as an opportunity to express their hatred of Jews. It is clear that Christian proclamation was not troubled by Roman intervention for another ten years.

Gallio's brother was Seneca, the famous philosopher and tutor of Emperor Nero. Later, Seneca would fall from favour, Nero would marry a convert to Judaism and then the church would begin to be persecuted by Rome.

Paul never ceased being a Jew and continued to do things that expressed his love for, and oneness with, his own people. Why did he refuse a valuable opportunity to preach in Ephesus? Earlier, he had wanted to head in this direction, and now, he was being asked to stay at a synagogue. Perhaps it was the vow he had made. It does seem that he went to Jerusalem (NRSV), the appropriate location to conclude the ceremonies associated with his vow, and that he reported to the church there. His journey concluded at Antioch.

Then Paul began a third tour, starting again with the churches formed during his first tour. Before he arrived at Ephesus, we are told about Apollos whose knowledge of Christ was accurate but incomplete. Priscilla and Aquilla were able to help him, and so he went on to Achaia with a fully formed gospel. Now, the very able Apollos was able to help converts of Paul on one side of the Aegean Sea (I Cor. 3:6) while Paul arrived in Ephesus where he was able to assist some whose faith had similar gaps to those Apollos had had before.

Prayer

Father, keep us diligent about the business of your gospel. Teach us what is true. Let us give to others what they truly need. Make us gentle in love and wholesome in purpose. Father, we have come to know your grace because Jesus is Israel's Messiah and this world's Lord. Grant that our service to you shall be a true witness to that. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Chapter nineteen

Again, we encounter people who only knew the baptism of John the Baptist, but in this case, they did not know about the Holy Spirit either. Many varieties of half formed gospel must have travelled ahead of the apostles, but now that Paul was able to proclaim the full message of Christ to them, they welcomed it and received the Spirit.

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We are not told that Apollos was rebaptised, or that he needed to receive the Spirit. Perhaps that is because he had already received the Spirit. Various examples show that the Spirit could be given with, before or after being baptised. Perhaps no mention is made of receiving the Spirit because Priscilla and Aquilla were not apostles and not qualified to delve into these matters. The ambiguities between these two accounts suggest we should not form doctrines from these early examples but be encouraged that God brings people to the fullness of his gospel as its fullness is proclaimed to them.

The Ephesus synagogue had expressed interest earlier in having Paul stay with them. He now stayed for three months. Then, opposition to him became vocal. Rather than compete with people hardened against him, he hired a hall and continued his dialogue and persuasion for two years. For Paul, Jesus being the Christ was the same as the reign of God (20:21, 25, 27). The extended time he spent here gave him more opportunity to open up the breadth of his subject—he later calls it 'the whole counsel of God'. His message for Jews and Greeks was the same. All needed the same Christ doing the same things.

The work of Christ was assisted by word getting out that miracles were happening. It was also aided by some trying to utilise powers they did not understand, and also, by a bonfire of now useless manuals on false worship! The Demetrius affair, on the eve of Paul's leaving the area, shows how profoundly the message of Israel's Messiah had taken root among those who had been idolaters, and how thoroughly they had been persuaded that the God and Father of Jesus Christ was God enough to trust for their whole life. The infrastructure supporting idolatry was being threatened, even though Paul had made no personal attack on their favourite idol. Paul, ever ready to be in the front line of public debate, had to be restrained. The volatile public had to be calmed by Roman civic authority, but no valid accusation could be made against the church or its message.

Prayer

Father, we thank you that the gospel has been established in so many places in our world and that whole companies of your people have come to see that they do not need idols. You alone are our Father. Grant that such a witness may continue in our community. Where some labour under an incomplete message, may the whole truth of Christ and your Spirit be proclaimed and may great joy and strength come to your people. May the community in which we live also confess that we have done nothing amiss, for the sake of Jesus your Son. Amen.

Chapter twenty

With all his heart, Paul wanted to get to Jerusalem and then Rome. Before this, however, he gave exhortation (or comfort) to the church at Ephesus, much exhortation in Macedonia, and three months ministry in Greece. His plans were changed by another threat to his life, and so, travelling north, overland, he rejoined Luke (vv. 5–6) and met believers at Troas (where the Macedonian vision had been given and where we first heard of Luke). They also heard many things from Paul. Their encouragement (comfort) is said to have come because Eutychus left the meeting alive, but that all night meeting would long remain in their minds and encouraged them.

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Paul's brief stop at a port close to Ephesus gave the elders there one last opportunity for encouragement from him, and gives us opportunity to see what was in Paul's heart as he travelled among these many churches. Was he just another religious salesman, or, had they, through his transparent life, encountered the truth of God? Even now, his heart was drawing him back to Jerusalem and further suffering. But this suffering would not deter him at all. The reign of God and the need to trust in him and his Son, the coming judgment, the whole revelation of the gospel, the powerful word of God's grace, these things had and continued to move Paul and these are the things he had declared and taught and testified to them.

Now, these elders, appointed by the Holy Spirit, would be responsible for the care of the church that Christ had purchased with his own blood. They would have to do this in the face of 'wolves' or false teachers. He urged them by his own example and the word of Christ to live simply, give freely and to help the weak. God had given them a rich experience of love, but this would have to be maintained, not by Paul, but by the Holy Spirit, the abiding Comforter within and among them.

Prayer

Father, your servant Paul has borne true witness to your grace. You were present in him to make yourself known, both then and now. We thank you for those who have brought your word to us, and so we know that you are the true God. We know you are reigning now and that all must acknowledge your Son. Grant that the love of the Spirit may be fully formed in us and that, without personal concern, we may freely give to others what you have shown to us. In the name of Jesus Christ your Son, hear our prayer. Amen.

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