

Gift of Love, Evidence of Grace, Gladness of Heart, Giving to Ability

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] You may like to open the Bibles in the pews again to page 895 to the reading from Acts chapter 11. For those visiting, we're preaching our way through Acts and we're up to chapter 11, roughly a chapter a week more or less.

And let's pray now as we come to God's word. Lord God, you've caused all Holy Scripture to be written to make us wise for salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. So we pray now that your powerful spirit will take your powerful word and write it in our hearts that we may believe it and live by it for the glory of Jesus.

Amen. They say that if a story is worth telling, it is worth telling twice. One of the characters in The Lion King, Rafiki, said that, but I'm sure it's an adage that is much older than that film.

If a story is worth telling, it is worth telling twice. It's why, of course, we get endless replays on television of what's regarded as the most important events for us.

Things like, you know, the 9-11 events and the last grand final and the grand final before that and the 1973 grand final, I think, was pretty important. If a story is worth telling, it is worth telling twice.

[1 : 16] And it's why when something important or exciting happens to us, we tell everybody. And again, we tell everybody. And eventually, those close friends will tell us that we're telling them too many times.

If a story is worth telling, it's worth telling twice. And that's what Luke thinks about the gospel going to the Gentiles, as we saw last week in chapter 10. Because half of today's chapter, in effect, tells the story to us again.

Last week, we saw how, under God's hand, direct hand, the gospel goes from Jews to Gentiles.

That is, non-Jews. In the story of Cornelius, a Gentile, who is converted and baptized as one of the first, if not the first, Gentile believer in the Lord Jesus.

It comes through a vision, comes through God's command. It comes through God working in both Peter, as well as in Cornelius. And we cannot, as we heard last week, overestimate the significance of this event.

[2 : 23] And that's why it's repeated again in chapter 11. It's not just repeated. Luke doesn't begin the chapter saying, well, I've told you all this, but I'm going to tell you again, just in case you missed it.

The word had spread about what had happened with the gospel going to Gentiles. And so chapter 11 begins with the word having now gone from Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea, where some of us, in fact, will be on Saturday, all the way back to Jerusalem.

So the chapter begins that the apostles and believers who are in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him.

So the message has spread. And now Peter is, in a sense, giving his justification, his testimony for the events that happened.

And so he tells them what we've read in chapter 10. But Luke could have just simply said, Peter told them all the events that you could have read about in the previous chapter.

[3 : 28] But he doesn't. He goes through it again, not word by word and not in as much length as chapter 10. But in a nutshell, he repeats the account with some variations, I guess, but nothing by way of any contradiction or discrepancy, just by way of summary, with a few emphases that Peter places as he gives his account to these Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who are querying why Peter has taken the gospel to Gentiles and, in particular, eaten at a meal.

So in verse 3, they ask, why did you go to uncircumcised men? And it's a bit of a put down, the uncircumcised, they're out there, they're the Gentiles, just the uncircumcised because Jews had to be circumcised.

And eat with them. Well, the eating with them, the significance of that is not just that they had a meal together, but that for the Jews, their distinction from non-Jews was focused in the food laws of the Jews that go way back to the early laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Jews were prohibited from eating various unclean foods. So particular animals or meats, they were not allowed to eat, notably, of course, pork, but other things as well.

Prawns, for example. Strict Jews still will not eat. But as well as that, it wasn't just some things are right and some things are wrong, but also part of the food laws in the early part of the Old Testament prohibited a strange law, the boiling of a kid, a young goat, if you like, in its mother's milk.

[5 : 11] And we might think that's a slightly bizarre command. It actually occurs three times, so it's not unimportant. Twice in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy. But from that developed a Jewish tradition that you wouldn't have milk and meat products together.

So no sort of, you know, meat pizzas or spaghetti bolognese with a cheese sauce. They won't eat that. And so therefore, to have table fellowship between a Jew and a Gentile was usually regarded as an infringement of all the Jewish food laws that mark the Jews off as being distinct.

So these Jewish Christians are querying Peter's actions that they have heard about from what we read in chapter 10. The word is spread because this was such a significant event.

And Peter tells them. And Luke tells us because it's so important. We cannot underestimate its significance. For us, of course, we live so far beyond this that for us, the Christian church is predominantly, in our experience, Gentile.

But in this day, before Acts 10, it was predominantly Jewish. And so to go to Gentiles was a huge leap. And it's so significant that Luke decides that he's going to give us Peter's defense of what's happened, as well as the story in chapter 10 that we saw last week.

[6 : 40] Well, Peter tells the story, I guess, in four parts we could analyze it. Firstly, the divine vision that Peter got. In Acts 10, the story begins with Cornelius, but now Peter's giving his account.

So he begins where it began for him. That is, with the divine vision from God to him. A vision of all sorts of animals, clean and unclean. And the instruction in the vision, in verse 7, get up, Peter, kill and eat.

That is, even the animals that are regarded by Jews to be unclean. What Peter's saying here is that what provoked him to bring the gospel to and baptize Cornelius and eat with Gentiles was a vision that came from God.

Not Peter's idea. He hasn't dreamed it up. But rather, it's under divine initiative from God. The vision climaxes, as Peter tells it, with verse 9.

A second time the voice answered from heaven, when Peter objected firstly, what God has made clean, you must not call profane.

[7 : 50] Now, in essence, that's the argument, the theological argument of Peter to these Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. That is, it's not my idea.

I objected to it at first. But it's God's idea. And who am I to reject God's idea? If God said these things are clean, then who am I to say that they are profane?

And we'll see that argument come up again a bit later on. That is, Peter saying, this is so clearly of God, I have no option but to accept it, to obey God's command.

Even though it's so radical and so different from what we Jews have experienced in the past. This is God's doing, and I cannot refuse it.

Well, Peter goes on from the vision in verses 11 and 12 to what we might call the divine command. And again, the emphasis is on the initiative of God.

[8 : 50] In verse 11, At that very moment, three men sent to me from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were. At that very moment. As though, what a coincidence.

But of course, it's not a coincidence. It's a sort of way of reinforcing the fact that God is behind these events. So what God has been directing Peter about is confirmed by the fact that at that very moment, men arrive at his door.

The background of that we'll find out in a minute. Although in Acts 10, that was already given to us first. So again, the sense is, this is God's hand at work.

And that's reinforced again in verse 12. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. We're not told here how the Spirit told Peter that.

But periodically, when people use that language, in my experience, what they usually mean is a sense of a hunch or intuition or a feeling that somehow God's leading me this way.

[9 : 56] I think for Peter, it's a bit more substantial than that. Because back in chapter 10, when we read of the Spirit directing Peter in chapter 10, verse 19, Now we don't know whether it's an audible voice, whether Peter would have heard it as well as others with him, or whether there's just a clarity in his head of this specific instruction from God.

But it's more than just an intuition or a hunch. Peter is making it clear that his actions are under divine command. God's Spirit has told him what to do.

And in effect, the implication of Peter's account here is, who am I to disobey it? The Spirit told me, he says in verse 12, to go with them and not to make a distinction between them, Gentiles, and us, Jewish Christians.

So it's reinforcing the message of the vision. That is, all foods are now clean in effect. No longer is there a distinction between Jew and Gentile in the economy of God.

The food laws were a way of distinguishing God's people, the Jews, from the rest of the world. But now in the way that God wants people to be saved after the resurrection of Christ, is for the gospel to go to all the world without distinction, Jew or Gentile.

[11 : 34] And that's in effect what Peter's acknowledging in verse 12. The Spirit's saying, do not make a distinction between them and us. At the end of verse 12, he mentions six brothers who also accompanied him.

From Joppa, which is near Tel Aviv today, up the coast of Caesarea. And Peter is saying in effect, it's not just me. There are six other brothers here. You can ask them.

They'll back up my account of what's going on. Now, presumably the implication is they may have heard the Spirit also give the same instruction. Maybe not. But it's certainly an added evidence by way of Peter's account to these critical Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem.

When Peter gets to Caesarea, the way he tells the story here, he discovers what's in effect preceded at Caesarea. As I say in Acts 10, that's the bit that actually comes first because the story in Acts 10 begins from Cornelius' perspective.

So here in verse 13 and 14, the man is Cornelius, though not named here, but it's clear from chapter 10. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house saying, send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter.

[12 : 51] He will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved. Well, now it's Cornelius' experience. This is the third part of Peter's account. We've had a divine vision, a divine command.

What we could say here is divine preparation for these events. And it comes again with God's control, God's initiative. Here it's by way of an angel standing in the house speaking to Cornelius.

But angels are simply messengers from God. That's actually what the word angel means. So again, the implication is this is God's directive. It's not a fantasy of Cornelius.

It's certainly not made up from Peter. But again, God is bringing about and orchestrating these events. So the angel is in effect speaking the divine word to Cornelius to send to Joppa to bring Peter.

At this point, a man unknown, presumably, to Cornelius. But notice what the purpose of it is. The end of verse 14 or the whole of verse 14.

[13 : 59] He will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved. Now, Cornelius, we're told back in the early part of chapter 10 is a devout man, a pious man, a God fearing man, though he's a Gentile.

One who's praying to God every day. And sometimes there are people who argue that around the world there'll be people who know nothing of Jesus. But if they're devout and pious and maybe praying to some God, then God will save them.

And they use the story of Cornelius to back up that argument. It's actually a faulty reading. Because though he was pious and devout and God fearing and praying, that didn't save Cornelius.

What saved him, in a sense, was the message that came with Peter. The message of the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection. I mean, he's saved really by God's grace.

But that's exercised through the message of the gospel preached to him. And so God is, yes, in a sense, answering his searching by way of his daily prayer.

[15 : 04] Not by saving him, in a sense, unknown, without him knowing about Christ and the gospel. But rather saving him through the message of the gospel that Peter is now coming to bring him.

Well, we've had those three things. Divine vision, divine command, divine preparation. And now, fourthly, some divine action. In verse 15, as Peter summarizes the events of what's just happened.

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. It's as though Peter can't get a few words out before the Holy Spirit acts.

And we might think, well, how does he know the Holy Spirit is acting? But it's just like as it happened to us at the beginning. Referring back to the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2.

Where people spoke in different languages and so on. We're not exactly sure of the manifestation here. But there's no doubt in Peter's mind and his friends' minds that the Holy Spirit has come upon Cornelius.

[16 : 07] And maybe his whole household at this point. And it's Pentecost all over again. That is, it's an authentic act of God, is what Peter's saying. This is divine action.

And then Peter remembers in verse 16, the word of Jesus when he'd said, John baptized with water, but you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And so, somehow God has provoked Peter's memory to those words of the Lord.

And then in verse 17 he says, In effect, it's the same argument as before.

If God's made these foods clean, who am I to call them profane? If God is doing this in Cornelius, who am I to hinder God? Who am I to refuse this as an act of God?

Clearly in Peter's mind, this is Pentecost over again. And as Wayne said last week, this is what we might call the Gentile Pentecost. So where Acts 2 on that first day of Pentecost, a few weeks after the resurrection, testifies to the giving of God's Spirit on Jewish believers in Christ, now that's extended to Gentile believers as well.

[17 : 26] It's a divine action. It's God's initiative. It's not Peter's fantasy or Peter's initiative or Peter's creation. It is God's. And who is he to refuse it?

Who was I that I could hinder God? Is what Peter's in effect saying. If God's the one who declares all foods clean, who am I to say that they're profane? If God is the one who commands Peter to go and make no distinction between them and us, who am I to refuse the command?

If God confirms his word by preparing Cornelius in advance, who am I to ignore that? If God's Spirit comes on Cornelius and his household, well, who am I to decline them baptism?

If God prompts Peter's memory of Jesus' words about baptism, who is he to put it to one side? Who can hinder God? This is God's work.

We must not refuse it, is what Peter is saying. And the criticisms of the Jewish believers from verse 2 are silenced in verse 18.

[18 : 32] When they heard this, they were silenced. Possibly as they ponder and think and reflect. Possibly as they feel the weight of God's work that they've heard an account of.

Their silence doesn't last all that long because then verse 18 goes on to say, and they praise God saying, then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

That is the response to the gospel of Jesus, which is faith and repentance. And it leads to the gift of eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And they don't just acknowledge that, but they praise God for it. They thank God that God's grace has gone to Gentiles. They don't just say, oh, well, God's obviously sending the Gentiles into the kingdom as well.

They praise him for it. They rejoice in it, in what God has done even for non-Jews. Well, from this account of Cornelius and his household being converted, the gospel begins to spread to Gentiles.

[19 : 41] We read in the next section that there were those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen. That goes back to chapter 8. They travelled as far as Phoenicia, which is Lebanon today, Cyprus, which is still Cyprus today.

It hasn't moved much. And Antioch, a city which is just in the Turkish border from Syria today in eastern Turkey. That persecution of Jewish Christians when Stephen was stoned to death led to many of them being scattered further around the Roman Empire.

But as they did that, they spoke the word to no one except Jews at the end of verse 19. And we might initially think, well, fair enough, a little bit critical.

That is, they're not speaking the gospel to Gentiles. But on the other hand, they are actually speaking the gospel to Jews. And it's Jews who are persecuting the Christians when Stephen was stoned to death.

So though they have fled the persecution by going to these other parts of the empire, it hasn't stopped them, these nameless people, evangelizing and telling their Jewish friends to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and become Christians.

[20 : 54] It's quite striking, actually, as I reflected on it. They've fled persecution, but it hasn't stopped them being bold in telling Jews to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Their names are not given. They're not the sort of ancient Billy Grahams and Pauls and Peters. They are just normal, everyday, grassroots Christians who are telling other Jews to believe in Jesus Christ.

The model of evangelism. But as well as that, verse 20, among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene, a city on the Mediterranean coast in Tunisia today, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also.

Hellenists are Greeks, but maybe not national Greeks, that is, Greek citizens from the country of Greece, but rather Gentiles who've been under the influence of the Greco-Roman world, in effect.

They're non-Jews. But they may not be racially Greek. And they have been spoken to in Antioch. Now, Antioch in these days was the third biggest city in the world.

[22 : 03] That, of course, all gets your minds going, thinking, well, what are the first two? We could have a little quiz, but maybe not. Rome, obviously, is number one. And the other one was Alexandria, which is on the mouth of the Nile delta in what is Egypt today.

Behind that was Antioch, a very cosmopolitan, pagan, fairly immoral city. As I say, it was on the Syria, just inside Turkey from Syria, on the Orontes River, 300,000 people, it's estimated, were in Antioch in those days.

So it's a sort of hub of trade and so on. It's a significant city, a strategic place for people to go. We don't know why these people went there, maybe not to evangelize, but having gone there for other reasons, they begin to evangelize.

And not just Jews, but Christians as well, Gentiles as well. That's what verse 20 is saying. And see the end of verse 20. Proclaiming the Lord Jesus.

Now, if they were going to Jews to share the gospel, the language we'd expect to read is something like proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ.

[23 : 16] But for people who are Gentiles, who don't have the Old Testament background, have no expectation of a Messiah or Christ to come, then the argument that Jesus is the Messiah is inconsequential.

So what? We're not Jews. We're not fussed about a Messiah. We don't care if there is one or not. But their proclamation to Gentiles is tailored for Gentile thinking.

It is Jesus is Lord is what the sum of the gospel is. And we see that in Acts, in the various sermons, how they're tailored for Jewish or for Gentile audiences.

The language varies, although the central message does not. Jesus is Lord is a summary of the gospel. And that's what these, again, unnamed Jewish Christians are proclaiming to Gentiles in Antioch.

What a wonderful picture of the early church at work, these unnamed people. They're not in it. They're not the sort of celebrity status that our world keeps going on about. They're just getting about their lives and sharing the gospel with other people.

[24 : 20] In this case, even Gentiles, non-Jews. Well, many are blessed. Verse 21, the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.

These are people who aren't theologically trained, probably, and they're just sharing the gospel and people are believing. What a wonderful work of the grace of God. And what a wonderful work by normal Christians.

And so great was this that news of it came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem. And so they decide to send somebody to Antioch. Now, it's not a policing measure.

They're not going to somehow quell these Gentile converts. They're going, it seems, to offer them encouragement. And under God's providence and with their wisdom, they send a great man, Barnabas, to go.

Barnabas has already been mentioned earlier in Acts. In chapter 4, he changes his name from Joseph to Barnabas, which literally means son of encouragement.

[25 : 23] Bar is son of in Aramaic and he's the son of encouragement. He's an encouraging person. He's a good man full of faith, we read here. He's the ideal person to send.

Imagine what would have happened to the church in history if they had sent somebody other than Barnabas, who had a more Jewish-centered, restrictive view, who was sometimes going to control and dominate or restrict the gospel going to Gentiles.

What a terrible tragedy that would have been. Barnabas goes there not as a wet blanket at all, but one warmly encouraging them. See what he says in verse 23.

When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion. Now we might take it for granted that he would rejoice at the grace of God.

In one sense, it ought to be the case, of course. But sadly, we don't always rejoice at seeing the grace of God at work. Sometimes we're indifferent to the grace of God.

[26 : 30] We hear about conversions and people coming to Christ from different backgrounds in different places and we think, oh, well, you know, so be it. We're not that excited.

We don't rejoice. We take it for granted or indifferently. But sometimes other emotions come when we hear of the grace of God at work. Sometimes there's real jealousy and resentment.

For example, within a church, if there are a number of people who become Christians and grow and become part of the church, sometimes the old timers can feel some jealousy or resentment at these new Turks coming into the place in a sense.

Or sometimes one church can feel real resentment and jealousy when they see the grace of God at work in other churches nearby. Maybe they feel very threatened by that. One of my jobs at the moment is to chair a group to look at planting an Anglican church in the Plenty Valley area where we have no Anglican church for miles.

And there's a genuine enthusiasm from neighbouring churches but without trying to give too much away, there is some resentment at the possibility because one particular person feels very threatened about this possibility.

[27 : 45] I find that very sad to be honest but sometimes it's actually part of church culture and not just within Anglican church culture. So that you might hear of a church sort of going really well down the road and your reaction is not to rejoice in the grace of God but rather think, oh dear, what's it going to do to us?

Well here is Barnabas who rejoices as we ought always when we hear of or see the grace of God at work. And he lives up to his name because literally the next bit of verse 23 goes on to say and he encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion.

Here are new Christians, they need encouragement, he's the right man for the job, he encourages them because starting the Christian faith is just one step, persevering is another and he's encouraging them to exercise steadfast devotion, not a sporadic attempt at coming to God but being regular, systematic, devoted, steadfast in knowing, growing and coming to God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

as a result of his ministry and we're told that he did this in verse 24 because he was a good man full of the spirit and faith, a great many people were brought to the Lord.

He goes there not to be an evangelist but to be the pastor and encourager of new Christians but as a result of that ministry even more people become Christians. Church just doesn't stop growing.

[29 : 18] As a result of that, maybe it's the weight of numbers, maybe he's feeling not out of his depth but swamped by possibilities. Barnabas went to Tarsus, that's a hundred miles away so he doesn't just drive down the road, it's a long journey to look for Saul.

Saul was the one who was converted on that road to Damascus that we saw in chapter 9. We're now about eight, nine, maybe ten years at the most later than Saul's conversion the historians suggest.

And when he found him he brought him to Antioch so it was that for an entire year they, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught a great many people.

That is, it wasn't simply breeze in one Sunday I've come from Jerusalem keep going it's great to see what's happening here let me encourage you to keep up steadfast devotion I'm back off on the Monday bus back to Jerusalem.

No, he stays for a whole year with Paul and sometime before that by himself before rather Saul had come with him. So this is a significant investment showing a real concern and love to teach these people for a whole year not just a quick Bible study in seven sort of quick sessions or something like that.

[30 : 32] This is significant discipleship. It ought to remind us of the need as exercising steadfast devotion that we do this through being taught from the scriptures of God and growing deeper in them to persevere in faith.

Well the chapter ends with a little episode with a prophet but it also gives us a little cameo of the effect of the change to becoming Christians of these Gentile Christians in Antioch.

One of the prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch even though Antioch's north of Jerusalem Jerusalem's high up so wherever you go from Jerusalem it's always down. They came to Antioch one of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world and this took place during the reign of Claudius.

Now the issue here is not this is a prophecy that's predicted and fulfilled under the spirit that happens it's there several times in the Old Testament and in the New ought not to surprise us too much.

The dating of it Josephus says is about 46 AD Claudius reigned from 41 to 54 so we're in the 40s AD 10 years or thereabouts after the resurrection of Jesus.

[31 : 49] The issue though is the response. The disciples determined that according to their ability each would send relief to the believers living in Judea that is the area around Jerusalem and this they did sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

The point is this gives us a brilliant cameo of Christian partnership. The mother church of Jewish believers has sent a Jewish Christian Barnabas to Antioch to pastor and encourage the church.

He has brought alongside with him Saul who is also a Jewish believer in Christ. That church when they discover about the famine that's affecting the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem they though they are Gentile Christians mainly take up a collection each according to their ability to send to those in need back in Jerusalem.

It's a wonderful picture of the unity of the church between Jew and Gentile new Christian and old Christian. Karl Marx might have claimed the slogan about from each according to ability to each according to their needs but actually here it's a Christian principle about giving and generosity.

In our drought ridden country maybe this ought to challenge us about our giving to those say in the country of Australia where they are struggling in Christian ministry so much.

[33 : 17] When I was at General Synod I heard a number of stories from country dioceses of Australia where the drought has so seriously affected them much more than us where we whinge about our little gardens.

People's livelihoods lost. The high suicide rates the struggle of churches to provide enough ministry to those who are really struggling and depressed. Well on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 at the end of it we get a little cameo there of the Jewish Christian church in its infancy devoted to the teaching of the apostles gathering together sharing their possessions rejoicing being glad expressing unity.

Acts chapter 10 is like the Gentile Pentecost. Peter made that comment early in this chapter 11 but by the end of chapter 11 we realise that the key themes at the end of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 are replicated in this Gentile church in Antioch devoted to teaching their gladness unity joy generosity and giving.

it's not the identical description but the key themes are there. It is an authentic work of God's spirit. We ought to be so thankful to God that the mercy of his gospel of Jesus Christ comes even to Gentiles offering us the repentance to life because if it did not most of us would not be believers in Christ because most if not all of us come from Gentile not Jewish background but there are challenges here about us as a church if we are a church of God under the influence of God's spirit then our devotion to teaching our in a sense unashamed evangelism of others our rejoicing our generosity our excitement at the grace of God hearing of it seeing it they ought to be marks of church life to an extent they are but here but I believe it's a challenge to us to ensure that we don't get hard or cold in our thinking and of course the challenge of Barnabas to the church in Antioch is also one to us remain faithful to the

Lord with steadfast devotion let's pray God our heavenly father we thank you for the mercy of your gospel that comes even to Gentiles as well as to those racially Jews we thank you that the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus is sufficient for all people of all places and all times to find life through faith and repentance in your gospel and we thank you for your powerful spirit and the evidence of your spirit at work in this church in Antioch and in our own church and pray that you may continue to work in us by your spirit that we may be devoted to your teaching that we may be generous that we may rejoice in your grace that we may have unity together across all sorts of social and racial spectrums and we pray this for the glory of Jesus

[36 : 40] Amen