

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

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ACTS 11-12

It's called “[the turning point.](#)” *A lineman picks up a fumble and returns it for a touchdown... a politician makes a fatal gaff in a debate... a salesman lands a mammoth account...* The situation suddenly does a 1-80. The landscape changes. This is what happened in Acts 10. God gave Peter a vision that altered the whole scope of Christianity. Prior to this moment, the ancient world viewed Christianity as a sect of Judaism. The first Christians were Jews - in Jerusalem – living under Jewish rules. But in Acts 10 God opened the door of salvation to Gentiles. He showed Peter that His grace was for all men – Jews and Gentiles.

At the time, God's people ate off one menu. Everyone else ate off another. Jews kept kosher. Gentiles didn't bother. These dietary rules were a source of Jewish pride. Their diet set the Jews apart from everyone else. But now it's lunchtime in Joppa, and God shows Peter a picnic blanket full of unclean entrees - all off-limits to Jews. Yet He tells Peter to “[pig out.](#)” Peter is asked to step over his religious prejudices to obey God's will.

And Peter could see, what God was doing with diet He did with humans. In light of the work of Jesus, religion had become obsolete. Keeping the Jewish Law, and its dietary stipulations, no longer mattered. Salvation was by God's grace through faith in Jesus. This meant folks didn't have to become Jewish to follow Jesus. *Salvation was now open to all men!* Humans were no longer divided into special and common, or clean and unclean. After the cross the only line of demarcation among us is whether we're “[in Christ](#)” or *apart from Him*. The cross was the new crossroads.

And Peter was immediately called to act on what he'd been shown. This religiously devout Jew goes with Gentiles - to a Gentile city – to the house of a Gentile named [Cornelius](#) – to speak to a Gentile audience... Peter tells them about Jesus and before he can finish the Spirit falls on each of them. Without requiring a single circumcision - without a lesson on Sabbath-keeping or offering a sacrifice - probably over a plate of hickory smoked ham and hog jowls... God saved the Gentiles just as He had the Jews - by faith. Apparently, salvation was by *Christ alone* and *faith alone*.

Acts 10 forever altered the direction of Christianity and the composition of the Church. And as Gentiles, we should be glad. Because of Peter's vision we can follow Jesus and enjoy pork barbeque all at the same time! Peter's vision was good news for Gentiles, but there were Jews who thought his actions were blasphemous. What was he doing ignoring 1500 years of tradition, and running roughshod over the Law of Moses? Not everyone was happy with Peter. There were angry Jews in Jerusalem who called him in to headquarters to answer for what he's done.

That's where we pick up in Acts 11. “[Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!”](#) Remember in Acts 6 Luke tell us that a large number of Jewish priests had become believers in Jesus. Obviously, they carried a deep affinity for the principles of Judaism. They were staunch traditionalists. For centuries you had to be a *child of Abraham* to be a *child of God*. Gentiles who wanted to know God had to join the Jewish community. So what is Peter doing now swinging the door open to Gentiles? The Jews thought Gentiles should have to jump through a few Jewish hoops.

Remember the game we played as kids... Two lines formed facing each other. Everyone locked hands. One group shouted, “[Red Rover, Red Rover, send Sandy right over.](#)” Little Sandy would muster a head of steam and race toward the other line to try and break through the human barrier. Imagine Jesus standing behind the Church at Jerusalem. He's calling, “[Red Rover, Red Rover, send the Gentiles right over.](#)” And here come the Gentiles, led by

Peter and Cornelius, racing toward the church. Yet the Jews clench their teeth, and lock their arms. They've put up a wall. They're determined to maintain the status quo, and keep the Gentiles out. *And we need to take heed...* Whenever a church tries to keep people *out* whom God has taken *in* it's opposing the Gospel. People of another color, or from a different background, need to be included not resisted.

These Jews had questioned Peter's actions, but they weren't privy to his vision. So he recounts what he saw, verse 4, "But 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, 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, and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.'" He admits he was initially reluctant, for the same reasons that concerned the Jews.

Verse 9, "But the voice answered me again from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.'" Ignoring the dietary laws wasn't Peter's bright idea, it was God's command. God was changing the rules. God said it was OK to eat bacon and put sausage on my pizza. And He said it three times to hammer home the lesson! Verse 10, "Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven."

The OT Law conditioned the Jews to view all of life as either clean or unclean. It was a grid that governed food, people, days, houses, times of the month, skin. In Judaism everything in life was either holy or unholy. But the cross of Jesus cleared away this distinction. The Law proved all men are unclean. The only holy one is Jesus. The cross leveled the field. A new line was drawn. What matters now is our relationship with Jesus.

Peter continues his story, "At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house." It was Peter, and six other Jews, along with the three Gentiles who came to fetch him. In one sense they went just a few miles up the coast from Joppa to Caesarea, but in another sense they were crossing a 1500 year old ocean.

"And he (the Roman centurion, Cornelius) 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.' God sent the angel. He wanted to save Gentiles. "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning." Like Pentecost, it was a sovereign move of God. Peter and his Jewish friends did nothing special to warranted God's salvation. It was all about grace. That's the way it had come to Cornelius.

Verse 16, "Then I remembered the word of the Lord, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' The power of the Spirit is the gift of God - to give to whomever He chooses. "If therefore God gave them the same gift as *He* gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?"

"When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." It was obvious to the church, as well as Peter, that the salvation of the Gentiles was God's work... *For the moment the opposition was muted.* Before we leave this story we should note that Luke saw fit to include it twice in the record for emphasis. And he wasn't writing on a 300 gigabyte hard drive, but a limited scroll. Yet what happened at Cornelius house was no trivial matter. It was a major breakthrough in the history of redemption.

Verse 19 "Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only." It makes us appreciate Peter. He'd gone where no Jew had gone before. Peter cut a new trail. It takes special men to pioneer new works and blaze new trails - it takes clear vision, decisive action, unwavering conviction, and courageous faith. Once the trail seems safe, other people jump on the bandwagon, but in the beginning the pioneers are few. And such was the case here. There were very few Jews willing to follow Peter in taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. For the most part the Gospel was spreading from Jew to Jew.

"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." There was some branching out. Hellenists were Jews who'd adopted Greek culture and language. They were Jews, but they lived as Gentiles. At least these

evangelists were willing to take the Gospel cross culture.

“And 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.” Antioch was the capitol of Syria. It was near the Mediterranean coast, 300 miles northeast of Jerusalem. After Rome and Alexandria it was the third largest city in the Roman empire. Its population topped half a million. Antioch was an architectural wonder. Its main street was paved with marble, and lined on both sides with marble columns. Historians say it was the only road in the ancient world with street lamps. The city's splendor earned it the nickname, “Antioch the Golden, Queen of the East.”

Antioch of Syria was situated on the Orontes River, 20 miles upstream from the Mediterranean Sea. It was known as the gateway from the eastern Roman Empire to the west. It was a key hub for ancient travel. And it was the perfect place to launch an outreach to the Gentile world. As we move on in Acts we find that the church that started in Antioch became the beachhead for Christianity's invasion into Gentile territory. Obviously, the Jerusalem believers sensed the significance of a church in Antioch, that's why they sent Barnabas to encourage this new church.

Verse 23, “When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” If you're looking for a name, here's a good one... “Barnabas” means “son of consolation or son of encouragement.” Barnabas was the fellow who befriended Saul when he went to Jerusalem to meet the disciples.

And under Barnabas' leadership, we're told, “And a great many people were added to the Lord.” Barnabas did a *good job* in a *wicked city*. Antioch was dedicated to the Greek goddess Daphne - who in Greek mythology had been seduced by Apollos. The city's own legacy supported the sexual perversion that ran rampant through its streets. It was a city full of temptation - *yet in desperate need for the Gospel*. Barnabas' word to the believers was to hang tough, be tenacious, strengthen their grip on Jesus. Today, we live in similar surroundings. Sex is worshipped. Perversion is commonplace. It's an “anything goes” culture. It's “people gone wild.” We too need “*purpose of heart... to continue with the Lord.*”

“Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul.” The church in Antioch was growing so quickly, Barnabas needed some help, so he sought a man perfectly equipped to reach Gentiles – his old buddy Saul. And as a pastor I should pay attention to Barnabas' example. I know pastors who'd never admit they need help. They insist on doing it all. Not Barnabas. He was humble enough to recruit a man - and share the ministry - with someone who ended up being more gifted than himself. The growth in Antioch was a credit to Barnabas' unselfish, servant leadership.

“And when he had found (Saul), he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Before Antioch, Jesus-followers were called, “believers,” “disciples,” “receivers of the Word,” “servants,” “people of the way” - to name a few. But the believers were first called “Christians” at Antioch.

Recently, I ran across a list of famous people who changed their given names for more sophisticated, stylish sounding names. *Robert Zimmerman* changed his name to “*Bob Dylan.*” *Marion Morrison* went by the name to “*John Wayne.*” *Leonard Slye* came up with the name “*Roy Rogers.*” Everyone knows *Issur Danielovitch*. He's now “*Kirk Douglas.*” And *Betty Perski* became “*Lauren Bacall.*”

But the believers in Antioch stuck with the uncouth, embarrassing name. The name “Christian” was originally intended as a derogatory term. The suffix “*-i-a-n*” means “the party of” - “Christian” meant “the party of Christ.” This was how the Romans referred to their slaves. Claudius' slaves were called the “*Claudians.*” Anthony's slaves were the “*Antonians.*” Thus, for believers in Jesus to be labeled “Christians” it was meant as an insult, a mockery. Yet *Christians were honored to be slaves of Christ*. Paul gloried in being a “fool for Christ's sake.” Peter later wrote, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God.” We should consider it an privilege to bear shame for Jesus sake.

Verse 27, “And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch.” Prophets uttered impromptu, extemporaneous messages from God. They delivered a specific message for a specific circumstance. The gift of prophecy is one of the spiritual gifts available to us.

“Then one of (the prophets), named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.” The gift of prophecy is an exciting gift. It’s a direct word from the Holy Spirit. Here’s a gift that keeps the church on the edge of its seat... listening... But Agabus’ prophecy was a warning. Dire economic times were on the horizon. He predicted a famine across the empire. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions this famine in his *“Antiquities of the Jews.”* The famine produced high prices and huge food shortages. People starved to death. The church though was somewhat insulated. They shared and took care of each other. Not only from *person to person...* but *church to church*.

“Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.” Here the church in Antioch decides to help Jerusalem. The daughter church helps the mother-ship. Often our church has helped pastors and other churches when they’ve fallen on hard times. We helped a new church in Nashville that was wiped out by the recent floods. You never know when we might need the help!

So they took an offering for the church in Jerusalem. Verse 30, “This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.” Galatians 6:6 teaches us, “Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.” Antioch understood their debt to the Christians in Judea. The Jerusalem Church had sent them Barnabas. Now it was time to return the favor. They send Barnabas back with a few bucks.

Chapter 12, “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out *his* hand to harass some from the church.” When it rains it pours. On top of the famine a wave of persecution hits the Jerusalem Church at the same time. And Herod is the culprit. The NT is full of Herods. Herod the Great’s rule ended shortly after the birth of Jesus. His kingdom was divided to his three sons. One of his sons, Aristobolous, had a son named “Agrippa” - who was the Herod in Acts 12.

Agrippa was a haughty man. He was schooled in Rome, where he made friends with a man named Caligula. Later when Caligula became emperor, he promoted Agrippa to king of Judea. Agrippa’s friends in high places - and his Roman education - made him arrogant and conceited. He was though a shrewd politician. He worked hard win over the Jews. So when it dawned on him how much the Jews hated the Christians he tried to rack up political points by mounting a crusade against the Church.

Verse 2, “Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” Tradition says he was beheaded. James was one of the Big 12 apostles, and the Jews couldn’t have been happier. The next day the Jerusalem Post announced Agrippa’s approval rating had climbed 20%. So he decides to go after the ringleader. “And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also.” He arrests Peter. God will show Agrippa this is not the way to keep getting a head! “Now it was *during the Days of Unleavened Bread.*” Evidently, Agrippa would’ve killed Peter immediately, if it had not have been the Passover.

“So when he had arrested him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.” The Greek word translated “squads” is the word “*tetrads*” which denoted a group of four soldiers. Four squads of four soldiers were dispatched to guard Peter. This was maximum security. Someone may’ve told Agrippa about the time when the Sanhedrin arrested Peter, and God sent an angel to bust him out. He wanted to make sure that Peter wasn’t going anywhere this time. So around the clock there were two soldiers chained to the Peter - and two more standing watch. As if four soldiers would be a match for a Angel!

“Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.” Peter is surrounded by trouble! Literally, his head is on the chopping block. *And what does the Church do?* They pull out the big guns. Rather than write letters, picket, and protest – they pray! It was the Puritan preacher, Thomas Watson, who wrote, “The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel.” Nothing is more powerful than a praying church!

“And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.” Imagine being in Peter’s sandals You’re awaiting execution. The hangman’s due at any moment. You’re under heavy guard. There seems to be no possibility of escape. What would be your disposition? There’s one certainty... *I wouldn’t be sleeping!* The next day Peter is

scheduled to get sawn in two, and the night before he's sawing logs. What peace... What supernatural composure!

Again Peter is a storm surrounded by the wind and waves, but this time he keeps his eyes on Jesus. He's unshaken. He stays above the situation. Keep in mind, every miracle recorded in the Bible started out as a problem. *Get your eyes off your circumstances and fix them on Jesus.* Once you do God can stop working on you and start working on the miracle. Peter had learned. Rather than *asking why*, he's *cutting z's*. Peter is walking on water and enjoying a supernatural peace, but remember he's not doing it alone. There's a praying church in his corner.

Verse 7, "Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by *him*, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" Notice, Peter is snoozing so soundly the angel has to slap him to wake him up. "And his chains fell off *his* hands." One commentary I read makes the observation that throughout the Scriptures angels are always in a hurry. Only once is God depicted in a hurry - that's when He rushes down the road to greet His prodigal son. But angels seem to always be in a hurry. And we can understand why! If heaven and the presence of God were your home - and you were dispatched to this wicked world - don't you think you'd want to tie up business as quickly as possible and get home? Angels never dilly-dallying!

"Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." You'd think if the angel could unlock the chains on Peter's wrists he could just as easily slip on Peter's shoes for him and wrap his coat around his shoulders. But there're almost always two parts to a miracle. God shoulders the real work, but there's still a minor role God leaves to us. God has a part and we have a part. He likes to partner with us.

Verse 9, "So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision." He thought it was dream. He's still in that early morning fog between the time you wake up and your first cup of coffee. Peter is pinching himself. It reminds me of the lady who confessed, "I dreamed I was eating spaghetti. But when I woke up, my pajama string was gone!"

Verse 10, "When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord..." It was like an electronic door before electricity. "And they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him." Peter is shaking his head - finally waking up. "And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people." Peter is rescued by another angelic jailbreak! Ole Peter keeps getting thrown in prison, and God keeps breaking him out. God is so faithful!

"So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying." This was probably the same house that hosted the Last Supper and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. It now hosted the prayer meeting where the church asked God to deliver Peter from prison... "And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer." Remember Rhoda has been praying for Peter's rescue. "When she recognized Peter's voice, because of *her* gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate." She was so excited God answered their prayers, she forgot Peter.

"But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" They don't believe it's Peter. They've been praying for a jailbreak, *but without a lot of faith?* "Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." Evidently, the church believed in guardian angels - that everyone has an angel assigned to them. We all have our own personal bodyguard. I'm not sure there's one angel for every believer, but the Bible teaches, and the early Church believed, in the reality of angelic activity in our lives.

Verse 16 is back to Peter. "Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened *the door* and saw him, they were astonished." The Church had prayed for Peter, but apparently they prayed some puny prayers. They weren't laced with much faith. When God answers, they're astonished. Yet that only reiterates the importance of prayer! At least they prayed!

You don't have to pray powerful prayers. A puny prayer - the size of a mustard seed - will move a mountain! A prayer with a tinge of faith - a few microbes of faith - will move the hand of God. Certainly, God answers mighty prayers of faith, but I'm saying He answers frail, feeble prayers too. *The only*

prayer God doesn't answer is the prayer that's never prayed!

Verse 17, "But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." This was another James – the brother of Jesus. He too was a leader in the Jerusalem church. "And (the angel) departed and went to another place." "Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that *they* should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed *there*." Caesarea was the Roman capitol of Judea. It was a beautiful seaside town with an incredible Roman theatre.

"Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace because their country was supplied with food by the king's *country*." Luke gives us the political background for what's about to happen. The Phoenicians had bribed Herod's aide. They sent lobbyists to grease his palm - gain a political favor. Israel was an agrarian society. Tyre and Sidon were sea merchants. Israel depended on their northern neighbors for trade. But the Phoenicians needed Israel for food. They bribed Blastus to get to Herod. Just goes to prove what goes in in Washington today is nothing new. "So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them." This was a rally held in the theater at Caesarea. When we go to Israel we stand in the exact spot Herod sat. What a spectacular venue this was and is today! A hundred yards away waves slap the beach. The sky is clear. The sun is high in the heavens. The seats in the theater rise upwards. It had a capacity of 4000 people.

Josephus records this incident and dates it 44 AD. He says Agrippa wore a robe made entirely of silver. He entered the theater early that day. Josephus writes, "At which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those who looked intently upon him." It hurt their eyes to look at him. Agrippa's silver threads made Elton John look like a thrift store shopper. Remember, Agrippa was full of himself. He was pompous and arrogant. He tries to dazzle the crowd with his beauty and eloquence. He's wearing something from "Dancing With the Stars." And the people start to chant...

"And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" And here Josephus adds the kicker, "upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery." The crowd that day hailed Agrippa as a god and he does nothing to stop them or set them straight! Beware, never ever stand in God's place. "Never take the bows for God!" When God is being praised your place is in the shadows! And what's ironic, nobody took the praise seriously except Agrippa. All the crowd was up to was flattery - they were manipulating the king's ego to get a favorable treaty. This is what flattery is about - *manipulation*. Someone has observed, "Flattery is like bubble gum - enjoy it for a moment, but don't swallow it." Don't fall for flattery! Herod's belly was full of too much bubble gum - as a result he came down with a case of worms.

Verse 23, "Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died." That's Luke's play-by-play, but listen to Josephus for the color commentary, "A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner... He was carried into the palace... and rested in a high chamber... and when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age..." How ironic, they said he was divine, immortal - but he died 5 days later. Herod's outcome is a commentary on Isaiah 42:8. God declares, "I am the LORD, that is my name; and my glory I will not give to another."

Verse 24, "But the word of God grew and multiplied." At the beginning of chapter 12 Agrippa is cutting down Christians and the Church is behind closed doors - at the end of the chapter this same Agrippa has been cut down himself and the word of God has multiplied. We need to look past whoever might be sitting on the earthly throne to God's throne in heaven. God is the one who ultimately calls the shots.

Years later Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:12, "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." I'm sure he was thinking of this episode. "And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled *their* ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark." They return to Antioch, but not for long, as we'll see in Acts 13.