

# ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

ACTS 11:1-18    APRIL 8, 2020

Not long before His death, Jesus had encouraged His disciples saying, “Don’t worry when you stand trial about what to say. The Holy Spirit will speak through you in that moment.”<sup>1</sup> I doubt that Theophilus, the first recipient of the book of Acts, would’ve ever guessed that this 3rd trial Peter had to face was to be among his own brothers in the Church.

It wasn’t official, but it *was* serious. A faction of Christians contend against the apostle and his part in the preaching of the Gospel to Gentiles. What follows is a tense exchange, that seems to *us* to be totally ungracious, overtly racist, and obviously unChristian. But is it fair for us to see it that way? We, of course, have the benefit of thousands of years of Church history and the completed revelation of Scripture. Part of that revelation, which these believers didn’t yet have, was Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, where he explains that God had revealed to him a mystery, something previously unknown to the church. He said, “Don’t forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. God himself revealed his mysterious plan to me.”<sup>2</sup>

Hadn’t God, for thousands of years, said that Israel was a special, separate, called out people among the nations of the earth? Hadn’t the Jews been forbidden from marrying Gentiles and being assimilated into their societies?

On the other hand, why *weren’t* the Jewish Christians ready for this next step of including all people in the Gospel? Hadn’t Jesus given them a clear directive about going into *all the world*? Now, with the benefit of the Holy Spirit illuminating their understanding of the Scriptures, couldn’t they see God’s love for those outside of Israel? For every Hagar and Rahab and Ruth?

It was a difficult issue. So, *were* the men who opposed Peter right for what they did? Sometimes, our friends *need* to stand up to us. To tell us where we’re going is not where God’s leading. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” We should take seriously those moments when fellow Christians, who *love* us, come and say, “We think what you’re doing is not right.” But, *when* that happens, it doesn’t automatically mean that *they* are correct in their complaint.

When we look at the complaint, the case and the candor of these guys in Acts 11, it shows an obvious misalignment with the heart of God. They’re saved, they’re not undercover Pharisees or anything like that, but in the end we can see that they were out of step with the Lord and it led to some serious errors in the way they were living and relating to others.

Paul would later write to the church at Corinth: “there *must* be divisions among you so that you who have God’s approval will be recognized!”<sup>3</sup> So we know that these sort of disagreements will be part of church life. When differences arise, we can take a lesson from Acts 11 about how to proceed and how to be on the *Lord’s* side, moving forward in grace.

We begin in verse 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 13:9-11

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 2:11-3:3

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:19

**Acts 11:1 - The apostles and the brothers and sisters who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.**

It had maybe only been a week since Peter preached to Corenlius, but word spread fast through the Christian community. Without telephones, without social media, without marketing. Throughout the region people had heard what happened. And it was *big* news.

In passing I'd have us dog ear this idea from the example of the apostles: They weren't the kinds of guys to hold press conferences. They didn't go around saying, "Look at what we're doing!" We live in a day and age where everyone feels the need to broadcast everything, to constantly self-promote. To make sure everybody knows the service programs the church is doing or different things we're volunteering in. I'm not saying it's always wrong to post what you did to serve the Lord on Instagram, but I do notice that's not what the disciples did. And, the constant self admiration that is cultivated through social media doesn't really leave room for the kind of meek and modest humility that Jesus modeled for us.

**Acts 11:2-3 - <sup>2</sup>When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, <sup>3</sup>saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."**

These were Jewish Christians who were still trying to keep many aspects of the Law of Moses. They wouldn't have been sacrificing animals in the Temple anymore, but the other code of conduct, dietary restrictions, observing days, washing, circumcision, those sorts of things, were still seen as *essential* in their eyes. Now, taking a look as a jury at this court martial, we can see that, even here, this was no mere personal conviction they were following, but it was an issue of culture, tradition, and *self-righteous legalism*. They wouldn't have agreed with that, but it's clearly true.

Now, there *are* legitimate restrictions that God leads individuals into in their personal walks with Him. We call them liberties. Of course, there are broader boundaries that we *all* are commanded to obey, but on the individual level God asks some of His people to do or not do certain things that He does not ask of *everyone*. Celibacy is a good example. The New Testament says that God will give *some* Christians the *gift* of celibacy. And, if they are given that gift, God is asking them to *not* be married.

Another example is given to us in the two Simons of chapter 10. Simon Peter had been asked by God to leave his nets. And he did. God said, "I want you to give that up to follow Me." But then we see Simon the Tanner. He was not asked to leave his tents. He remained there, working the leather as a faithful Christian. Both were used by God. Both were led by God. Different requirements.

So, how can we tell the difference between self-righteous legalism and Spirit-led convictions? The circumcision party here gives us a few ways to tell. First of all, this was a *partisan* affair. They came as card-carrying circumcisionists. They had a pre-set bias. We note they were *categorically* opposed to the *idea* that people who *weren't* part of their party would not only be given the gift of salvation, but that Peter would even pay them a visit. The biggest indicator of legalism is this: They wanted to force their conviction onto everyone else. Listen, if God leads you to follow a certain diet as a matter of conscience, that's fine. Do what He says. But conviction is for the *individual*. Legalism is put on *everyone else*. When someone comes to you and draws a line in the sand, not about a truly essential issue like the deity of Christ or the virgin birth or the resurrection, but about some application of the Christian life, some behavior, some observance, when they come and try to force on you some mode of being, *that* is legalism.

Paul said clearly in Ephesians 2 that God has *ended* the system of law with its commandments and regulations. So beware of legalists trying to chain you in self-righteousness.

What do we see when these men come before Peter? Rather than *celebrate* the grace of God, they *criticized* their brother. They should've noticed that their criticism was almost identical to what the Pharisees had said about Jesus in Luke 15. "We don't like who you associate with. We don't approve of that meal you just had."

Now, this would've been a truly difficult moment for Peter. This issue threatened to divide the Church altogether. And we know that he felt enormous pressure from this group of Christians. Later in Galatians 2, we're told "he was afraid of criticism" from these guys. But on *this* day in Acts 11, the Lord made good on His promise to speak through His servants in situations like this.

In his defense, it's clear Peter's goal was *not* to simply vindicate himself or get back in their good opinion, but to magnify God's grace *and* to try to bring these guys along. That's an important element, too.

Peter's doesn't have a knee-jerk reaction and immediately kick these guys out. He doesn't quickly form a group around himself and devolve into party politics. In times of division, the goal should be *unity*. It's not always possible, but always our goal as we vigilantly defend grace.

Let's look at what Peter said.

#### **Acts 11:4 - <sup>4</sup>Peter began to explain to them step by step:**

He didn't play the apostle card. He didn't say, "I'm Peter. Deal with it." He didn't say, "I'm casting vision, you just get in line behind whatever I want to do." He didn't threaten to sue them or start a campaign against them. Instead, he walked them, slowly, step by step through God's leading and His work in the situation. He'll highlight God's word. He'll highlight God working wonders. He'll highlight the witnesses. What had happened could be explained and defended according to Godly and Biblical principles.

This is important, not only when we deal with disagreements in the church, but in your own life. When we move into a big decision, some big change, some pivot of opinion or behavior, we *should* be able to explain how we were led to take that path by the Lord. Peter's movements weren't done on a whim. God had directed him. Let's take big life choices as an example. Christians believe that God gives us particular gifts and particular opportunities and particular works that we are to discover and walk in. So, when a Christian decides to make a big move to another community, another church, another career, it *should* be accompanied by identifiable leading from God the Holy Spirit. *If* a person makes a big change and other Christians ask, "Why did you do that?" And the answer is, "More money." That's *probably* a problem. Peter takes them step by step through the clear leading of God, proving that this was not some human desire, but part of the wonderful work of God.

We'll move quickly through the next verses, as we've commented on them already when they were first shared.

**Acts 11:5-10 - <sup>5</sup>"I was in the town of Joppa praying, and I saw, in a trance, an object that resembled a large sheet coming down, being lowered by its four corners from heaven, and it came to me. <sup>6</sup>When I looked closely and considered it, I saw the four-footed animals of the**

earth, the wild beasts, the reptiles, and the birds of the sky. <sup>7</sup>I also heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ <sup>8</sup>“ ‘No, Lord!’ I said. ‘For nothing impure or ritually unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ <sup>9</sup>But a voice answered from heaven a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call impure.’ <sup>10</sup>“Now this happened three times, and everything was drawn up again into heaven.

Here’s what we note about Peter’s retelling: He doesn’t inflate himself in the story. He doesn’t reference the fact that he had worked astounding miracles in Joppa. He doesn’t make himself look great or important. He doesn’t remove the warts from the story. These apostles are such a great model for real, Christian leadership. Beware of swagger!

**Acts 11:11-12a - <sup>11</sup>At that very moment, three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup>The Spirit told me to accompany them with no doubts at all.**

Any reasonable listener would come to the conclusion that this was an obvious move of God. Peter hadn’t gone out looking to stir the pot. He hadn’t done all of this try to stick it to his ultra-conservative brothers. His motivation was *spiritual*. It wasn’t about demographics or market share or influence. He was cooperating in the providential work of God as God led him.

The Lord doesn’t need our devices to spread the word about Jesus Christ. “*At that very moment.*” This whole story shows that our God can harness all of time and all of creation to accomplish His work. Why settle for human schemes when we’re invited to participate in providence? It seems today that more and more Christians and churches are being swallowed up with an obsession with image and with hype and with cultural machinery found in the world. That’s not how the Lord does things. Be led. Be led. Be led!

**Acts 11:12b - These six brothers also accompanied me, and we went into the man’s house.**

Peter had anticipated that there would be trouble in Jerusalem, or at least that there would need to be an accounting for what was going on. That reveals just how serious the average, Jewish Christian was in their separation from Gentiles. There was *clearly* no motivation to reach the world with the Gospel. But praise God that He does that impossible, even through imperfect vessels like us.

But, Peter acted wisely here, not just out of fear. Often we think about the division within the early church between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, but what was happening here was monumental from another angle, too. You see, at this point the book of Acts has said that the Christians, after riding out one wave of persecution led by Saul, were now well respected by the Jewish community. They interacted in the temple. There wasn’t a lot of friction between them and, even, the Sanhedrin during these years. But now, having opened their arms to the Gentiles, a violent wedge will be forced between the Church and the non-Christian Jews. In fact, *after* this text, the next time we visit Jerusalem we’ll see a new period of violent persecution breaking out against the believers.

In the news today we frequently see Christians doing controversial things. If they must be done, they should be done wisely and by the true leading of God. Now, if that’s the case, come what may. But, Peter here must have understood some of the serious implications of his actions, and he carried himself with wisdom, bringing these guys along, not only to witness what happened in Caesarea, but to stand with him in Jerusalem. And we commend these 6 guys. They didn’t shrink under the

pressure. They may not have had a speaking role in this drama, but their part was still important. Their role was one of presence and support, standing on God's side even in the face of opposition.

**Acts 11:13-15 - <sup>13</sup>He reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa, and call for Simon, who is also named Peter. <sup>14</sup>He will speak a message to you by which you and all your household will be saved.' <sup>15</sup>"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came down on them, just as on us at the beginning.**

Peter reminds them that the issue was *salvation*. This wasn't about politics or press or anything like that. They were talking about people whose eternal souls hung in the balance. Not just 1 man, but his whole household and his whole world by extension. Wives and children. Servants and soldiers.

Think of the unsaved masses of humanity walking the earth today. A study done in 2015 suggested that 31% of the world's population identifies as Christian.<sup>4</sup> Let's say *all* of those people really are saved. That means 7 out of every 10 people are headed to hell. 5.5 billion people are about to lose their lives forever, unless they become born again. In the mean time, some Christians are arguing over whether we should only sing hymns in church! Let's keep salvation in the forefront of our minds.

**Acts 11:16 - <sup>16</sup>I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'**

We note that Peter here, remembering the prophetic word of the Lord, saw a *dual* fulfillment. This is an important aspect of how we, as futurists, interpret Scripture. Frequently in the Bible, the book of Acts included, we see prophecies having a multi-stage or multi-part fulfillment. It's Biblical to read prophecy that way and it's the only way to harmonize prophecy, in a broad sense.

So, by now, through Peter's defense we see that what had happened was confirmed by a vision, confirmed by the Holy Spirit, confirmed by providence, confirmed by miracles, confirmed by the word of God and confirmed by witnesses. They were all in agreement.

When Joseph Smith arrives on the scene and says, "I've seen a vision and have a new message from God," but that message contradicts the revelation of Scripture, or is given without witnesses, it's not reliable. It's not Biblical. It's not the way God does things. Smith is an extreme example, but the principles can be brought down to *any* teaching or statement made by people who claim to be servants of God. And, remember, the general context is a disagreement being dealt with in the church body.

**Act 11:17 - <sup>17</sup>If, then, God gave them the same gift that he also gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I possibly hinder God?"**

Peter acknowledges here that Cornelius and his household were saved by *belief*. Not by baptism. Not by circumcision. Not by observing the Sabbath. We are saved by grace, through faith, that's it.

As Peter closes his statements we notice how frighteningly close this whole thing is to that time when they were before the Sanhedrin. The apostles had said, "We've got to obey God, rather than men." Gamaliel had said, "Hey, leave these guys alone, we don't want to be fighting against God."

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>

But this scene is *not* between Christians and Sadducees, but between Christian brothers! It's amazing how easily even a Spirit-filled believer can wander into serious error.

With all this talk of providence and God's power, how could we possibly "hinder" Him? Well, the Bible says that we're able to "quench" the Holy Spirit. The example of the wilderness wanderings and Peter's own epistle reveal that, through our choices, we can impact God's timeline in certain ways. Certainly we can hinder the work of God in the lives of *others* by discouraging them or placing burdens on them. What we do matters and we do not want to be hindering the Lord's work.

**Acts 11:18 - <sup>18</sup>When they heard this they became silent. And they glorified God, saying, "So then, God has given repentance resulting in life even to the Gentiles."**

We weren't there, so it's hard to say just how these guys reacted to what they'd heard. We know that this circumcision problem would dog the church for many years. The way it reads, it seems to me that they held their peace (how could you not?). But, when they say, "So then..." it feels more like them *admitting* the truth than applauding it. God's glory will ring out from the rocks if need be, and it seems in this case it came from their rock hard hearts, rather than an overflow of excitement.

In Jeremiah 9, God laments that the stubbornness of His people's hearts had led them to idolatry and off the path which followed Him. It broke God's heart and resulted in a terrible desolation, where God had wanted celebration and fruitfulness and His glory to reign as a light to the whole world.

We want to be people who are soft-hearted, relying on the leading of the Holy Spirit and ready to do whatever God asks us to do. We should expect divisions and differences to arise. When they do, we should stand on the side of God's grace, God's word, God's effort to save, not clinging to tradition, self-righteousness or bias. If we stand with the Lord, whether on trial before brothers or adversaries, we can know that we have honored our Master and done His bidding, magnifying His glory through our lives.