

o8. Acts 11:1 - 12:25





## Acts 11:1-8

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the **circumcised believers criticised** him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’

Compare the criticisms of Jesus’ behaviour by his opponents (Luke 5:30; 1:2; 19:7)

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision (see Acts 10:9-16). There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’



## Acts 11:9-14

But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were (see Acts 10:17-18). The Spirit told me to go with them and **not to make a distinction between them and us** (see Acts 10:19-20). These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ (see Acts 10:5-6)

‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ (Acts 2:21).



## Acts 11:15-18

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning (Acts 2:4). And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' (Acts 1:4-5) If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed on (ἐπὶ 'relying on') the Lord Jesus the Messiah, who was I that I could hinder God?' When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

Since God has manifested his will by giving to the Gentiles the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 10:44-46), 'just as it fell upon us at the beginning', how can they object to eating with them (see Acts 11:3)? 'God gave them the same gift that he gave us'.



It is not being circumcised that is essential for receiving the Holy Spirit, it is ‘believing in (relying in faith on) the Lord Jesus the Messiah’. This solemn credal formula appears only here and in the final verse of Acts (28:31). Jesus is the Messiah (see Acts 2:38; 3:6; 4:10; 8:12; 9:34; 10:36; 10:48): the one in whom are fulfilled all the promises made to David; the one through whom the reign of God is to reach to the ends of the earth. He is the Lord (see Acts 1:21; 4:33; 7:59; 8:16; 9:17): the one through whom comes God’s salvation.



Repentance is a gift from God, and God has clearly given this gift to the Gentiles. Those who, like Cornelius, welcome this gift are declared pure by God, and so the commandments of the law relating to the avoidance of what is unclean do not apply to them. The ‘**Lord of the Sabbath**’ (Luke 6:5) is Lord also of regulations of the Torah. The ‘**Initiator of life**’ (Acts 3:15) has given to the Gentiles a share in his own divine life by pouring out upon them the gift of his Holy Spirit. It is for the community of the Lord’s disciples to welcome them as brothers and sisters.



# The Church in Antioch. The wonders of God's grace

Acts 11:19-21

Now those who were scattered (διασπείρω) because of the persecution that took place over Stephen (8:1-4) travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus (4:36), and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene (Luke 23:36) who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.





**Antioch** was established on the Orontes river c.300BC as the residence of the Seleucid kings. In 64BC it became the capital of the Roman Province of Syria. The Greek geographer Strabo estimates that the population of Antioch in the first century was about half a million, which would make it the third largest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria. The Jewish community was a significant one, possibly numbering as many as twenty-five thousand. It had its own governor who was assisted by elders.



## Acts 11:22-26

News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas [Acts 4:36 & 9:27-28] to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted (παρεκάλειω) them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1) and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people [45-46AD Paul's 'enlightenment' 34AD]



## Acts 11:26

It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’

To this point the members of the community have been called ‘**brothers and sisters**’ – of Jesus (see Acts 1:14), and so of each other (see Acts 11:12). They have been called ‘**believers**’ – in the crucified and risen Messiah (see Acts 1:15; 5:14; 9:30; 10:23; 11:1,21). They have been called ‘**saints**’ (see Acts 9:13,32,41) – because they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The most common title (thirty-seven times in Luke’s gospel and twenty-eight times in Acts) has been ‘**disciples**’ – because they look to Jesus as their teacher.

Now, for the first time, they are called ‘**Christians**’, not by the Jews who would not have recognised their claim to be followers of the Messiah, but by the Gentile population. The fact that they met on the first day of the week and that Jews and Gentiles met and ate together set them apart as not being a Jewish sect.



## Acts 11:27-30

At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named **Agabus** (see later Acts 21:10-11) 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. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief (διακονία) to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

In the spirit of sharing which is central to being Christian (see 2:45), Antioch helps the Jerusalem community in its time of need. By noting the presence of prophets, Luke highlights the fact that the initiative for this sharing comes from the Holy Spirit. The Western text introduces this scene with the statement ‘When **we** gathered together’. This supports the tradition that Luke was a Syrian and a member of the Antioch community.



There is evidence of recurring famines during the reign of Claudius, including an especially widespread famine in 45-46AD. In his letter to the Galatians, after speaking about a visit which he made to Jerusalem three years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18; see Acts 9:26), Paul goes on to insist that he went to Jerusalem only on one other occasion 'in fourteen years' (Galatians 2:1-10). It is likely that he is measuring from the time of his conversion (34AD) to the year of his writing to the Galatians (perhaps late 48AD). There are good reasons for arguing that the visit mentioned here by Luke is the visit described by Paul in Galatians 2:1-10, and that it took place in 46AD.



It is interesting to note that the relief was sent, not to the apostles, but to the elders (πρεσβυτέρος). Till now Luke has used the word 'elders' only of the elders who were part of the organisational leadership of the Jewish community (see Acts 4:5,8,23; 5:21; 6:12). The Christian community in Jerusalem organised itself, as one would expect, in the manner to which the members had been accustomed as Jews.

For Paul's continued care for the poor in Jerusalem see especially Romans 15:25-27.



## Acts 12:1

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.

Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great. He was also descended from the Maccabees through his grandmother, Mariamne, who was the grand-daughter of the last of the Hasmonean dynasty, Hyrcanus II. When Caligula became emperor in 37AD, he gave Herod Agrippa the territory of his uncle Philip (mentioned in Luke 3:1). Later he added Galilee. In 41AD, the emperor Claudius added Samaria and Judea, so that in 41AD Herod Agrippa was king over most of the territory once ruled by his grandfather. This lasted till 44AD when, once again, Judea and Samaria were ruled by a Roman governor.



## Acts 12:2-5

After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread). When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

Throughout this scene, Peter is portrayed as reliving the experiences of Jesus. Hands are laid on Jesus' disciples as they had been laid on Jesus (see Luke 9:4; 20:19). Peter is arrested, as was Jesus (see Luke 22:54), and on the occasion of the same festival (see Luke 22:1,7,54). They intend to bring Peter out to the people, as they had brought Jesus to Pilate (see Luke 23:1,26).



## Acts 12:6-7

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an Angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “**Get up** quickly.” And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, “Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.” He did so. Then he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and **follow me.**” (Luke 5:27; 9:59; 18:22).



‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’

(Ephesians 5:14)



## Acts 12:8-10

Peter went out and followed him; he did not realise that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him.





## Acts 12:11-16

Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.” As soon as he realised this, he went to the house of **Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark**, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognising Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, ‘You are out of your mind!’ But she insisted that it was so. They said, ‘It is his angel.’ Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. He described for them how the Lord had brought him out of prison.

‘Mark is linked to both Antioch and Barnabas in Acts (12:25; 13:5; 15:39), and to Barnabas in Colossians 4:10, as well as to Peter (1 Peter 5:13; Eusebius H.E. 3.39.16)’ (Pervo page 306).



## Acts 12:17

And he added, 'Tell this to James and to the believers.'

This is the first indication of the organisational leadership exercised by James in the Jerusalem church (see commentary on Acts 1:14; see also 15:13; 21:18). James is mentioned also by Flavius Josephus, who refers to him as 'James, the brother of Jesus who is called Christ' (*Antiquities* 20.9.1).

Then Peter left and went to another place.

to Caesarea (Acts 12:19)

to Antioch (Galatians 2:11)

to Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:12).

He travelled with his wife (1 Corinthians 9:5).

Back in Jerusalem for the Assembly (Acts 15:7).

Martyred in Rome.



## Acts 12:18-19

When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death. Then Peter went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

Peter returns to Caesarea, where he had met and baptised Cornelius (see Acts 10:24). He stays in the port which connects Palestine to the vast Roman empire, ready to witness to Jesus ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8).



## Acts 12:20-23

Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they came to him in a body; and after winning over Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for a reconciliation, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them. The people kept shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a mortal!" And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an Angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

Flavius Josephus gives us an account of the sudden and unexpected death of Herod Agrippa. It took place at Caesarea, during the games which were inaugurated by his grandfather, Herod the Great, to honour Caesar Augustus.

Luke's account echoes the description of the death of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (see 2 Maccabees 9:7-9).



12:24-25

But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. Then after completing their mission (διακονία) to Jerusalem (see Acts 11:29-30) Barnabas and Saul returned and brought with them John, whose other name was Mark.

After the fall of Herod Agrippa, Luke speaks of the advance of the word and turns our attention back to Barnabas and Saul who, after completing their mission to Jerusalem (see Acts 11:29-30), return to Antioch. They bring with them John Mark (see Acts 12:12).