

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY - PART TWELVE - CHAPTERS 11 AND 12

God had used Peter to accomplish a great breakthrough which took the gospel to the Gentiles. First the Lord had had to overcome Peter's own prejudice against Romans, (chap.10) but another problem remained. The result was absolutely predictable; other Jewish Christians still bound by their own prejudices objected.(11:1-3) Instead of hitting back at his critics, Peter calmly and carefully explained how God had dealt with his own hang-ups about Gentiles and then used him to bring Cornelius' household to Christ.(11:4-15) He showed how God had made no distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers in the manner and measure in which the Holy Spirit was given to them. They had all been baptised by the same Spirit into the same body of Christ just as Jesus had promised. (11:16,17) Peter had simply accepted what God had done. His critics quickly did the same.(11:18) Harmony and unity were restored and the way was open for an exciting new stage in the growth of the Christian church.

Learning how to handle criticism that springs from prejudice is one of the most vital Christ-given skills of leadership.

The church at Antioch sprang so vigorously into being because the Lord had broken down the prejudices of a whole group of Jewish Christians. They 'spoke the word' and 'preached the Lord Jesus' to both Jews and Greeks,(11:19,20) so that it was to the Lord Jesus that a large number turned.(11:21) If they had preached their denomination, their building, their pastor or their special doctrines then it would have been to these things that people turned. 'The hand of the Lord was with them' because they were doing what He had told them to do. His hand is still is with us when we do what He tells us.

The church in Jerusalem realised that mature leadership was needed and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. He was a great choice. He had the essential qualifications for any task in the church,(11:24) which had already been set down in 6:3. These qualifications showed as he continued his role as 'the son of encouragement'.(4:36) He did not rush into Antioch to make changes but rather he encouraged them to let the God who had already done a great job continue His work.(11:23) Continuing growth and maturity in the Christians brought growth in numbers, and still does.

Barnabas, as an encourager, saw the need for a team of teachers rather than to have the spotlight on him alone. He remembered a young man called Saul whom years before he had helped to find acceptance in the Jerusalem church and who had since been learning to be a missionary in his home town. A solid year of teaching by them both continued to sharpen the evangelistic edge of the Antioch disciples. The nickname 'Christianoi' was a term of abuse which compared them to the Augustini who urged the people of Rome to worship their former emperor, Augustus. The most effective way still to motivate and equip people in evangelism is not so much a course in evangelism but teaching in all that we have in Christ.

An important indication of how well they had been taught was their response to Agabus' prophecy of world wide famine. They recognised that his message was from God. Instead of saving money and hoarding food to protect themselves they gave sacrificially and ahead of the need to those whose need would be greatest. This was a real prayer meeting, (11:27-29) in which God spoke and they acted in obedience. They sent Barnabas and Saul with the gift because they recognised that the starving Christians of Jerusalem would have an even greater need than food. They would need encouragement from the word of God.(11:30)

Barnabas and Saul left on their way to Jerusalem to which the scene now shifts.

12:1-4,18-23 Q.1 What family characteristics does this Herod show? (Matt.2:16; 14:10) Why does such behaviour run in some families? Why did God allow James to be killed? Were there not enough people praying for James?

12:5-11 Q.2 Why should Peter not have been so surprised by his amazing rescue?(5:19) Give examples of how God works in our lives beyond our wildest dreams.(Eph.3:20)

12:12 Q.3 What does this verse tell us about where people normally came together to pray in those days? What does it show us also about the home and spiritual background of John Mark? How can we understand his later defection,(13:13) in the light of such a home?

12:13-17 Q.4 What happened last time Peter had dealings with a servant girl who looked after the door of a house?(Jn.18:17) How does this story contrast with the previous one?

12:13-17 Q.5 Why were Peter's friends so surprised by his arrival since they were praying for him? Is it possible that they were praying for something other than his release? Why are our own prayers often made in unbelief?(James 4:2,3)

12:17 Q.6 This is our first introduction to another James who is to play a key role in the Jerusalem church. Who is he and what else do we know about him?(Acts 15:13; 21:18; I Cor.15:7; Gal.1:19; Mark 6:3; James 1:1)

12:18-23 Q.7 Why did the Lord strike Herod dead? When did He do similar things in the rest of the Bible? Why does He not normally do this to those who oppress Christians?

12:24,25 Q.8 Verse 24 is the third of Luke's 'chapter' endings. What was now happening and what important steps have been taken since the last one in 9:31 which allowed this?