

Heritage Christian Community Baptist Church
Acts 11:1-30 NKJV God's Grace Defensed and Activated
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Acts 11 does not begin with a new miracle, but with a theological aftershock. What God decisively did in Acts 10 now must be understood, interpreted, and embraced by the growing church. Acts 10 records the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Gentiles in the house of Cornelius. Acts 11 we will discover the interpretation of that event by the people of God. Together, the chapters show us that revelation alone is not enough; the growing church is learning how to discern what God has done. We saw in Acts 10 how God acts sovereignly and unmistakably. Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, received angelic instruction in a vision. Peter receives a vision that redefined what was “clean” and “unclean.” The Holy Spirit falls upon Gentiles while Peter is still preaching, mirroring Pentecost itself. Luke’s point is clear: Gentiles are not second-class recipients of grace. They receive the same Spirit, in the same way, without adopting Jewish ceremonial identity. When Acts 10 ends, there is no church council and no formal declaration. That silence sets the stage for Acts 11, where the implications of God’s action must now be faced. What happens when divine activity moves faster than institutional understanding? Acts 11 answers that question by showing the church learning to submit to God’s redemptive initiative.

Not Doctrine, but Fellowship (Acts 11-18) NKJV

11 Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. ² And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, ³ saying, “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!”

⁴ But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: ⁵ “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. ⁶ When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I said, ‘Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But the voice answered me again from heaven, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ ¹⁰ Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.

Luke begins by telling us that the apostles and believers in Judea heard that “*the Gentiles also had received the word of God*” (v.1). That phrase is important. To “receive the word” in Luke–Acts consistently refers to the Gentiles actively accepting the preached Word at the time of hearing and adhering to the Spirit in that moment. The controversy does not arise because Gentiles heard the gospel, but because they received it. When Peter arrives in Jerusalem, he is immediately confronted by “those of the circumcision” (v.2). Their accusation is revealing: “*You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them*” (v.3). The issue is not merely association but recognition of status. Table fellowship in the ancient world symbolized acceptance and shared

identity. By eating with Gentiles, Peter had implicitly declared them full members of the covenant community. This is to say that we may affirm God's grace in theory while resisting its implications in practice.

Rather than defending himself emotionally, Peter responds with chronological testimony. Luke says he explained everything *"in sequence"* (v.4), signaling careful theological reflection rather than impulsive storytelling. Peter recounts the vision in Joppa (vv.5–6): a sheet descending from heaven filled with animals both "clean" and "unclean". When the voice commands him to eat (v.7), Peter does not object out of rebellion, but out of faithfulness to the law (v.8). Peter's refusal reflects sincere devotion shaped by prior revelation. This is not stubbornness; it is theological tension. In other words, Peter clings to what he has learned from studying the law of the Pentateuch (Deut. Ch14). Divine correction comes in verse 9: *"What God has cleansed, you must not call common."* The emphasis falls on God's action. Cleansing is not achieved through ritual observance but through divine initiative. Holiness is no longer defined by separation from people, but by submission to God's redemptive work. The vision's repetition three times (v.10) underscores certainty and finality. God is not offering an option; He is revealing a new stage in salvation history.

Q1: On what basis does someone belong to the people of God?

A: Open

Q2: How is Holiness defined in this text as it relates to the law?

A:

Q3: Does the Bible contradict itself in this study as Peter clings to the law and the Spirit corrects Him?

A:

¹¹ At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ And he 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, ¹⁴ who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.' ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ 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?' ¹⁸ When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

Immediately, God confirms the vision through providence. Three men arrive from Caesarea (v.11), and the Spirit instructs Peter to go *"without misgivings"* (v.12). Kenneth Wuest emphasizes that the Spirit removes inner hesitation before external obstacles are addressed. Obedience begins internally because of the Holy Spirit within. Peter also brings six Jewish

believers as witnesses. This detail matters in the conversion process. The inclusion of Gentiles is not a private innovation but a communal discernment. Cornelius's angelic vision (v.13) and the promise that Peter's message would bring salvation to the entire household (v.14) reveal that God is orchestrating events on both sides of the cultural divide.

As Peter speaks, the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles *"just as upon us at the beginning"* (v.15). This comparison is decisive in referencing the Day of Pentecost. The Gentiles do not receive a lesser version of the Spirit; they receive the same gift in the same manner. Peter interprets the event through the remembered words of Jesus (v.16). Experience is not allowed to stand alone; it is evaluated and explained by Scripture. Peter's reasoning is synonymous with the Apostles' experience: if God gives the same Spirit, then God grants the same standing. Peter's conclusion is not triumphant but humble: *"Who was I that I could withstand God?"* (v.17).

Resistance to Gentile inclusion would not be loyalty to tradition, but opposition to God Himself.

The response in Jerusalem is striking as the believers fall silent. Silence here is not confusion but surrender to the Holy Spirit. Then they glorify God, acknowledging that *"God has granted repentance that leads to life even to the Gentiles."* The phrase is highlighted "granted repentance." Repentance then is a divine gift. Salvation, from conviction to conversion, is God's work from beginning to end.

Q4: Peter says, "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them."

What does this teach us about the Spirit's freedom to act beyond our expectations or control?

A: Open

Q5: What does the silence of the Jerusalem believers in Acts 11:18 reveal about genuine spiritual discernment?

A: Open

Q6: Where have you seen God's grace at work in ways that initially challenged your theology or comfort?

A: Open

Christians in Antioch and Judea

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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. ²² 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. 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. ²⁴ For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. ²⁶ And when he had found him, 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. ²⁷ And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to

Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, 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. ²⁹ Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. ³⁰ This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 11:19–21 Luke now deliberately widens the narrative lens. Having shown how the apostles and Jerusalem church came to theological clarity regarding Gentile inclusion, he turns to what God has already been doing on the ground—often ahead of institutional awareness. The movement of the gospel does not pause while leaders deliberate. Instead, it advances through ordinary believers whose lives have been disrupted by persecution. Luke reminds the reader that these believers were scattered because of the persecution that arose after Stephen’s death (v.19). What had appeared to be a devastating blow to the Jerusalem church is now revealed as a catalyst for expansion. The scattering is not portrayed as strategic planning but as forced displacement. Yet even in displacement, the people of God remain witnesses. They “*preached the word wherever they went*,” suggesting that proclamation was not confined to pulpits or apostles but embedded in the daily lives of believers. Initially, these scattered believers spoke “*only to Jews*.” This detail is important. Luke does not romanticize the church’s growth as immediate or effortless. Cultural and theological caution remained strong. The expansion toward Gentiles occurred gradually, through obedience step by step rather than through a single decisive moment.

Verse 20 marks a quiet but radical turning point: “Some of them... began speaking to Greeks also.” Luke does not name these believers. Their anonymity underscores the point—this is not apostolic innovation but Spirit-prompted faithfulness among unnamed disciples. The gospel crosses another boundary, not by decree, but by courage. Luke then provides his theological explanation in verse 21: “*The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord*.” This phrase, “the hand of the Lord,” is Old Testament language for God’s active power and presence. Kenneth Wuest notes that Luke deliberately attributes growth not to method, organization, or persuasion, but to divine enablement. The church does not grow because believers are clever, but because God is present. Here Luke reframes persecution itself. What looked like loss becomes mission. What felt like scattering becomes sowing. Disruption becomes divine strategy. The church learns that God is not limited by adversity; He often advances most powerfully through it.

Q7: Why do you think these believers initially spoke only to Jews, even after being scattered?

A:

Q8: How does the phrase “*the hand of the Lord was with them*” challenge modern ideas of church growth?

A: Open

Q9: In what ways might God use disruption in our lives or churches for mission?

A: Open

Acts 11:22–26 When news of this Gentile response reaches Jerusalem, the church responds wisely. Rather than sending critics or enforcers, they send Barnabas. Luke’s choice of character is deeply theological. Barnabas, whose name means “son of encouragement,” is uniquely suited to discern grace rather than police boundaries. Verse 23 is pivotal: “When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced.” Luke does not say Barnabas examined credentials or demanded conformity. He *saw grace*. This reveals Barnabas’s spiritual maturity. Mature faith recognizes God’s work even when it does not unfold according to familiar patterns. Barnabas’s joy becomes an act of theological affirmation—Kingdom expansion among the Gentiles is the work of God’s hand.

Barnabas exhorts the believers that “*with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.*” The exhortation is not toward Jewish customs, but toward devotion to Christ. This signals a shift in how faithfulness is defined. Loyalty to Jesus, not adherence to ethnic or ceremonial identity, becomes the center. Luke then offers a brief but telling description of Barnabas: “*He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*” (v.24). Barnabas’s effectiveness flows from his spiritual character, not his authority. Leadership that advances unity must be Spirit-filled before it is structurally empowered.

Recognizing the need for teaching and leadership, Barnabas goes to Tarsus to retrieve Saul. This is a strategic yet pastoral decision. Saul, once feared, must be reintegrated into God’s unfolding mission. Together, Barnabas and Saul teach the church for an entire year. Luke emphasizes time and formation. This multicultural, growing church required deep discipleship, not merely enthusiasm. It is here, in Antioch, that believers are first called “Christians” (v.26). The name is certainly given by outsiders, not as a compliment but as an observation. Their identity was so clearly centered on Christ that no other label sufficed. The church is no longer defined primarily by ethnicity (“Jew” or “Gentile”) or by law, but by visible allegiance to Christ. The gospel has formed a new people whose defining feature is Christlikeness. Antioch now emerges as a prototype of the missional church: diverse, taught, Christ-centered, and outward-facing.

Q10: What does it mean to “see the grace of God” in unfamiliar settings?

A:

Q11: How does Barnabas model healthy leadership during seasons of growth and change?

A:

Q12: What does the name “Christian” communicate about identity, both then and now?

A:

Acts 11:27–30 The chapter concludes by showing that this new unity is not just theological but tangible. Prophets arrive from Jerusalem, reminding us that God continues to speak into historical circumstances. Agabus foretells a coming famine (v.28). Prophecy here is not predictive spectacle; it is pastoral warning meant to prepare God’s people. The response of the Antioch church is immediate and instructive. Each disciple gives “according to his ability”

(v.29). There is no coercion, no uniform amount—only willing, proportional generosity. What makes this moment extraordinary is the direction of the giving: Gentile believers send aid to Jewish believers in Judea. This reverses centuries of religious hierarchy and cultural suspicion. Unity reaches its fullest expression when spiritual kinship produces material sacrifice. The theology of inclusion demonstrated earlier in Acts 11 now finds concrete expression. The church that worships together also bears one another's burdens. Luke closes the chapter with quiet efficiency: the gift is sent through Barnabas and Saul. The same leaders who nurtured the church's identity now steward its compassion. Doctrine has become embodied love. Mission has become mutual care.

Q13: How does prophecy function in this passage—as prediction or guidance?

A: Open

Q14: Why is it significant that Gentile believers support Jewish believers?

A:

Q15: What practical expressions of unity might God be calling our church to embody today?

A: Open

Q16: What have you learned from this study?

A: Open