

Acts chapter 11 shows us how God gently but firmly stretches His people beyond their comfort zones. The Lord is breaking down walls, enlarging hearts, and teaching the early church that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is truly for all people.

1. Peter on Trial: When God Moves Outside Our Comfort Zone (Acts 11:1–18)

News travels fast.

“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!’” (Acts 11:1–3)

The believers in Jerusalem had heard that Gentiles had received the word of God, but instead of rejoicing first, some “of the circumcision” confronted Peter. Their accusation was not about false doctrine but about fellowship: *“You went in... and ate with them.”*

For them, sharing a table with Gentiles crossed a serious line. Their concern reflects deep-seated traditions and fears of ceremonial defilement. They believed in Jesus, but their hearts were still guarded by old barriers.

Peter’s response is wise. He does not argue or defend himself in anger. He patiently explains, step by step, what God did.

“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.’ But the voice answered me again from heaven, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.” (Acts 11:4–10)

Peter tells them about the vision: a sheet full of animals he had always considered unclean, and the voice from heaven commanding him to kill and eat. His first reaction was, “Not so, Lord”—a contradiction we recognize in ourselves as well. If He is truly Lord, “not so” is not an option. Yet Peter, like us, is struggling to let God reshape his categories.

The vision happened three times, emphasizing its importance. Immediately afterward, three men arrived from Caesarea:

“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. 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, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.’” (Acts 11:11–14)

Peter makes it clear: he did not invent this. The Spirit told him to go. Cornelius had seen an angel. God arranged the whole encounter so that Peter could preach “words by which you and all your household will be saved.”

As Peter began to speak, God gave His own confirmation:

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. 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.’ 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?” (Acts 11:15–17)

Peter’s argument is simple and powerful:

- The Spirit told me to go.
- The angel sent them to hear the message of salvation.
- As I preached, the Holy Spirit fell on them in the same way He fell on us at the beginning.
- Jesus promised this kind of Spirit baptism.
- Therefore, God Himself received them.

“Who was I that I could withstand God?”

This is the key question for the church in any generation. When God chooses to work in ways that stretch us, will we resist Him or submit to Him?

The response in Jerusalem shows that, at least in this moment, they chose well:

“When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.’” (Acts 11:18)

They stop arguing. They glorify God. They acknowledge that God has granted repentance to life even to the Gentiles.

Practical application

- Be careful not to fight what God is doing. We can cling so tightly to our traditions or preferences that we end up resisting a genuine work of the Spirit. Ask yourself: Am I saying, “Who am I to withstand God?” or am I trying to control the way He must move?
- Rejoice when others come to Christ, even if God uses people or methods you would not have chosen. The important thing is that repentance and life in Jesus are spreading.
- Let God stretch your view of who the Gospel is for. The cross is not a tribal badge; it is God’s provision for all humanity.

2. The Gospel Reaches Antioch: Light in a Dark City (Acts 11:19–21)

Luke then turns to the broader movement of the Gospel.

“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.” (Acts 11:19)

Persecution had scattered believers from Jerusalem. They carried the message wherever they went—but at first, they spoke only to Jews. The old boundaries still shaped their thinking.

But God had more in mind.

“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. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” (Acts 11:20–21)

Some believers from Cyprus and Cyrene broke the pattern. In Antioch, they began speaking to Greeks—Hellenists—and preached the Lord Jesus to them. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a large number believed and turned to Him.

Antioch was a strategic and notorious city:

- It was the third-largest city in the Roman world, after Rome and Alexandria.
- It was prosperous, cosmopolitan, and deeply immoral.
- A famous temple to the goddess associated with Daphné stood nearby, with ritual prostitution as part of its “worship.”

Yet it is in this dark, sensual, idolatrous city that the Gospel takes deep root. God delights to plant His church in places that seem most hopeless to human eyes.

Practical application

- No city or culture is beyond the reach of the Gospel. The same Jesus who saves in quiet villages can save in corrupt and crowded cities.
- Sometimes God uses unnamed believers for some of His most significant breakthroughs. We do not even know the names of these men from Cyprus and Cyrene, but God used them to launch a major work in Antioch.
- We are called not merely to survive in a dark culture, but to shine in it. The believers in Antioch did not hide; they preached Jesus openly.

3. Barnabas in Antioch: Encouragement, Commitment, and Discipleship (Acts 11:22–26)

News of the Antioch revival reached Jerusalem:

“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.” (Acts 11:22)

Barnabas is the perfect choice. His name means “son of encouragement.” He was the one who had previously stood up for Saul (Paul) and brought him into fellowship with the believers in Jerusalem. He is gifted at helping believers accept what God is doing and at building bridges.

“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. And a great many people were added to the Lord.” (Acts 11:23–24)

Barnabas does not come to tear down or control. He comes, sees the grace of God, rejoices, and encourages the believers.

He exhorts them “that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.” This is more than a shallow decision. It is a settled resolve in the core of the person. “Purpose of heart” means:

- Setting the direction of your life, not just having a passing feeling.
- Deciding, “By God’s help, I will cling to Jesus in this hostile environment.”

He knows they live in a city saturated with vice and idolatry. Vague good intentions will not be enough. They need clear, deep, wholehearted commitment.

Luke describes Barnabas as:

- A good man.
- Full of the Holy Spirit.
- Full of faith.

Because of his ministry, even more people are added to the Lord.

But Barnabas also realizes something: this growing work in a major Greek-speaking city needs strong, sustained teaching from someone uniquely prepared. He knows just the man.

“Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 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.” (Acts 11:25–26)

Saul has been in Tarsus for years—working, learning, growing, sharing the Gospel in relative obscurity. God has been preparing him. Barnabas goes to seek him and brings him into this strategic situation.

For a whole year, Barnabas and Saul meet with the church and **teach** many people. The believers in Antioch do not only need initial preaching and encouragement; they need ongoing, systematic teaching so that they can be rooted and grounded in the truth.

It is in this context that:

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” (Acts 11:26)

The term “Christian” likely began as a nickname, perhaps even a mild insult—“Christ-folk,” “those Christ people.” But it was a fitting label. These believers were so identified with Christ that people could not talk about them without referencing Him.

Practical application

- Encouragement is a vital gift in the body of Christ. Barnabas looks for the grace of God, rejoices in it, and then calls people to deeper commitment. Ask God to make you an encourager who helps others cling to Jesus.
- Purpose in your heart to continue with the Lord. In a culture saturated with temptation, you will not drift into faithfulness. You need a conscious, heart-level decision: “Lord, by Your grace, I am going to walk with You.”
- Teaching is crucial for a strong church. Preaching calls people to faith. Exhortation stirs them up. But teaching anchors them in truth. Do not be content with spiritual sound bites; pursue deep understanding of Scripture.
- Being called a “Christian” should mean people see Christ in you. Not just in your words, but in your character, your love, your integrity, and your hope.

4. Prophets, Famine, and Generosity: A Church That Cares (Acts 11:27–30)

During this fruitful season in Antioch, God also raises up prophets who travel between churches.

“And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. 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.” (Acts 11:27–28)

Agabus, a genuine prophet, warns by the Spirit that a severe famine is coming. This is not a vague prediction; Luke notes that it came to pass in the days of Claudius.

The believers in Antioch respond with compassion:

“Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.” (Acts 11:29–30)

Notice several important things:

- They give voluntarily. “Each according to his ability.” No one is coerced. Each gives as he or she is able.
- They give intentionally. They “determined” to send relief. This is purposeful, not impulsive.
- They give outwardly. They do not just focus on their own needs in Antioch. They share with believers in Judea whom many of them have never met.
- They trust faithful servants. Barnabas and Saul carry the gift to the elders in Jerusalem. This strengthens bonds between Jewish and Gentile believers.

The church that was once made up mainly of Jewish believers in Jerusalem is now being helped financially by largely Gentile believers in Antioch. The walls are coming down, not only in theory but in practice.

Practical application

- Genuine faith leads to practical love. When we understand what God has given us in Christ, we become generous toward others, especially toward fellow believers in need.
- We should give according to our ability. God is not comparing your giving to someone else's. He sees your heart and your circumstances.
- Healthy churches think beyond their own walls. Antioch did not say, "We have enough problems of our own." They looked outward and gave.

A Challenge for Believers

Acts 11 speaks to us in several pointed ways:

1. Are you resisting what God is doing because it does not fit your traditions?
The believers in Jerusalem initially criticized Peter for eating with Gentiles. Are there ways God is working today—in people, places, or cultures—that you are quick to dismiss simply because they are unfamiliar?
2. Have you made a deep-hearted decision to continue with the Lord?
Barnabas urged the Antioch believers "that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord." In a world full of distractions and temptations, have you set your heart to cling to Him?
3. Are you growing in the Word, or just coasting?
Barnabas and Saul spent a year teaching the church in Antioch. Are you positioning yourself where you can be consistently taught Scripture, not just entertained or emotionally stirred?
4. Is your faith affecting your generosity?
When the famine was predicted, the disciples in Antioch gave according to their ability to help distant brothers and sisters. Is your heart open to the needs of other believers, near and far?
5. Are you living in such a way that "Christian" is an accurate description of you?
Do others see enough of Christ in your life that they would naturally connect you with Him?

An Invitation to Those Who Do Not Yet Know Christ

If you do not yet belong to Jesus, consider Cornelius and the Gentiles in Caesarea. They were religious, sincere, and even generous. But they still needed to hear the message of salvation. God arranged for Peter to come and tell them that forgiveness of sins comes through Jesus Christ.

Through His death on the cross, Jesus shed His blood to pay for our sins. He took the judgment we deserved. Through His resurrection on the third day, God declared that He is truly God, Savior, and Lord.

Scripture says:

“To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” (Acts 10:43)

“Whoever believes in Him” includes you. Not whoever is good enough, or religious enough, or belongs to a particular group—but whoever believes in Him.

If the Spirit of God is stirring your heart, you can respond to Jesus today. Your own words are best, but you could pray something like this:

“Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins, shedding Your blood for me, and that You rose again from the dead. I believe that You are God, Savior, and Lord. I turn from my sin and ask You to forgive me. Please come into my life, make me new, and teach me to follow You. I give myself to You.”

If you truly turn to Him in faith, He will forgive you, give you new life, and make you His own. The same Lord who broke down the walls between Jew and Gentile in Acts 11 is able to break down every wall of guilt and separation between you and God today.