

We are continuing this morning in Acts, looking at the story of the early church. Acts was written by Luke, a follower of Jesus, physician, and historian who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. We have been witnessing the expansion of the early church as the disciples go out from Jerusalem to share the good news of Jesus' life, death for sins, and resurrection from the dead and to exhort people to turn from their sins to believe in Jesus. Last chapter, a soldier named Cornelius came to faith and received the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Peter. In the process, God showed Peter that God has accepted the Gentiles – those who are not Jews – into the family of faith on equal standing with the Jews if they believe in Jesus. As we begin chapter 11, we see that word of what has happened has travelled back to Jerusalem. We will read Acts 11 & 12 this morning:

*Acts 11:1-30 - The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him <sup>3</sup> and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." <sup>4</sup> Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: <sup>5</sup> "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. <sup>6</sup> I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' <sup>8</sup> "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' <sup>9</sup> "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' <sup>10</sup> This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. <sup>11</sup> "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. <sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. <sup>14</sup> He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.' <sup>15</sup> "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>17</sup> So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" <sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." <sup>19</sup> Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. <sup>20</sup> Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The Lord's hand*

was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. <sup>27</sup> During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) <sup>29</sup> The disciples, *each according to his ability*, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

**Acts 12:1-25** It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup> He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. <sup>3</sup> When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. <sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. <sup>6</sup> The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. <sup>7</sup> Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. <sup>8</sup> Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. <sup>9</sup> Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup> They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. <sup>11</sup> Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." <sup>12</sup> When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. <sup>13</sup> Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup> When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the

door!" <sup>15</sup> "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." <sup>16</sup> But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup> Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place. <sup>18</sup> In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. <sup>20</sup> He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. <sup>21</sup> On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. <sup>22</sup> They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." <sup>23</sup> Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. <sup>24</sup> But the word of God continued to increase and spread. <sup>25</sup> When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

In these chapters, Peter explains to the disciples what happened with Cornelius, the church sends out more missionaries and faces more persecution, but also sees God continue to deliver and protect them. Many of the same themes are repeating themselves as we make our way through Acts. **I believe that for this sermon the challenge is not to teach you something you don't know, but to ask you whether you are obeying what you have heard.**

Remember that Jesus said that the wise man is the one who hears His word and acts on it, while the foolish man hears and does not act. And James says:

**James 1:22 - Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**

So for this sermon I want to ask you three questions for you to reflect upon, based on what we see in this passage.

- 1) **How is God challenging you to leave the safe, comfortable place in order to cross boundaries and share the gospel with others?**

Peter's experience with Cornelius showed him that God was creating a worldwide, multi-ethnic family. In chapter 8 the Samaritans came to faith, and now the Greek-speaking Gentiles receive the Spirit. They are seeing that God does not show favoritism. And even though Peter was criticized by some, he went and saw the power of God bring salvation to Cornelius and his household. But it never would have happened unless he was willing to trust God and leave the comfortable environment for a place that was much more unfamiliar.

Some of you are staying in comfortable places in your life. Where is God challenging you to leave the safe, comfortable place?

Remember, we are all missionaries.

*Acts 1:8 - But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

*Matthew 28:18-20 - Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

You know these things. But are you doing them? In this passage, some went to the Jews, in v. 19. Others went to the Greeks. Where is God calling you to go? Maybe it's the Peru trip. Maybe it's in your neighborhood or workplace. It may just be crossing the street, crossing your lawn. Go to a different place. Pick one unfamiliar place or person and go there. Have a plan, and be open to God leading you in unexpected ways. Look for opportunities to share the gospel.

*Romans 1:16 - I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*

We cross boundaries to bring the love of God to people because Christ did it for us.

*Philippians 2:5-8 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!*

## 2) How can you pray more fervently for Him to move, believing that He will do it?

In ch. 12, Herod persecutes the church. Peter is imprisoned, and once again the people devote themselves to prayer. They channel their fear into prayer, placing their burdens in the Lord's hands.

*.<sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

Peter is freed miraculously from prison and comes to them. Amazingly, they don't even believe it at first.

*<sup>15</sup> "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." <sup>16</sup> But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.*

We can do nothing apart from Him. Let's pray more fervently after the service. Or come to our noon prayer times on the 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesdays. Or gather when you can with other believers to pray.

***John 14:11-12*** - Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. <sup>12</sup> I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even **greater things** than these, because I am going to the Father.

How can you commit to prayer? What can you replace with prayer? Can you journal? Put something on your mirror or somewhere else where you will see it? Can you schedule reminders on your phone during the day? Will you come up and pray after the service?

## 3) Will you obey Him, regardless of the outcome?

Is He calling you to obedience, whether it results in miracles or persecution? It does not have to be something big. What is the small thing he is already calling you to obey? And will you obey regardless of the outcome?

Peter is freed miraculously from prison. James, on the other hand, is killed. You do not know whether your obedience will end in victory or in suffering. But you do know that the Lord is good, and worthy to be praised, whatever happens.

Hebrews 11, the hall of faith, lists people who obeyed God and experienced incredible miracles, and others whose experiences were not so great.

**Hebrews 11:32-40** - *And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, <sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup> quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. <sup>35</sup> Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup> Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. <sup>37</sup> They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- <sup>38</sup> the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup> These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. <sup>40</sup> God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

There is a cost associated with following Him. We are picking up our cross and following Him.

Acts 11:29 tells us that each one served according to his own ability to meet needs. Barnabas encouraged. Peter preached. Some gave and served. Some went and preached to the Jews. Others to the Gentiles. Some joined together in prayer. Will you be faithful to what God has called you to do?

Take some time to reflect upon these questions this morning, remembering that it is not about hearing the word but putting it into practice.