

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Study Guide: Acts 11:19-21

In Acts 10, the first expansion of the Gospel to an entirely Gentile audience has taken place. Luke is now preparing to detail the rest of Saul/Paul's missionary journeys.

Two "vignettes" that serve as a transition between Cornelius' conversion and the systematic evangelization of the Gentile world:

Acts 11:19–30 – this describes the Church's expansion northwards, through the efforts of unidentified evangelists and missionaries.

Acts 12:1–25: King Herod Agrippa I and his attacks on the apostolic college. This is Luke's last chronicle involving Peter and Jerusalem.

- **Those Who Had Been Scattered: v. 19**

"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. "

A similarity to Acts 8:4: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

Acts 8:4 – Luke's story of the Messianic Jews of the new Diaspora taking the gospel wherever they went. Acts 11:19 - How some of these same believers made their way north along the Phoenician seaboard. Some took ships to Cyprus; others continued north to Antioch on the Orontes.

- **Antioch on the Orontes: v. 19**

The Orontes River is about 355 miles long. Beginning in Lebanon, it

flows northwards through Syria before entering the Mediterranean Sea near Samandağ in Turkey. It is the chief river of what is called the Levant – a geographical term which refers to a large area in the Eastern Mediterranean region of West Asia.

“Antioch on the Orontes” – is in the modern Hatay province of Turkey. It was founded in 300 B.C. by first ruler of the Seleucid dynasty. It was named by him after his father Antiochus.

When the Roman General Pompey reorganized Western Asia in 64 B.C., he made Antioch a free city and established it as the seat of administration for the Roman province of Syria.

By that point, Antioch population is estimated to have been around 500,000. This made it one of the three largest cities in the Graeco-Roman world. Only Rome and Alexandria had larger populations.

Syria’s produce passed through Antioch on its way west. The city served as both a commercial center and a seat of Roman administration.

Antioch had a large colony of Jews, as well as Asians from Persia, India and even China. It was called, “The Queen of the East”.

Antioch was well-known for its sexual immorality, which was enhanced by the cult of Artemis and Apollo at the city of Daphne, some five miles away. This included the Syrian worship of Astarte, which included ritual prostitution.

Now that we have some idea of the geography of Luke’s accounts, let’s read verses 19-21 again:

- **Taking The Gospel To The Gentiles: vv. 19-21**

“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. 20 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. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."

These Greek disciples who fled from the persecution in Jerusalem restricted their efforts to reaching the Jewish populations in the cities they went to. Why? 1. These Hellenistic Jews were much like themselves. 2. They had not yet embraced the idea that the gospel was also for non-Jews.

A Break From The Prior Pattern: v. 20:

"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.

While the bulk of Hellenists kept their evangelism efforts trained on the Jewish population, others decided to evangelize the Greek-Gentiles.

These men were from Cyprus and Cyrene. Barnabas was also from Cyprus. Cyrene (on the north African coast) was the home of Simon, the man who carried Jesus' crossbeam. See: Acts 13:1 - "Lucius of Cyrene".

These disciples told these Gentiles "the good news about the Lord Jesus." Luke uses two Jewish terms, "Messiah" and "Lord".

Non-Greek Gentiles would have had very little background for understanding the long-held expectations of a Jewish Messiah. However, the Greek term "Kyrios" or "Lord", as well as "Soæteær" or "Savior" were very much in use in the religious organizations of the eastern Mediterranean.

Using the very language of the Greek cults, these unnamed missionaries told their audience about the Son of God who had been born as a human, suffered death, and risen again on the third day.

- **The Lord's Hand Was With Them: v. 21**

“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”

Luke is using a “Hebraism” – “The Lord’s Hand”. It is a frequent phrase in both the Old and New Testaments. It references God’s power throughout the history of His dealings with His people.

See: Exodus 14:31; Psalm 80:17; Luke 1:66; Acts 4:28; Acts 4:30.

In Acts 11:21, Luke is saying that the power of God was released in these evangelism efforts. The Gentile conversions were a result not just of preaching, but of miracles.

The pattern throughout the Book of Acts:

- Sound of rushing wind (2:2).
- Tongues of fire (2:3).
- Miraculous speech (2:4).
- Lame man healed (3:1-10).
- Building shaken (4:31).
- Sudden death of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11).
- Imprisoned apostles freed by angel (5:17-21).
- Philip transported from desert to Azotus (8:40).
- Light and voice at Saul’s conversion (9:1-9).
- Saul blinded and healed (9:8-19).
- Aeneas healed of paralysis (9:32-35).
- Dorcas restored to life (9:36-41).
- Cornelius and Company Speaking in tongues (10:46).

At Antioch, as in other places, the power of God was manifested as these evangelists shared the Word of God.

Surprisingly (?), the Greek Gentiles embraced the Gospel message, F.F. Bruce: “As if it was the very thing they had been waiting for, as something that exactly suited their case...”

I want to give you another quote by F.F. Bruce, because it underscores the historical importance of these events. Here’s what he writes about them:

The Multiplication Of Gentile Evangelism: v. 21

“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”

The scope of evangelism following the Day of Pentecost:

Acts 2-3: From 120 in to 3,120 in the Temple Courts

Acts 4:4: 5000-8120 (?) Many scholars believe that Luke means an additional 5,000 men had been saved, not counting women and children. “Men” may be a generic term for both men and women (Example: “In Adam, all die.”)

The Jerusalem Church had grown quickly. The Antioch events illustrate the salvation of Gentiles. Such large numbers of Greek Gentiles believing the Gospel marked a truly watershed moment in the first century Church.

Next time: How the Jerusalem Church responded to the Gentile conversions at Antioch.