

Good News Travels Fast

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[0 : 00] Well, if we could, this morning, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read, the book of Acts, Acts chapter 11, and if we just read again from the beginning, Acts chapter 11, from the beginning.

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them, and so on.

Amen. It's often said that good news travels fast. Good news travels fast. But you know, I often wonder if bad news travels faster.

In fact, sometimes I think that gossip travels faster than good news and bad news. But however, we're familiar with the phrase, good news travels fast.

And especially, it's especially through in the day and generation that we live in, because with super fast broadband and with instant communication, we're able to know what's happening in all the different countries and all the different capitals of our world.

[1 : 25] We're able to know what's happening there. And with global news being reported on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we're able to know what's happening in the world because it's all been reported on.

Whether it's the dreaded topic of Brexit, or the devastating wars in the Middle East, or even the awful fires in Australia, the spread of the coronavirus from China, the floods that are taking place in England, or even the unsettling times for our Scottish government.

It's all been reported on 24-7. And you know, with modern technology, whether it's good news or bad news, it's all able to travel very fast.

Of course, more often than not, it's usually bad news that travels fast. And sometimes, it's even things that aren't newsworthy at all, that go viral. But you know, what we witness in this chapter is that the good news of the gospel has travelled.

And it's travelled because it has now travelled to the Gentiles who are living in Caesarea and Antioch. But you know, sadly, the first act that takes place here is that the good news had travelled to the Gentiles, but that good news, it was viewed as bad news by those who were in Jerusalem.

[2 : 42] And yet, what we see here is that Peter, he returns to Jerusalem from Caesarea, and he gives this report to Christians in Jerusalem of what's been happening in the church of Jesus Christ.

And what Peter reported was that it wasn't bad news, that the good news had travelled fast. In fact, Peter reported that it was good news that the good news of the gospel had travelled fast and spread further and wider.

And so in this chapter, I'd just like us to look at it this morning, because in this chapter, we hear of two reports of good news. Two reports of good news and what happened among the Gentiles.

Because in the first half of the chapter, there's a report of repentance. And then in the second half of the chapter, there's a report of revival. And so there are two headings this morning.

A report of repentance, that's the first half of the chapter, and then a report of revival. A report of repentance and a report of revival. So first of all, a report of repentance.

[3 : 48] We're told in verse 1, Acts chapter 10.

Because if you remember, Acts chapter 10, it was what we called the Italian job. Where the apostle Peter, he was commanded by God the Holy Spirit to go to this Gentile Italian soldier who was called Cornelius.

And he was to go to his home and preach the gospel to him and to all his family. And as we said, the Italian job of Acts chapter 10, it was a pivotal moment in the book of Acts.

Because the gospel was now spreading from the Jews out to the Gentiles. And that's what's been reported in this chapter, in chapter 11.

What's been reported is what happened in chapter 10, the Italian job. And as we read in verse 1 there, when the apostles and other members of the church, when they heard that the gospel had now spread to the Gentiles, they thought it was good news.

[5 : 15] Because we're told that the Gentiles received the word of God. They received the gospel. They received Christ. Which, who is the gospel? The Gentiles, they embraced Jesus Christ as he was freely offered to them in the gospel.

And so many of the apostles of the church and the church members, they all rejoiced to hear this good news. The good news that the gospel had now reached the Gentiles.

But as we went on to read in verse 2, not everyone thought it was good news. We're told, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

Now, many in the early church, they thought of the gospel spreading as good news. But the circumcision party thought that the gospel spreading to the Gentiles was bad news.

And, you know, when they heard Peter, who was one of the leading apostles of the church, when they heard that he had preached the gospel to the Gentiles, they criticized him. They criticized him.

[6 : 27] This circumcision party, they separated themselves from Peter and showed that they were extremely disappointed and even disgusted with the fact that Peter went to preach the gospel to Gentiles.

You could even go as far as to say that the circumcision party, they were horrified. Horrified by what Peter did. Because they said to Peter, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

And you can almost hear the disgust and the dismay in the voices of this circumcision party. But, you know, all this tension here, it was because for centuries, the Jews and the Gentiles, they never mixed.

They would keep themselves to themselves. The Jews would mix with Jews. The Gentiles would mix with Gentiles. And as we said before, there was always this barrier, this barrier that was created.

And it was created more because of the Jews and their attitude towards the Gentiles. Because the Jews, they viewed the Gentiles as, they viewed them as unclean, uncircumcised, and unholy, and ultimately unsavable.

[7 : 38] The Jews thought of themselves as better than everyone else. And inevitably, it carried this barrier of distinction and division between the Jews and the Gentiles.

But for the circumcision party, this is what's interesting. They were Christians. They were Jewish Christians. They were Jews who had been converted to Christianity.

But what happened was that even though they were Christians, they still remained, or they still retained this Jewish identity and mindset. In fact, those of the circumcision party, they actually insisted that in order to become a Christian, you had to become a Jew first and be circumcised.

But what's clear here is that the circumcision party had misunderstood the gospel. because the gospel of the circumcision party was a gospel of Jesus plus circumcision.

It was a gospel of Jesus plus circumcision. And what's more is that the circumcision party, they placed a lot of emphasis upon the outward appearance and upon works for salvation.

[8 : 57] And they didn't emphasize the response, the humble response of a heart in faith and obedience to Jesus Christ. So the circumcision party, they emphasized outward appearances and works instead of faith and obedience to Jesus Christ.

In other words, as Christians, the circumcision party, they were very legalistic. They had a very legalistic mindset. And that's why they were openly disappointed and even disgusted with Peter.

But the reality was that they had misunderstood the good news of the gospel. Because they had a gospel of Jesus plus. They had a gospel of Jesus plus circumcision.

And sadly, their misunderstanding, the misunderstanding of this circumcision party, it actually filtered through the church, through the early church, and caused many Christians to lack assurance of salvation.

Because when they heard the message of the circumcision party, they all thought that they were never going to be good enough. And you know, that's what Paul had to repeatedly contend with in many of the churches that he wrote to and visited.

[10 : 16] Paul had to contend with this gospel, this gospel of Jesus plus. He had to contend with it when he went to the church in Colossae. He had to contend with it when he went to the Philippians.

He had to contend with it when he went even to the Galatians. It was a gospel of Jesus plus. A gospel that actually wasn't a gospel at all. Because it always made people think that they weren't good enough to be saved.

And you know, the same is true today, is it not? Because you know, there are many of you here, and I think about you so often. And you've grown up with the gospel.

You've heard the gospel all your life. You know the gospel. But it seems to me that you've misunderstood the gospel. Because regardless of the amount of sermons that you hear about Jesus Christ bearing your sin upon the cross and dying in your place, you still think that you're not good enough.

And you still think that you have to do something in order to be saved. I don't know if I'm right in saying that about you, am I? But dare I say that you have such a misunderstanding of the gospel because for far too long, Christians in our island have acted like the circumcision party and placed an emphasis upon the outward appearance and good works and not on the humble response of the heart in faith and obedience to Jesus Christ.

[11 : 54] And you know, my unconverted friend, correct me if I'm wrong, but do you think today that the good news of the gospel is Jesus plus? Is your understanding of the gospel a gospel of Jesus plus?

Do you think that you'll only be saved if you're good enough? Do you think you'll only be saved if you've done enough in order to earn favor with this holy God that seems so distant from you?

Do you think that the gospel is a gospel of Jesus plus my baptism? Do you think it's a gospel of Jesus plus my Bible reading? Jesus plus my church attendance?

Jesus plus my Sabbath keeping? Jesus plus my law abiding? Jesus plus my good living? Jesus plus my faithful neighbouring? Is your gospel a gospel of Jesus plus?

Jesus plus? Jesus plus? Well, my friend, I want to say to you today it's not a gospel of Jesus plus. No. It's Jesus Christ.

[13 : 01] And Jesus Christ alone. The good news of the gospel is about coming to this Jesus empty handed and whole hearted.

That's how you have to come to him. Empty handed and whole hearted clinging to his finished work on the cross. My friend, the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news.

And as Peter reminded the church or the people of Caesarea, he reminded them it's a message of repentance unto life. It's a message of repentance unto life.

And you know, that's what Peter reported to the circumcision party in Jerusalem. He gave a report of repentance. That when the Gentiles heard the gospel, they responded with repentance unto life.

And the report Peter gives, it's recorded for us from verse 4 down to verse 16. It's just exactly what happened in Acts chapter 10. Peter reports of all that happened in the Italian job in Acts 10.

[14 : 10] Where he was given this vision commanded by God the Holy Spirit to leave his Jewish seaside town of Joppa and then travel up to the Gentile seaport city of Caesarea and go to the home of this Gentile Italian soldier called Cornelius and preach the gospel to him and to his family.

And Peter says in verse 15, as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

If then God gave the same spirit to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

And you know, what a question. Who was I that I could stand in God's way? When all those in the house of Cornelius repented of their sins, Peter knew that it was all a work of the Lord.

And he stands back and he says, no, God is at work here. Who was I that I could stand in God's way? And with that, the circumcision party, when they hear this report of repentance, they respond in silence.

[15 : 34] We're told in verse 18, when they heard these things, they fell silent and they glorified God saying, then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.

At first, the circumcision party thought that the good news of the gospel going to the Gentiles was bad news. But when they heard Peter's report of repentance, they were both astounded and dumbstruck.

But you know, they praised the Lord that the Gentiles had been granted repentance unto life. They had been granted repentance unto life. But what is repentance unto life?

That's the question that's in your intimations this morning. What is repentance unto life? That's one of the questions asked in our shorter catechism. What is repentance unto life?

And the catechism gives the answer. You can read it in your intimations. Repentance unto life is a saving grace whereby a sinner out of a true sense of his sin and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ doth with grief and hatred of his sin turn from it unto God with full purpose of and endeavour after new obedience.

[16 : 54] sin and you know I love that catechism because it reminds sinners sinners like you my friend it reminds sinners that when you hear the gospel of Jesus Christ when you hear the good news of Jesus Christ you have a responsibility to respond.

you have a responsibility to repent. Because when the gospel is preached in truth and sincerity it's not take it or leave it.

No, the gospel tells us you must repent. You must repent. My unconverted friend repentance unto life repentance that leads to life to eternal life is when you turn from your sin and turn to the saviour Jesus Christ.

It's an active response to the good news of the gospel. And you know my unconverted friend the reason I refer to you so often as my unconverted friend is for this very reason.

You haven't turned from your sin and turned to the saviour Jesus Christ. You're still unconverted and I call you my unconverted friend because you're still in this state of sin and you haven't turned to the saviour and the only way to turn from your sin to the saviour is through repentance.

[18 : 27] Repentance unto life. And so my unconverted friend you need to repent. You need to repent and be converted. As Peter said long ago that your sins may be blotted out.

You need to turn from your sin seeking the Lord's forgiveness in repentance and turn to this wonderful saviour because that's the only way you will ever become a Christian.

You need to turn from your sin and turn to the saviour Jesus Christ. And you know that's why those in Antioch who were first called Christians that's what they experienced they experienced repentance unto life.

They repented of their sins and they turned to the saviour Jesus Christ. But when we consider the church in Antioch there wasn't just one or two of them that repented of their sin.

There were many of them. There were lots of them. In fact there were so many of them who repented of their sin and turned to the saviour that were told that there was a revival in Antioch.

[19 : 39] And that's the second report that's given in this chapter. A report of revival. So there was a report of repentance in the first half of the chapter. But then secondly a report of revival.

A report of revival. Look at verse 19. It says Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen they travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch speaking the word to no one except Jews.

But there were some of them men of Cyprus and Cyrene who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also preaching the Lord Jesus and the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

Then it says in verse 22 the report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. So the second half of this chapter contains the report about another Gentile region that received the gospel.

Now it said that the church in Antioch it was the first Gentile church and it was founded around 42 AD and Antioch it was a Gentile church because Antioch was a Gentile city it's located it was located in Syria and it was part of this major trade route where they traded spices and it meant that people would travel from all over the different parts of the world and they would all trade in Antioch and so Antioch you could say it was this international multicultural cosmopolitan Gentile city but you know what's amazing about it is that Antioch was located nearly seven and a half thousand miles north of Jerusalem and yet the gospel reached those in Antioch and the gospel reached them because of the persecution of Christians that's what we read in verse 19 now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen they travelled as far as

[21 : 50] Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch speaking the word to no one except Jews you remember back in chapter 7 and chapter 8 of the book of Acts when Stephen was stoned when Stephen was stoned to death there was this great persecution against the church and for fear of their lives the Christian church they scattered they ran from the city of Jerusalem into the regions of Judea and Samaria and even beyond they were all scattered and as we read there in verse 19 they went to Phoenicia which was just over the border of Israel to the north and some of them went to Cyprus which as you know it's a small island north west of Israel but further north still was Antioch and that's where these Christians were scattered and of course as we said before the scattering of Christians into all these regions it was the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to the church that Jesus said when the

Holy Spirit comes upon you you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth and so as the church was scattered so was the seed of the gospel but you know what I love about this passage is that as the church was scattered the gospel spread and it spread we're told in verse 21 no in verse 20 because they preached the Lord Jesus they preached the Lord Jesus as the church scattered the gospel spread because they preached the Lord Jesus they preached the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ and that good news it traveled far and fast they preached the Lord Jesus you know my friend they didn't use gimmicks to draw people in they preached the Lord Jesus they didn't water down the message to make it more comfortable to listen to they preached the Lord

Jesus they didn't replace the preaching of the gospel with something else entirely no they preached the Lord Jesus but why because they knew and believed that the power of the gospel was in the preached word they knew that the word of God is the power of God unto salvation and as we read there in verse 21 the result of faithful gospel preaching was the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord you know my friend these unnamed and unknown Christians they simply and faithfully preached the Lord Jesus and a great number believed they repented from their sin they turned to the Saviour who is Jesus Christ they preached the Lord Jesus and you know in his commentary Al Molar he highlights the contrast between the church in the first century and the church today in the 21st century and sadly

Luke reading his comment he just describes the free church today because he says regrettably in our own day many churches have turned away from the simplicity of preaching and evangelism some churches and Christians seem to think that preaching and evangelism are an ineffective means of advancing the kingdom instead many church growth books advocate an endless array of marketing strategies and clever programs designed to bring people into the church but he says God's ways are far simpler and far more effective spirit filled and spirit empowered preaching and evangelism are God's appointed means of bringing people into his kingdom for those in the early church he says God blessed their efforts to simply and clearly communicate the gospel to their friends and neighbours and anyone they met therefore he says let us never doubt God's power to save through the simple means of gospel preaching my friend the church in the first century preached the Lord

Jesus because they knew and believed that the power of the gospel is in the preached word and as you know my Christian friend the good news of the gospel it hasn't changed in over 2000 years therefore the church today in the 21st century as that church we must preach not ourselves says Paul but Christ Jesus as Lord because that's the good news we want to travel we want that good news to travel far and fast throughout our communities and throughout our island and beyond that's the good news we want to spread this gospel of Jesus Christ we're to preach Jesus Christ as Lord and you know for those in the early church the good news was that the good news of the gospel it travelled far it travelled fast because it travelled that 7000 plus miles from Jerusalem and the church in Jerusalem they heard a report about it they heard a report of revival which we read off in verse 22 we're told that the report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent

[27 : 30] Barnabas to Antioch when he came and saw the grace of God he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose for he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith and a great many people were added to the Lord so when the church in Jerusalem heard the report of revival in Antioch they sent one of their best men because who better to send to Antioch who better to help and encourage these young converts than Barnabas because who else could get alongside all these young Christians than Barnabas the man who was called the son of encouragement and when Barnabas when he travelled to Antioch that 7000 plus miles from Jerusalem as soon as he arrived we're told he rejoiced he rejoiced to see the Lord working among the Gentiles he rejoiced to see people coming to faith in Christ he rejoiced to see sinners being brought to salvation and as you would expect

Barnabas got to work straight away he encouraged and exhorted the Christians in Antioch as we're told there to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose Barnabas encouraged and exhorted the Christians in Antioch to live their Christian lives with whole hearted commitment to the Lord but Barnabas we also read that he knew his limits and he knew he needed help because we're told in verse 25 Barnabas went to Tarshish to look for Saul and when he found him he brought him to Antioch and for a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people and in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians knowing his limits and being humble enough to ask for help Barnabas went looking for Saul and Barnabas and Saul were told they stayed in Antioch for a whole year just to disciple these young

Christians and as we read it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians Christians and as you should know the title or the term Christian it refers to someone who follows Christ someone who's committed to Jesus Christ that's what a Christian is but you know when we consider this report a revival we ought to notice the pattern the pattern of preaching and teaching in the early church for these young Christians because when the people in Antioch when they heard the good news of the gospel and when they responded through repentance unto life when they responded by turning away from their sin and turning to the saviour were told there that they were then exhorted and encouraged by Barnabas to commit their life to Jesus Christ and when there was commitment and discipleship they were known as

Christians and that's the pattern they heard the gospel they were called to make a commitment they made a commitment they were known as a Christian and my friend it's the same pattern for preaching and teaching in the church today because there's no doubt that you've heard the gospel you've heard the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ that he came into the world to save sinners you've heard the good news and you've been urged to respond you've been urged to respond in repentance by turning from your sin and turning to the saviour Jesus Christ and because of that you've been exhorted and encouraged to commit your life to Jesus Christ you're to come empty handed but whole hearted to this Jesus and when you come empty handed and whole hearted and make a commitment there's discipleship and when you're a disciple of Jesus you are a Christian you are a Christian so my friend

I want to ask you today are you a Christian are you a follower of Jesus are you committed to Jesus Christ and yes you might not know everything about Christianity I don't know everything about Christianity and you might not understand everything about Christianity I don't understand everything that's in the Bible but that's what a disciple is a disciple is a learner and that's what the word disciple means the word disciple means learner so are you a Christian are you a follower of Jesus are you committed to Jesus Christ and you know the fact that Saul and Barnabas stayed a whole year in Antioch they didn't go off planting another church somewhere else no they stayed in Antioch because they were committed to discipleship and they knew that discipleship it's a slow process it takes time but you know the foundation and basis of discipleship is commitment to Jesus

[32 : 52] Christ and the way in which Saul and Barnabas disciplined the church in Antioch it's also important because Christians were disciplined through preaching and teaching in fact it's the preaching and teaching of Saul and Barnabas at Antioch that's been emphasized in this whole passage they were preaching and teaching that's how the Christians in Antioch were disciplined one commentator said we should never lose sight of the fact that the primary context for discipleship is the gathered church Bible study groups and home groups can certainly aid our growth and godliness personal devotions are a great means of developing maturity but God has ordained that preaching and teaching in the context of the local church should be the primary means by which Christians are disciplined and encouraged to follow after Christ and what that commentator means is that my friend if you want to be a

Christian or if you want to grow as a disciple then you need to be where the Lord's people are gathered you need to be in church because the Lord's house is the place to be both ends on the Lord's day and even during the week it's a place to be if you really want to be saved if you really want to be a Christian if you really want to grow and be disciplined and taught and transformed by the word of God and shaped then you need to be under the preaching and teaching of God's word it's not me you need to be listening to that's not what I'm asking I'm not asking you come and listen to me I'm asking you to be under the preaching and teaching of God's word regardless of who's preaching because that's how we're shaped and taught and challenged and disciplined it's all through the word of God and you know as John Newton said it's in the Lord's house that you're reminded of two simple truths I am a great sinner and Jesus

Christ is a great saviour and you know that's what we need to be reminded of again and again in our discipleship and so what we see in this chapter chapter 11 is that the good news of the gospel it travelled far and it travelled fast there was a report of repentance in Caesarea there was a report of revival in Antioch but you know what's really interesting is that as we continue our study in the book of Acts we'll see that the church in Antioch this Gentile church it actually became the launching pad for the gospel to spread further into Europe it spread further and wider and all started with what happened in the church in Antioch and it was all because the Christians in Antioch took their discipleship seriously they wanted to grow they wanted to learn they wanted to be shaped through the preaching and teaching of God's word they were willing and because of all that they were willing to be used by the

Lord so that the good news of the gospel would spread further and wider you know my friend it's often said that good news travels fast so we need to seek to take our discipleship seriously too so that through the preaching and teaching of God's word we as poor disciples will be used by the Lord so that the good news of the gospel it'll spread to the homes and the families and the community and our island and beyond that this message of the Lord Jesus will be made known to sinners who are sitting in darkness my friend let's seek to take our discipleship seriously for the glory of God and the extension of his kingdom well may the Lord bless these few thoughts to us let us pray our heavenly father we give thanks to thee for for the word of

God that it is the only rule to direct us on how we may glorify God and enjoy him forever and Lord we pray that thou wouldst bless thy word to us that thou wouldst use it to challenge us to stir us up to equip us and even to call us to call us Lord to thyself that for those Lord who are still in darkness that they might repent and turn to the saviour for Lord thy people that we would be encouraged to keep being disciplined to be taught and shaped and formed and fashioned by the word of God Lord we give thanks to thee for the means of grace and help us to use them for the furtherance of thy kingdom and for the glory of thy name Lord bless us then together we ask uphold us and keep us for we ask it in Jesus name and for his sake amen we're going to bring our service to a conclusion by singing the words of Psalm 143

[38 : 07] Psalm 143 in the Scottish Psalter page 439 it's the second version of the Psalm Psalm 143 we're singing from verse 6 down to the verse marked 8 and we're singing this Psalm because it was John Murdo's favourite Psalm he loved these words lo I do stretch my hands to thee my help alone for thou will understand all my complaint and moan my thirsting soul desires and longeth after thee as thirsty ground requires with rain refreshed to be Lord let my prayer prevail to answer it make speed for lo my spirit doth fail hide not thy face in need lest I be like to those that do in darkness sit or him that downward goes into the dreadful pit because I trust in thee

O Lord cause me to hear thy loving kindness free when morning doth appear cause me to know the way wherein my path should be for why my soul on high I do lift up to thee these verses of psalm 143 to God's praise Lord I do stretch my hands to thee my help alone for thou well understand all my my thirsting soul desires long after thee as thirsty grant requires with rain refreshed to be thee

Lord let my prayer prevail you answer it make speed for lo my spirit doth fail hide not thy face in need lest I be like to those that do in darkness sit or him that downward goes into the dreadful pit because I trust in thee O Lord cause me to hear thy loving kindness free when morning doth appear cause me to know the way wherein my path should be or why my soul on high

I do lift up to thee the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever more Amen