

The Jerusalem Church and the Antioch Church

Acts 11:19-26

When we look at chapter 11 of the book of Acts, there is a story about two churches. One of them is the Jerusalem church and the other is a church in Antioch. As we know, the Jerusalem church is an amazing church that began with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. About 3,000 people were saved there by Peter's powerful sermon and another 5,000 people were saved through the miracle of a crippled man being raised up. However, as time passed, the Jerusalem church was in decline which continued for quite a while. On the other hand, the Antioch church had just opened, but the church was built by faithful Christians. This church sent missionaries like Barnabas and Paul under the leadership of the Gospel and it became a central church to the later spreading of the Word of God in Rome. Then, why did the Jerusalem church decline and the Antioch church grow? In a word, it is because the Jerusalem church couldn't rise up to the "change" of the situation.

The Word of God was spread in Jerusalem as well as in all Judea and Samaria, and the gentiles began to come to Jesus and were saved. The gentiles, not the Jews, began to come to Him. That is to say, the situation and circumstances had changed. But the problem is that the Jerusalem church members didn't understand and criticized the new situation. When we look at verses 1-3, it shows us how the Jerusalem church members faced this different situation. "The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him." Note the phrase: "the circumcised believers". There are those who still respected the Jewish traditions among the Jerusalem church members. The circumcised believers were inquiring of Peter about entering the house of a gentile named Cornelius and introducing him to the Word of God. From their point of view, Peter broke the commandments by entering the gentile's home. They believe that Peter had committed a crime. God had always planned to have His word spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, to even the gentiles. So that's when the Jerusalem church began to open the door of salvation for gentiles. Just as Jesus said, the Word of God was introducing itself in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Nevertheless, the Jerusalem church members couldn't see any of God's amazing works and the changing world, they still wanted to keep their doctrine, rules and traditions.

The world is changing very rapidly. Our sense of value and our view of the world are changing as well. The speed of change continues to come faster than compared with the past. People's requests are changing and the way they are receiving God's Word has also changed. Just as the Jerusalem church, many of today's churches have a problem answering to the changing world through the Word of God. We have an amazing, great gospel, but we can't use it to answer the changing world? Why is that? That is because today's churches have become dull about saving lives and changing the world. The reason is that are bound by their own traditions, doctrine and dogma. Today's church is losing the power of God's Word. The church, which has to be the core of change, is becoming an outsider to the changing world. Therefore the important subject for us to look at today is that the church should restore God's plan to save the world. The word of God must be restored to its original intent, not be held hostage through tradition or doctrine. However, keeping traditions and doctrine is not wrong. However, what I want to say is that saving the world through the Word of God is more important than any tradition that we have.

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God wants us to use the gospel as the answer to a changing world, not by being a slave to our old fashioned way of thinking.

God does not discriminate between the Jew and the gentile. He wanted the gentiles to be saved also. That is God's plan. However, the Jerusalem church didn't know what God's plan was. When we look at chapter 15 of the Book of Acts, we can see that there was a conference at the Jerusalem church due to a problem that they had with doctrine. The topic of this conference was the saving of gentiles. They gathered together to discuss and debate. When Peter went into the Cornelius' home, the Holy Spirit came and the gentiles were saved. When Barnabas and Paul began mission work for gentiles, the gentiles repented of their sins and came to Jesus. But the problem was that the Jerusalem church was not ready to receive gentiles for their salvation. I think God might think, "I cannot work with the Jerusalem church to save all nations." After this, when we look at the Book of Acts, the Jerusalem church was pushed out for the salvation of Rome and the world. The church had lost the leadership of gospel. The church was continued to decline later the Jerusalem church became a church dependent on receiving economic assistance from other churches in Asia Minor or Macedonia. Why did this happen to the Jerusalem church? It's because they didn't know what God's plan was. It's because they were tied to their tired doctrine and traditions.

So God has chosen a different church instead of the Jerusalem church. He has chosen a different church for saving the gentiles. Verse 19 tells us that he chose the Antioch church. The more the Jerusalem church became weak, the more that the Antioch church rose and had a hold on the leadership of gospel. Verse 20 says, "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." The Christians who were scattered due to Stephen's trial came to Antioch and they also spread the gospel to Greeks. The Christians who came into Antioch broke the traditions, rules, and doctrine of the Jerusalem church and spread the gospel to the gentiles with God's plan and worshipped together with them. The surprising aspect of the Antioch church was that both Jews and gentiles gathered together to worship God. But it isn't surprising that this pleased God. God blessed the Antioch church and the church was reconstructed. Verse 10 says, "The Lord's hand was with them." The Lord's hand was with them because they broke away from old traditions and doctrine and worshipped God with the gentiles. I imagine that the sick were healed and many other miracles were performed. A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. That was a real revival movement.

Then the Jerusalem church sent an investigator to Antioch to inquire as to what was happening there. The one that they chose was Barnabas. Do you know what Barnabas saw at the Antioch church? Verse 23 tells us, "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." Barnabas saw the evidence of the grace of God through the Holy Spirit at Antioch. We can see the difference here between the leader of the Jerusalem church and Barnabas. The Jerusalem leaders criticized the Holy Spirit's movement because it happened in the house of Cornelius, a gentile. The Jerusalem wasn't filled with the Holy Spirit, they were filled with a criticizing spirit. However, Barnabas saw the evidence of the grace of God at Antioch. He saw that the grace of God was poured out on this church and that the Lord's hand was with them. If Barnabas saw the Antioch church as criticizing and judging, he would be able to find many other weaknesses as well. However, the

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Antioch church simply maintained their ministries. They were beginners to the Christian life. As we think about the church, they didn't know much about doctrine. They could be out of balance in their Christian life. However, Barnabas saw the evidence of the grace of God. Barnabas saw this evidence rightfully as the work of God and the grace of God rather than things to criticize. The Jerusalem church that was getting weak was filled with the criticizing spirit, but the Antioch church that was growing was filled with the spirit of grace and the spirit of forgiveness.

The difference between those who have been blessed by God from those that have not been, the difference between families which have been growing in faith or those that aren't, and the difference between churches that are growing and those that are declining, is all the same. It's the way that they see God's grace! This is very important. God's desire is for us to be full of His grace. Let us look at ourselves. Actually, we are pretty dull, lacking luster or a shine. We are not righteous at all. If God looked at us critically, I am sure that we would fall into hell right now. But the Bible proclaims that God has made us clean even if we are sinners. We call this 'justification'. God wants us to see righteous even though we are not. This is God's love. That is forgiveness. We are sinners but yet we are accepted by God. The fact that we are going to heaven is not because we are righteous, but rather it is because we are forgiven by God.

When we look at chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke, we find the story of the prodigal son. In this story, the problem is that the younger son took all he could from his father, set off for a distant country, and there he squandered his wealth in wild living. However, when you look at the Bible carefully, the older son is just as much a trouble maker as his younger brother is. That is because the older son didn't know what his father's thoughts were. As we know from the story, when the younger son went to his father he forgave him. While the younger son was still a long way off, his father ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The father brought the best robe and put it on him. And put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Also he killed the fattened calf and had a feast as they celebrated his sons return. This was the father's thoughts. Similarly, the Bible tells us about God's forgiveness for sinners like us. However, the older son wasn't so forgiving. He became angry because his father had killed the fattened calf just because his wayward brother was back at home. He thought it was nonsense. The older son refused to go the feast. When his father went out and pleaded to him, he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never even gave me, not even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill a fattened calf for him!" The father said, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

This phrase: "this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" shows what was in his father's heart. This is a very special phrase. Have any of us ever had an experience with the death of our children? Have any of us ever had children who have suffered from an incurable disease? Let us think like of the children who have died and are alive again and of those who have had pain and are healed from the incurable disease. Do you think killing the fattened calf for the child matters at all to them? A parent's thoughts when they are seeking after their children are just like God's thoughts. So that's why God saved us even though He had

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to have His son Jesus Christ crucified. However, the older son didn't know his father's thoughts. Because he didn't know the father's thoughts, he criticized his younger brother.

We are living with the same problem. We are living with thoughts similar to those of the older son. Just like the older son, our lives are self-centered and we are critical of others. That is our tragic story as a Christian. We should have God's vision no matter what. We must have God's thoughts to others who are working for the heavenly kingdom and give the Word of God as answer to the changing world. Then, how can we have God's thoughts or God's vision? What type of person would be challenged to be a tool of God? A person who has not learned very much? A person who is poor? A church that is small in size? The answer is none of the above. In my opinion, those that are stubborn would be most challenged to become a tool of God. They don't like change. If we hold onto our own stubbornness, methods and experience, we may not have our best experience with God.

In today's scripture reading, we can see the possibility for believers to have God's thoughts and God's vision. Beginning in Acts 11:3, Peter began to explain everything to them precisely as it had happened because Peter went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them. Peter explained why he went into the house of uncircumcised men and how the Holy Spirit came on them. And then he said, "Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 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?" (Acts 11:16-17) Actually, Peter was a traditionalist and a conservative that had grown up in Judaism. Nevertheless, he opened his mind when God was talking to him. Peter didn't persist in his beliefs. He didn't persist in his early education, tradition and habit. That's right. When we form our own barriers with the Word of God, it is time to listen to God's voice. Quite honestly, the person who has the most difficulty changing in church is one that is not listening to God's Word. They don't want to repent even though they know God's Word. They don't want to apply God's Word to themselves.

The greatness of David did not mean defeating Goliath. It does not mean victory in war and forming a unified nation. It does not mean moral perfection without any sin. Rather, the greatness of David means kneeling down in front of God's Word. When Nathan pointed out David's sin, David recognized his sin and knelt down to God. "I have sinned against the LORD." He was the man who shed many tears of repentance. On the other hand, Saul's failure is not because of losing a war. There was no moral problem. Rather, Saul's failure came from not bending his knee to God's Word. The blessed people are not committing a sin, but rather they a repenting from sin. A powerful Christian is formed through God's Word. What is a blessing? When we are listening to God's Word, we can repent of our sins. When we are listening to God's Word, we can recognize that His Word is just for us. We desperately need to be changed by the Word. This is true. Our attitude should be the same as that of God. Tradition and doctrine are important but our attitude should be the same as that of God. I pray that our members' attitude becomes the same as that of God and change the world through the Word of God.