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SIMON PETER MAKES A REPORT ON GENTILE CONVERSIONS

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF THE ACTS
NUMBER 42
ACTS 11:1-18

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As we read these words in this Scripture, we at first think it is a re-hash of what we have just studied, but we soon discover it is something else entirely. Let us remember that the early church had two great problems. The first problem was geographic and the second was racial. Pentecost came to the Jews in Jerusalem in 30 A.D. thus the church in the beginning was confined to one geographic location. Since the church was to become a missionary organization and spread the Gospel to the whole world, this local concept would have to be changed. In our next study in Acts 11:19-30, we will see this missionary aspect of this early church. The second problem was a racial problem for the church at Pentecost began with Jews only and it first appeared that the church was a Jewish monopoly and the Jewish dispensation would continue in some different form. But such is not to be. Both Jews and Gentiles were to be included in the church and the middle wall of partition was to be torn down in the temple and both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female were to be included in the plan of God. Anyone, Jew or Gentile, who received Christ would be saved. Regeneration was the basis for equality. All members of the human race can have freedom, but it takes regeneration to make men equal. Acts 2 tells of the Jewish Pentecost. Acts 8 tells of the Samaritan Pentecost which involved people who were half-Jew and half-Gentile. Acts 10 tells of the Gentile Pentecost. So this is the chapter which tells us how the church expanded, both geographically and racially.

The first half of chapter 11 actually deals with the mechanics of divine guidance. It is the story of how God guides the believer. There is nothing weird or mysterious or strange about God's guidance. Illustration--You get a pain in your left shoulder blade and that means you should sell. Or you get a sinus headache on the port side and that means you should buy. The wind blows a certain way and you feel a certain strange sensation, and you have a sharp twinge in your right knee and this means you are to get married, or a strong throbbing in your left elbow and this means not to marry. Now you may think this sounds a bit overdrawn but many people look on divine guidance just about this way. Many people think of divine guidance as mysterious activity as illusion, or delusion, or emotion, or hysteria.

But let us remember, God has set up some principles by which any person can know the will of God at all times.

ISAIAH 30:21 "And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left."

God's guidance is based on these concepts--

1. To be guided by God you must know the Word of God. So, the first principle is knowledge. You must know the Word of God, for the Word of God reveals the will of God. This idea is developed in many passages.
2 Corinthians 6:1-11 and 2 Peter 1:12-21
2. The principle of yieldedness. It involves staying in fellowship with God through the use of confession. 1 John 1:9
ROMANS 12:1 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."
ROMANS 6:13 "Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God."
3. Spiritual growth as a believer. It comes by learning doctrine, prayer, service, giving, etc.

Categories of the Will of God

1. The viewpoint will of God. What viewpoint does God want me to take. This comes from learning the Word of God. The Bible is the mind of Christ and here we learn his viewpoint.
1 CORINTHIANS 2:16 "For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ."
2. The operational will of God. What does God want me to do? This is the application of God's word to experience.
3. The geographical will of God. Where does God want me to go? This comes from knowing God's word and from maturity and experience.

You cannot violate the will of God as revealed in his Word and get away with it. There are three wills of God revealed in his Word--

1. The directive will of God
2. The permissive will of God
3. The overruling will of God

(These three wills are revealed in Numbers 22 in the story of Balaam.) A man can do God's will or he can refuse God's will and decide to do his own will.

In this passage before us tonight we have come to what I call the racial expansion of the church.

ACTS 11:1 "And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God." The conversion of Gentiles came as a great shock to the Jews of the Jerusalem church. The Jerusalem church had the opportunity to be the greatest church of all times but they dropped the ball and many Jews were never willing to admit that Gentiles were as much of the plan of God as were Jews. Since we enter the plan of God through faith in Jesus Christ, it means that anyone can be saved, provided he comes by faith.

ACTS 11:2 "And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him" Simon Peter was the subject for criticism when he returned to Jerusalem from Caesarea because he had taken part in the Gentile Pentecost. The doctrine Peter had learned and applied in Caesarea was "What God hath cleansed call not thou unclean". So here Simon Peter is being challenged about his part in the Gentile participation in God's salvation. The Jewish leaders were still clinging to the Mosaic Law as the way of salvation, and therefore, were opposed to salvation by grace, which enabled all to be saved. People who want to help God with salvation always have a hard time accepting salvation by grace. These Jewish believers have accepted Christ, but they revert to their background and prejudices and go back to their dependence on the Law of Moses for salvation. They have been living so long on keeping the Law of Moses as a way of salvation, plus the hundreds of other restrictions their Scribes had written down, that salvation by grace is really hard for them to believe. The standard in their soul was such that they had developed a fantastic system of learning the Mosaic Law, memorizing Old Testament passages, and this to them was salvation. But this was entirely human viewpoint. Now salvation by grace comes along and they simply can't accept it. Salvation by works and salvation by grace just don't go together and this is the issue these legalistic Jews were facing. A legalistic person resents doctrine and they live by prejudice. This is why a little bit later on we will see their bitter criticism of Simon Peter, and on down the line their bitter criticism and hatred of Paul. Over this very point the Jerusalem church will die and the center of Christianity will move on out to Antioch and to Ephesus. You see, salvation by grace could never have been preached by this Jerusalem church for this was foreign to their legalistic minds. So another center would have to be found for Christ's church and the missionary movement. Jerusalem was God's first choice, but they refused to be used, and God moved on beyond them to other centers. When we read in verse 2 "these of the circumcision" we are reading about legalistic Jews and we read "they contended".

ACTS 11:3 "Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them." This verse shows that Peter had had fellowship with Gentiles, had actually eaten with them, and therefore, he could not be spiritual. Now what is the point for us right here? It is simply this...Don't judge the spirituality of other people by your own prejudices and your own idea of right and wrong. These critical Jews could see nothing wrong with themselves and everything wrong with Simon Peter. The Scribes had taken the Law of Moses, had added to it, and had written down a law that no Jew could eat or have fellowship with a Gentile. Now Simon Peter had done just this and this meant he was out of fellowship with God. Please remember, you can not drink, not dance, not play cards, etc. has nothing to do with your right to criticize other people. You are not a Christian because of what you do not do, but because of what you believe in your mind. Now I am not passing judgment on the right or wrong of these things, I am simply saying that you are not spiritual just because you don't do certain things. You may not do any of these things and still in the sight of God be just as far away from spirituality as you can be.

Now in this incident we are seeing the first crack in the Jerusalem church and before it is over the whole Jerusalem church will come tumbling down and the Christian movement will move elsewhere. Legalism is always guilty of judging others and if you are guilty of always judging others, please read Romans 14:4 and 14:10.

ROMANS 14:4 "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand."

ROMANS 14:10 "But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ."

We are to keep our nose out of other people's business.

The Big Report

In these next verses we have the big report Simon Peter gave when he returned from the Gentile Pentecost at Caesarea.

ACTS 11:4 "But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying" It started out as a report to a few legalistic Jews, but it finally reached the whole Jerusalem church.

Let us notice seven factors included in this report.

ACTS 11:5 Factor one. "I was in the city of Joppa praying: and in a trance I saw a vision, A Certain vessel descend, as it had been a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came even to me" This was prayer. During the time Simon Peter was praying, God revealed to him this great spiritual truth. God used a trance, a vision to reveal this truth to Simon Peter. Remember, the New Testament had not yet been written. God doesn't have to use this method today for we have the written word and this is sufficient.

ACTS 11:6 Factor two. "Upon the which when I had fastened mine eyes, I considered, and saw fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air." This second factor was thinking. He saw the vision and he began to think on the meaning of the vision.

ACTS 11:7-10 Factor three. "And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay and eat. But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth. But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven." This third factor was the guidance through the Word of God. Simon Peter was so stiff-hearted that it took three repeats for this vision and truth to sink into his mind.

ACTS 11:11 Factor four. "And, behold, immediately there were three men already come unto the house where I was, sent from Caesarea unto me." This fourth factor was what we call providential circumstances. This is a dangerous factor for it is so easy for us to read our own minds and conclude this is God's will. Let us be sure that the providential circumstances always square with the Word of God. Providential circumstances can be very beneficial, provided we know that they coincide with the clear teaching of God's Word.

ACTS 11:12 Factor five. "And the spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the man's house" This is guidance by the Holy Spirit. Six Jews went with Simon Peter, and though they had not seen the vision Peter had, they heard the explanation and they were ready to witness what God would do. So including the three Cornelius had sent, plus these six, plus Simon Peter, we have a party of ten men making this trip to Caesarea.

ACTS 11:13-15 Factor six. "And he shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved. And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning." This sixth factor was guidance through comparison. Cornelius compared the message the angel had given him with the message God had given Simon Peter and they were identical. Peter and Cornelius put the two together and one substantiated the other.

ACTS 11:16-17 "Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?" This seventh factor was guidance through Scripture memory. Simon Peter remembered Acts 1:5 and called it to memory. The thing that had happened here was a fulfillment of the promise Jesus had given them.

Conclusion

ACTS 11:18 "When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." Here is Simon Peter's orientation to the grace of God. His prejudice and his legalistic background had to go. And as a result of this legalistic religion was stopped in the Jerusalem church. But legalism was defeated only temporarily, as we will see a bit later in this book. But because of the grace of God, the missionary movement goes forward.