

Discipleship Questions

How did the persecution that happened in Acts 8 impact the spreading of the gospel beyond Judea and Samaria?

What work did Barnabas and Saul do in Antioch?

What were the disciples in Antioch called?

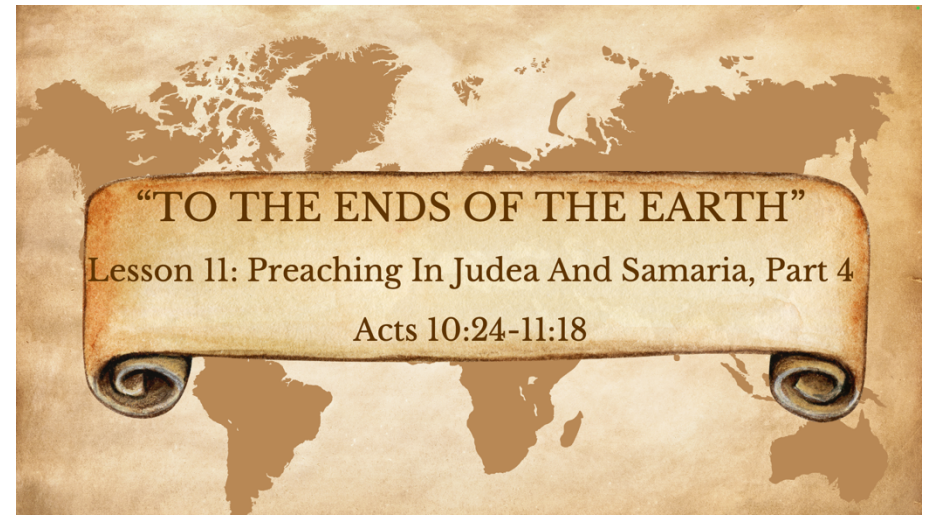
How did the disciples in Antioch provide famine relief in Judea?

What did Herod do to the apostles James and Peter?

What did the church do when Peter was in prison?

How did God rescue Peter?

Why did God kill King Herod?



We have been watching the gospel spread throughout the book of Acts. But, until chapters 10 and 11, it had been limited to the Jews. Now, it has become clear that Christianity was not a new sect of Judaism, as God opened the doors of His kingdom to the Gentiles!

The Gospel Spreads To Antioch (Acts 11:19-26)

11:19-21. When the disciples in Jerusalem were persecuted and scattered (in connection with Stephen), they took the word of God with them (Acts 8:1-4) as far as Phoenicia (north of Samaria, along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea), Cyprus (an island in the Mediterranean), and Antioch (in Syria, one of the largest cities of the Roman world). For a time, the word of God only spread to the Jews there. Then, some men from Cyprus and Cyrene (a city in North Africa) came to Antioch and began preaching the good news about Jesus as Lord to the Greeks (likely Greek-speaking Gentiles), as God had opened the doors of the kingdom to the Gentiles! The Lord's hand was with them (approving of what they did; perhaps also working miracles, opening doors of opportunity, etc.) and many believed the preaching about Jesus and turned their lives to the Lord (Acts 2:38; 3:19). Although Antioch was full of wickedness and idolatry, the gospel turned a large number away from these to Jesus as Lord!

11:22-26. After news of the gospel's successes reached the church in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas (from Cyprus; known as an encourager, Acts 4:36-37) as far as Antioch to encourage the new disciples there. When Barnabas arrived, he was glad when he saw the grace of God manifested in the lives of the disciples in Antioch. He encouraged them to remain loyal (true, faithful, Revelation 2:10) to the Lord Jesus with hearts that were resolved (devoted with steadfast purpose) to continue following Jesus. Luke then adds that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit (full of the

Spirit's influence, perhaps also having miraculous gifts) and faith in God. Large numbers were added to the Lord (Galatians 3:27) through his work and the work of the disciples in Antioch. Then, Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul (northwest of Antioch; Acts 9:30; perhaps seven to ten years had now passed). Perhaps Barnabas sought Saul specifically because of his mission to the Gentiles and the opportunity in Antioch (Acts 26:16-18). After bringing Saul to Antioch, Saul and Barnabas met with the church and taught many people over the course of a year. The disciples of Christ (a typical term used in the gospels and Acts to describe Christ's followers) were first called "Christians" (those who adhered to and were possessed by Christ) in Antioch (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16).

Famine Relief To Judea (Acts 11:27-30)

11:27-30. Prophets (who spoke Divine revelations by the Spirit) came from Jerusalem to Antioch while Saul and Barnabas were there. One prophet (Agabus) spoke of a severe famine that would happen throughout the world (Roman world) that took place during the reign of Emperor Claudius Caesar (41-54 A.D.). This prompted each of the disciples in Antioch to send financial relief according to their ability (compare with 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9) to the Christian brothers and sisters in Judea. Saul and Barnabas apparently carried this relief to the elders of the various churches throughout Judea, who could oversee its proper distribution. This is the first reference to elders overseeing local churches (Acts 14:23; 20:17-32).

Persecution Against James And Peter (Acts 12:1-19)

12:1-5. Around the same time (perhaps 43-44 A.D.), King Herod (Herod Agrippa I, ruler over Palestine) laid hands violently on some in the church (at Jerusalem). He executed the apostle James (John's brother) with the sword (likely beheaded, Matthew 20:20-28). Note there is no mention of a replacement for James as an apostle, as the New Testament does not teach apostolic succession. As Herod saw that his actions pleased the Jews, he wanted to capture their allegiance even more by arresting Peter. This was during the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Passover, when many Jews came to Jerusalem, Exodus 23:14-17). Rather than executing Peter during the festival (which could have been offensive to the Jews, Mark 14:2), Herod kept Peter secured in the prison by four squads of four soldiers each until Passover was complete. During this time, the church prayed fervently to God for him (Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Peter 5:7).

12:6-19. Peter was kept in prison, bound with two chains between two soldiers, with others guarding the door. The night before Peter was to be brought out for the trial, an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the dark cell. The angel struck Peter on the side so he woke up, and instructed Peter to quickly get up. The chains fell off his wrists, he got dressed, and he followed the angel. Though Peter did not know what was

happening (thinking it was a vision), they passed the first and second guards and passed through the iron gate that opened by itself into the city. They went a little farther and the angel left Peter. Then, Peter recognized the Lord had sent His angel to rescue him. He immediately went to Mary's house (John Mark's mother). Many disciples had assembled and were praying there. Peter knocked at the outer gate and a servant girl (Rhoda) answered but left him at the gate without letting him in due to her joy. The disciples did not believe it was Peter (insisting it was his angel). Peter was eventually let in and they were amazed to see him. Peter described what happened and told them to tell James (likely the brother of Jesus, prominent in Jerusalem) and the brothers. Then Peter went to another place. At daylight, there was a great commotion among the soldiers about what had happened to Peter. After Herod had a search made and Peter was not found, he interrogated the guards and ordered their execution. Then, Herod left Judea and went to Caesarea.

King Herod Dies (Acts 12:20-25)

12:20-25. There was a dispute between Herod and the people of the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon (north of Palestine). They obtained an audience with Herod and presented themselves before him. They won over Blastus (a man in charge of the king's bedroom) and evidently used him to ask for peace with Herod, since their country was dependent on food from Herod's country. On the appointed day (perhaps in connection with an event held in Caesar's honor, as indicated by the historian Josephus), Herod was dressed in his royal robes and was seated on his throne, and delivered a speech to the people. The people began to praise Herod as having the voice of a god rather than a man. Herod accepted this praise and was struck by the Lord for not giving the glory to God. He was eaten by worms and died (perhaps an internal parasite that killed him only a few days later). The result, Luke records, was that the word of God spread and multiplied! Furthermore, Luke records that Barnabas and Saul completed their relief mission in Jerusalem and brought John Mark back with them to Antioch.

Conclusion

The persecution that aided in the gospel spreading through Judea and Samaria also aided in it reaching even farther. This included Antioch. Now, after the church had faced famine and additional persecution, Saul and Barnabas were in Antioch for what would happen next.

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Written by Eric Krieg

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