

The True Israel
Acts 11:1-18

Romans 11:1-24

Romans 11:25-32

Responsive Psalm 40:1-10

This morning we are going to be looking at Acts, chapter 11, which is going to be continuing the account of what we studied last week in chapter 10, only this week we will be looking at the reaction of the larger church to the account of Peter and the Roman Centurion. Some of what we are looking at this morning is a recap, as it is Peter giving an account to the Church at Jerusalem of the events that had happened in Caesarea. So, let us go ahead and start this morning by reading Acts 11:1-18 (read acts 11)

So right off the bat we see that this news that the Holy Spirit had come to the Gentiles was not well received by the believers in Jerusalem, for they criticize Peter for having fellowship with a Gentile. For eating, and lodging within the house of a Gentile was considered forbidden for a Jew. Just as Peter needed a vision from God to instruct him on these things, the other apostles and believers in Jerusalem also needed to learn this lesson as well. The fact that Luke deemed it necessary to include the account of Peter's vision twice shows of what great importance this has in the ministry of Christ. This idea of no partiality with God, especially in a time when for generations there had been a ritual separation between the Jews and the Gentiles. But as we know today, it was never truly about the Jews and Gentiles themselves, but rather it was about God's chosen being separated from the world. To not be associated with the things of this world, to remain clean, and untarnished by the sinful lusts and desires, and this lesson was taught in the ordinance that the Israelites, being blessed and chosen by God, should not mix with the pagans.

The bigger picture, that was missed by the Jews of the time was that it wasn't about them, but it was about God. And now, is the fulfillment of that purposed distinction, and that plan included the Gentiles to be part of the holy people of God. God is building for himself a holy nation of Israelites, descendants of Abraham, not by blood, but by faith, which all of these things were a shadow of the true intent and purpose now being fulfilled in Christ. Now we have a like distinction, but it is not between nationalities and races, but between believers and unbelievers. But as Christ gave as an example throughout his ministry, it is not as if we as believers are to take a cue from the Jews and separate ourselves from the pagans and unbelievers. On the contrary, we are to be a light and a witness to them in the hopes that they to may one day be called brothers and sisters in Christ.

We get an example of this with Peter, who engages with Cornelius and his household, he eats, and lodges with them sharing the gospel, so to we are to be with the world around us, within our own community and neighborhoods so that we may reach some, and that they may come to believe. As we saw when reading through this chapter this morning, Peter did not respond directly to the criticism that was brought against him for lodging and eating with the Gentile. But instead recounts the events which brought about the lesson he had to learn and likewise bring it to the believers in Jerusalem so that they may also learn from his experience. He did not lay forth an argument, nor bicker and argue against them but rather he just gave examples and told them how God had lead in the ministry of Cornelius and his household. Peter spoke to them as one who himself also needed to change, and the final proof as it were, was the Holy Spirit coming upon them, just as it happened to the Jewish believers at Pentecost.

Verifying the legitimacy of their belief, and that the blessing of the Holy Spirit did truly come upon them. There was a massive lesson for the Jerusalem church to learn through Peter's experience, and I think the main point through the vision that Peter was given, and the account to which he is now bringing forth, is the voice of God that he heard, saying "do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This was repeated 3 times, which shows the absolute importance and significance of the lesson that was to be learned here. The words of God which came to him, which interpreted the vision of the sheet of unclean animals has massive implications for the mission, and the doctrine of the church, and also for the Christians perspective on the law of Moses.

Jewish converts, that is those who had come to believe upon Jesus as the Messiah, understood Christ as the fulfillment of the promises, and prophets for they believed that he was the Messiah that they were waiting for. But it is apparent here in this discourse that they did not understand nor see the larger picture, and in many ways were still relying on their Jewishness as a form of sanctification, that is that keeping the law, the traditions and orders that were set in place is what brought about sanctification among them. But now, you have these Gentiles, who did not have the law, who did not have the temple worship, the traditions, the feasts, and the holy days, now also believing and having been gifted with the holy spirit. This could only have one implication, that now holiness in terms of ritual cleanliness has now been replaced by the cleansing and sanctification through faith in Christ alone.

As we talked about a few years ago, which was really the main point in the book of Galatians, is that salvation, and sanctification is of God, and God alone, it is not God and the law, or God and good works, it is not God plus anything...but it is only by God. It is only he who claims the unclean to be clean, and it is only by his power and sanctifying blood that we have been made to be vessels of honor. The Law, the Mosaic covenant, did not come to the gentiles, for it is apparent in the case of Cornelius. He was a devout man, he worshiped God, yet, being a Gentile was never allowed full access, always being an outsider, always being ritually unclean. But God has torn down that barrier, there is therefore now no ritual barrier, there is no longer a distinction among God's people between those of the promise and the outsiders, for all have been given the promise, all have been given the inheritance, there is now only God's elect and all have been reconciled to him through the cross.

Now, the Jewish believers can witness and offer salvation to the gentiles on the same basis that they themselves received it. There no longer is a separation between these ethnic groups, Jewish and Gentile believers can now have table fellowship, can be welcomed into each others homes as an expression of their shared holiness in the new community of God's people. But the larger, farther reaching ramifications of this account of Cornelius and his household, is that the Law of Moses can now be seen to have been fulfilled and replaced by God's saving work. The culmination of all of these things, the fulfillment of all that these things foretold has now come and the laws, and traditions that formerly functioned as a way to identify God's people is no longer necessary, for something greater has come, that is the holy spirit, faith, and the new birth.

The fulfillment of Jeremiah 32, has come to pass "Behold the days are coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, My covenant which they broke though I was a husband to them. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds, and write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and that shall be my people. I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

The time of the new covenant has come, as Paul said in Hebrews chapter 8, after having quoted the passage in Jeremiah which we just read, he says “in that he says, A new covenant, he has made the first obsolete, now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. Jesus said at the last supper, Matthew 26:26, “And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, and gave it to the disciples and said, Take, eat, this Is my body, Then he took the cup and gave thanks and gave it to them saying, Drink of it, all of you. For this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” Christ has come, and established a new covenant in his own blood, making the old obsolete. No longer is there a need for the ritual separation, for the law and the prophets have been fulfilled in one, that is Jesus Christ, and he has established a new covenant, not of works as the law that was given before, but a covenant of grace through faith. A covenant that encompasses the Jews and the Gentiles, the rich and the poor, the slave and the free, there is now no distinction in race, nationality or creed in the family of God, but all have been reconciled to him, through the blood of Christ.

As we will find out as we continue our journey through Acts, though it would seem here in this passage that many began to worship and praise God upon hearing this account of Peter's and salvation now being brought to the gentiles, there were still those who did not agree, for this will be an issue talked about again later in this book. And on one level, an opposition to the wide spread indiscriminate outreach of the gospel would seem offensive to a Jew, who for generations have been practicing a way of life given to their ancestors by God, growing up believing to be God's special chosen people. Don't get me wrong here, I am not belittling the promises and ordinances that God set forth for the Israelites, for indeed they were God's chosen people, for by them came the Messiah, for by them came the prophets, and the law, and the temple which foretold of the greater high priest, who is in the greater temple, who has established a better law. God chose to use them in his plan to bring about redemption to the world, but the problem is that they became so attached to the example, they either completely rejected the fulfillment, which is Christ the very Messiah that they were looking for...or at the very least put a heavy weight upon their law and traditions and tried to add it to the faith.

So, you can understand how the concept of the gospel and salvation reaching out to the Gentiles would be highly controversial, and totally unacceptable to some. It is an over focus upon the example to the detriment of the fulfillment. Many completely missed the whole point, that the reality is that it was always about Christ, the laws, the traditions, the rituals, even the separation from the Gentiles was all about Christ. And now that he has come, he has fulfilled all of them, bringing about salvation to anyone who believes upon him. Not the self righteous law followers, but the broken, beaten, sin sick individuals who come to him. Jesus had to deal with this very same issue during his ministry, for he did not make the same distinction that the religious leaders made, Mark 2:15 is one such account which says, “Now it happened, as he was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many, and they followed him. And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to his disciples, How is it that he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners? When Jesus heard it, he said to them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

What profound words, and what a jab at the scribes and Pharisee's. For they saw themselves as those who were righteous, they saw themselves as just a bit better than everyone else...and Christ said, I didn't come for you, who follow the law, and find righteousness in your traditions...but I have come for those who are sick in sin, to bring life to the dead.

So what does this all mean for us today? What are the implications of salvation coming to the Gentiles, to the sick and the weary and hopeless? It shows that salvation is by faith, and faith alone, apart from the law, and apart from the established traditions and rituals of the old covenant. The law proved to be a stumbling block to the Jews, as Paul wrote in Romans 9:30 "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith, but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone, As it is written, Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and a rock of offense, and whoever believes on him will not be put to shame." As scripture said, even Abraham was justified by faith, and it was accounted to him for righteousness, the law did not come for another 430 years after Abraham...yet he was established in righteousness by faith. Just as the Gentiles, not having the law were also made righteous by faith.

So again, we see as Paul wrote, that the old covenant is obsolete, and has faded away for a new covenant has been given in Christ, established by his blood. Not by the blood of bulls, and lambs, but by the one and only Son of the most High God who has established a better covenant on better promises, for it is no longer predicated upon our nationality, our genealogy, or even our own works and ability...but solely upon faith in God, which is a gift that he has given to us. So even our faith, is not our own, we did not work it up, but it is God who gave it to us. The old testament is full of accounts of God's people breaking the covenant that God had made with them, for the reality is...salvation through your own works and righteousness is not possible. Paul said that the law as given to make sin, even more sinful, to show that there really is no righteousness within mankind, and that we are all hopeless, and lost sinners who are deserving of everlasting death, who need someone to pull us out of this pit of despair and slavery to our sinful lusts and desires....and that is Christ. He has come, fulfilled the law, is the one to whom all the promises that were given pointed to, so that he may establish by his blood a new, unbreakable covenant with his people for it is now no longer based around works, but is rooted in faith, and brought about by the Holy Spirit. He has now established a new Israel, a new chosen people, one that spans all generations, and people from all nationalities.

So that I suppose brings up the question...why then was the law given, what did God establish the old covenant with its traditions, and set the Israelites apart from the rest of the world? Well, again, Paul answers that question in Galatians 3. "Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor, for you are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ."

We who are Christians are no longer under that law, for the law is a law of condemnation, bringing about judgment and death to all those who are under it, but in Christ we have been saved from the condemnation of God's righteous law having been forgiven and now have been made the adopted children and heirs according to the promises, having been sanctified by his blood, and made righteous by faith." For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is a work of God- not by works lest any man should boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared before hand for us to do."

We do not do good works out of a need or necessity to fulfill the old covenant law, but we do good works for we are created in Christ to do so, and we desire and love him, and through him we love others and it is that love which drives our good works. And, even those good works as Paul wrote in Ephesians is prepared before hand by God for us to do. The guide, and rule in this faith is that love which we have for our savior, not some arbitrary list or guide, but a love for God working in us through the Holy Spirit. IF we who are Christs were to be put again under the law Paul would not have wrote in Galatians, "The entire law is fulfilled in the keeping of this one command, To love your neighbors as yourself, so I say, walk in the spirit....HE doesn't say, keep the law, but rather to walk in the spirit and by doing so you will not gratify the sinful desires of the flesh."

So you can see how the salvation to the Gentiles would be such a controversial subject for the Jewish believing community. For the Gentiles were not given the law, the prophets, or the promises that they were....but yet, it was God who claims what is clean and unclean and he had intended to graft in those who were afar off to be one and the same in Christ from the beginning. As we saw from the vision that God gave to Peter, that he too needed to learn this lesson and was being prepared for the ministry to go out to the Gentiles...and in the end he concluded in verse 17, "Who was I that I could withstand God" Or in other words, who am I to argue against God. This echo's back to chapter 5 and the words of Gamaliel after Peter and some of the apostles were arrested, he said, "Keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men it will come to nothing; but if it is from God you can not overthrow it lest you even be found to be fighting against God."

That is Peter's argument here, it had become so clear that God had intended to bring the Gentiles into the fold that who are we as his apostles and servants to deny what God has set forth? And thinking upon that this week, that applies to each and every one of our lives does it not? Things may not be exactly how you think they should be...yet it is God who has brought you to this point, either to suffer for a time, or a time of peace and rejoicing and who are we to withstand, or argue against God in anything? But rather no matter our lot, we are to praise, worship, and glorify him for we are his workmanship created in his image to do his will, and we should do what he has set before us to the best of our ability in the name of he who has brought us here.

It is God who spurs on such good works, it is a desire and a love for him that drives us to even do things that we ourselves may not desire, we may find that God has put us in situations that we would rather not be in, but we are to put ourselves aside for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. For it is all about him is it not? Do we not owe him our all, he who has given us the riches and glory of his grace? Who has taken us who are unclean, and has now claimed us to be clean? Through his blood has made the unrighteous to be righteous, by his love has out-poured his mercy on us so that while we were yet sinners, while we yet hated him...he died for us, so that we maybe his beloved. And it is this that is our driving force to do good, to seek to please him, to earnestly strive for the mark, and to do that which he has set before us, not to gain merit...but rather simply because he has loved us, and has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. For God has given us the Holy Spirit, which works in us to bear fruit, which as Paul wrote in Galatians, the holy spirit works in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control and against such, there is no law."

So let us live our lives as those who have died to Christ, having put to death the sinful desires of the flesh to seek only after him. To live by the spirit, to be driven by our love for him who has given us all.