

THE CALL OF THE GENTILES

BIBLE TEXT : Acts 11:1-26.

LESSON 304 Junior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "Many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Acts 11:1-26

¹ And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.

² And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him,

³ Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.

⁴ But Peter rehearsed *the matter* from the beginning, and expounded *it* by order unto them, saying,

⁵ 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:

⁶ 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.

⁷ And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay and eat.

⁸ But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth.

⁹ But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God hath cleansed, *that* call not thou common.

¹⁰ And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven.

¹¹ And, behold, immediately there were three men already come unto the house where I was, sent

BIBLE REFERENCES:

NOTES:

From the East and the West

It was very hard for the Jews to believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was also for the Gentiles. Peter had had to have a vision from Heaven in order to believe it. The saints who had accompanied him to the house of Cornelius, the centurion, had heard the Romans speak in tongues as a sign that they had received the Holy Ghost; and then those with Peter had believed. And still the Jews wondered if it could be true.

There had been another centurion, when Jesus was on earth, who had believed on Him. When his son had been ill to the point of death, the centurion had come to Jesus for help. The disciples had wondered that Jesus would heal a heathen, but He had told them: "I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11). In that way Jesus told His followers that there would be many in Heaven besides the Jews. They would be as great as Father Abraham, and would receive rewards along with Isaac and Jacob. But the disciples had not understood.

Neither did the Jewish converts in Jerusalem understand the fact that Gentiles could be Christians. They thought Peter had defiled himself by eating with Cornelius and his friends.

Peter's Vision

Peter told the whole story again, how he had seen the vision of a sheet lowered from Heaven in which had been all manner of four-footed beasts, both those, which had been called unclean by the Law, and the clean ones. He had heard a voice say, "Arise, Peter; slay and eat." Peter was as zealous as any of the Jews; and when he answered, he meant, "I cannot." He had never eaten anything, which the Law called unclean. But God showed him that if He said something was clean, Peter was not to call it unclean.

It was true that God had given the law, which had called some animals unclean; but here was another sign that the Law had been fulfilled and was no longer in effect for the Christians. The forms and ceremonies that had been given to Israel as object lessons to teach them about Jesus and the Gospel He would bring, were no longer necessary. Jesus Himself had come, and there was no more need for the types. The kind of meat a person eats does not change the condition of his heart. If he is a sinner, doing without meat will not make him a Christian (Matthew 15:17-19).

Without Respect of Persons

Peter had wondered what lesson the vision might have been sent to teach him besides the obvious lesson of eating meat. When the soldiers came from Cornelius, Peter began to think about the difference between clean and unclean people — as the Jews believed there was a difference. He realized that the vision had been given to teach him not to call any person whom God

from Caesarea unto me.

¹² And the Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the man's house:

¹³ 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;

¹⁴ Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved.

¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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?

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.

¹⁹ Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

²⁰ And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.

²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

²² Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they

has cleansed "unclean." God has given everyone an opportunity to be saved if he will forsake his sins.

Peter had taken six witnesses with him when he went to visit Cornelius. It is a good thing when we feel duty-bound to do something, which we think may cause some question, to take along some witnesses. Peter patiently explained his entire experience with Cornelius and the Gentile believers, and the Jewish saints were satisfied. They could see that he had certainly been sent by God. And when they heard that the Gentiles had received the Holy Ghost, they, too, rejoiced.

Spreading the News

Good news must spread. Not only was the Spirit to be poured out in Jerusalem and the towns near by, but the message of the Gospel had to be carried into other lands. It may be that the Christians had never travelled very far, and, normally, they would have been contented to continue living where they were until they died. For generations, the same families would occupy the same tracts of land. But now they were thrilled with a living Story to tell. They must be on their way to speak forth the Good News. The message of salvation must be told by word of mouth and by the lives of the Christian people among the unsaved in distant places.

Persecution

When Stephen was stoned, severe persecution had broken out and had sent the Christians from Jerusalem. Sometimes they had to travel far because, as Paul (who was still called Saul at this time) later said of himself, "I persecuted them even unto strange cities." There were many other people like Paul was before he was saved, and they tried very hard to drive away or punish all who believed in Jesus. Can you imagine anyone wanting to treat Jesus and His followers like that, when they had never done anything but good?

Wherever the persecuted Christians went, they preached about Jesus — but still only to the Jews. Perhaps a great majority of them had not yet heard about Peter's visit to Cornelius, and they still did not know that the Gospel was for everyone.

Jesus had sent the disciples into all the world to preach the Gospel, and had promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

The Hand of God upon Them

When Jesus promised that He would go with His people, He told them that they first must be endued with power from Heaven. That power came with the baptism of the Holy Ghost. When the disciples preached in the cities of Cyprus, Phenice, and Antioch, they had that power, and the "the hand of the Lord was with them." No matter how much the people had preached about Jesus, if the Spirit of God had not been working with them, souls would not have been saved. Paul later compared his ministry with that of Apollos and said: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase" (I Corinthians 3:6). Nothing we do for the Lord is effectual unless we do it with the Spirit of God directing.

Souls were saved in those far cities because the ministers and workers had prayed much, and the Spirit of God could speak through them to the hearts of sinners. Eloquent words might impress the mind, but it takes the Spirit of God to touch the heart. When we try to tell someone that Jesus can save him from his sins, we, too, must have the Spirit of God upon us so that our words will touch the heart.

God gives that Spirit in abundant measure when we are

sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch.

²³ Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.

²⁴ For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.

²⁵ Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:

²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

baptized with the Holy Ghost; but we must continue to ask God's blessing upon our work, and continue to consecrate all we have to Him, in order to see God work through us. We have often heard the expression, "Revivals are not worked up, but are prayed down." May God's people ever have a burden of prayer upon their hearts for the salvation of the lost!

Meeting at Antioch

Antioch was three hundred miles north of Jerusalem, which was a long distance when men had to walk. But in that great city there were many people who believed the preaching of the disciples, and a great revival started. When the believers in Jerusalem heard about it, they sent Barnabas to be the evangelist to conduct the services. Barnabas was happy to see the many people being saved and the power of God coming upon them; and he went to Tarsus to find Paul to come and help in the meetings.

Paul and Barnabas made a good evangelistic team, and for a whole year they stayed in Antioch, preaching with such power that great numbers of people were saved. They themselves were built up in the faith, and were prepared for a new mission. As they were praying and fasting with others in the church, the Holy Spirit said: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13:2). That meant that they were to be missionaries to the Gentiles. The door was open so that everyone might hear the Gospel and be saved.

Christians

It was at Antioch that the followers of Christ were first called Christians. Let us who say we are Christians be sure that we are following Christ and living in such a manner that He will not be ashamed to own us.

QUESTIONS

1. What was a centurion?
2. How had the Lord proved to Peter that Gentiles could be saved?
3. What made Peter's friends believe that Gentiles could be saved?
4. Why did the followers of Jesus leave Jerusalem?
5. What did they do wherever they went?
6. Who went to Antioch to establish a Church?
7. How did Paul and Barnabas know they were to be missionaries to the Gentiles?
8. How long did Paul and Barnabas stay in Antioch?
9. What does the word "Christian" mean?
10. Where was the word "Christian" first used?