

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 26, Chapter 11

Before we begin Acts 11, I want to take a breather to summarize the high points of our study up to now so that we don't get too swamped in facts and new terms and lose our way. But before I do that I feel it necessary to speak to you from my heart for a few moments. We have spent 25 weeks, about 6 months, just getting through the first 10 of the 28 chapters of the Book of Acts. And I have probably spent more time on Bible history, and the history of the Jewish people, and delving into their culture, customs, and mindset and then trying to connect it all together than any book I have ever taught. Most who are listening to me are gentiles; and thus you have little idea what modern Jews, let alone the ancient Jews of the Bible are all about, and you may also be thinking why should you even care to know? How does this help us to understand God's Word and apply it to our lives? I forewarned you of this approach at the outset of our study because outside of teaching the Book of Acts in this way, I don't know how else to extract its intended meaning.

Thus the reason for my long-winded and broad approach in teaching you about these matters is that Acts is the structural bridge that spans two eras: the Old and the New Testament. It is the binding link between the Law of Moses and the advent of Messiah. However most important for our proper understanding is that Acts is a 100% Jewish bridge. It is a bridge built entirely upon the bedrock of Jewish society, the steel of Jewish thought processes, the connecting rivets of the Jewish religion of that era, and the labor of the historical traditions that had been developed and nurtured over the centuries that drove Jewish behavior and decisions. All the writers of the Old Testament were Jews (or more correctly, Hebrews), and all the writers of the New Testament were Jews except for the God-fearer Luke who seems to have remained a Christ-believing gentile yet threw in his lot with the Jewish disciples and apostles of Christ, even becoming a traveling companion of Paul, and all that might have been missing from him being a Jewish convert was circumcision.

I have often been asked what caused my wife and me to venture away from the mainstream Christian institutions and to start this ministry of Bible teaching from a Hebrew Roots perspective. A way of teaching that challenges things we've all believed in at one time or another. A friend of mine, Dr. Robert McGee, once said to me that sometimes we need to pause and seriously examine why we believe what we believe. I've stated to close friends for a very long time now that in my estimation most Christian institutions have backed away from leading their flocks in a search for the truth and instead have encouraged their members to uphold and defend their particular doctrinal status quo. That is, depending on how long a certain denomination has been in existence, some time at their earliest inception a group of leaders decided on what was truth, what they believed in, listed them and called them doctrines, and set out to teach these doctrines as immutable. Except in the rarest cases, these doctrines cannot be challenged; rather they must be accepted without question and adhered to in perpetuity, or the dissenter is typically asked to go elsewhere. For these denominations, the

search for the truth ended the day their doctrines were posted because from their perspective all the truth that existed had been found.

Perhaps the main issue I have with that mindset is that it doesn't allow for the playing out of the mysteries of Biblical prophecy, nor does it allow for ongoing progressive revelation and the inevitable twists and turns it brings with it. Thus new information and new circumstances are often covered over or willfully ignored because they may contradict long held doctrine. The unexpected return of Israel as a Jewish nation in 1948 is one such example.

Today the Bible is not usually taught in verse by verse, chronological fashion, nor is it taught in its historical context. For one reason, in this era of hectic lives and short attention spans the congregational audience usually has no patience for it (so I applaud you for hanging in there). Rather the Bible is taught according to what scholars call apologetics. Apologetics are arguments or reasoned justifications of something; usually a justification of certain established religious doctrines. Therefore if a Bible passage seems to say something different than the denominational doctrine demands, then the Bible passage is either declared irrelevant for our times, or it is allegorized in a well thought out way to make it conform to the unchangeable doctrine. So once again; for many centuries, now, the issue has been less about searching for God's truth or embracing a new revelation with an open mind and a thirsty soul; but more about defending cherished, familiar beliefs and traditions that are securely locked behind a door of denominational creeds and doctrines. If Yeshua's first disciples had thought and behaved in that way, instead of being open to the new revelation of His coming and all that it entailed, the faith we hold dear and count on would have been stillborn.

Rather, I want to be personally prepared and to help prepare you, for whatever comes next in God's redemptive plan for mankind (and much has been promised and is yet to come). I don't want to miss it, and I don't want you to miss it, because of closed minds and rigid manmade doctrines. Thus here at Seed of Abraham Torah Class, we are doing our best (admittedly imperfectly) to try to crack open, if just a wee bit, what has in many cases been a locked and guarded door. And the key to this door is to understand these ancient people of the Bible, their times and mindset, the intent of their words, and the context and circumstances in which they uttered them, as found in the Holy Scriptures. I realize that this is often uncomfortable for you because it is much easier to just settle on some basic matters and never have to address them again. Most people come to Church to casually fellowship with other like-minded Believers and to be emotionally uplifted; to feel better when they leave than when they arrived. They want validation for what they have always believed. However, just as maturing from a child to an adult forces us (hopefully) to reconsider things in life that at one time seemed simple and easy to understand as children, but involve multiple shades of gray and conflicting principles as we reach adult hood, so it is that as we learn of Christ and His sacrificial love that drove Him to the cross, if we endeavor to mature in Him we will necessarily find out that certain God principles and patterns aren't so straightforward or as easy to apply to our lives as we first thought.

And sometimes to our greatest discomfort we will also find out that certain doctrines were originally formed due to human agendas in the past that are not so apparent to the congregation today, and once unearthed can be troubling. However our goal in learning God's Word, and in response being obedient to it, should not be about our search for comfort; it

should be about our search for truth. And I can tell you from experience, the truth is not always comfortable. God's Word is so wide and so deep that no man, no teacher, no Pastor, no Rabbi has a corner on the truth, or knows all the truth, because God's way is to reveal more and more of the truth in His good time; and so our search should be ongoing. Yet, there are things we can reasonably test, and we can conclude and know with a certainty if we work at it, and at times this leads us to things we've assumed were truth but new information that better conforms with God's Word demands that we must now unlearn them. That takes courage and persistence, it takes faith, and it takes humbling ourselves before the Holy Spirit such that we're not so allergic to finding out that we may have been wrong about some important things concerning our faith that we close our eyes and ears.

But as no other book ever written, the Bible tells us that if we will seek diligently for the truth within its God inspired passages, we are guaranteed to find it. We are also told that the truth will set us free. Free from what? From bondage to sin that began with a lie in the Garden of Eden; not free to do anything we feel like. Truth sets us free; freedom is not gained from stubbornly (perhaps fearfully) holding on to humanly imposed doctrines and customs that have been so warm and customary to us over the years that we have not had to think about them twice. We've not been terribly motivated to ask ourselves why we believe what we believe. That is, however, indeed what I'm asking you to do.

So what we've learned thus far in the Book of Acts are things that, for some, can be unsettling; for others, informing and enlightening. For instance: that belief in Jesus Christ arose from the religion of the Jews, just as Yeshua Himself was a hereditary, genealogical and cultural Jew. The religion of the Jews since sometime after the Babylonian exile is what we today call Judaism, even though there is no evidence that during New Testament times, or before, that the term Judaism was used to label the Jewish religion.

We also discovered that the religion of the Jews in New Testament times was practiced much like Christianity is practiced in modern times. That is, Judaism consisted of a number of factions that shared a few commonly held and fundamental beliefs among them, but also many more beliefs that were at opposite ends of the spectrum (such as if bodily resurrection was possible). Further, because of the Babylonian exile some 600 years prior to New Testament times, and because the vast majority of exiled Jews had voluntarily decided to remain in the various foreign lands to which they were sent, there was a distinct split in how Judaism was practiced between the Jews who lived in the Holy Land versus those who lived out in the Diaspora (that is, the Jews who lived in foreign lands). The Jews living in the Holy Land were outnumbered 20 to 1 by the Diaspora Jews. However, the Diaspora Jews in general looked to Jerusalem for spiritual direction because that's where the Temple, the Priesthood, and the Sanhedrin were located.

We learned that there were other factional splits in Judaism as well, and these factional splits play significant roles in our New Testament stories and their outcomes. The most familiar one to Christians is the split between the Sadducees and the Pharisees; the two most predominant social/ religious/political parties of the Jews. But the cause of this split is not apparent without understanding basics of Judaism and Jewish society in that era. It was the aristocratic Sadducees who operated the Temple, controlled the Priesthood and ran the Jewish High

Court: the Sanhedrin. But it was the learned Pharisees who were the overseers of the Synagogues. Thus the Synagogue and the Temple were rivals and held little in common. The Synagogue looked much like a typical Church looks with its building, seating, speaking platform, and authority structure. The Synagogue is where Rabbis and others taught their doctrines and Bible interpretations and the Synagogue was the center of daily Jewish religious life. There was only one Temple but there were hundreds and hundreds of Synagogues. And there was a Synagogue present generally wherever a Jewish community of sustainable size would spring up.

Especially for the Diaspora Jews who lived hundreds, and in some cases a thousand miles or more, away from Jerusalem it wasn't usual that they would ever in their lifetimes come to visit the Temple for a Biblical festival or to sacrifice there; it was simply too expensive, too time consuming, too dangerous and too impractical. So their attachment to their Jewish religion was to their local Synagogue. When people went regularly to worship and have fellowship, even in Jerusalem, it was usually not to the Temple but to their Synagogue. So we must necessarily understand that for Yeshua and for all His followers, as well as all regular Jews, theirs' was the world of the Synagogue, and only on certain ceremonial occasions did they venture to the Temple and interact with the priests.

The central doctrinal tenets of the Synagogue can be summed up in one Hebrew word: **Halakhah**. **Halakhah** was a merging and mingling of the Biblical Torah, Traditions, and ancient customs. It was their manual not just for their religion, but for their everyday behavior. It was not a written manual yet (that wouldn't come for another couple of centuries), rather it was taught orally and enforced by various Jewish religious authorities who didn't agree on many important matters; this is one of the main reasons for the several factions of Judaism that developed and the never ending infighting that usually only amounted to passionate debate but at times spilled over into violence. All the disciples and followers of Yeshua belonged to one faction or another of Judaism, and to one Synagogue or another, so they didn't have a single unified mindset even after coming to belief. And we see this play out early on among the disciples as we hear of Hellenist Believers (Greek speakers) versus Hebrew Believers (Hebrew speakers) who don't trust one another to impartially dole out money and food to the widows among their group.

Despite their various levels of devotion to Judaism, for the Jewish people there was no getting around the reality that in New Testament times the world was a gentile Roman world; the Holy Lands were in the hands of the Romans and the Diaspora Jews lived in one province or another of the Roman Empire. It had been this way for going on 2 centuries by the time of Christ's execution. The Jews of the Diaspora by necessity dealt every day with the majority gentile world and its many complexities. Like the proverbial frog in the kettle, slowly and imperceptibly the Diaspora Jews found themselves looking and thinking more and more like their gentile neighbors. But the more pious and zealous Jews of the Holy Land who lived nearer to the greatest symbol of their heritage, the Temple, and nearer to the power center of Jewish religious authority, Jerusalem, tended to keep as much distance between themselves and the gentiles as possible. It was in this context that a new faction of Judaism, one born in the world of the Synagogue, arose. This faction believed that Yeshua of Nazareth was the Messiah they had been waiting for. But, progressive revelation visibly demonstrated that He

was a different kind of Messiah than the long-held Jewish customs and traditions had said they were to expect; He would not lead the Jews in a revolt against Rome, which was expectation #1. Further, He was not a mere man; He was indeed a descendant of King David, but also He claimed to be God. Even more perplexing, if not disappointing, He would achieve the goal of bringing in the Kingdom of God, a Jewish Kingdom, through His death and resurrection; not through his personal charisma and a series of stunning military victories that would liberate Judah. More this would be a spiritual kingdom as opposed to a typical physical kingdom. Most Jews then were like most Christians today: this simply was not what their trusted religious leaders had told them a Messiah would be and do, so even the vivid reality of Yeshua and of His miracles that so many of them personally witnessed didn't sway them. Maintaining their familiar doctrinal status quo was what mattered, and it was also what was demanded by the Jewish religious leadership; not accepting the newly revealed truth.

Thus we find upon Yeshua's death that a small group of 12 disciples took up the cause as its leadership, and their particular faction of Judaism became known as The Way. They didn't stop going to Synagogue; they didn't stop going to the Temple. They didn't stop practicing their Judaism or stop obeying the Law of Moses. In fact on one particular occasion, the first Shavuot (Pentecost) after Yeshua's crucifixion, the 12 disciples (all Galileans) were in Jerusalem in obedience to the Law, and along with thousands of Diaspora Jews who were there for the same purpose, saw and experienced something that shocked them. The Holy Spirit visibly descended upon Yeshua's followers and they all began speaking in foreign languages that they didn't know. Peter and others of the disciples used this event as a springboard to teach other Jews about Yeshua and what the coming of the Spirit meant, but they were arrested by the High Priest and told to stop speaking about this Yeshua.

Not long afterward, a Greek speaking Jewish Believer from Samaria named Stephen went to one of the 400 or so synagogues in Jerusalem to preach the Gospel to them, and they became so incensed by what he had to say that they took him to the Sanhedrin. In a hasty kangaroo court trial, he was convicted and promptly stoned to death. Immediately following this, a number of Jews in Jerusalem set out to destroy this new radical faction of Judaism and so the terrified Believers fled Jerusalem to safer parts of the Holy Land and to nearby countries.

In response the Sanhedrin sent Paul, a strict Pharisee, after one particular group of Believers who had fled to safety in Damascus, Syria. On the journey to arrest these Jesus sympathizers Christ confronted Paul in spirit form, from Heaven, and Paul, although blinded, became the newest Believer. The same zeal he had for rounding up and punishing Believers he would now use to spread the Gospel message.

Back in the Holy Land Peter and James, Yeshua's brother, were the unquestioned leaders of The Way. Peter was roving around, making new disciples of the Holy Land Jews and checking in on the welfare of some of the scattered Believers, when he had a vision that would forever change yet another fundamental mistake in his *Halakhah*-based Jewish theology. But before he had his vision, a gentile Roman army officer named Cornelius had a visitation from an angel telling him to go and fetch Peter because there was something Peter needed to tell him. Peter's vision happened shortly afterward. The vision was a parable; it involved a cloth sheet being lowered down from Heaven with all kinds of animals in it, some (if not all) being

prohibited as food for Jews according to the Law of Moses. God told Peter to kill and eat. This vision greatly confused Peter not only because of the instruction, but because the words used didn't pertain to food; they pertained to people and to objects.

As the men arrived to escort Peter to visit Cornelius, Peter suddenly realized what this vision/parable was telling him; first, it had nothing to do with food at all. Rather it was that Peter (and all Jews) were to stop regarding gentiles as unclean. Why? Had God recently cleansed gentiles and made them clean? No. God had created gentiles clean (as He does all things). In fact gentiles represented a spiritual status the Torah calls common. Common was a perfectly fine status, and was not evil or wrong and certainly not unclean. It was Judaism that had developed traditions that declared that gentiles were unclean and so Jews couldn't have anything to do with them or they would risk becoming ritually defiled. Thus since God had entrusted Jews with the Good News, then this faulty theology about gentiles would have to be straightened out so that Believing Jews would go to the gentiles, and gentiles could be saved as well.

While Peter is talking to Cornelius and his household, in a second Pentecost event, the Holy Spirit visibly fell on these gentiles, indicating that they believed the Gospel message and that God had accepted them. This stunned Peter and 6 other Jewish Believers who had come with him. They never imagined it possible that gentiles could accept the Jewish Messiah, and that God would accept them, without them first becoming Jews. But now that they had accepted Christ, and the ***Ruach HaKodesh*** had fallen on them, ought they to be circumcised and so to become official Jews? A number of Jewish Believers thought so, and our Bibles usually call them the Circumcision faction. This would remain a contentious issue within The Way, and it appears that Peter was as ambivalent about it as Paul was outspoken against it.

This pretty well sums up the road we've thus far traveled in the Book of Acts. With that, open your Bibles to Acts chapter 11 and we'll continue our journey.

### **READ ACTS CHAPTER 11 all**

This chapter opens in the immediate aftermath of Peter's dealings with the God-fearing gentile, and new Believer, Cornelius and his household. And the tone of this passage is that the Jewish Believers really didn't know how to handle this revelation about the Holy Spirit falling upon gentiles. And the Circumcision faction among the Believers felt that although salvation in Christ had without question come to the gentiles (as evidenced by the visible nature of the Holy Spirit coming down upon Cornelius), they felt that the next logical step was to become a Jew; and that was accomplished by circumcision. In fact the belief was that while one could be saved as a gentile, one could not continue as a gentile.

It is not surprising that it was in Jerusalem that Peter encountered this opposition since Jerusalem was the center of the original community of Believers, and it was still where the leadership of The Way operated from. But just as importantly it was where Judaism was practiced in its most fundamentalist extremes, and so the thought of gentiles having anything to do with the God of Israel was not accepted. Peter may have understood from God that the standard ***Halakhah*** of the Jews that said that gentiles were naturally unclean was wrong, but

that isn't something that is easily dismissed by other Jewish Believers just because one person says so. Old Traditions and ways of thinking die much harder than that.

Notice the complaint of verse 3 that is directed towards Peter: "You went into the homes of uncircumcised men and ate with them." This is not an accusation that Peter essentially consorted with the enemy. Rather this is an issue of ritual purity and thus the leader of the Messianic movement (Peter) has voluntarily subjected himself to becoming defiled and thinking it alright. This did not settle well with the Jewish Believers in Jerusalem; after all shouldn't their leader be the most pious and careful of them all (as an example to the others)? And please keep in mind in all of our lessons throughout Acts (and anywhere you read in the New Testament) that the term "the uncircumcised" is simply a Jewish colloquial term that means gentile. So we see that the issue of circumcision is directly tied to ritual purity.

What about a male gentile getting circumcised solves that issue? It is because it is assumed that the only reason for circumcision is to disavow one's gentile identity and to convert to a Jew. Once someone is a Jew, then that person (male or female) can go into a Mikveh and be ritually cleansed of all their gentile impurity (something that they could not do before circumcision). Naturally as a Jew one would of course also follow the Jewish **Halakhah** as regards the purity provisions. Bottom line: God-fearer or not; Believer in Christ or not; the issue of ritual purity that surrounds gentiles remains unchanged in the eyes of circumcision faction. And in fact when we get to Acts chapter 15 and the famous Jerusalem Council whereby certain rules were to be implemented upon the growing number of gentile Believers it was entirely about purity provisions because these new Believing gentiles expected to worship with, dine with, and have open fellowship with Jewish Believers. So the question was how the leadership of The Way could assure their Jewish brethren that they wouldn't become defiled by being around these gentile Believers.

Starting in verse 4, Peter's defense for going into the home of a gentile and eating with him is to tell the story of the vision/parable that he had when he was in Yafo at Shimon the tanner's house. And so he tells it nearly word for word as we read it back in chapter 10. And when in verse 8 Peter gets to the part about telling God "no" that he will not eat such things as were in the sheet lowered down from Heaven, it is to make clear to Kefa's hearers (which was mainly the circumcision faction) that he is no less strictly Torah observant than they are. So he was just as horrified to hear this instruction from God as the circumcision faction is taken aback by Peter telling them about the instruction. I need to comment here, as I did in chapter 10, that Acts 11:9 is poorly translated in the CJB. Where it says: "Stop treating as unclean what God has made clean" it is incorrect. What it actually says is: "Stop treating as **koinos** what God has made **kathartos**". "Stop treating as common what God has made clean".

I'm not going to go back through our last 3 weeks of study whereby we talked extensively about the spiritual state called common; I'll leave that up to you to review it for yourselves. But what I do want to add is this: I can tell you right now that many of you are reading this statement as though God (through Peter) is saying that He has recently cleansed the gentiles when He says He "had made (them) clean". And you'd be wrong. And the reason you automatically perceive it that way is because you still see it through the lens that pervades Christianity, which say a) gentiles were unclean and so God had to cleanse them, and b)

because you still want to relate this to the kosher food laws, which most Christian leaders say is what Peter's vision was about (it wasn't), and c) because it is taught that the Levitical food laws were abolished for Believers (but that is decidedly not so). Rather when God says that He made gentiles clean, He means that indeed He created them (he made them) as clean creatures. It was only Judaism, not God, who ever at any time declared gentiles as universally and naturally unclean creatures. So God was rebuking Peter; not informing him of a change. God was saying, 'Peter, I made gentiles clean, so don't you say otherwise or treat them in such a way'. Further, if a gentile (who naturally carries the "common" spiritual status) accepts Christ, he or she is elevated to the same "holy" status that Jews naturally carry. So Peter should stop thinking of Believing gentiles as being forever stuck in their "common" spiritual status; they are no longer common they are now holy as a result of their faith in Yeshua. And it is not by means of a physical circumcision and thus converting to become a Jew that elevates them to a holy status; it is God Himself who declares their elevation to holy.....nothing more.

Verse 15 is a telling statement. There Peter relates to his listeners that the Holy Spirit fell on these gentiles "just as it fell on us at the beginning". That is, it was another Pentecost event. Christ told the Jewish Believers to wait on something amazing that was going to happen before they began their ministry; and Peter realizes that amazing event was Pentecost. It was the starter's gun at the beginning of a race for the Jewish Believers. But in Caesarea Maritima that same starter's gun had been raised and fired signaling the beginning of the inclusion of gentiles. Always the motto had been, first to the Jews then to the Greeks. It seems that the Jews' head start was over. Little did they know that soon the Jews would find themselves the minority party of Christianity.

The most important statement about Peter's self-defense to the circumcision faction for his associating with gentiles is in verse 17:

**<sup>CJB</sup> Acts 11:17 *Therefore, if God gave them the same gift as he gave us after we had come to put our trust in the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, who was I to stand in God's way?"***

Peter basically says, it's not my fault. Peter doesn't second guess whom God deems worthy of salvation. Peter doesn't choose who the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon; the Lord does. It also kind of harkens back to Gamaliel's wise statement to fellow members of the Sanhedrin about what they ought to do about Peter and this growing faction of Judaism that they did not start or sanction. A group that followed and worshipped a deceased carpenter from Nazareth.

In Acts chapter 5, we heard this:

### **Acts 5:38-39 CJB**

**<sup>38</sup> *So in the present case, my advice to you is not to interfere with these people, but to leave them alone. For if this idea or this movement has a human origin, it will collapse.***

**<sup>39</sup> *But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them; you might even find yourselves fighting God!" They heeded his advice.***

When the circumcision faction heard those wise words of Peter that of course were the truth, they relented. How indeed can we call ourselves followers of God and then turn around and question who God chooses as His own? They instead began to praise God, and a chilling reality settled in over them. In verse 18 we read:

**Acts 11:18 CJB *"This means that God has enabled the Goyim as well to do t'shuvah and have life!"***

That is: "This means that God has enabled the gentiles as well to repent and have life!"

We'll finish chapter 11 next week.