

10/23/22 - Acts 11:1-18 - "Level Ground at the Foot of the Cross"

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- [0 : 00] We'll be reading from Acts 11, verses 1 to 18. And it's the ESV, so just to let you know. Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.
- So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them. But Peter began and explained it to them in order.
- I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me.
- Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But I said, By no means, Lord, for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.
- But the voice answered a second time from heaven, What God has made clean do not call common. This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven.
- [1 : 11] And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction.
- These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter.
- He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as on us at the beginning.
- And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?
- When they heard these things, they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.
- [2 : 17] That is the word of the Lord. Amen. Thanks, brother.
- You know, I do apologize for attempting a failed attempt at boosting your resume, Rick, of handling the money. It is Pastor Appreciation Day. I thought that you might appreciate a little bit extra more on your plates, but you already do enough.
- And so I apologize for misspeaking, especially to Christine. And boy, we're getting to the end of our time in the book of Acts.
- There's obviously more chapters laying ahead for us to cover at some point in the hopeful near future. But we'll be finishing towards chapter 12 of Acts in this segment of our sermon series.

And so we're going to be shifting gears here pretty soon in a couple weeks, covering some of our aspects of the statement of faith. And we're looking forward to getting into the Christmas season.

[3 : 28] Yeah, I said it. We got to talk about it. It's the elephant in the room. It's coming. And I've been looking forward to it since January. And the snow, not so much.

But yeah, definitely looking forward to Christmas coming up. And hopefully you'll be engaged in the next teaching series for Advent. And without any further comments, let's dive into this passage.

And I want us to understand a couple components regarding the church and the church's purpose. And if you have not known, the church is in some social club.

It's not just a bunch of people who get along and like the same things that everyone likes and everything. The church is a special organization that, depending upon your doctrine, it's an institution of truth.

I praise God for the doctrine in this church, the doctrine that we preach, the doctrine that we sing and do and pray. And even our hospitality is rooted in doctrine.

[4 : 40] So it's a special organization and hopefully an institution of truth. However, the church at times becomes the most apparent discombobulated mess of drama, which often discredits the truth that the church attempts to display, to proclaim, to preserve.

Now, fortunately for us, we can look through 2,000 years, nearly 2,000 years of church history and be able to foresee problems of yesterday in order to avoid problems of tomorrow.

But this is not the case for the early church. The early church did not have this plethora of church history sections in Barnes & Noble to be aware of to avoid finding themselves in a tricky situation in tomorrow.

The future simply hung in the balance in the early church from situation and circumstance to situation and circumstance.

In other words, they're writing history for us today. And we approach the text today keeping this very aspect in mind. Understanding the fragility of the church as situations arose.

[6 : 00] Similar to just a couple chapters previously with Ananias and Sapphira. And their what looked like a generous claim that it was all a lie against God.

Or to Simon the sorcerer who he could have bolstered his profession over in Samaria and been the most popular guy with the power of the Holy Spirit, gaining followers that take Mark Zuckerberg off his platform in Facebook.

He would be the man. All of this hanging in the balance. And the church begins in the passage today being filled with rumors and gossip.

Just as is unfortunately prevalent in our day today. And Luke is wrapping up a three-part narrative. It's a trilogy, we'll just call it, because I really enjoyed the Star Wars trilogies.

And I enjoy Star Wars. And we're just going to call it the trilogy. Before all these other imposter movies came in to be, there used to be a trilogy. And this is a trilogy that we've been in.

[7 : 10] A three-part narrative that we've been breaking up the past three weeks. And so we're forced to look back upon the context of which we came from. So we have to survey where we're at in this third part.

How did we get to where we are today? From Joppa with Peter healing a crippled man, to raising Tabitha up from the dead in Joppa, to resting with a tanner, a one Simon, the tanner, as Luke articulates in his book.

And we go from Joppa to this mysterious trance that Peter gets taken in, in his prayer closet, on a roof overlooking the Mediterranean.

And here, God reveals something new to him. Just as was read and summarized, and we'll talk about it more in depth. That God is doing something new. He is declaring what was once previously unclean as clean.

Which was once common as clean. Pure. And so this all stems into Peter wondering what in the world is going on.

[8 : 25] This goes against all of his piety. And this leads him to hearing a knock on the door of this intersecting narrative with this other guy up in Caesarea who has a vision at this same exact time frame and sends men to receive a message from Peter.

And Peter's like, I don't even know what's going on right now. What message are you talking about? And the Spirit leads him up to Caesarea.

And in Caesarea, we see that the message clicked with him. The Gentiles in what's known as Cornelius' house are saved. Gentiles are saved.

This is a huge movement. If you have a chance to look back at previous sermons, I would encourage you to do so to really feel the weight of the context today in the passage as we're carrying forward.

But today, we understand that while Peter's out on his Mediterranean trip in Joppa to Caesarea, there's rumors spreading.

[9 : 35] Peter's apostolic authority is hanging in the balance. And the future of the church, just as they're writing history, is uncertain.

It could go this way. It could go this way. And I think it's good for us to feel the tension in the passage. We have to feel the tension of this passage.

And so, what we have today is a sermon titled, Level Ground at the Foot of the Cross. And we're going to unpack this within a contextual understanding of where we've been the past two weeks in this trilogy.

And the passage today is going to reinforce the previous parts of this trilogy. From piety and prejudice to the confirmation of salvation to the Gentiles.

But additionally, this is going to challenge us today to live in obedience when the winds of the culture blow against us.

[10 : 46] The church must stand firm. Even if it costs us our reputation. Let's see that today.

Let's pray. Father, we pray at this time that you help us to understand and apply the text of what you've been unfolding to us in this trilogy.

Father, we thank you for your word that it is true. It has authority over our lives. It's sufficient. It doesn't need our interpretations of it. It has its interpretation that we have to draw out.

Father, help us at this time to draw from the well of your word. And Lord, help us to be challenged. Help us to be corrected. Help us to be encouraged by your word.

Let this time be supernatural as we enter your word. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So I have two sections as the passage is sort of naturally broken up into.

[11 : 54] And the first section is, hopefully you can understand what I'm trying to do here with the words and appreciate it, confronting rumors and rumors of rumors in the church.

It's almost like a little slogan at the bottom. Coming to a church near you. And we see that there's a problem in this day and age within the life of the church.

In verse 1 of chapter 11, just as David read today. Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea.

Think about this. Throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

And when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

[12 : 54] But Peter began to explain it to them in order. You know the weight of such a phrase. If you've been in possibly any relationship in life, that dreaded phrase, We need to talk.

With four words can literally throw somebody who already struggles with anxiety into more anxiety.

You know, as human beings, you're being married for 20 years. It's like your mind jumps to the, oh boy, we're getting a divorce. It's like, no, I need to talk to you about maybe rearranging the living room, right?

We're changing the curtains, not a divorce. From a pastor's standpoint, it's like, we have church members. We need to talk. And that's all we're given.

It's like, oh great, you're leaving the church. It's like, no, I just wanted to know if I could serve in any way. It's like, to our pleasant delight, it's not what we had jumped to in conclusion.

[14 : 02] And so, these circumcised Jewish believers, these were pious, devout Jewish believers who believe in Jesus Christ, they're obviously jumping to some conclusions of their own.

Has Peter gone from apostle to apostate? Oh, maybe just like we assume when anybody's out for a vacation, they haven't been to church in a while.

Oh, they're struggling in their faith and they're falling away from the Lord. Maybe distance in this Mediterranean extravaganza out that Peter's been on, distance has made him fall away.

They criticized him, saying, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

They address criticism upon his actions. What specifically, though, is the criticism concerning?

[15 : 14] Obviously, it's known that Peter associated with Gentiles. He ate with them in Jewish culture. Eating with other people was very contractual.

It wasn't just like, hey, come on over for a sandwich and be on your way. No, it had profound meaning. It was intimate. It was a time of intimate discussion and almost a contractual, like, this person is with me.

Luke seems to clarify that the issue at hand has to do with people groups. He does that by how he writes this.

He doesn't say which individual he stayed with, the tanner. He didn't talk about the individual of Cornelius. He doesn't even mention Cornelius in this passage, which is important in understanding what he's getting at here.

The problem is very general between those who are God's people and devout Jews and those who are outside of that fold.

[16 : 19] Circumcised and uncircumcised. And Peter has gone off the rails, according to Jerusalem. Oh, wait till Peter gets home.

And we're going to have a sit down with him. He defied God's ceremonial laws regarding dietary regulations. He's probably eaten all these unclean things. He's gone off the rails.

Maybe he's demonically possessed. He's forbid all ceremonial washings. It's time to have a talk.

He needs to repent. Well, it's difficult to understand the thrust of why they're so critical over his actions of meeting and all of that.

Of why they had a problem. Could it be a couple things, actually? So, what I'm trying to say is, why is it a problem?

[17 : 19] Are they concerned that Peter's compromising in his credibility? Possibly. Could it be that all this Old Testament history of the nation of Israel being set apart from that which is clean has actually become distorted from clean and unclean to better than?

Possibly. But most of all, could it very well be the problem that they don't understand the impact that the gospel had upon purity laws that Jesus Christ fulfilled?

I believe all of those could be very possible, too, why they're criticizing his association. But knowing the heart of man, it very well could be all of that. We can't even, we can't miss our humanity, church.

This broadcasts the problem in humanity, even back then. The moment that we even hear rumors today, don't we jump to similar conclusions?

They aren't Christians! Why would they be with them? We assume the worst. And church, while the thrust and motivation of their criticism may be unclear, there is one thing that is crystal clear, and that is found in our fallen nature.

[18 : 45] We are quick to make judgments and nearly qualify ourselves upon the basis of our opinion and assumption regarding any matter.

So this has a couple things as it expands into our lives today. This small section of passage reminds us that even the apostolic body of this day was not unquestionable.

They were not untouchable. And you'll hear at a false teacher near us somewhere that it's not the case for the modern-day, quote, apostles.

They claim that they are untouchable. These Christians were not rebuked for questioning God's anointed, but similarly understand that at the foot of the cross there is level ground.

Even if Peter is given the weighty task of heralding an apostolic message. Another aspect that we can unpack is that we are reminded that rumors are often fueled by our assumptions.

[20 : 08] And rumors and gossip always must be addressed directly to the first parties involved. We live in a culture that we're so accustomed to just keeping this gossip triangle alive and well.

Dividing parties between other parties. That so-and-so said something to me about this, and then rather than addressing that so-and-so, we talk to somebody else who's not involved in this situation, and so the triangle is formed.

This is how the world and the world outside of the church operates, but not the church. And we see a proper pattern of addressing it.

Peter goes directly to the source. Gossip is the biggest destroyer of the church, and Satan capitalizes upon our relational turmoil here in order to divide us, to drive a wedge between church members.

And so gossip must always be confronted head-on. If you want to learn more about that, you can read Matthew 18. And so Peter does just that.

[21 : 23] He crafts an experiential argument. An argument that's all based on experience.

That could be subjective based on its questionable beginning and how it was revealed, but it's an experiential argument that Peter tries to highlight that there is no possible way that this can be untrue.

And so he unpacks a couple verses here, 12 of them, basically how Stephen refuted the charges against him as people were gripping stones, a refutatio, and he refutes the charges to defilements and preaching possibly a false gospel.

Look with me in verse 5. He says, I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet, descending and let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me.

Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard, I saw, I heard, a voice saying to me, rise, Peter, kill and eat.

[22 : 47] But I said, by no means, Lord, for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth. I'm devoted, Peter would explain. Verse 9, but the voice answered a second time from heaven, what God has made clean do not call unclean.

In verse 10, this happened three times. And all was drawn up again into heaven. And Peter continues to address the criticism.

And behold, at the very moment, three men arrived at the house in which we were sent, in which we were, and sent me to Caesarea.

And the Spirit told me, all the while, I'm hearing this knocking on the door, the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. And these six brothers also accompanied me.

And he entered, and we entered the man's house. Verse 13, and he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter.

[23 : 59] He will declare to you a message of which you will be saved. in all your household. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as it was at the, just as on us at the beginning.

And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Peter steps back with all these fingers pointed at him.

And he's saying, guys, I don't know what's going on precisely, but God is doing something here. And I denied it three times.

And behold, I got out of that time confused as all get out. And there was a knock at the door. And these guys mentioned me by name to go with them.

And so these two visions intersect in just this instantaneous confirmation and questioning Peter all along the way starts to see the reality of what's going on.

[25 : 06] What was going on was undeniable. It was simply undeniable. What happened is new and definitely uncomfortable if no unclean or common thing has entered your mouth.

That's true devotion, isn't it? So regardless of it being new and uncomfortable, it is true regardless.

Why? Because God is truth. And so as we see the second section, we have these rumors and rumors and rumors and this next section we see that God is the reconciler of His church.

not only in this dispute of these accusations, He's also the reconciler of sinner to Himself.

So verse 17 continues, if then God gave the same gift, Peter says, to them as He gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

[26 : 29] If this is true, who am I to stand in God's way? How about that for a refute?

How can I hinder God? You've heard the stories of Jonah. I'm not falling for that. it's not wise, it's not safe to stand in God's way.

And Peter would actually, this is such a profound moment in his life, he'd recall this in Acts chapter 15 at the Jerusalem council. The point of this confirmation is not just food or ceremonial defilement, church, but salvation to all people.

God saves all people. Regardless of your opinion of those people, regardless of your assumption of those people, what God has made true is true.

And so for us, what God revealed to us through the apostolic body as bound for us in the word today doesn't care about your opinion on the matter.

[27 : 46] It doesn't care about my opinion on the matter. This revelation as experienced through Peter and proclaimed to us is truth.

And we got to deal with that. It's not about groups of people being greater than one another. It's about Jesus Christ being the greatest over all.

It's not about the concern over other people wavering in their faith through association with the others. It's about God's concern to reach the others.

We don't always like how God directs us, do we? We may disagree, but nonetheless, none of those reasons are good enough to defy God's will.

And so, Peter kind of gives his closing argument, kind of closes the book, you can probably hear it, and he sits down. And what happens?

[28 : 51] Verse 18, when they heard these things, they fell silent. I think our day and age today, that we could ever give another individual.

It's the loudest rebuttal, dismissal, that we can often give. It's easy for us in a text message, an SMS society, for us to miss that.

But how much greater in those pin drop moments, when an argument is laid out, and you just say, deal with it. To say the least, Luke records that these critics were awestruck.

silent. And notice, we're going to go back to English class here, notice, there's a period, they were silent, period.

Not a comma, not a semicolon, they were silent. I would imagine this would be a variety of reactions of skepticism, of cynicism, of people saying that, I can't believe it, as they're sitting there in thought, or the cynics saying, I won't believe it, this is wrong.

[30 : 20] But Peter, who once was reluctantly yielding to God, poses a question and literally turns this case, just as Stephen did, and put those accusations, his critics, upon the stand, and says, let's talk about who's wavering and who's devoted to God.

God's speaking clearly, he's confirming it, he's doing this, you're responsible for how you respond. I'm done. This could go in two directions, obviously.

We could see two denominations splitting, you could have the circumcision group of Christians, you could see the non-circumcised and the Gentile group with Peter leading the charge, both operating in the name of Jesus, you see that?

This could go in two different ways. But praise God, in verse 18, and they glorified God, saying, then to the Gentiles also, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

The silence gave way to praise of salvation. This once controversial concept became the basis of God's development in the plan of salvation.

[31 : 42] Why? God granted it. And for me, that's good enough for me. The supreme legislator, the creator of the law, amended the law because he is God.

He instituted the law. The law existed in a progressive fashion to be fulfilled, to point to Jesus Christ, that in Jesus Christ he fulfills the law.

And he grants both salvation and repentance. I don't know what you were expecting when you came to church today, but hopefully you realized that you came to some good news.

believers. What a passage today. What a trilogy. If anything, I think it helps us realize that God is truly in charge.

And he is the only authority able to declare forgiveness. And how often the church acts like the gatekeepers of forgiveness. We're not the gatekeepers of God's will.

[32 : 53] If anything, we might be attributed the glory of being a doormat to the Holy Spirit, if we're given that honor. But God does what he wills.

We can't remember Jesus even declared, whoever has ears to hear, let him hear. Right? Luke 8.8. And this passage, along with the entire book of Acts, refutes the judgment that we might pass upon people or other groups, as if God's power isn't sufficient.

And we might actually never admit it, that we doubt that God's power is sufficient, but our actions proclaim it, and how we handle that. We can't ever forget that we are called in this life to be glorified seed scatterers.

Our job is to scatter seed, to sow the gospel vast and wide, regardless of our opinions, regardless of our assumptions of people.

God progressively matures us, doesn't He? Through a series of aha moments. Aha. Right? It was true for Peter.

[34 : 09] And so may this passage serve as a reminder, not only to that God has that authority, but also the miracle that we're assured in salvation now, based on an aha moment then.

because guess what? Y'all are Gentiles too. All y'all. To my recollection, I don't think you're Jewish, but I mean, to my recollection, we are all Gentiles.

And we are testimonies now of salvation due to the aha moment then. So as we wrap up this trilogy, let's marvel, close at marveling at God's glory and the expansive salvation that's available to all.

Let's be reminded to correct ourselves. If we need to be corrected, let us be corrected today humbly. Or you can pick up a rock after the service. I'll be on the parking lot.

You can have your shots. Let's be corrected if we need to be corrected. Or if we're not being corrected, let us have the confidence to correct one another when we fall short and hold each other accountable.

[35 : 28] The first thing I want us to marvel in God's expansive salvation to all, the first of three things, is that salvation is multi-ethnic. We can survey the history of the church, even us, how we got here to be, and be extremely embarrassed of the fact that we will always see cultural prejudices invading and segregating the church.

The main reason in denominational life happened on the basis and the premise of racism. God welcomes all to the church, regardless of your sin, and guess what?

regardless of your skin. Not to mention your social status, not to mention where you went to school, not to mention your income level, and leading up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it doesn't matter what water fountain you drink at.

Leave the exclusivism to God to sort out those who belong to Him or not, lest we grieve the heart of God in complete abandonment of what Jesus Christ Himself prayed in John 17, 20.

I do not ask, He says, for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one.

[36 : 55] Just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.

Mr. Rogers can't be the only one who got it back in that time period, as he dipped his feet with an African American in a kiddie pool. He can't be the only one who doesn't care about his reputation.

The second thing I want us to understand and remember is that salvation is international. Not long ago, on a news source, whatever you watch near any of us, that pesky news informing us, right, of truth.

It reminded us of the open borders, that we're just going to let the borders be open and the USA will be recipients of many fugitives that are fleeing hostile situations in other countries.

And this happened in the world, okay? It should grieve our hearts when we hear the church indicate that they would shut their door to refugees because it isn't their problem, because they didn't vote for the person who opened the borders.

[38 : 26] Christians are Christians. We cannot confuse Christian nationalism with Christian evangelism. Church, come on.

Don't fall for the cultural value systems of hierarchical patriotism. There's a way to be patriotic and not commit idolatry.

Did you know that? And I support patriotism and I do not commit idolatry. Open borders is their issue.

Open borders is their issue. It's a cultural issue. But to shut our doors to others because of where they are from becomes not a cultural issue, but a gospel issue.

I told you I was hitting hard today. The last thing, and you can stone me after this, salvation levels the ground, the cultural ground.

[39 : 37] Salvation levels the cultural ground. Similar to the last with international speech. Aren't we quick to exclude folks from our group? Right?

It's like we're children, like grown-up children, still wearing diapers. In a cafeteria room, we're not going to let the uncool people sit at our table, the undesirable people.

I'm going to test you on this at the potluck after church today. We're not going to let those Presbyterians sit at our table. We're not going to help reach Youngstown with the Pentecostals.

Ha! Can't do that. While some folks might not flatter us or support our opinions or reinforce our prejudices or boost our pride or fuel our egos, if God is for people and his power is over salvation, who are we to ever be against anyone?

the world is trying. The people outside there, the world, your news source, regardless of their bias, is trying to capture our perspectives.

[40 : 57] And knowing that we cannot adjust our message based on our perspectives, but our perspectives must adjust on behalf of the message.

The message is superior to what we hear upon the news. It's superior to what you think about open borders. It's superior to what you think and have your opinion upon.

God saves those he chooses, does he not? Let's never contradict that claim and play God. I'm done swinging.

Church, may we sow. May we sow compliantly with the gospel, according to the gospel. May we sow confidently, courageously.

Thinking back to Mr. Rogers dipping his feet with an African-American. I mean, may we be willing to risk our entire reputation in order to reach those needing the good news.

[42 : 08] Let it never be hindered by our prejudice. God is not partial. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.