The Antioch Church

(But God’s word is not chained: 2 Ti 2:9)

Acts 11:1-30

Key Verse: 11:20 “Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.”

People call the book of Acts not only the acts of the apostles, but also the acts of the Holy Spirit. This is because most of the acts of the apostles were initiated and directed by the Holy Spirit. In chapter 10 God showed a vision to Peter, who was praying, and the Holy Spirit asked him to do what was next. The Holy Spirit told Peter to accept the gentile visitors and to visit Cornelius’ house. The Holy Spirit directed Cornelius to send his men to Peter and invite him to his house. While Peter was speaking the gospel to Cornelius and his family, the Holy Spirit came upon all those who heard his message. (10:44) Here we learn that world mission is initiated by the Holy Spirit and completed by the Holy Spirit. In doing the work of God we need to hear the voice of the Spirit and to obey him. The way of successful ministry is to follow the Holy Spirit and to work with him. Peter was a stubborn and legalistic fisherman. But when he denied himself and obeyed the Holy Spirit, God used him to open the door of church to welcome all the gentile believers. Do you want to do God-pleasing work and to live a Christ-centered life? Walk by the Holy Spirit and obey him. Galatians 5:16 says, “*So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh*.”

Look at 11:1-3. “***The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.***” Peter’s visit to Cornelius’ house and communion with his family became big news to the Jerusalem church. This was because of two reasons; first, the gentiles accepted the word of God as the Jews did; second, the top leader of the church claimed Peter violated Moses’ law by visiting and eating with the Gentiles. The circumcised believers who criticized Peter were Judaizers, who strongly insisted Christians observe Moses’ law. They demanded believers to become Jews first, then Christians. They accused Peter of being a law-breaker by associating with the gentiles. They believed that Moses’ law forbade the Jews from associating with the gentiles.

How did Peter defend himself from the accusation of the Judaizers? **Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story**. (4) To shorten his whole story, Peter saw a special vision while he was praying. It was a large sheet which contained all kinds of unclean animals, and there was a voice, “*Get up, Peter. Kill and eat*.” Peter denied the voice, but there was another voice came from heaven, “*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*.” This happened three times. Right then three men who had been sent from Cornelius came to meet Peter, who was still hesitating. But the Holy Spirit told Peter to follow the visitors with the other six brothers. In Cornelius’ house while Peter was speaking the word of God, the Holy Spirit came upon those who heard his message.

Peter told the Judaizers to remember what the Lord Jesus told before he was taken into heaven. “***John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit***.” (16) Peter said that the gentiles were baptized with the Holy Spirit by the Lord Jesus. Peter concluded his defense in verse 17. “***So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”*** Peter meant that the baptism of the Holy Spirit upon the gentiles was the work of God, so how dare he stand against God? He told them that it was the irresistible will of God and the undeniable work of the Holy Spirit. How could a mere man resist against the mighty God?

Do we have Judaizers among us? Is there anyone who criticizes the work of the Holy Spirit and co-workers with their legalistic viewpoint? Do we exclude those who are different from us because of denomination, tradition, location, and so on? We may make mistakes as the Judiazers did if we exclude them because of their human condition. If we do not follow the work of the Holy Spirit, we will become modern Judaizers. On the contrary Peter obeyed the Holy Spirit. He crucified Judaism and legalism in order to obey the Holy Spirit. Peter became humble before God and obeyed God’s will. God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble.

Look at verses 19-21. “***Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phonecia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.***” Stephen was the first martyr who had been killed while he was preaching the word. Act 8:1 says that on that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 8:4 says, “*Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went*.” Those who had been scattered traveled as far as Phonecia, Cyprus and Antioch, the territory of modern Turkey. They preached the good news about Jesus to Jews only. But those who could speak Greeks spoke to Greeks also. In this way the word of God spread wide even to the gentiles through the scattered diasporas. God’s word had been spread through Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and now to door of Asia. Satan tried to destroy the work of God by killing Stephen and persecuting the apostles. Satan tried to stop the work of the Holy Spirit and to chain the word of God. But, he failed. God’s word is not chained. The work of the Holy Spirit is still going strong. The truth is still marching on. The word of God spread to Asia not by the apostles, but by the diasporas.

Later, Apostle Paul was imprisoned in Rome. Nero, the Roman Emperor, put him in jail to stop the word of God. But what did Paul do in the jail? In his second letter to Timothy he said, “*for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained*.” (2 Ti 2:9) In fact Paul wrote his four letters to the saints while he was in prison, those letters being Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. His letters have been read by many people who were later changed and converted into Christianity. God’s word cannot be chained or confined. It is living and active and penetrates our souls and breaks chains and shackles, and destroys all human barriers. God’s word works beyond time and space and transcends all human limitations. God’s word creates one miracle after another through our faith. This is because it is the word of the Almighty God.

We often feel limitations and face obstacles when we preach God’s word. Not only from ungodly hostile pressure from outside, but also from our weaknesses and sinfulness from inside chaining us down. These days it is not easy for us to identify ourselves as Christians in public. Not to mention to preach the good news about Jesus. In Muslim world and communist countries such as China and North Korea Christians will be killed when they preach the word. In America an ungodly atmosphere seems to seal our mouths and lips. Above all, because of fear we are not free to preach the word. Fear of persecution and rejection clutches our feet and prevents us from preaching. To our missionaries’ negative thoughts caused by language barriers, age gaps, and cultural differences, chain our hearts. Even though such limitation and condition chain us, God’s word is not chained. God’s word work freely, mightily, and steadily beyond our limitation.

One Korean student went to Germany as student missionary in 1980’s. He was not fluent in the German dialect. He was physically handicapped. He came from a third world country to a relatively civilized country. He had nothing to boast about himself. He was withdrawn because of these human conditions. But, he did not give up. He believed the power of God’s word. He held 2 Ti 2:9, “*But God’s word is not chained*.” He challenged his limitation with faith, so God’s word helped him to overcome his limitation. God blessed his faith so that he could teach the Bible to many German students with the help of the Holy Spirit. God helped him raise many disciples of Jesus who lived by faith, not by human condition. He also finished his Ph D successfully through faith.

God’s word is not chained. It is living and active. It has power, power to create, power to save, power to heal, power to break, and power to raise. When we believe the power of God’s word, we experience one miracle after another. Let us examine our heart! What makes us chained? What makes us paralyzed? Fear? Busy schedules? Language barriers? It is not language problems or generation gaps or cultural differences. It is our unbelief and laziness. I pray that we all may repent for our unbelief and believe the power of God’s word. Let us break the chains of fear, laziness, and fatalism, and put ourselves on the armor of God to fight a good fight for Christ. Amen!

News about the great works of God among the gentile believers in Antioch reached the church in Jerusalem. So the church sent Barnabas to Antioch (22). Who was Barnabas? He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith (24). He was the disciple who brought Saul (Paul) to the Jerusalem church and defended him (9:27). Barnabas was a sacrificial supporter of the church who sold all he had and brought them to the church (4:36,37). The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to Antioch in order to see the work of God and to encourage them. Barnabas encouraged the believers in Antioch church to remain true to the Lord in all their hearts. (23) He also invited Paul to work together with him as Bible teachers in the church. (23-24) Both taught great numbers of people there and the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (26) Later the Antioch church became the first gentile church and world mission headquarter which sent missionaries to Asia and supported other churches financially (29,30)

In conclusion we learned that world mission is the work of the Holy Spirit. So we must pray hard to receive the Holy Spirit and work with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is called *paraclete,* which means literally the one who defends in my place. Jesus called the Holy Spirit, “Another Counselor” (Jn 14:26). How can we hear the Holy Spirit? How do we follow him? We can hear the Holy Spirit when we pray as Peter did. We hear the voice of the Holy Spirit when we read God’s word and praise hymns. We hear his voice when we repent of our sins. Let us seek God’s will and set up our minds on things above so that the Holy Spirit can speak to us. Peter was ready to listen to God and obey him. God used Peter for his purpose because Peter became a man of the Spirit, not of the law.