

Day 45, Acts 11:19-30 & 12

by David Servant

The sermon emphasizes the importance of Jesus' teaching and the early church's reliance on apostolic oral accounts, rather than the New Testament epistles.

Scripture: Matthew 25:35, Matthew 28:18, John 21:18, Acts 12:24, Philippians 1:21

Topics: "Early Church", "Repentance"

Description

David Servant reflects on the early church's reliance on the apostolic oral accounts of Jesus' life, questioning if the modern church over-emphasizes the New Testament epistles over Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. He highlights the distinction between believers who turn to the Lord in repentance and those who may be considered 'unsaved believers.' The sermon explores the significance of disciples being called Christians in Antioch and the specific prophecy of Agabus regarding a coming famine. David also delves into the contrasting fates of Peter and James, emphasizing the blessing of death for believers and the power of prayer in the early church.

Transcript

An interesting point to ponder is that, at this point in church history (about 15 years after the church's birth on the day of Pentecost), the book of James comprised the entire New Testament. The book of Galatians wouldn't be written for at least another three years. Conservative biblical scholars estimate that the synoptic Gospels---Matthew, Mark and Luke---were not written for at least another 15 years! Yet the church thrived during its first 30 years. Of course, they had the apostolic oral accounts of Jesus' life that were passed along. It makes me wonder if the modern church is not guilty of over-emphasizing the New Testament epistles at the expense of Jesus' teaching that we now find in the four Gospels. Remember, Jesus did tell His disciples to go and make disciples, teaching them to obey all that He commanded (Matt. 28:18-20). That is the important thing!

I'm wondering if you caught the interesting phrase in 11:21: "A large number who believed turned to the Lord." It seems to say that not all who believe necessarily turn to the Lord, that is, repent. If so, such unrepentant believers could be called "unsaved believers."

It was in the Gentile church in Antioch where the disciples were first called Christians. It was probably unsaved Gentiles who bestowed that title upon the disciples, as they observed that their conversations and lifestyles all revolved around Christ. Thus a title that was meant to be derogatory became regarded by the early disciples as one of honor. True disciples can say with Paul, "To live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21).

I like today's story about the prophets, one of whom was named Agabus, who came down to Antioch from Jerusalem. His prophecy was not some vague, mystical forecast that we so often hear from the many alleged prophets who roam from church to church today. I so pity the gullible people who, when they find just a few words in one of their many nebulous prophecies that seemingly come to pass, are convinced these self-proclaimed prophets are from God. Agabus spoke specifically. His word of the coming famine was his message, it was not vaguely contained within a prophecy that included scores of other vague "messages."

I also like how the church responded to Agabus' prophecy. They obeyed Jesus, who will one day say to everyone one of two things, either "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat," or "I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat" (Matt. 25:35, 42). So many modern "prophecies" cater to the selfish desires of those listening.

How could Peter sleep so soundly on the eve of his execution? Jesus had promised him years before that he wouldn't die until he grew old (John 21:18-19), so Peter had no worries. Moreover, God obviously has a tremendous prison ministry!

Why did God deliver Peter from death but allow James to be martyred? That we don't know. But perhaps we should ask a different question: "Why did God let James go to heaven so soon but kept Peter on this lousy earth?" Death is a great blessing to those in Christ (Phil. 1:21-23).

Take note that the prayer meeting for Peter was held in a house, as were most gatherings of the early church. There is no record in Acts of any special church buildings during the first 30 years of the church's history. The early disciples didn't need special buildings then to make disciples, and church buildings really aren't needed today. In fact, church buildings often work against the making of disciples. They rob money from missionaries and the poor.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, recorded the same story about Herod Agrippa that we read today, writing that shortly after Herod gave his speech in Caesarea that won him undue praise, he was struck with a violent stomach illness. He died after five days of agony at the age of 54. Those were five days of mercy.

John Stott wrote a fitting summary of Acts 12: "The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing. It closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing." Amen.

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