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ACTS 11:19-30

Last week we saw how Cornelius was converted. We saw that Cornelius was a Gentile. He was also a God-fearing Gentile. We saw how he longed to know more of the God he feared and he prayed and God sent the Apostle Peter. We saw how Peter was reluctant to go, but he obeyed God and he went to the house of Cornelius and explained salvation to him. We saw as a result of that that Cornelius and those with him were saved and they also received the Holy Spirit and were baptized.

Well, today we're going to see even more Gentiles come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

However, there's a difference in these men and Cornelius. Cornelius feared God. Cornelius was a devout man. Cornelius gave alms and prayed to God continually.

The folks we're going to see today are **pagans**. They're **heathens**. They lived in a culture that cared nothing for Almighty God. They worshiped idols they or other men had made. About the only things Cornelius and the folks at Antioch had in common was the fact that they were all Gentiles and the fact that they were all lost and bound for hell until Jesus saved them by His grace.

Please don't miss the progression found here, because the progression we see here reminds us that the **Book of Acts** is not a haphazard telling of the early church and the spread of Christianity. The **Book of Acts** is in fact a step-by-step unfolding of how the gospel of the Lord Jesus spread in a very systematic fashion.

Jesus left the disciples with this command:

"...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the uttermost parts of the earth."

Well, in recent weeks we've seen that Jesus was preached in Jerusalem, haven't we? I mean the gospel was preached so effectively in Jerusalem that thousands were saved and the religious authorities had the apostles imprisoned and flogged. They even had at least one stoned to death. Paul had to be let down over the city wall in a basket in order to save his life, and ultimately sent to Tarsus.

However, the preaching of the gospel had not been confined to Jerusalem...it had spread outside the city into the surrounding areas. All Judea heard about the saving power of the blood of Jesus. This precious truth traveled to Samaria, and today we shall see it making its way completely outside the confines of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. We'll see it beginning to travel indeed to the uttermost parts of the earth.

We need to remember what God used to spread the gospel. Christianity so threatened the religious leaders that **a great persecution** arose and the persecution was so severe that the early believers were forced to scatter. However, what the religious leaders and the devil meant for evil, God actually meant for good.

And may I say this to you...this is one of the primary ways God has used to spread His gospel. He has used persecution down through the centuries. Last week, someone mentioned the fact that the Puritans were so named for their efforts to purge the church of

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false doctrine. Indeed they were. (And your ignorant thought they were named for their “pure and holy life.”) They were actually named for their efforts to purify the Church of England of Roman Catholic and other influence that was not in keeping with what they knew the Word of God taught, and in so doing they incurred the wrath of the King and the Bishop of the Church of England. Consequently they fled to this continent and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ spread and was established on these shores.

Acts 11:19...

“speaking the word to no one except the Jews alone...”

What we see here are saved Jewish believers preaching to unsaved Jewish folks. These Jewish believers had been forced to leave Jerusalem and they came to Phoenicia and to Cyprus and to Antioch. When they got there they began to preach the Lord Jesus Christ! They could not keep silent! The gospel was “to the Jew first...” but it was “also to the Greek!”

Verse 20...

We need to understand just a little bit about Antioch. Antioch was in Syria. Antioch was the third largest city of the known world in that day. Only Rome and Alexandria in Egypt were larger. **It was a political center. It was a commercial center. It was also a morally corrupt center.**

In Antioch, many of the folks worship Daphne and the worship of Daphne was like the worship of Diana in Ephesus...it was sexual.

Because of its proximity to Judah and Israel, many Jewish people had migrated there. We need to keep in mind that already Jews in great numbers were living outside of Israel. They had already been dispersed when their country had been overtaken by the Assyrians and the Babylonians and many of these folks had taken up residence in many countries...and many could be found in Antioch...**taking advantage of its cosmopolitan and commercial culture.**

These are the Jews we see being converted in **verse 19**.

But the city of Antioch was a city made up primarily of Gentiles and these are the folks in **verse 20**.

Believing Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and began preaching the gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch...**and what happened?**

Verse 21...

See, the gospel didn't have to be preached only to those Gentiles who had already shown some interest as Cornelius had. **The gospel was to be taken everywhere!**

We're not to just take the gospel to Americans or the British or Canadians and the Russians... We're also to take the gospel to places like Malawi and the Zulus and the Indians of South and Central America. That's why we send out our precious loved ones to those places, isn't it?

So, we see Gentiles who had been in a culture that was successful as far as politics and commerce goes...but was very lacking in their knowledge of the God of heaven.

Now what happens next?

Verses 22-24...

The news of the many who were coming to a saving faith in Christ traveled fast and it reached Jerusalem. When the church at Jerusalem heard about it...they sent Barnabas to investigate. **WHY?**

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See, God had intended the Jews to be a “light to the nations” but they had failed miserably to do this. They considered the Gentiles (Greeks) to be so inferior to themselves. In fact, in **John 7:35**, when Jesus made the statement that “you shall see Me, and shall not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come”, the Pharisees had sarcastically asked if Jesus intended to go and preach to the Gentiles. In other words, the Pharisees were saying, “No, that’s one place we certainly won’t be coming...to the Gentiles.”

Now so far, the only place the gospel has been preached has been in Israel. Even the Gentiles who have been saved have been saved in Israel. Now, the saved Jews must understand that the gospel would not only be preached in the Holy Land, and the gospel would not only be preached by saved Jews to the Gentiles in the Holy Land, but the gospel would also be preached to the Gentiles outside the Holy Land and eventually the gospel would even be preached by the Gentiles.

I believe it’s extremely difficult for us to understand just how foreign an idea this was to these Jewish believers...

So, some weren’t yet quite convinced that the gospel should even be preached to the Gentiles. They probably thought it was bad enough for Peter to take the gospel to Cornelius, but at least Cornelius was a God-fearing man. **However, in Antioch, the Jewish believers were just going into the streets talking to everybody!!** What exactly were they saying and how were they saying it? What exactly were the new converts believing and how were they believing it?

Whatever their reasons...they sent Barnabas to find out!!

We met Barnabas way back in **Acts 4**. We saw back then that his given name was Joseph, that he was a Jew, in fact, he was a Levite, and we need to know that even then, being a Levite was something the Jews looked on as special. We also saw that Barnabas was from the Gentile area of Cyprus. We saw that he was a generous man who sold a tract of land and brought the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles.

A couple of weeks ago we saw that Barnabas was a great encourager. Remember it was Barnabas who came alongside and vouched for Paul when Paul was trying to convince the apostles of his love for Jesus and his calling by God.

So this kind and generous Levite who so had the gift of encouragement that the name by which he was known meant “son of encouragement” was sent to Antioch to see what exactly was going on.

We see in **verse 23** that what Barnabas saw was overwhelmingly genuine. The Word of God tells us to test use discernment. It tells us to look at the fruit of other believers. Well, Barnabas tested everything he saw and heard by the Spirit and he was convinced that the gospel that had been preached in Antioch and that the gospel that had been accepted in Antioch was real...and only then did he give his blessings to it. He rejoiced and began to do what Barnabas did best...he encouraged them...he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord.

Verse 24 tells us that Barnabas was a **good man**, this speaks of his **character**. But, you know, being a good man and being of good character is really not enough, is it? Good men with good character aren’t that hard to find...but **verse 24** also tells us that Barnabas was **full of the Holy Spirit**, which speaks of his **Christianity**. Verse also tells us that Barnabas was **full of faith**, which speaks of his **commitment**.

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Now, Barnabas could have said, "Hey, I'm the official representative from Jerusalem. I'm here to tell you what to do and how to do it. You must run your church like the church at Jerusalem and you're to report to me." But, Barnabas was a very humble man. Barnabas was genuinely happy about the salvation coming to these Gentiles, wasn't he?

Barnabas simply applied the principle of **Experiencing God** that says we're to see where God is working and then seek to get in on it!

Verse 25...

Here we learn something else about Barnabas. We see that Barnabas knew these folks needed sound teaching. Barnabas must have thought, "I'm not really a teacher. I'm an encourager. I can't teach and disciple great numbers of new believers all by myself. I need help!"

This is exactly the type situation Satan looks for. If he can find folks who are hungry to be taught and then make sure they have false teachers, then they'll never grow in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. All the rest of the New Testament this truth is borne out. False teachers eventually crept into so many of the churches...Paul would later speak to this and Jude would later speak to this and Peter would speak to this.

And Barnabas, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, knew these folks needed sound teaching...

So, he left for Tarsus to look for Saul. By the way, this word "look" literally means "to seek up and down," "to search for." Why did he go searching for Saul? Because like Barnabas, Saul had been born and raised in a Gentile culture. Saul could easily identify in so many ways with these people. Barnabas knew that Saul would declare the whole counsel of God!

By the way, when the Lord Jesus sent out His disciples, how did He send them? **He sent them out two by two.** Here we see these two...Saul and Barnabas working together...each with supporting gifts. **Saul, the teacher and Barnabas, the encourager.**

Verse 26...

Saul came with Barnabas and for an entire year they met with the church at Antioch and taught many new believers... "...and the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch."

Before they were called Christians, they were called *disciples*, they were called *saints*, they were called *brothers*, they were called *witnesses*...but here at Antioch, they are called Christians. This label for them was probably a label given in derision...a derogatory label. But it soon became a badge of honor. The word Christian meant "follower of Christ." And I believe it meant more to those folks back then than it does to most folks today.

For one thing, being known as a Christian back then could get you killed. There are Christians in this world today who live in danger because they are known as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. But many folks take this term lightly. Believers in Iraq and in Yemen and in the Sudan and in so many other places don't take this term lightly!!

Dr. Harry Ironside once handed a gospel booklet to a man on a train, and the man turned to him and asked, "What did you give me that book for?"

Dr. Ironside replied, "I thought you might be interested; and may I ask, are you a Christian?"

"Well," the man replied indignantly, "take a good look at me...do I look like a Jew or a Chinamen?"

"You look like an American," Dr. Ironside said.

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“Then,” he responded, “that is your answer.”

Even today many people are willing to say, “I am a Christian” but would balk at saying they are “believers” or “disciples” or (heaven forbid) “saints.” **They are “cultural Christians” who have not experienced saving commitment to Jesus Christ.**

Verses 27-30...

Here we see that a man named Agabus told the Christians at Antioch that a great famine would take place. The Antioch Gentile Christians took up a contribution for the relief of their Jewish brethren.

By the way, this is the first time a church is said to have taken up money for another church. It's interesting to note that the parent church in Jerusalem didn't send relief to Antioch but Antioch sent relief to Jerusalem.

They simply saw the need and they tried to meet it.

I believe we've seen today our first glimpse of just how the early church should conduct themselves. Paul would later write down for us these and more principles by which the church should operate.

Galatians 5:14-6:9...

Let's just very quickly see five principles that Paul gives us in these verses.

1) Restore each other...Galatians 6:1...

If we know of a fellow Christian who has been caught up in a trespass, God doesn't want us to pick up the phone and “spread the news”...He wants us to do our best to restore that believer **“in a spirit of gentleness”**. Why? **“..lest we too be tempted.”**

None of us is above failure. We need each other to care enough to **confront** us and then to **restore** and **encourage** us and **love** us!

2) Bear one another's burdens...Galatians 6:2...

Many times we see folks much more willing to share the things that are bothering them in an AA meeting or a group therapy meeting than in church, don't we? **Why is that?**

Folks will stand up in an AA meeting and share their failures, their disappointments, and their fears, yet...they won't breathe a word about any of these things at church. The reason is that they don't fear condemnation at the AA meeting, do they?

Where do you long to go when you're hurting? Where do you want to go when all hell seems to be breaking loose around you? You long to be with those who will come alongside you and put their arm around you and pray with you and understand, don't you?

Beloved, we are a family. We are sisters in Christ. We are all part of the family of faith. Let me tell you again what I've told you before...you all are much closer to me than my family of flesh! Outside of Bill, our children, Bill's mother and maybe a few others...there are no Christians in our families.

And because God commands it, we really need to learn to bear each other's burdens.

3) Examine our own work...Galatians 6:4...

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I believe Paul is telling us not to compare ourselves to another believer. Just examine your own work...are you doing anything at all for the kingdom of God? If not, why not? We're not getting any younger...when are you going to start?

4) **Share all good things with those who teach...Galatians 6:6...**

I believe our pastors should be well taken care of. I don't believe Bro. Bob or Bro. Casey or any of our missionaries should have to worry about how they're going to pay their bills.

5) **Do good especially to the household of faith...Galatians 6:9-10...**

We should take care of our own! That's why I'm excited about our seminary student project. But that shouldn't be **all** we do! Look around...how can you help a brother or sister in Christ?

Getting back to the Christians at Antioch.

When the text says that **"the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch"**, it means that Antioch was the first place they were given that name.

But, taking that sentence another way, we might also observe rightly that **they were Christians first of all, before anything else**. They could have been Gentiles first and only Christians second, in which case they would have said, "We are Gentiles. Why should we send money to the Jews?"

They could have been pagans first and Christians second, in which case they would have said, "Why should we worry about anybody but ourselves?"

Actually, they were neither of these. They were Christians first. And because they were Christians first, they felt a bond with all other believers and were determined to help them when the need arose.

Are you a Christian first? Is that the most important thing about you? Do folks look at you and call you a Christian? Are you known as a Christian in your neighborhood?...on your job? Are you happy most of all to be a follower of Jesus Christ? If you are, then the gospel will go forward. God will bless it, and many other people will be brought to the Lord Jesus Christ through you and your witness.

By the way, you know, there are more ways to take the name of the Lord in vain than cursing. I believe we take the name of the Lord in vain when our lives don't reflect the One by whom we're called.

Alexander the Great once learned that in his army was a namesake...**another Alexander, who was a known by all to be a coward.**

The story is told of the time that Alexander the Great called this young man into his presence and he asked him, "Is your name Alexander and are you named for me?" The trembling coward said, "Yes sir. My name is Alexander and I was named for you."

The great general said, "Then either be brave or change your name, son!"

Fortunately for you and me, the Lord Jesus Christ doesn't call on us to change our name when we are cowards, but He **does** expect us and exhort us to be who we are...to live out our calling in faithful and obedient service.

May God help us to do just that!!