

Back in Acts 8:4 Luke bracketed the explanation of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the covenant promises of God through Christ Jesus with a brief **description of the relationship between persecution and the expansion of the gospel** when he briefly noted, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” Now here in Acts 11:19 we have the closing bracket, basically saying the same thing, but now with Saul and the inclusion of the Gentiles in the foreground of the story. He states, “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch...”

Ancient Phoenicia is the region of modern-day Lebanon, north of Israel and west of Syria. It contained the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon, the kingdoms represented in the prophetic books of the Old Testament as enemies of Israel, Gentile cities with long histories of paganism.

Cyprus is the island in the Mediterranean Sea, south of Turkey and northwest of Israel. There were disciples of Jesus very early in Cyprus. Luke mentions one of them in Acts 21:16, Mnason, whom he labels “an early disciple.” Joseph, you will know him as Barnabas, was a native of Cyprus. He was introduced to us in Acts 4 as a generous man fully invested in the life of the Church, who sold some of his land in order to provide for others in Jerusalem. His nickname, Barnabas, means ‘son-of-encouragement’. He has played a major role in the missionary growth of the church through the preaching of the gospel, teaching the church, wisely including others to participate in such missionary endeavors, and the one whom we see in this passage going to find Saul to minister to a largely Gentile church in Antioch.

Though Phoenicia and Cyprus are mentioned, and these seacoast areas are somewhat connected, it is in Antioch that the story moves in Luke’s telling. It is because though the scattered church preached to the Jews in Phoenicia and

Cyprus, in Antioch, some of the disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene began teaching the Greek-speakers the gospel. Cyrene is an interesting note. It is far from the other places Luke lists, in North Africa, modern Libya. But, do you remember Simon who carried Jesus' cross? He was from Cyrene, as were his sons Alexander, a clearly Greek name, and Rufus, a Latin name meaning 'red', whom Mark refers to as alive in Rome in Mark 15:21. So, when the gospel was preached to Cornelius, it was preached to a God-fearer, but Antioch was known as a thoroughly Greco-Roman pagan city in a thoroughly pagan land, and the gospel is proclaimed by these Cyprian and Cyrene brothers as the hope of all people there.

The progression reminds us that the book of Acts is not a haphazard collection of stories, but rather a step-by-step unfolding of the historical growth of the Christian church through the then-known world. When we understand this movement we also begin to understand why it was necessary to have the previous chapters between the brackets. We might think that chapter 11 should have immediately followed chapter 8, because the gospel was simply moving from south to north, so Antioch should have followed. However, chapters 9 and 10 show us that **God was making it possible, rather, *certain*, for the Gentiles to hear the gospel, believe upon Jesus Christ, and be received into the covenant people of God without becoming Jews.**

Moreover, the gospel is not only for those Gentiles who were familiar and friendly towards the Jewish traditions, or had already shown interest in the revelation of God through the Old Testament, but that the gospel is for all people in all places, and the Holy Spirit was to be poured out upon all who believe wherever they might be when the gospel catches up and overtakes them.

In chapter 13 we discover that Antioch becomes the great seat of missionary effort in the early church. It is from Antioch that Paul begins each of his three

missionary journeys. It is the impetus of Antioch that calls the apostles to form the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 to finally adjudicate that Gentiles don't need to be circumcised to be fully included. And Antioch was largely pagan, and as some of those pagans were transformed to become worshippers of God through Jesus Christ, they naturally had a desire for other pagans to hear the good news, believe, and be saved from the judgment to come.

So, what was Antioch like?

Antioch, located on the Orontes River on the southeastern tip of modern-day Turkey, 60 miles west of Aleppo, Syria, was founded by one of Alexander the Great's generals. When Alexander died, his kingdom was divided between four generals. One of these was ruled by a man named Seleucus, who founded Antioch on the Orontes River to maintain trade between the Western and Eastern world. It was far enough inland (15 miles) to be a strategically located fortified city to oversee the rule of Syria. For the Arabs, whose world was the desert, the natural capital of Syria was Damascus. But for the Greeks, whose world was the Mediterranean, the natural capital was Antioch.

Over the years Antioch grew into a powerful political center, the city stretching out to fill the land between the river and the mountains to the north. One of the other four generals, Ptolemy, eventually defeated Seleucus and incorporated Syria into his more southern kingdom. He made Antioch the capital of this new larger area.

The Romans, under Antony, eventually obtained Antioch and made it the center for its Syria garrison. **It was a splendid city of great beauty, architecture, art, philosophy, commerce, and extravagance.** It's suburb of Daphne, to the south 5 miles, contained a temple to Apollo and was a kind of resort community for the wealthy, becoming full of immorality. Some mosaics have been unearthed there and are housed in the Antioch museum in Antakya, Turkey. Rather than the usual Roman mosaics of two shades of

colors, the Antioch/Daphne mosaics show a wide array of color, displaying the extravagance and wealth of the city and the skills of its artisans.

As we read about the various cities of the Roman world in the book of Acts, we find that each is quite particular in character. Jerusalem is Jewish, and the persecution of the church there is due to the violent defense of Jewish tradition and thus a disdain of both Christians and Gentiles. Rome is quite different. As capital of the Roman Empire, it was a political powerhouse which sought to obtain and maintain power, and to which ambition was a major virtue. Christians were hated here because they proclaimed a Christ who had all authority and power and that humility and self-sacrifice and honoring others was the normative virtue. Athens was the philosophical center of the Greek world. Christians were mocked here because the idea of a resurrected Master seemed asinine to their Greek presumptions that all matter was inherently an illusion. But Antioch was cosmopolitan and tolerant, a place where persecuted Christians fled to find refuge. A great center of trade and learning and a multi-cultural heterogenic mix of Romans, Greeks, Arabs, Jews, together with those of various tribes from the surrounding lands and travelers from afar, both east and west.

By Luke's day, Antioch had grown in importance to become the 3rd most significant city in the Roman world, behind only Rome and Alexandria. The wealth of the East flowed through Antioch on its way to Rome. The armies of Greece and Rome had marched through it. In order to thrive in Antioch, you had to be able to tolerate those of other cultures, with differing values. In this way, Antioch was much like America. **Cosmopolitan, wealthy, educated, powerful, entertained, and immoral.**

Even the ancient pagans thought Antioch was corrupt. It was too immoral for Rome! There was a phrase coined by the Stoics, "Daphnic morals", referring to the small grove outside the city, named Daphne. In Greek mythology

Daphne was a nymph, a beautiful female maiden, daughter of a river god, who was pursued by Apollo until she cried out for help and was turned into a laurel tree. Thus, in this Grove of Apollo in the town of Daphne, the worshippers of Apollo would copulate among the trees of the grove in wanton sexual indulgence. Antioch was so well known for its debauchery and corruption that not long after this when a Roman senator, Juvenal, was trying to describe how Rome, which had been morally upright in the days of the republic, but had become degenerate through the influence of the East, said in poetic language, “The Orontes has flowed into the Tiber.”

Yet, it was here that a great missionary movement to the nations of the world began. It was in the politically powerful and permissive, the wealthy and wanton, the cosmopolitan and corrupt, that a great church was established. It was a church which was formed from a mixture of ethnicities and histories, differing cultures and culinary, but grounded in the Word of God, anxious to whole-heartedly obey Jesus Christ, remaining steadfast to the purpose of the Lord, which became the missional hub to the nations of the world.

I think that the attitude of the Church in America today can easily become cynical about our current social and political culture. We lament the direction towards paganism and permissiveness, the disintegration of the family and of virtue, of personal accountability and respect for authority. In this way, we are living in a city much like Antioch.

So let this Word of God be a reminder, that the wickedness of a culture, whether it is truly tolerant or progressively intolerant of truth, does not determine the efficacy of God’s Word or God’s Church. The gospel is not limited by our culture’s predisposition to self-exaltation, even in the most catastrophic cases like abortion or identity redefinition. Barnabas entered the church in Antioch and saw “the grace of God” because “the hand of the Lord was with them.” What did he see? He saw men and women transformed by

humble repentant faith in Jesus who had “turned to the Lord.” He saw that God was granting repentance and faith there, grace. **There is hope for our own Antioch, too, because God is gracious and overcomes our evil hearts with the newness of His life-giving Spirit.**

So when those of Cyrene and Cyprus had preached the gospel to the Greek-speakers of Antioch and a church was established, Barnabas was sent to investigate it. **What do we know about him?** Why was *he* sent to investigate this new multi-cultural church? Maybe it was because he was Cyprian. Maybe it was because he was wealthy and could afford to travel there. Maybe it was because he was a “son of encouragement”. What we do know is that he was Jewish, of the tribe of Levi, that he was Cyprian, his native-born land, he was generous, for he had given of his own wealth to support others in Jerusalem, and that he was an encourager. Luke calls him a “good man”. If you are going to investigate what is happening in Antioch, you would want to send a good man, with good judgment and good sense and a discerning spirit. So Barnabas was sent to Antioch.

And how did Barnabas respond when he saw “the grace of God” in Antioch? He rejoiced! He was glad about it. Now, we might say that should be a foregone conclusion when the Lord is redeeming others, but let us not forget that this was a new thing for the church. This was the unexpected inclusion of a largely Gentile church. It was not a foregone conclusion that Barnabas, a Levite, would celebrate the Levitical inclusion of uncircumcised men. But he did rejoice. Why? Because he was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. **My friends, what does it mean to be full of the Holy Spirit? It is to rejoice in the things in which God rejoices.** It is to speak the truth which God has revealed. It is to love the things which God loves. It is to live by dependence upon the Lord. These people were not his people, and he rejoiced! This city was not his

city, and he rejoiced! Christ Jesus was building His church in far-off lands, and he was glad.

I need to become like Barnabas. I want to full of the Holy Spirit like this – to be happy when God works somewhere else. I can be happy when God works among us, among our church, in our city, or in my family. But when he is moving powerfully somewhere else...well, we are usually more restrained in our joy, are we not?

Octavius Winslow points out well the numerous reasons which we have to be happy as those who belong to Christ Jesus. He writes in his work, *The Sympathy of Christ*, “The religion of Christ is the religion of JOY. Christ came to take away our sins, to roll off our curse, to unbind our chains, to open our prison-house, to cancel our debt; in a word, to give us the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. Is not this joy? Where can we find a joy so real, so deep, so pure, so lasting? There is every element of joy- deep, ecstatic, satisfying, sanctifying joy- in the gospel of Christ.

The believer in Jesus is essentially a happy man. The child of God is, from necessity, a joyful man. His sins are forgiven, his soul is justified, his person is adopted, his trials are blessings, his conflicts are victories, his death is immortality, his future is a heaven of inconceivable, unthought of, untold, and endless blessedness- with such a God, such a Savior, and such a hope, is he not, ought he not, to be a joyful man?... Why, then, are you not a more joyful believer? Why go you mourning all your days, without one gleam of sunshine, one thrill of joy, one ray of hope, one note of praise? Is it not because you are looking to yourself and within yourself, to the almost entire exclusion of Christ and of the great and complete salvation wrought for you in and by Christ?”

Barnabas was full of joy because He was full of the Spirit and faith. He functionally believed that Jesus is who Jesus truly is, and thus he walked accordingly, and this was in gladness.

Note, too, that Barnabas doesn't merely rejoice and then leave. **He rejoices and then gets to work.** He encourages them. He exhorts them. He instructs them to remain faithful to the Lord with "purposed heart." Interestingly, the word "exhorted" here is the word used of the Holy Spirit in John 14-16, "comforter" or "helper" or "encourager". *Paraclete*. Barnabas came alongside them to strengthen them to remain faithful to the Lord *because Christ Jesus is worth it*. Being full of the Holy Spirit and faith, he worked with the Spirit's primary purpose, to testify to the Christ, to reveal His worthiness, His value, His beauty, His sufficiency, and His glory, testifying to His works and His words as the means of remaining faithful. An encourager doesn't simply make a command to remain faithful, but he shows *why* Christ is worthy of our allegiance by showing us Christ again. And by doing so, a great many people were added to the Lord.

And think about how humble, i.e. faith, that Barnabas must have been. How self-effacing. He was a big-wig in the Jerusalem church. He was wealthy, vindicated by the Spirit in apposition with Ananias and Sapphira, the liars. He was found to be true. In generosity he was preeminent. The apostles sent him to Antioch. Not Peter. Not James. Him. He could have claimed such an authoritarian position, "I am the official representative of the true church in Jerusalem. You must answer to us. Let me tell you how to run your church here in Antioch. There is a proven pattern and discipleship program we have used. First, there's 40 days of this, then 12 steps of that, combined with charts and graphs and shapes and cells, blah, blah, blah." But he doesn't do this! He rejoiced in the work of the Lord and encouraged them to continue submitting to Christ Jesus as Lord. Then, he went out of his way to go find another man

whom he remembered from a time before whom he saw to be particularly fitted to help this church. Not from Jerusalem, but from Tarsus, the city next door to Antioch.

This was a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic church with very little knowledge of the Word of God. What did a church like this need? They needed a gifted teacher of God's Word who could help communicate in their cultural forms. Who could teach them soundly? Who knew their culture well and knew the Scriptures well? Barnabas considered that this wasn't his gifting, but he knew another one who was so gifted. He thought of Saul.

We need to be humbled like this, to see the glory of Christ and the edification of one another as more important than being recognized and appreciated.

Tarsus was about 100 miles from Antioch, just across a fast Mediterranean inlet. Tarsus was Greco-Roman, too. In fact, Saul had Roman citizenship which his father had somehow procured under the Roman emperor. He had training in philosophy and rhetoric and also in Jewish Scriptures as a Pharisee who studied under one of the most prominent rabbis, Gamaliel. He knew both Greek culture and the Scriptures. He had been confronted by Christ Jesus and transformed to a Christian.

Can you imagine what Saul was going through? Confused, persecuted, laboring in synagogues, wondering what Jesus had meant when he told him that he would stand before kings and preach the gospel? He had met no kings. He had stood before none. He had run back home under persecution. Then...Barnabas comes knocking, "I need you in Antioch." I imagine that Barnabas set Paul loose in Antioch and was glad. The teacher teaching, the encourager encouraging, and "a great many people" were taught. Do you see the similarities in the text? When the certain men from Cyprus and Cyrene came and preached to the Greek-speakers, "a great many people turned to the Lord, believing" and then Barnabas comes and rejoiced at this and then

encourages them and “a great many people were added to the Lord” and now Saul and Barnabas set to teaching “a great many people” for a whole year.

The Church is established through faith in Jesus and then is taught the ways of the Lord over time. God saved a great many, and sent gifted men to teach that great many. And it was good.

One of the weaknesses of much missionary work is the absence of one of these two vital ministries. Often we send a great teacher without an encourager.

Oh, the trials that come in cross-cultural ministry. The stress and the toil, the burdens and the loneliness. An encourager is vital to show us Jesus. Yet, an encourager without a teacher only holds the line without moving it forward.

Christians need to be strengthened by the Word of God. No one pastor or church planter has all the gifts. We are meant to work together, to be interdependent. To be mutually edifying. This, too, is the fullness of the Spirit of God. **May we recognize this and strengthen one another to exercise the gifts which we have been given, all to the same end, that the church might remain faithful to the Lord in the purpose of our heart.**

The effect of this two-tone harmony of teaching and encouragement was widely known in Antioch. The church was known as “Christ-ones”. Think about this. This Christ was new to Antioch. It’s not like here now, where most people have at least heard the word Christ and have a presupposition of what it means. When the youth group was sharing the gospel on the streets, we found that everyone knew of Jesus, though it may be questionable which Jesus they knew. But in Antioch, nobody knew who this Christ person was. Yet, the Church was known to be connected to him. Thus, in a pagan world with many gods and goddesses, this group of disciples were labeled, “The Christ ones.” And how do you think that they got that moniker?

Well, how do you categorize a group of people who are so culturally different? *It was because of where they placed their hope.* They hoped in the

Christ. They talked of him *as their hope*. Their fears were alleviated in the Christ. They boasted about the Christ's mastery and authority over all which threatened to steal their joy. They knew that Jesus makes all things new and by His authority will make all things right, because He conquered the ultimate corruption: death.

Think about it. This is why politics and religion are often lumped together as non-speakables at the holiday dinner table. It's because both of them are reasons, presented or assumed, for ultimate hope – for what will make things *right*. **And how do you know what people hope in for life, joy, and the power to make things right? They talk about it *all the time*.** They post about it. They write about it. Then, they are identified by it because they are motivated by the hope that the object of their hope can save us. This is why Paul reminded the Colossian church that “God chose to make known to [the saints] the riches of the glory of the mystery of the gospel among the Gentiles, which is the Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27) and Peter reminded the suffering Christians to “**set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to given an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess. Yet do it with courtesy and respect...**” (1 Pet 3:15-16a). Do you see the connection between setting Christ apart as our Master and the obvious declaration of our hope? He is our authority, the Powerful One who knows what is right, good, and true, according to the infinite wisdom which He possesses, and whom can be trusted because He laid down His life for us, and took it up again a victor over that from which we need the greatest hope: death our most powerful enemy. So, these Antioch disciples were setting Christ as Lord in their hearts. They submitted to His authority, wisdom, and words. He was their hope of salvation, glory, restoration, and life. And they talked about him.

Thus Christians gained a new term, a new mark, a new name: Christians, those Christ people. I don't think that it was necessarily derogatory. It was

simply descriptive. **Those are the Christ people, and they are different. What really motivates them is not politics of power or excessive entertainment or wealth or commerce or art, it's this Christ guy.** That's what really motivates them. That's what really gives them hope. That's what they talked about and thus with which they were identified.

And this motivation for the glory of Christ had teeth. It wasn't all talk. It was active. We see this immediately when Agabus foretold of a famine. Now, a brief word about the famine "throughout the whole world". First, the word "world" here is not the word for universal cosmos. That is, it was not a world-wide famine. Rather, the term means, literally "house-abiding", that is 'inhabitants.' Thus, it is usually referring to a particular region under a particular control or sovereignty indicated in the context. Now, where this particular region is, is not clear. From the context we could conclude that it was Roman Syria (Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch), but the collection to Judea wouldn't make much sense. Rather, the context seems to imply, as Agabus is from Jerusalem, that the region affected would be Palestine, by which there is a famine mentioned from Egypt in 45CE to Palestine in 46-47CE by the historian Cassius. Luke gives us an aside that this famine occurred (past tense to him) in the reign of Claudius (41-54CE), assuming that his reader, Theophilus, would remember what famine to which he is referring here.

Regardless of the extent of the famine, Luke's point is that the believers in Antioch took action! They each gave *according to their prosperity*, and collected it all up together to send to support the Jerusalem church with whom there was need. A few things to learn. **The offering was voluntary and "according to prosperity." That is, nobody was coerced to give.** This was not a tax, coerced by punishment or shame. In fact, one could say that they were *glad* to give relief to their brothers in Jerusalem. **The gospel of God's grace compels joyful generosity**, and just as Barnabas rejoiced to see God's grace at

work in Antioch, so these believers, formerly outsiders, rejoiced to support their new brothers with what they had when their brothers needed it. In the same way, we at EBF never want to coerce such benevolence, but rely upon the joy of the redeemed. Therefore, we do not spend much time speaking about giving, although we do mention needs from time to time, but rather we speak of the holiness of God, the severity of sin and its consequences, the magnificence of God's grace towards us in Christ, the scandalous gift of His Spirit to us, and the extravagance of His love for us. **We know that when we behold the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus, we become like Him, degree by degree, according to the power of His life-giving Spirit, and we will be generous as He is generous.**

Secondly, people gave differing amounts according to what they could afford. Thus, I'm sure that some gave none, as they had to profit from which to give, and some gave much, as business had been good. Either way, this gift was an act of love, not coerced, but compelled by love.

This Gentile church, formerly excluded by the Jewish people, are giving of their own resources and own wealth, each volunteering according to love for the Christ and for His people, their brothers and sisters, so united as fellows sharing in affection for one another that they sent an unasked for gift to support the brothers in Judea. Arabs and Jews and Greeks and Persians and Anatolians all pooling their resources to support the persecuted Jewish church as one family under one Lord, Jesus.

In this one act you can see the effect that the gospel of grace is having on people. The former divisions are eroding and love for one another is growing. Just as Jesus explained, "They will know that you are my disciples because you love one another." We may elucidate: love one another across former divisions and former animosities and doing so with joy.

Why? Because Christ is their motivation. His glory. His church. His renown. His fame. His praise. And if you love Him, you will love His Church. His whole Church. The ones elsewhere, where God is working. With gladness. With joy. With expectation of God's goodness in the fullness of the Spirit and faith.

So, how do we become humble like Barnabas? How do we labor like Saul? How do we become generous like the Antioch believers? We behold the beauty and significance of Christ Jesus, who though He was rich with the wealth of heaven, made himself poor so that you and I might gain his inheritance with him. We consider, daily, His promises, and Winslow is helpful here, for in Christ: Our sins are forgiven, our souls are justified, our persons are adopted, our trials are blessings, our conflicts are victories, our death is immortality, our future is a heaven of inconceivable, unthought of, untold, and endless blessedness- with such a God, such a Savior, and such a hope, how can we stay unchanged in affection for our far-away brothers in need? How can we speak but not act? How can we, indeed?