

A Thriving Church Takes Root in Antioch

Text: Acts 11:19-26

Introduction:

Having shown how the Lord had bridged the gap between Jew and Gentile, Luke now picks up where he had left off with Saul, who will become a prominent figure in the remainder of the Book of Acts. Saul will especially be used by God, to carry the Gospel into much of the Gentile world. And so, last we left off with Saul, he had to flee Jerusalem, under the threat of his life, and he wound up back in his native homeland, of Tarsus. And Saul comes back on the biblical scene, when a great need arises in a thriving church, that takes root in Antioch.

I. A Thriving Church Takes Root in Antioch

"Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the Word to no one but the Jews only" (vs. 19).

We recall that a great persecution had arisen, following the martyrdom of Stephen, which forced many of the Jewish converts to scatter outward, into all of Judea and Samaria. And as they did so, they preached the Gospel in these other regions, and many were coming to faith in Christ. One example of this, which we were given, was found in the ministry of Philip, who was used by God, to bring many Samaritans to Christ.

Well, here we find out, that, that dispersion pushed all the way up, even to the coastal region of Phoenicia, to the island of Cyprus (off the west coast of Syria), and as far North as Antioch (a great access point for Asia Minor and the major Greek speaking cities to the North and West). Indeed the Gospel was spreading rapidly, all over the place. And again, what seemed to be a great blow to the church, in the death of the beloved deacon, Stephen, turned out to be a huge opportunity for the expansion of Christ's kingdom!

But, at the first, those who spread out, preached primarily, only to Jews. There were synagogues, and Jewish people scattered all throughout these regions, since the time of the great dispersion that had taken place, way back when the Jews were exiled from out of their land, by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. And so, the focus, throughout this present dispersion, was on reaching these Jews. However, as we have seen in our context, God had begun to build a bridge from Jerusalem, into the Gentile world, in the events that had taken place with Peter and

Cornelius. And a "spill over" was already beginning to take place, and the damn would be completely removed, following the events that take place here in our text, as God sets up a critical access point, into the Gentile world, right here in Antioch!

"But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus" (vs. 20).

Some of those Jews, who had dispersed, during the Post-Stephen persecution, were Jews from Cyrene (a region in Northern Africa) and Cyprus (an island off the west coast of Syria), and being immersed in the Greek culture and language, they also went up to Antioch, but they preached the Gospel to Greek Gentiles ("Hellenists"). And so, as God was working among the Jews from various regions in Judea and Syria, He had also begun to sow Gospel seed among the Gentiles in Antioch, by means of these Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene.

"And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord" (vs. 21).

And so, as these foreign Jews preached to the Gentiles in Antioch, God was blessing their efforts, and many Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ. A stirring of the Holy Spirit was clearly taking place in Antioch! [Note: When the "hand of the Lord" is with a people, great things take place! All the more, this ought to move us to plead with God, to lay His hand upon this work here in Merrick! Otherwise, all of our labors are powerless!]

"Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem [which was now ready to respond to such an event], and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch" (vs. 22).

Prior to what had just happened with Peter, they could never have done this. They would have continued down the "Jews only" line. But, now that the bridge had been built; now that they could say with certainty, the words of verse 18b, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life,"; now, they could send one of their own, indeed a Jew, to investigate and encourage the work taking place there in Antioch! And so, they send the great "encourager!" If what is going on there is indeed authentic, they want to support it. They want to help add to the cement that was bringing this work together. And so, they send Barnabas, that faithful and beloved encourager, who had proven his sincere faith and commitment to Christ, on many an occasion already. Surely, this brother, who had already sold his property, and laid the proceeds at the Apostle's feet, would be well equipped to travel up north, to sincerely encourage the work there!

"When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord" (vs. 23).

Barnabas went up to Antioch, and he beheld the grace of God there. That is, he had seen the evident work of regeneration and transformation, erupting there. A once, idolatrous people, were now embracing Christ and His Gospel! Barnabas knew without an inkling of doubt, that this was nothing short of a miracle; this was a clear manifestation of divine power, at work amongst naturally, helplessly lost and rebellious Gentiles. This was a work of grace; a very clear explosion of grace, in an area that was once full of darkness and gross idolatry. And seeing this, he was glad! His own heart was edified and ecstatic, when he witnessed the power of God, at work, among Gentiles! And so, he did what he was best known to do. He encouraged them! He motivated them onward! He infused a fresh dose of courage and boldness in them, exhorting them to continue walking with the Lord, with every bit of a conscious focus and effort! He did not tell them to "Let go and let God!" No, he pressed them to exercise energy; to throw their whole hearts into the process of working out their salvation with fear and trembling! He compelled them not to sit back, but to act, and that with energy and fervency! Oh brethren, how we need such encouragers in the life of our church today! It is so easy to back slide, and to lose ground, and to take it easy, forgetting that this is a race, indeed, a war! Would it be that we would be a people who are constantly fighting; fighting against lethargy and looseness and slackness, pushing ourselves forward to lay hold of the prize! I wonder, how purposeful are we, in our walk with the Lord? How engaged are we? What do the oft-repeated, Scriptural terms, "perseverance and endurance and withstand and *press on*" mean to us?!

"For [Barnabas] was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith..." [Like Stephen and Philip, Barnabas was a spiritually energized man, with his back facing the world, jealous for, and consumed with Christ!]. "And a great many people were added to the Lord" (vs. 24). God was blessing this work, and He was blessing Barnabas's efforts, and more and more souls were being saved, and added to the Lord and His church!

"Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul" (vs. 25).

As the church at Antioch began to significantly grow, Barnabas knew that help was needed, in the work of discipling these newborn brethren. And so, he knew of one particular man, who would be greatly suited, to help in this regard. He remembered a young and energetic Saul, who had fearlessly preached the Gospel, almost to his own destruction, back at Jerusalem.

And so, he travels North and West to Tarsus (some 85 miles or so) to find Saul. And this is how Saul/Paul makes his way back into the scene of Biblical history. And he will be a prominent figure, throughout the rest of Acts, as God continues to break Gospel ground, in the Gentile regions of the world. But first, he will spend a year preaching/teaching and getting established in Antioch, which will be his sending church.

"And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch" (vs. 26).

Before God (by the church at Antioch), sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey, he established them, and groomed them further at Antioch. And, in keeping with the biblical pattern for sending out missionaries, God would later have them sent *by the church!* In the meantime, they are used here at Antioch, to teach a great many people. [Notice, the fulfillment of the Great Commission taking place here---Matt. 28:18ff; Evangelism -> unto baptism -> unto teaching, sanctification and growth]

And here, for the first time, the term "Christian" is coined...by whom, we know not. We just know that the disciples were first called Christians, here at Antioch. More than likely, this served to draw a line of distinction between the religion of Christ, and the continuing opposing religion of Judaism. [See also Acts 26:28 & 1 Peter 4:16 Vs. Mark 3:6; 12:13; Matt. 22:16].

AMEN!!!