

The Great Stories of the Early Church
34 - Barnabus
and the Church at Antioch
Acts 11:19-26

- 19 Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.
- 20 And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.
- 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.
- 22 Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch.
- 23 Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.
- 24 For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.
- 25 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:
- 26 And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. KJV

Introduction:

You will recall the previous events in the book of Acts I presume. Peter had opened the door of the gospel to the Gentiles by his visit to Cornelius. That is, he officially opened the door, the church at Jerusalem recognizing what the prophets and the Lord Jesus had declared, that salvation was open (as it had always been) to any person in any place who would repent of his sins turning to the Living God in repentance, obedience and faith. Christianity officially opened its arms to this truth, declaring that God made no difference between men based on ethnicity.

But if you look carefully you will notice that this is not a continuation of that story but, instead, a parallel set of events that were occurring alongside the stories we have been studying since chapter 8.

Acts 8:1-4

- 1 And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.
- 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.
- 3 As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.

4 Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.
KJV

We have looked at the ministry of Philip in Samaria, the conversion of the Ethiopian official, the conversion of Saul and the ministry of Peter to Lyda, Joppa and then up to Caesarea to Cornelius. But beginning with the death of Stephen and the persecution of the church that ensued another set of events have been occurring which are noticed by Luke in this passage.

This is actually the prologue to Luke's record of Paul's ministry which officially began here at Antioch. But before he moves to the account of Paul he gave us a preview, the beginning of the Antioch church.

Persecution, as our text says, drove believers out of Judea to Phenice (Lebanon), Cyprus (a large island off the coast of Syria), and Antioch, a port city of Syria, just to the north of Lebanon. They came, though, not as refugees so much as missionaries, carrying the gospel message with them. But it is obvious that the lessons learned from Peter's experience with Cornelius had not yet reached this migrant preachers because in v.19 Luke made a point to mention that there was no outreach to the Gentiles. In fact, these traveling souls seemed to focus primarily on the Greek speaking Jews, called here "the Grecians."

V.20 says that "some of them" who were driven out of Jerusalem were actually from Cyprus and Cyrene, so why were they in Jerusalem in the first place? No doubt they among the crowd at Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit fell on the Day of Pentecost. These locations had not been mentioned specifically but the list given in Acts 2:7-11 was by no means exhaustive. They had obviously been converted and had remained with the church after their baptism rather than returning home.

But now it has become advantageous to leave Jerusalem and Judea in order to survive.

Parenthesis - There is nothing wrong with avoiding or escaping persecution. Christianity is not a suicide cult. Denying Christ and denying truth in order to avoid persecution is wrong for sure but escaping, hiding, avoiding in order to protect one's self or family is not. Rather it may be proper and wise.

As they traveled and in the places to which they traveled these people spoke of Christ to those that they met.

That they preached to Jews only and "spoke only to the Grecians" is not a contradiction. Among the Jews, as we have already mentioned, there were Hebrew speakers and Greek speakers. The Jews who spoke only Greek were called "Hellenists" which our KJV translators have rendered "Grecians" but they were Jews who primarily lived outside of Palestine who spoke and worshiped in the language of the day, Greek.

The speaking they did was probably primarily done in the synagogues where there was a freedom for those in the audience and particularly visitors to make comments or ask questions.

V.21 - “The hand of the Lord was with them.” This is to be distinguished from the Holy Spirit falling on them and causing the converts to speak in languages they did not know. As we saw at Samaria when Philip ministered there in ch. 8, the power of God assisted Philip as he spoke to the Samaritans with such enabling that many were converted but they Holy Spirit did not fall on them until the apostles were sent to lay hands on them.

As we noticed before, the peculiar manifestation of tongues seemed to die out with the apostles but that did not mean that the powerful working of the Holy Spirit ceased. The common method of God’s working when the apostles were not present came to be what is described here and what we read in the stories of great Revivals through history.

21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

V.22 is quite interesting. The church at Jerusalem was interested that the new community of believers get off on the right foot, so they sent a man whom they trusted to help with the formation of this new group into a proper church. His name was Barnabus.

We have already been introduced to Barnabus in this book of Acts. You will recall that when Paul escaped a murderous plot of the Jews at Damascus he had come to Jerusalem seeking to join himself to the church there. But they were afraid of him until Barnabus took him under his wing and confirmed his faithfulness to the rest of the church. But as Paul had begun to preach in Jerusalem and debate with the Greek speaking Jews, they became so enraged that the brothers in the church urged him to go home to Tarsus, his home city, to save his life.

Here we have another case of the early believers escaping persecution when possible.

V.23 - “He came and saw the Grace of God. Now, if Grace is the unmerited favor from God to man, it cannot be seen, but if Grace is God’s enabling power for men to serve Him in the right way, then it was totally visible to Barnabus and undoubtedly what he did see and what Luke described in this way. It is the same thing that anyone who visits a place where God is working in power sees.

The believers at Antioch were profoundly repenting of sin. They were experiencing peace that their sins were forgiven. They were receptive to the message of Christ, seeing Him as Savior, Lord, Deity. They were giving themselves in obedience to His commands, forgiving and loving one another. They were anxious over the souls of those who had not yet believed and openly giving witness to what God had done for them. The Grace of God was open and visible.

And Barnabus “was glad.” There is a joy that is stirred in the heart of any true saint when he witnesses the working of God unto salvation in the lives of others. No doubt Barnabus, like Saul will, was longing for his brethren among the Jews to be saved. These converted Jews could see the whole story of redemption. Revisit the messages of Peter and Stephen and you will see that

they could connect the whole work of God from Abraham to themselves in a very clear fashion. Suddenly it all made sense and for Barnabus to see it all coming together in the conversion of many hundreds of his countrymen was a thing of joy that thrilled his soul.

V. 23 - he “exhorted them all.” The newborn believer needs exhortations, instruction, encouragement. This is not the end of a road but the beginning. Barnabus knew that this newly found faith must find expression or it would wither and die like the seed that fell on the stony ground in Jesus parable, or it would be choked out by the cares of this world like the seed which fell among the thorns.

The beginning of faith is a wonderful thing but perseverance in the faith, endurance in faithfulness, and endurance in hardship is a must. So, he....

“exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.”

Barnabus launched these new believers immediately into the necessity of “cleaving to the Lord.” Jesus Himself had emphasized this duty of Abiding in Him.

John 15:5-8

- 5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.
- 6 If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.
- 7 If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.
- 8 Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.
KJV

The word “cleave” which Barnabus used and the word “abide” used by Jesus are forms of the same word. There is no doubt but that Barnabus meant the same thing as Jesus.

The scriptures take for granted that they new believer is coming in true repentance away from the wickedness of his/her former life and has committed to a life of complete and profound obedience to the Lord. But, for the most part, such people are seriously lacking in information as to how this all works.

There is a need, for sure, that they learn proper doctrine. Catechisms and Confessions of Faith have an important and a proper place. But I would suggest that any believer’s greatest need lies just in this place where Barnabus began, learning how to “cleave to the Lord.” The words “purpose of heart” suggest an intense commitment and faithful effort.

We are prone to think of teachings concerning abiding in Christ as being for the mature believers, too advanced for the beginners. Barnabus, on the other had, considered it absolutely appropriate and completely necessary for these who were just coming to Christ. Why? Because the habits formed in the early days of our Christianity tend to remain with us for good or for bad. Poor early teaching and poor examples of Christian behavior cripple the developing Christian and make the path of development much more difficult.

And, it is a self-propagating pattern. Poorly taught young believers become entrenched and poorly developed church members who neither provide good spiritual training nor godly examples for the new converts whom God saves and adds to the church. When this pattern repeats itself for generations it produces what exists today, a lukewarm and barely functioning Christianity.

It is imperative that every believer, regardless of his/her calling in life become both an example and an encouragement for new converts on this matter of abiding in Christ.

It is precisely the failure to do that one thing which puts churches individually as well as Christianity at large in need of Awakening and Revival. Were we all rigorously practicing this elementary step of our faith there would be no need for an Awakening.

V. 24 - It is interesting that Luke added the word 'for' to the beginning of this statement concerning Barnabus. Doing so makes it an explanation for why Barnabus taught these things to new believers.

“He was a good man and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.”

Young men in every age who commit their lives to the ministry want to know how they can be effectively used of God to bring souls to Christ. And.... they get much advice: go to school, get a Th.D., listen to great preachers and emulate them, read good books, etc. etc.

Often it is overlooked that the character of the man, his personal walk with god and his private study of scriptures are the elements that will make or break his effectiveness. Look at what is said of Barnabus by Luke that is also connected with his character:

24b “and much people was added unto the Lord.”

V.25 - One more thing is also needed to be effective in the Lord's service.... humility, the awareness of the need for help and the willingness to seek it. Barnabus was aware, I believe, of two things: (1) Paul would bring abilities and gifts that Barnabus lacked but the church needed, and (2) Paul would ultimately outshine him. But he went after Paul anyway, convinced that the kingdom would be advanced by Paul's presence.

V.25 - The product of this wise and humble move is revealed here. A church was established and not just any church but the sending church for the apostle Paul who took the gospel to Europe and founded the entire movement known as Western Christianity. Paul brought the gospel to the Europeans but it was the church at Antioch that sent him out and supported him.

But now let us track this back to the beginning.

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20 And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.

21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

Though these did not yet fully understand the breadth of the gospel message, they carried the missionary spirit of Christianity.

This was very much the way that the gospel spread in the first three or four centuries. People would leave their homes to escape persecution, travel to places where they could find peace and they would carry the message of Christ to a new place. It seems that the more the Roman government worked to exterminate them the faster Christianity grew.

It behooves us to look at these unnamed primitive Christians and seek to emulate them, to be concerned for those around us, to carry the gospel with us wherever we go.