



The First Christians
Acts 11:19-26 (CSB)
October 3, 2021
BI – God’s plan for the Church will not be thwarted

Intro – Moments in the History of the Church

I’m a history nerd – I love learning about things from history – even more so when we can actually see it in person

Being able to see things from the Bible/historical moments in the church helps to bring the narrative more alive---being able to see God work His plan for the church

-Widows Mite – Luke 21:2 – women gave all that she had <show widows mite in hand>

-1611 Edition King James Bible – an edition that had profound impact on the world

If you had a chance to go back and see historical events in church history take place – what would you go see?

-Martin Luther and the Thesis on the Door in Wittenburg? Oct 31, 1517

-Acts 2 and the day of Pentecost – 3000 people respond to Peter’s sermon in the temple sq

-What about the first gentile church in a very unlikely place –Today we will see this church

Weve seen in the preceding sermons that something is changing in the progression of the gospel reaching the world. It had moved just being located geographical in Jerusalem and Judea, to started to bring in Gentile or non Jewish people. Today we are going to see the flood gates open.

A Church Born From Adversity | Acts 11:19-21

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

The beginning of this verse takes us back the persecution that broke out when Steven was stoned. This takes us back to Chapter 8:1, where Saul was the agent who helped this persecution break out in Jerusalem. He was the guy who went door to door, dragging believers out from their homes and taking them off to jail, for the audacity of simply following Jesus. Luke tells us in 8:1 that all except the leadership in the church at Jerusalem (the Apostles) were scattered through Judea and Samaria. The believers were moved from the center of Jewish culture, Jerusalem and the temple to the surrounding regions.

This is a case of God using something evil to accomplish His purposes. Note its important to see that God is not the one that brought the evil, this persecution, but He uses the results of it to help accomplish His purposes. This is similar to the account of Joseph in the OT. Joseph was the guy who sold in to slavery by his brothers, separated from his family and even spent time in prison for crimes he didn’t commit. At the end of his life, he makes this statement in Genesis 50:20 ***You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.*** The evil brought by his brothers, allowed God to move Joseph down to Egypt and put in him into a position of power that would allow for the survival of the Jewish people. God used the evil of the Saul led persecution to continue the spread of the gospel, the Good News of Jesus.

Remember the Great Commission, given in Matthew 28:19-20, where Jesus tells His disciples to go and preach the gospel to the whole world? Luke gives as similar account in Acts 1:8, where Jesus tells the disciples they will... ***be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*** This is exactly what is happening with the dispersion of the followers of Jesus when the Sauline persecution break outs. They move north, going from Jerusalem to Judah, and Samaria. As they leave Jerusalem to avoid the persecution from Saul and his guys, they don’t stop preaching the gospel. That’s what chapter 8,9 and 10 of Acts is about. The gospel arriving in areas that still under Jewish influence, but not at the heart of Judaism.

Moving back to 11:19 Dr Luke gives us even greater detail of where the gospel was spreading to. It hadn't stopped there in just the northern areas of Israel and Samaria. Others from displaced from the persecution continued to move north and west. They went to north to Phoenicia, which was the area on the Mediterranean coast, that included such cities as Sidon and Tyre. They got on boats and west to the island of Cyprus, and they went still further north to a city that called Antioch, which is the city and the group of believers that we will focus on today. This city was about 400 miles north of Jerusalem¹.



Antioch was probably what many of the Apostles in Jerusalem would have thought to be the unlikeliest place for a church to not only be founded but to thrive. Antioch, sometimes called Antioch on the Orontes River, or Syrian Antioch to distinguish it from other cities with the same name, was founded by the man named Seleucus, who had been one of the 4 generals Alexander the Great's empire past to after his death. It was founded around 300BC and it grew to quickly become the capital of Syria.

It was located inland a bit, about 15 miles up the Orontes river but was still had a port that was accessible to the Mediterranean, but by being inland, it also was connected eventually to the vast network of Roman roads that lead to the eastern part of the Empire. Some of the major major cities in the Roman Empire took on and became known for something that made them unique. Jerusalem was known for the Jewish religion, filled with people zealous for God and not being found of the Romans. Rome, the capital of the Empire and worried about power. There was Athens, one of the intellectual centers. Antioch was known for being cosmopolitan, a city that was a blending of many people from around the empire. There were the local Arabs who made up the local province of Syria. There were a great many Greeks, since the city had been founded by those from Greece/Macedonia. There were the Roman's who had come in and conquered the city. There was even a large contingent of Jews who had migrated and settled there. There were probably about 25,000 of them settled there at the time Luke was writing Acts. Josephus mentions that during his time, Antioch was the 3rd biggest city in the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria Egypt, it had a population of at least 600,000².



Antioch was a rich city. As I mentioned the wealth from the eastern trades flowed through the city on the roads from the east, and would load up on the ships at its ports on the way to other parts of the empire in the west. Antioch was also known through out the Roman world as a moral cesspool. There was a well known area called the "The Grove of Apollo", a place known as an outdoor brothel. There was a Roman satirist Juvenal who wanted to take a short at Rome, wrote "the Orontes River emptied its garbage into the Tiber River³", or Rome was corrupted by Antioch.

And this was were the first gentile church would be founded. Some historians put it at about 7 years from the day of Pentecost to the gospel arriving in Antioch.⁴

The believers who were fleeing the persecution continued to speak the gospel, but they only spoke to other Jews. I wonder if the large Jewish population that was in Antioch had been why those who been fleeing Saul, had chosen to settle down in Antioch. The gospel didn't stay with the Jews, however. We have seen it making inroads with gentiles, or those who ere not ethnically Jewish in the preceding chapters. Here in Antioch, was were it all really changed as the first gentile church was founded here.

¹ [Barnabas: The Goodness of Great Faith | Desiring God](#)

² [The First Gentile Church \(gty.org\)](#)

³ John MacArthur Commentary – Acts pg 313

⁴ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1739/the-first-gentile-church>

20 But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus.

It wasn't enough that the gospel was making it to the Jews, there were believers who made the journey from the other parts of the empire to come and preach the gospel in Antioch, and it wasn't just limited to the Jews, it was also brought to the Greeks.

Luke doesn't even tell us who these men were who preach the gospel to Antioch were. What was more important to Luke was the message, not the messengers in this verse. They came from Cyprus, the island off the coast that was mentioned in verse 19. They came from Cyrene, which was located in north Africa. They preached the good news about Jesus to Greeks in the city. These men, being Greek speaking Jews from predominantly gentile areas, were much more open to preach to the gentiles.

Notice here the way that Luke phrases what these men were preaching. He says that they were proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. Most of the times when we see Jesus mentioned, we see Jesus Christ, or Christ Jesus, but the way that Luke phrases this tells us something. These preachers knew their audience. We here in the 21st century, when we hear Christ, we think of Jesus, the long promised Messiah. In fact, Christ in the Greek means anointed one or Messiah. This would have been lost on the Greek audience though. They had no idea about the concept of the Jewish messiah. Instead they preach about the Lord Jesus. The terms lord and savior were quite often used in the religions of the eastern Mediterranean world for those seeking salvation. This is language those non Jewish people in Antioch would have been familiar with, so using it made it easier for them to understand the good news of Jesus.

21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

This group of men are faithful to preach the gospel, the good news of Jesus and God responds by blessing them. Luke tells us that Lord's hand was with them. The phrase the Lord's hand was with them, is an OT phrase. It was used in the OT to express two things. First it could mean that God was expressing power in judgment (Ex 9:33, Duet 2:15, Josh 4:24). It also could mean that God was expressing His power through blessing (Exra 79, 8:18, Neh 2:8,18). And that was the case here.

The men were faithful to preach the good news of Jesus and God blessed. In fact He blessed greatly. Were not even told how many responded, except that a large number responded to the gospel and put their faith in Jesus. The number of people who respond is so great that a number is not even given, just the fact that it was a large number. And this phrase or a variation is repeated 2 more times in the following verses of 24 and 26. Clearly the gospel was having an impact, changing peoples lives here in the city of Antioch.

The growth was quick, it was large, and it needed to be lead. The person or people who would lead this church were important. Luke introduces us to that person in verse 22, Barnabus.

A Godly Leader For Growth | Acts 11:22-24

22 News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch.

New had reached the Apostles in Jerusalem of the explosive growth that was taking place in the city of Antioch. This shows that the leadership of the church was not disconnected from what was going on. The Apostles knew they needed a person to go oversee this new church. But it just couldn't be anyone. It had to be the right person for this role. If they sent the wrong person, it could have torpedoed the new church, the first gentile church. Think about it, if they sent someone who was legalistic about following the law, trying to impose those conditions on the gentiles, it could have pushed people away from the church. And this would eventually become an issue for the church to deal with. The Jerusalem council in Acts 15 had to make an adjudication on this matter, with James writing the churches official position.

The person that the Apostle choose was a man named Barnabas. We first meet Barnie back in Acts 4:36-37. ***Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas (which is translated Son of Encouragement),³⁷ sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.*** His original name was actually Joseph. He was from the tribe of Levi, or the priestly tribe that served in the temple. He actually wasn't originally from Jerusalem, but was born in Cyprus, a gentile dominated island in the eastern Mediterranean. He grew up being exposed to those outside the Jewish faith. This would have helped prepare him for the melting pot that he would find in Antioch. In these verse we also find out two other things about him. He was an encourager. He would be the

cheerleader there alongside people, encouraging them. This trait was so overflowing from him, that the Apostles actually changed his name to Barnabus, and that is what we know him as going forward. Finally in this short 2 verses, we also find out that he was generous. He sold a chunk of land that he owned, and brought the proceeds to the feet of the prophets to offer it up for use by the leadership in Jerusalem.

Barnie reappears in the narrative after Saul's conversion in chapter 9. Saul had his Damascus road experience where he meet Jesus and changed his ways 180 degrees. He leaves Damascus under the cover of darkness because there are threats on his life. He comes up to Jerusalem and wants to meet with the church leadership. Some chronology would put about 3⁵ years from Saul's conversation to his travel up to meet the leadership in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18 points to this). When he comes up, no one will meet with him, they all must have assumed that it was a trap of some kind. Eventually the leadership, or at least Peter relents and agrees to meet with Saul/Paul and spends 15 days with him. And this was all possible because of Barnabus. Barnabus spoke up and authenticated Saul as a disciple of Jesus (Acts 9:27). Saul ruffled a few more feathers in this time frame, and the disciples shipped him out, sending him back to Tarsus, his home town.

In this two short sections of verses we are introduced to Barnabus, the man that leadership felt was the best choice to go lead the church in Antioch.

23 When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts,

As Barnabas arrives in Antioch, he gets to work and we can see why he was chosen to come and provide oversight to this young church. He comes in and sees the grace of God that is on display. Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus. We saw how much Peter struggled with this idea in the preceding chapters, but that didn't bother Barnabus in the least. He was glad, he was over joyed that more people were coming to faith in Jesus.

The next thing that he does, well he really just lives up to the meaning of his name. He encourages the believers. He encourages and gives them a reminder to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts. Another way of saying it might be... *"That they with purpose of heart" – that means a firm resolution, a fixed spirit. That you would purpose in your heart that you "would cling unto the Lord."*⁶

24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord.

In verse 22 and 23 we see what Barnabus did when he first arrived in the city. Verse 24 provides the reason why he did what he did, and also even gives us further reasons for why he was chosen out of all the leadership in Jerusalem to go over see Antioch.

Luke tells that Barnabus was a good man. He also tells us that Barnabus was full of the Holy Spirit and Faith.

*How do they relate to each other? Probably fullness of the Holy Spirit and faith is the root or source of Barnabas' goodness. Paul unpacks this relationship in Galatians. He says in [Galatians 5:22](#) that goodness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. You don't get the Holy Spirit because you are good. The Holy Spirit takes over your life and starts to make you good.*⁷

Under Barnabus' leadership, Luke tells us again that a large number of people were brought to faith. We are not told how many but it was a lot. This is the second time that Luke mentions this tremendous growth. And because there were so many, the numbers actually were more than Barnabus could handle

He had to call in reinforcements to help him with this growing church.

What's in a Name? | Acts 11:25-26

25 Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, 26 and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

⁵ [Apostle Paul's Timeline - Study Resources \(blueletterbible.org\)](#)

⁶ [The First Gentile Church \(gty.org\)](#)

⁷ [Barnabas: The Goodness of Great Faith | Desiring God](#)

Barnabus realizes just how big the response is to the gospel and he needs help. The first person that comes to mind is Saul. Was it something that had struck Barnabus in those years ago when he spent time with him in Jerusalem, or was it that there were rumors circulating to what Saul was up to and that was why Barnabus had chosen to seek him.

Barnabus seeks out Saul and goes to his last mentioned location, Tarsus. It was a hundred mile journey from Antioch to Tarsus. And when Barnabus got there, Saul wasn't easy to find. Barnabus had to search for him. The Greek word that's used to show that Barnabus searched (Anazeteo) implies that laborious search.⁸ Saul had just gone to his home and chilled in the years between the meeting in Acts 9 and here in Acts 11. It seems that he had continued to preach the gospel to the town surrounding Tarsus, and he had been run out quite a few times. Paul seems to imply in 2 Corinthians 11:(24-28) that it was a rather trying time for him. He suffered greatly. He mentions that he had been lashed 5 times, and another 3 times beaten with rods. He was even stoned once. He would make frequent journeys on dangerous roads and spent many nights out in the cold without food and water.

He moved around a lot, but that didn't stop Barnabus. Barnabus kept looking until he found him, and he did find Saul. He convinced, or persuaded, the sales job must have not been too hard, and Saul comes back to Antioch, and they get to work right away.

They spent the next year teaching these new believers. This large group of people who had come to faith now spend the next year learning about their faith, growing deeper in their understanding of Jesus. How cool would it have been to spend a year under Paul's teaching? Imagine how much they would have learned. But it wasn't just them learning. They were taking what they were learning and they were applying it to their lives. People could look at the believers' life and there was a change in it. So much so that the people of Antioch started to call them Christians. Up until this point in the growth of the church, Jesus' disciples have been called many things, but not Christians.

They had been called disciples – because they were disciples of Jesus. (Acts 11:26)

They had been called saints – saints carries the idea of being a holy one, or one who is set apart (Acts 9:13)

They had been called believers – because they had believed the truth of the gospel and responded in faith

They had been called brothers – because their shared relationship as part of the family of God

They had been called witness – it was Jesus himself who called them witness to His resurrection – Acts 1:8⁹

Here for the first time thought they are called Christians. This word carries a meaning of Christ one – or one who is in the party of Christ. It wasn't a name the disciples applied to themselves. And it wouldn't have been a name the Jewish population had given them. It was a title that given to them by people of Antioch. Sometimes it was probably used in a derogatory way. But it spoke to the impact that gospel had in these people's lives, it changed them. And they city noticed, that now here were tons of people whom were trying to be like Jesus. What a statement.

There was a lot in the passages today – what can we take from this and apply to our own lives as we seek to walk with Jesus

Apply it –

Trust in God's Plan – when God says He's going to do something, it will happen

Allow God to grow & use us – using our gifts, talents and abilities to grow the kingdom

Represent Christ Well ---live up to your name

Close in prayer

⁸ John MacArthur Commentary – Acts pg 314

⁹ Acts – James Montgomery Boice – pg 202