

Action in Antioch

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[0 : 0 0] This evening is from Acts chapter 11 verses 19 to 30, which is found in the Church Bible, page 1105. Now those who have been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When he arrived and saw what the grace of God has done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.

[1 : 2 7] So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.

This happened during the reign of Claudius. The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea.

This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. Thank you. Wonderful. Thanks for reading, Joanne.

Well, good evening. Let me add my welcome to David's. My name is Jamie. I'm one of the ministry trainees here at St. Silas. And it's my joy to be leading us through our time together now.

[2 : 3 1] It's a wonderful, exciting passage of church growth. Please do keep your Bibles open at Acts chapter 11. That's page 1,105. And let me pray and ask for God's help as we begin.

Almighty God, ruler of all, we thank you that the same spirit that we have just read of is at work here tonight.

We ask that you would guide my words and guide all of our hearts so that we may hear what you are saying to us through the Scriptures. We pray this in the name of the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.

So the Acts of the Apostles. A glorious book full of, well, action. We've got Romans and religious leaders, riots and resurrections.

There's adventures across the Mediterranean, shipwrecks and even a prison break or two. These first chapters of the church are a remarkable story.

[3 : 31] The gospel begins its journey to all nations and conquers many trials as it advances across the Roman world. We wouldn't be sitting here today if it weren't for the actions of the men in this book.

The story of the church in Scotland begins with the events recorded for us in this very book. But let's pause for a second as we begin our sermon series in Acts.

Let's think a second about the name. Acts. Here's two questions. Who are the actors in Acts? And what is the goal of their actions? The Acts of the Apostles is the name that has been used for this book since at least Errhenius in the second century.

And indeed, the apostles, in particular Peter and Paul, are key players in the book. Much of the action is centered on them, where they are, what they say and what they do.

But they're not the key player. The key player in Acts is the same as the rest of the Bible. It's the living God. You see, Acts is Luke's second volume.

[4 : 40] The first was Luke's gospel, which according to its first chapter was written so that the reader might have certainty in what they've been taught about the Lord Jesus.

Luke wants his readers. Luke wants his readers to be absolutely confident about the truth of the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

And Acts follows on from this. Let's turn back to its opening verses on page 1092. Luke reminds us in chapter 1, verse 1, that his gospel was an account of all that Jesus began to do and teach until his ascension.

The implication being that this volume, Acts, is what the risen and ascended Lord Jesus is continuing to do. And that is what we see throughout this book.

We see great many people doing a great number of things. But it's clear all over that it is Jesus through the Holy Spirit who is building his church as the gospel is taken to the ends of the earth.

[5 : 52] And that's the goal of these acts. The goal is the gospel advancing. See what Jesus says in his final words to his disciples before he ascends. They've asked in verse 6, when the kingdom will be restored.

And Jesus says that that's not what they need to know, but he does clarify what they do need to know. Look at verse 8 with me. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. That's the last thing he says before he ascends into heaven.

Jesus promises two things. He promises the spirit of God and that his disciples, not just the small number present at this scene, but the thousands and millions to come, will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

So that's what this book is. It's a book of Jesus through the spirit at work in his people, building his church, spreading the gospel, testifying to the truth about himself.

[6 : 58] That his crucifixion has opened the floodgates of his kingdom. And this will advance across the face of the earth. The Jewish Messiah hasn't come just for the Jews.

He's come for everyone. For anyone who will accept him from any nation, he invites into his church with open arms. And that's what we saw in the passage just before ours.

If we turn back to page 1105 in our passage, the verse just before, even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

That's what verse 18 says. It's a remarkable statement, even to Gentiles. That's where we find ourselves now. And it may seem obvious to us because we've seen the fruit of it for centuries, but this is big news.

This is a world where the door has been flung open. Anyone can be brought to God. Anyone can be saved. They need only to have faith.

[8 : 00] Anyone who repents and believes the good news can be reconciled to God. Because Jesus' kingdom isn't just some small Middle Eastern nation.

His throne doesn't reign in some earthly capital. No, Jesus rules the whole world, and he rules from heaven. And as he rules, we see him building a massive multi-ethnic church.

And it starts, well, it doesn't start. It continues here in the assembly in Antioch. So we have three points this evening. A great number believe through ordinary evangelists.

A great number are taught and built up. And a great number give generously. So our first point as we look at verses 19 to 21. A great number believe through ordinary evangelists.

The first thing we see is the surprising methods by which the word spreads. Look from verse 19 with me. Back in chapter 7, we can read about the brutal stoning of Stephen.

[9 : 23] How he is killed because he proclaimed the truth about Jesus Christ.

And this murder makes Jerusalem so unsafe for the new community of disciples that everyone except the apostles has to flee the city. We see a lot of fierce opposition to the gospel in Acts.

Firstly, the Jewish leaders. And later, the Romans resist the truth about God and want to suppress it to the point that they'll kill anyone proclaiming it.

But as we see persecution in Acts, we also see that there is an inability of those opposed to God to stop God's word. Persecution doesn't stifle out the word of God.

If anything, it seems to do the opposite. Where the church is under real heat, the word goes out far and wide. We still see that today.

[10 : 26] Under some of the world's most brutal regimes, the gospel is slowly but surely bearing fruit. And that's what happens here. The scattering of all the disciples after Stephen's martyring is what brings the gospel to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.

At first, many Jews hear the glorious news that their Messiah has come and they turn to God in faith. Now, this spreading initially exclusively amongst the Jewish population shouldn't surprise us if we put ourselves in the mind of a first century Jew.

Remember that Judaism, for over a thousand years, was centered in the temple in Jerusalem. That was where you met God. That was where you made your sacrifices and gave your offerings. And so many of the initial followers thought that when the Christ came, that he'd lead people to Jerusalem.

That he'd lead them to becoming true Jews. But what is starting to dawn on Luke's readers at this point is that that is not the case. We're in the middle of a wonderful section where a trickle of Gentiles is about to become a flood of converts.

And some of the disciples get it. They know that all need to hear the good news. And so we have these glorious men tell about Jesus to Greeks also. And what do they say when they speak?

[11 : 52] Well, have a look at verse 20 again. They were telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The surprising thing here is that these men are ordinary.

I mean, they're not even named. But look at the result. The Lord's hand was with them. And a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

A great number believe. It's happening in Antioch just like at Pentecost when 3,000 were added to the number in Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus is doing the same work in Antioch as in Jerusalem.

His work doesn't stop at national borders. His reign isn't confined to man-made boundaries. And yet, despite the horde of converts, this is also so unlike Pentecost.

I mean, it's just so ordinary. Ordinary men from Cyprus and Cyrene telling the good news about Jesus to other ordinary people in Antioch.

[12 : 55] But that's encouraging, right? No matter who you are or where you're from, God can use you in the greatest mission of all time. If you're from Belfast or Birmingham, Uganda or Uzbekistan, and you share the gospel, then people can and will come to faith.

That's true, even here in Glasgow. And why do I know that the same thing can happen? Because the key player was never these men to begin with. The key player here, as in all of Acts, is the risen and ascended Lord Jesus, the Christ, the King of all.

The Lord's hand is with these men. He is at work in them as they speak. He is the one turning hearts back to himself. A great number of people believe and turn to the Lord when the Lord is at work and at no other time.

Our God can and does use extraordinary events like Pentecost. But he also uses the unbelievably ordinary, the normal day-to-day.

I mean, how did you come to faith? I'm sure for most of us, it was a normal disciple sharing the good news with you in normal ways. For me, it was my family and Scripture Union leaders.

[14 : 13] Normal people. Well, as normal as my family gets anyway. The church grows when normal people proclaim Jesus. That's how it works.

And so for us, what will we do? Will we talk about Jesus? What was it our Ugandan brother said last week? He said, gossip the gospel until the gospel becomes the only gossip.

The church isn't just growing in the special and important places. It's growing at the fringes in the unexpected places. Do you ever find yourself doubting that the gospel will reach that far-off nation?

Or what about closer home? Do we truly believe that the Lord can change hearts in this city through ordinary evangelists? Even ourselves? Because he can.

Could we be the ones who proclaim Jesus Christ in the forgotten communities of Glasgow? Not in the big exciting parts, but somewhere that people need Jesus.

[15 : 20] So that's our first point. But the church growing means more than just new converts. It means growth and maturity in the church too.

And this is our second point. A great number are taught and built up. Here we meet Barnabas, a hero of the early church. He's gentle, faithful, and a great encouragement.

In fact, his first name is actually Joseph, but the apostles name him Barnabas, meaning son of encouragement. His encouraging acts have already included selling a field to give its worth to the church and being one of the first to welcome Saul as a co-worker in the gospel.

And encouraging is what he continues to do when he sees the great number of disciples in Antioch. See his joy in verse 23. Barnabas acknowledges that this is God's doing.

It's by his grace. As it is when anyone believes in God. Not one of us deserves the opportunity to have our sin wiped clean and to be declared righteous.

[16 : 39] But by God's grace, he freely gives us that chance. And this is what Barnabas sees here. And seeing God at work frees us from boasting over any success we have in evangelism.

John Stott, commenting on this passage, writes that when we see that the Lord is both subject and object, source and goal of evangelism, we have to repent of all self-centered, self-confident concepts of the Christian mission.

We don't need to boast. But like Barnabas, we can be glad. And Barnabas doesn't stop there. He keeps encouraging. He knows that while the Christian life is never less than turning to God in faith, he also knows there's much pressure to fall away.

There are many temptations to be deceived. So Barnabas in verse 23 encourages these disciples to continually remain true. When looking at Revelation last week, Robin had us thinking that we stay faithful tomorrow by staying faithful today.

That goes for those in Antioch here too. Every day is the day to not stay still but grow. Every day is a day to keep going.

[17 : 56] Now this isn't something new or different. It's just daily believing the gospel. Daily being true to the Lord with your whole heart. Not relying on your own strength.

That's how the church grows when its members keep growing. When they remain true. And with Barnabas here, we see that there isn't two different churches. There isn't a Jewish one in Jerusalem and a Gentile one in Antioch.

No, Jesus is building one massive, multi-centered, multi-ethnic church. And do we see his humility in verse 25? It seems that there are so many people coming to faith that the workload is just too much for him.

So he travels over a hundred miles to Tarsus to find Saul. And once again, what happens when they arrive back is just ordinary.

When Barnabas and Saul return, they will teach. For over a year, the assembly in Antioch gathers and is built up by teaching. The great number who have turned in faith to the Lord now grow not just in number, but in knowledge and maturity.

[19 : 05] That's what the Lord does with his church. He establishes it and then he builds it up. It's clearly successful. As in a few chapters time, we see this very church in Antioch sending out missionaries to elsewhere.

And I think we can also see this building in both the way that they live and the way that they speak. The disciples throughout Acts are people of the way. Women and men who live differently because of what God has done for them.

But they are also men and women who talk about Christ a lot. See the end of verse 26. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

I think this shows us two things. One is the significance of the church in the city. And the other is that the Christians are not Jews nor Gentiles, but something completely new altogether.

Antioch is a huge city, by the way. It's the third largest in the Roman Empire. It could have had as many as half a million residents. And they certainly came from all over the eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

[20 : 12] And now this great number of disciples has become a recognized, established part of the city. The gospel is no longer something centered on Judea. No longer centered on the Jewish people.

It's a new thing altogether. The citizens of Antioch recognize it as such. It's not a sect of Judaism. It's not a pagan religion.

It's not bound by ethnicity. It's something new. Something world-changing. Christianity. The church of Jesus Christ. So how is it that the non-believing citizens of Antioch know enough about the Christ to name these believers Christians?

Well, it must be because they're talking about him. If the name of Christ was constantly on their lips, then it would only be natural for the rest of the city to see these people as followers of Jesus and his way.

Those with faith who have turned to Christ. The church in Antioch shows that the Lord Jesus is building a church not centered on some temple, not on a pilgrimage site, but on him.

[21 : 22] That's the point. The church of Jesus is built by Jesus, around Jesus, as it teaches Jesus good news. And now finally, we see that not just the moving of the center of the church away from Jerusalem, but the unity of the church across the world.

Our final point, verses 27 to 30. A great number give generously. It's one of the many joys of the Christian faith that the church community is a two-way street.

You can give me something, and I can give you something else, something different back. First, we see the Lord continuing to provide from Jerusalem.

The Lord doesn't always take us out of trouble, as we saw with the persecution after Stephen's martyrdom. And after all, we do follow a crucified Lord.

But he does always prepare us and give us what we need. Read verses 27 to 30 with me. During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

[22 : 31] One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. This happened during the reign of Claudius.

The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

God warns his people through the Spirit that a famine is coming, and so they prepare accordingly. But do you see how they prepare? Not with the established Judean church providing for the Greek church.

This time it's the church in Antioch that has every member chip in to provide support for the needy back in Judea. What a beautiful piece of gospel partnership.

What a beautiful picture of the new life found in Jesus. It's not clear why the church in Judea is the one with the greater need. It could simply be that the famine is more severe there.

[23 : 35] Regardless, they are in need. What a great response.

Each gives what they can. No one is ever told to give what they don't have, but we are to give as we are able. For some of us, that really is quite a lot.

For some, it won't seem like much. But the Lord uses what is needed at each time. Barnabas and Saul in verse 26, far from seeing the work of taking this gift as beneath them, see it as an essential part of their ministry.

Acts of generosity are good ministry. And so is uniting the Jewish and Gentile churches in this mutual support. So we've seen how the church is going away from Jerusalem.

Growing all over. This great multitude believing in Antioch is just the start. As I said earlier, shortly Antioch will be sending out missionaries further afield.

[24 : 42] So where do we land with this? What does it mean for us that the church is centered on Jesus? Right now ascended at the right hand of the Father. Well, I must confess, when I first read this passage, I thought, yeah, more Christians, yay.

But hang on. Let me say that again. Yes, more Christians, yes. Another soul saved. Another citizen in the kingdom of God. Another human being brought from darkness to life, from despair to hope, from death to life.

Another servant of Jesus Christ who is going out with the mighty word to conquer yet more lands, to deliver more captives from sin and Satan. Let's not lose the wonder of seeing God at work.

Let's not lose how gloriously exciting it is when new people come to know and love the Lord Jesus who loves them and died for them. As we see the authenticity of this church in Antioch, that everything God does there is the same as he's been doing in Jerusalem, then we can rejoice as we see the same work that he's doing here.

Let's follow their lead. Let's have confidence that Jesus rules and reigns from heaven, not earth. Trust that the Lord Jesus is building his church through his faithful evangelists.

[26 : 07] And so no place is too surprising for him to be at work. When the word is preached, then the Lord is at work, changing hearts and saving lives. We can be those ordinary evangelists who share the good news, not in a special place, but just in another normal place that needs to hear it.

We are part of the one church of Christ, united by him, giving in some ways, receiving in others. So see the Lord's hand at work.

Trust his word and tell others of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, I thank you for how you grow your church.

Lord, we thank you that you are in control. You reign and you are at work in this world, taking your gospel to the ends of the earth. Lord, we thank you for those centuries ago who brought the gospel to this land.

And we pray for us here now that you would help us to be bold, trusting you in what you are doing as we share the good news of Jesus with others.

[27 : 22] Lord, we pray this in the wonderful name of the risen Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.