

May 22/23, 2021

God on the Move
Daring to Be the Church Series
Acts 11:19-30
Pastor Ryan Harmon

As we turn to God's Word, let's open with a word of prayer.

Our Father, as we open Your Word, we pray that You would ready our hearts to hear the truth that You have to speak to us. We thank You that Your Spirit is guiding us. We thank You for this moment that we can gather together and we give You glory for that. Teach us now, we pray, as we study Your Word. Amen.

So, I don't know about you, but as we've been walking through the book of Acts these past few months, I've just been continually astounded and encouraged by the way God moved in these early days of His church, the incredible things that He did in these first days, the miracles and the vast amount of people that were coming to faith. It's been encouraging to me. But, over these past few weeks, I've begun to ask myself the question of whether or not I'm studying and thinking about these things as merely history—something that just occurred in the past—or am I approaching it as a statement of who God is and what He is still doing. Is this merely history? If it is, God will still move, because He is active and He is on the move today. But, if I don't think of it that way, if I don't approach it that way, what's possible is that I'll miss out on the opportunity to partner with Him in obedience in what He is doing today. Because our God is on the move. That's what we've seen in the book of Acts. We've seen Him moving around this world of Jerusalem. And last week, we recounted as Bryan unpacked exactly how remarkable it was that God brought together the Jewish and the Gentile people, and the work that He did to help that get in the mind and the heart of Peter.

And then, that brings us to where we are this morning in Acts, Chapter 11, Verse 19. So, grab your Bibles and turn with me there.

So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. (*NASB, Acts 11:19)

So there, again, we see how this movement began with the Jewish people. But that was about to change. Verse 20:

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. (Vs. 20-21)

Now, one of the challenges all of us that have been teaching this series have faced is: How do we convey the continuity that Luke intends for us to understand as we walk through this book? It's easy to kind of take it in segments and miss the larger story. And here, in verse 19, Luke immediately takes us back to Chapter 8, to Stephen's martyrdom. I don't know if you can remember a month ago. A lot has happened in the past month. But it was a month ago that Josh unpacked this account of Stephen being martyred and what occurred afterwards. He was stoned at the hands of the Jewish people. They didn't like what he had to say, didn't like the message. And what then began was this massive amount of persecution for the believers in Jerusalem, and it caused a scattering throughout the region. But what we know about God is that that will not stop Him. And God used that scattering in order to allow the gospel to go out and to move out from that geographic boundary in Jerusalem. So, the scattering occurred and what happened is, the gospel went out. God used that. God was on the move.

Now, the geographic boundary was a large hurdle to overcome, but it was minor, minuscule, compared to the ethnic boundary. And that's what Jeff and Bryan talked about these last two weeks. The astounding nature and how hard it was for these early disciples to come to grips with the fact that the Jewish/non-Jewish distinction was now, in Christ, obliterated—set aside—that division demolished. As I've been thinking about these last two weeks and trying to think, is there any parallel for us? Is there any analogy that we could use that would help us understand what that must have been like? It's hard to come up with anything. We're so far removed from that Jewish/Gentile distinction. Last week, Bryan asked us to consider, “Who would be a Cornelius to you. Who would be someone that would be unclean, kind of taboo, maybe we wouldn't approach them?” I don't know if that thought experiment was profitable for you, but I think it's hard to come up with an example.

So, as I was thinking about this, I was trying to think of a modern-day analogy for us. And, in light of current events, the closest I think I can come—and, again, it's only, it's just close; it's not really right on point. But, in light of all the violence in the Middle East right now, imagine if you saw an Israeli and a Palestinian put down their weapons, put down their rockets, and under Christ—because of Christ—join together in united, unified fellowship, grounded in love. How astounding would that be? That would be front-page news! It'd be on the cover of *Time Magazine*. It would be everywhere. It would be the image that we would see everywhere because it would be so remarkable that these two divided people somehow came together. Now, it's not just that the ethnic distinction would disappear. It's that the ethnic division would disappear, and it would disappear because what is primary is no longer their ethnicity. What is primary is Christ. Christ is first. Christ is primary.

So, for you and me, if we have placed our faith in Christ, our primary identity is Christ follower. That's who I am before I'm an American, before I'm a Nebraskan, before I'm the husband of Jenee, I am a Christ follower. See, division is what the human heart tends towards and Satan loves division. He is trying to sow division all of the time. And God hates division, and He was adamant that it would not take root in this fledgling group of believers in its first days.

So, now, God was drilling into the heart of Peter this message that distinction, that division, no longer is relevant, and He was preparing the leaders in Jerusalem with that reality. But, at the same time, what we learn in our passage is that God was on the move...God was on the move...and He

had prepared people's hearts and had transformed them. And men from Cyprus, which is the island out in the Mediterranean, and in Cyrene, which is North Africa, believers were making their way to Antioch and they were sharing the gospel, talking about what God had done in their life. Now, Antioch is a city in Syria, and it was a strategic city for this movement. It was a cosmopolitan city. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Unlike Jerusalem, which was—the majority—a Jewish city, Antioch was a mixed city. It was a melting pot and much more easily in Antioch, Jews and Gentiles would already sort of naturally come together. And what God knows is He is going to use Antioch in the days to come to launch a missionary movement into the Gentile world that will transform the world.

Now, the other thing I love about this passage is that Luke says this. He says that unnamed believers were the ones that were proclaiming the Lord Jesus. Regular people. People like you and me, transformed by God's grace, proclaiming the name. And God was bringing about this incredible growth; He was on the move, and very soon the leaders in Jerusalem would hear about it. And that's just what Luke tells us happens next. Verse 22:

The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.

So the leaders of the church in Jerusalem hear what's happening up in Antioch and they want to verify it. They want to see what's happening—make sure that it's in line with what they know to be true. And so, they send Barnabas. And Barnabas was a strategic choice because Barnabas himself was from Cyprus. He was from that island. So, to the movement that began, at least in part, through people from Cyprus, they sent Barnabas, a man from Cyprus, to go check it out. So, his capacity, his ability to enter into that situation, would be incredibly high. Verse 23:

Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and *began* to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain *true* to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. (Vs. 23-24)

So, Barnabas arrived in Antioch and we're told he **witnessed the grace of God**. How do you witness the grace of God? Have you ever thought about that? It's invisible, right? How do we witness God's grace? Well, what's evident is that Barnabas arrived in Antioch and he saw the situation and what he saw was the undeniable mark of God doing what only He can do. A definition of grace that you may not have heard before, that I particularly love, is that grace is God acting to accomplish what only He can accomplish...God acting to do what only He can do. Does that include forgiving our sins? Absolutely! Only God can do that. No one else can do that. That is God's grace. Does it also include empowering these believers to be on the move? Does it also include breaking down the dividing wall of hostility? Absolutely! Only God could do that. God acting to accomplish what only He can accomplish.

So, Barnabas arrives in Antioch and he sees the quality and the unity of the fellowship between the Jewish and the Gentile believers and he says, "This is not a man-made invention. This has the hand of God all over it." If the hand of Satan loves to sow division, the hand of God brings about counter-cultural unity, and that's precisely what Barnabas saw when he arrived in Antioch. He

saw Jew and Gentile gathering together of course, but that was no longer their primary identity. Their primary identity was Christ follower. This was now a family under Christ. So, upon seeing this, he was filled with joy, and it says that he **encouraged them**. That's literally what Barnabas' name means: He's the *Son of Encouragement*, and he encouraged them with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord. That essentially means to keep Jesus as their primary occupation, their primary passion. To have all that is in them—everything flowing from them—the heart, the center of their being, aimed at following after, remaining committed to Jesus Christ. Nothing is more central. Nothing is more important. So now, Verse 25:

And he (that is Barnabas) left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. (Vs. 25-26)

So now, what do you do with believers that have just placed their faith in Jesus? Well, what's clear to Barnabas is that you train them up; you teach them; you form them in the faith. And Barnabas knew this was a big job and he knew it would probably take more than just him. And so, I'm sure his mind went back to that odd guy named Saul that, ten years prior, God had called to be on-mission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. And Barnabas went to find Saul. I wish we had an account of that that was like. He either took a horse or he jumped on a boat and went up to Tarsus and found Saul. And I'm sure Saul was engaged in ministry, but now his ministry to the Gentiles was going to begin in earnest. So Saul accompanied Barnabas back to Antioch, and they began to train and teach these new believers.

I think that emphasis is important for us to consider, for a moment, how critical it is. Their first priority was to teach, to help these new believers learn. Sometimes I think we downplay the importance of learning and of teaching in the church. We say things like, “All that matters is just ... just love Jesus.” And, of course, that is primary. Barnabas said, “Don't forsake the passionate pursuit of Jesus.” But Barnabas also knew it was critical that these new believers be grounded in their faith so that the new wind of doctrine or some new philosophy would not steer them off course. So, they began to teach them. I don't think this was some kind of sterile teaching in a classroom, students falling asleep in the back. I think this was life on life, modeling, discussing, asking questions, digging into who God is, how we follow Him, how He intends to make us more like Him by His very grace. And, of course, this is absolutely natural, that learning would be so primary, because we are disciples. That's what the early believers referred to themselves as. And disciples are learners.

Consequently, this is one of the reasons that we've made such a point of emphasizing life groups over this past year. Life groups are just an environment for believers, a fellowship of believers to come together and discuss and learn together who Jesus is and how to follow Him right in the context of our own lives. And I would ask you, if you're not in a life group, do you have a fellowship, a community of believers, a community of Christ followers, that are helping you learn what it means to follow after Jesus? If you don't, you're missing out on one of the primary environments that God intends to use to help you become more like Him.

So, they came, and they taught. It's interesting, they're called disciples. Disciples are learners. That's primarily how the believers referred to themselves, but I think it's notable that Luke then tells us this is the first time, in Antioch, that these disciples were called Christians. They never refer to themselves as Christians. The word only occurs three times in the New Testament. They always refer to themselves as followers of Jesus, followers of the Way, the disciples of Jesus, learners, students of Jesus. But I think what was happening is, this movement was getting so big in Antioch that the outside world had to somehow identify who these people are. And so they decided to call them after the person that these people, these disciples, keep talking about. They keep talking about this guy, Jesus Christ. They keep referring to Christ. They're following after Christ. So, let's call them "little Christs." That's what Christian means: little Christs. That's who these believers were following. That's who they couldn't stop talking about.

And what Luke tells us next, I think, gives us a glimpse of the extent to which they had been transformed into Christ's very likeness, how their heart had been changed, and it took a crisis to bring that out. Verse 27:

Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them name Agabus stood up and *began* to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the *reign* of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a *contribution* for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders. (Vs. 27-30)

So, God prompts Agabus. It's pretty evident that, at this time, there were a number of believers that were quite mobile. They were making their way around. And some of them had been given visions by God, promptings, to share with the church, in order to encourage them, to prepare them. That's just what Agabus did. We're going to hear about him later in Acts as well.

And the response of that church in Antioch, these new believers, is both inspiring and challenging to me. Because I don't know about you, but when I hear of scarcity, when I hear there's going to be a shortage of something, my inclination isn't necessarily to give stuff away. Do you all remember the great toilet paper shortage of 2020 and how we responded to that moment? (*laughter*) "Hurry, get your toilet paper!" Mountains of Charmin possibly in your pantry right now? When there is shortage, the human inclination is to hoard, gather, take care of yourself. But, in this moment, they heard a famine was coming. Of course they're going to be affected by it. It's not far away. It was probably going to start down in Egypt, and they're not far from there. But God was on the move, and God had gripped their hearts and they were being shaped after His likeness. And our God is generous. Have you considered how generous He is with you? We have a generous God. We also have a God that has no lack, and He can provide all that we need. And so, these believers in Antioch, knowing that, let go. And they knew there were brothers and sisters now in this family of faith under Christ that were going to be in need, and so they sent what was needed down to care for those in Jerusalem and throughout Judea.

A generous God creates a generous church. What would it look like for us to be generous these days? I wasn't necessarily going to share this example, but something happened on Friday that

made me think it would be appropriate. We are in this moment where we're turning the corner a little bit on this COVID story, and we're all so thankful for that. We're celebrating that. I want to thank God for that. I also think it would be appropriate to say: Could we remain generous in spirit towards those brothers and sisters that we have around the world that are still in the midst of a deep, deep crisis? The reason I bring this up is because we have many—even what we would call staff—in South Asia that are struggling to an incredible degree right now. COVID is ravaging countries like India and Bangladesh...and I just wonder...could we be generous in prayer for them?

This became particularly potent for me on Friday, because we just learned that one of our former staff, who was 46 years old, just died of COVID. I'm going to throw his picture up here. That's Angrung who was one of the most joyous people I've ever met. He's got a young family. Some of our leaders in South Asia, three of them have had two brothers-in-law die and a mother die of COVID. And so, as we turn the corner and we celebrate and we thank God for our story, could we remain generous in prayer for brothers and sisters in the faith who are struggling, who aren't in this moment that we're in? Could we lift them up, pray that God would protect them?

I want to let you know as well that we, as a church, seeing the need over there, have given money to their benevolence fund so that they can care for members of their churches throughout South Asia that are struggling in this moment. A generous God creates a generous people, and there is no crisis that's too great. God is on the move in South Asia. God had been on the move throughout this past year. He has been working. Our God is on the move.

That's what we see in the book of Acts, and He's still on the move. There are no people that are too far off. There is no sin that is too great. There is no person that's too taboo. There's no crisis that's too great that He, by His grace, will not come in and move and act and spread His gospel. Our God is on the move, and we are His people, called to step in obedience into the work He is doing right now, right where we are. And, as we seek after Him, as we seek after his son, Jesus, He will help us come to know Him and to become more like Him. And He will empower us to *Dare to Be the Church*.

Will you join me as we pray?

Our Father, You are so good, and we praise You that You are more active than we can possibly imagine. You are working. Help us to be obedient. Help us to have eyes to see You moving right around us. Shape our hearts to be generous like Yours. We ask these things in the name of Your son, Jesus, Amen.

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SPRING 2021 // WEEK 7

Life Group Questions

Acts: Daring To Be The Church // May 22/23, 2021

God On The Move // Acts 11:19-30

Introduction

Our text this week shows us the continued spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. The Jerusalem church sends Barnabas—a key figure in the Gentile mission throughout *Acts*—to Antioch to investigate the response to the gospel by the Gentiles there. We learn that what identifies someone as a Christian is one's devotion to Jesus and not ethnicity or any other factor.

To get the most out of your group time, we invite you to look over the questions below and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

Here are some suggestions to get your conversation started:

1. How do you like to be identified? By family name, nationality, political affiliation, occupation, title, or something else? Why is it important to you that people identify you in that way?
2. What is one thing you wish you would have invented? Why?

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

- 1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
 - a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
 - b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
 - c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
 - 2) Invite someone to read the passage in the group.
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Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

- 1) In one or two sentences, how would you summarize the main idea of this week's sermon to someone who was not there?
- 2) After hearing about the large numbers of conversions among Gentiles in Antioch, the Jerusalem church sends Barnabas to investigate. **What do you think they wanted Barnabas to find out?**
- 3) **What convinced Barnabas that the conversions in Antioch were legitimate? What identified these new Gentile converts as followers of Jesus, or as Christians?**

If Barnabas was sent to Lincoln Berean Church, would he be convinced that we are followers of Jesus? If so, what would be the markers that would identify us as followers of Jesus?

Is it as clear to people that you are a Christian as it is that you are a Republican/Democrat, American/Mexican, teacher/attorney, etc.? Can you elaborate on your answer?

- 4) Too often we think church unity is grounded in politics, nationality, gender, or social status. Based on Barnabas's acceptance of the Gentile converts in Antioch as legitimate Christians like the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, **what does this passage tell us about what the basis is for unity in the church?**

How well do you live out the kind of unity expressed in *Acts 11* (give yourself a grade)? Do you find it hard to accept others as followers of Jesus who hold different theological views or political views than you do, or come from a different background or culture than you do? What causes you to struggle with this?

- 5) **What was the importance of Antioch sending famine relief to the church in Jerusalem?**

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

Prayer opens us up to the leading of the Holy Spirit which makes it an important part of the Christian life. We realize that everyone has their own comfort level with group prayer, and we want this to be a time of safety and care. You may verbalize your prayer or pray silently to yourself; that way everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Some things to consider during prayer time:

- What did the message or group discussion cause you to notice about your relationship with Jesus?
- How can you express gratitude for what God's teaching you?
- What questions are stirring that only God can answer?
- Are there troubling things in your life that need to be confessed to God?
- Is there an unmet need that only God can fulfill?

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Each week we're suggesting a couple of spiritual exercises. These are not required, but they may help us to actively live our faith and grow as followers of Jesus. Feel free to practice one or both. If a certain exercise is helpful for you, we encourage you to find a way to incorporate it into your daily life.

(Memorize) This week memorize *Galatians* 3:26-29.

(Pray) Spend a few moments every day this week praying this prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer*:

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace to take to heart the grave dangers we are in through our many divisions. Deliver your Church from all enmity and prejudice, and everything that hinders us from godly union. As there is one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so make us all to be of one heart and of one mind, united in the holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and love, that with one voice we may give you praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God in everlasting glory. Amen.