

Words and Deeds: Little Christs
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 107:1-9; John 14:15-18; Acts 11:19-30

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 11:19-30. May God's richest blessing be on the reading of His sacred and perfect Word. "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to 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 ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, 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. 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, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."

Times of transition are hectic. If you've moved into a new apartment or a new home, you know the chaos. Boxes upon boxes, finding tons of old things to give to the Salvation Army, cherishing old trinkets you haven't seen in a while. If you're like me, much of the pandemonium of a move is forgotten, but you still remember the little things that stand out – the friends that came to help you pack, the long-lost letter you thought you'd never see again, maybe the toy that reminds you of days long gone.

Today's passage is a transitional passage for Luke. He's got a lot of ground to cover in a short time. For the past several weeks, we've been following Peter's story and how through him, God brought the Gentiles officially into His Kingdom. It was a vital part of knowing what God was doing in the early church. But now we need to move to where the action is, and Luke uses this portion of his book to get us from one place and one set of Christians to another. There's a lot thrown at us, but no direct theology and not even an impressive or memorable story. Yet even here, God has left His imprint. We'll see in some of the small details Luke gives us how God is at work as the ministry to the Gentiles begins to take off.

The first thing that Luke does is share with us that the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles is taking off in a big way. After Stephen's death, all these Christians from Jerusalem left to escape the wrath of Paul and the Jewish authorities. And they went pretty far north – to the old boundaries of ancient northern Israel and well beyond; that's Phoenicia, which is a region. Some wind up on Cyprus; that's a big island north and west of Israel's coastland and south of Turkey. Then there's Antioch, which is a big city.

Now here's where the details help us to see what God does. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Only Rome and Alexandria were bigger. But Antioch was the one with the reputation. Like another major city where Saul ministers, Corinth, Antioch was extremely cosmopolitan. In this region of the empire, Antioch was where cultures from all over came together. It was well-known as a pagan city, full of temples to the gods and some of the worst elements of those temples, like shrine prostitution. Ancient accounts described Antioch as the place where all the muck in the river wound up – and that's what other pagan people thought of it!

It is the last place you might expect such a moral, purity based faith like Christianity to take root. And yet, because God doesn't work by our expectations, this became a base of operations (so to speak) for the mission to the Gentiles. God uses the least likely places and people to accomplish His will. And no wonder! Because Antioch was also a place where people from all over the world came, and when God got ahold of the population there, Christianity started to spread throughout the Roman Empire.

When you think of Detroit, if you're like me, you think, "Maybe we're rebuilding from the ashes." Lots of good things are going on downtown in the business district. Yet that's one small part of an awfully large city. So many people have written Detroit off. Yet God is not done here. In fact, it's impossible to know if God might use Detroit one day as a center of revival. Sounds crazy, right? It does to me too. Yet it's not beyond God. And if God could redeem a pagan cesspool like Antioch, He can redeem Detroit. And we can be part of it as we act as God's faithful people, His ambassadors to this corner of the world.

At first, a lot of the folks sharing the gospel were only going to the Jews – at the time, roughly 25,000-50,000 Jews lived in Antioch in their own little enclave. But then, as word spread that God had included Gentiles in the Kingdom, the disciples in the region start going and sharing the gospel with the Greeks in Antioch...and they start listening. Think about this carefully with me...it means that the first intentional outreach to the Gentiles was headed not by the official leadership of the church, not by the apostles, but by ordinary disciples of Jesus like you and me. Peter had to be led to Cornelius after having a vision; this is genuine mission work, and it's being done by simple people who love Jesus.

I wrote the pastoral note a few weeks back so that you would know that we've started our mailing campaign to newcomers to Chesterfield, and that the more we're all here, the more likely it is newcomers will feel welcome and know that we're a good family to be a part of. But from a statistical point of view, less than 2% of Christians get involved with a church because of advertising like that. You need to do it, you need the name CrossWay to be in the community, but that's not how very many people come to a church. How many people come to church via the pastor being out in the community? Less than 6%. Over 86% of folks who find their way into a church were invited by a friend – the other 6% through organized visits (what we used to call door-to-door evangelism).

God has put His Kingdom in the hands of ordinary people because that's how He made the vast majority of us. We're ordinary, and that's just fine. It's an ordinary thing to invite your friends to something you enjoy, something you're excited about. I hope you're excited about how you've grown at CrossWay, what you've learned, the people who are your church family. Because the church doesn't grow, the Kingdom doesn't expand, by having great music concerts every week or artisanal coffee or even a fantastic children's program. It expands as God has His hand on the church that is expressed through the people of the church finding a love for God and faith in Him and sharing it.

Now numbers don't mean God's hand is on something. I heard a great quote this week: "If God's hand is on something, it will grow. But growth by itself is not proof that God's hand is on something." I believe God's hand has been here as I've seen many of you grow in your faith, how you've stuck beside the church and each other in good times and bad, how some of you have wanted to learn and become deeper disciples. I want the church to grow numerically, but that doesn't prove God's hand. I want to see the church grow because every healthy church wants more people come to know Jesus. That's the sole reason we should want to grow. And in the first attempts to convert the Gentiles in Antioch, they were successful for that very reason.

So what happens next? Word gets back to the home office, back to Jerusalem. And they send Barnabas to Antioch. Now this was a divinely appointed choice. I'm not sure anybody else could have been the more perfect representative from Jerusalem than Barnabas. He's described by Luke as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith – extremely rare compliments. (Even Jesus cautioned against calling anyone a "good" man because there's such a difference between human goodness and godly goodness!) We remember him from earlier in Acts because his name means "son of encouragement" – he knows how to lift people up.

What is so striking about Barnabas is what's going on between the lines. When he arrives and sees all that God's been doing, he is just overjoyed. His main encouragement to them is to keep doing what they're doing – to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. The thing that stands out about Barnabas is just how selfless he is. He's not interested in telling them what they've got wrong, how they can make their church better. He doesn't come in to stir up the pot. He's there to inspire the new believers to stay faithful.

That doesn't mean there's never a time for correction. Eventually, Paul has to correct the churches in Corinth and Galatia pretty harshly because they've stepped into errors that could threaten their faith and their salvation. But Barnabas goes to Antioch and sees something beautiful, something that God has done, and he has no ego about it. He isn't going to tell them how they can fix everything to fit a Jewish model of what the church should look like. No! He just says, "Stay in this place of faithfulness." He gives the A-OK to a brand new church with a new identity a bit different from the Jewish believers.

I can tell you, there's nothing more painful than when people attack or abandon a church because of their own desires and issues, and it's beautiful when the larger church acts like Jesus and encourages its congregations and pastors and elders. When we were first organizing CrossWay out of the ashes of our former church, our old denomination said it couldn't be done. Our new denomination took a chance on us and put their money behind us.

Some of you know that Catha and I went out to Seattle shortly after becoming a part of the EPC for what had originally been called church planting training. It was actually an evaluation of whether or not this particularly consulting group thought that I had what it takes to be a church planter. They didn't. It basically cost the denomination a couple thousand dollars for them to tell me that I'm an introvert that isn't going to draw in the masses in six months. I could have told them that and saved them two grand!

But the folks in the EPC said, "We don't care about that." They continued to support us. Even though we have this place currently rent-free, they still financially support us. There are folks that regularly check in to see how we're doing. They want us to succeed and grow and be deeply in love with the Lord. And that's why we're still here four plus years later, because they saw what the Lord was doing and said, "Keep at it!" And I'm grateful for that.

Another reason I love Barnabas is that when he realizes just how big the opportunity is, maybe God shows him, just how huge it will be to share the gospel with the world at large, what's his first thought? Not, "Surely I'm destined for great things because I'm a good man full of faith." Not, "Look how important I could become if I reached out to the Gentiles." What's his first thought? "Where is Saul? He's the guy we need for this job. He's the one that has all the training and understanding that God has been building in him to reach the Roman world."

And so Barnabas goes on a search for Saul. He travels up to Tarsus – 250 miles away, so either a really long journey or a really long boat trip – and tries to find Saul in his hometown. Keep in mind that nobody's heard from Saul in a while...he may be sharing the gospel, since there's been a big time lapse, but he also may be in hiding since everywhere he'd gone to try and convert his fellow Jews, they'd tried to kill him. Barnabas is taking a risk just in trying to find Saul. But again, Barnabas is all about Jesus and getting the good news out, so it's worth it. And once he does find Saul, they come back together to Antioch, teaching and preaching together.

I think Barnabas is a real example of selflessness to us. He so wants for God's will to come to pass, and he's not thinking about what's best for himself. When people talk to him, they feel better about their faith and better about God and better about their church. When I grow up, I want to be more like Barnabas.

I'm going to skip a line – I'll come back to it – just to discuss what else is going on in Antioch. Prophets come and speak to the church in Antioch. By the Spirit's leading, one predicts the famine that would happen in Claudius' reign – we now know this famine occurred in 47 AD. Couple thoughts here...one is that this prophecy in the Gentile church legitimizes them in a new way. More of the gifts of the Spirit are showing up. While the prophets were from Jerusalem, their prophecy occurred when they were a part of the church at Antioch.

But also, the prophecy gives the Gentile believers the opportunity to show that they are genuinely a part of the universal church. They send gifts to the church in Judea – the Jewish church – through Barnabas and Saul at the end of their time in Antioch. Those gifts are meant to get them through the lean times ahead. God didn't just bring the Gentiles into His church so that they might receive the blessings of salvation, but also to encourage and help the faithful who were the first to believe once the hard times come.

We still have a ways to go before we are a fully established church, but that doesn't mean that we don't have the opportunity to help others as we were helped. I'll be sharing some ways we can give back in the near future to some ministries that helped us get on our feet when we first started. I also know that we have EPC churches directly affected by the massive hurricane damage, and that we might be able to send some aid there. I also would like to encourage us to send notes to Andrew and Norine Brunson as they head home. They have gone through a terrible ordeal, and a lot of healing will still need to happen back here. We can be an encouragement to them as so many have been an encouragement to us.

Now I'm going to go back to the last line we're going to discuss today. "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." The title "Christian" was given to them by outsiders. The Bible only refers to the believers, to the saints, as "Christians" three times. One time, it's here; another time, it's Saul telling someone suffering for that title not to be ashamed but to wear the name proudly.

This was not a name Jesus gave His followers or that the early church used. (They called themselves "followers of the way" a lot, and they called each other "brother" or "sister" often.) This wasn't a term of respect. The best way to think of the term as it was used back then is as "those Christers" or "those little Christs." The unbelievers made it a derogatory term that the church eventually picked up and ran with. That became what we call each other because it's precisely what we are supposed to be – little Christs.

And that's our final thought for the day: would someone who knows you well call you a "little Christ"? Someone like Barnabas who puts others ahead of himself and doesn't need the applause of the world? Someone like Saul who take a risk to let others know just how good the news about Jesus is? Someone like the believers in Antioch who turned to the Lord and were willing to help others in the church in need?

I listen to Christian music and promote Christian events; I'm involved with multiple Christian ministries. But am I someone that someone else could point to and say, "He really models what I think Christ was like?" That's a hard question. And of course we're going to fail; no one is Christ-like all of the time. But even then, the way we return to the Lord when we fall is a model and an example.

My friends, that's my prayer for us today. May we be little Christs that our friends and neighbors might see so that they might investigate the good news of Jesus for themselves. May we so want others to enter the Kingdom of God that we would reach across barriers to bring others in. May we be so open to the Lord's leading that He could use us to bring revival to Detroit and to Chesterfield and to all the places we might be. And as we do, may we know the grace and encouragement and love of the Lord who cares about us so much and who is making a place for us right now in our eternal home with Him.