

Acts 11

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[0 : 0 0] The book of the Acts of the Apostles is the sequel to the Gospels. And that means that if you read through, for example, the Gospel of Matthew, you come to the end, it's almost like there should be a little strap line at the end of Matthew to be continued.

The same with Mark and Luke and John, because Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are all parallel accounts of the same story. At the end of each of them, there should be a strap line saying to be continued.

And that continuation is the Acts of the Apostles. We must never think of it as a different story. It's a continuation of the Gospel story, the story of Jesus, except the only difference is that this time he's no longer physically present.

And the Acts of the Apostles, I don't know if you've ever read it. I hope you have. And if not, then read it, because it's so readable. And it's so exciting, because it tells you the story of how the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, was spread beyond Jerusalem, where it started, into the regions beyond, and the countries beyond, and the cultures beyond.

And there are several milestones in the book, in the story. It begins with the ascension of Jesus, how, having done everything that he came to the earth to do, he was lifted back up to heaven, where he had come from originally.

[1 : 3 9] That was the first milestone. Second milestone comes ten days later, when all the disciples are together in Jerusalem, and when the Holy Spirit comes down upon them in extraordinary power, fills the disciples.

That was what is known as the Day of Pentecost. And an extraordinary power came upon the disciples, to the extent that when one of them, Peter, stood up, the result was that having preached to thousands of people, three thousand people came to faith in Jesus.

Can you imagine that? Three thousand people in one shot come to faith in Jesus. The next milestone, well, there are several milestones, let me just condense the story.

Another further milestone came when the Gospel extended beyond the Jewish people. Remember that up until that point, all of Jesus' disciples were Jews.

In fact, Jesus himself was a Jewish man. So, at the very beginning, the Gospel, the message of Jesus, was contained within the Jewish community.

[2 : 5 9] But very quickly, into the book of Acts, there comes a point where the Gospel jumps out. It goes, it breaks out. And it extends beyond the Jewish community to the Gentiles.

The first time this happens is in Acts chapter 10. And the first Gentile, the first Roman to be converted, come to faith in Jesus, was a man called Cornelius.

And he was a Roman centurion. I won't tell you the story, I don't have time. But amazingly, extraordinarily, the Gospel reached into his heart and he became a changed man.

Now, we might think, well, so what? But you have to remember it in terms of the conflict that there was between Jews and Gentiles.

Because it was unthinkable for a Jewish person to eat with a Gentile person. It just didn't happen.

[4 : 07] Now, don't ask me why. It just didn't happen. That was the reality of life at that time in that culture. So, for the Jewish Christians to realise that God wanted Gentiles to belong to him, that was a massive deal.

That was a big deal. And it was a huge challenge for them to accept. They now had to have fellowship and friendship with people who weren't Jewish people, who were Gentiles, who were Romans.

That was no easy prospect. And hence, you have this inquiry at the beginning of chapter 11, where Peter, who was instrumental in the conversion of Cornelius, he's summoned to the council.

And they're asking him all these questions. Well, what happened here? How can you account and how can you explain this man Cornelius coming to faith in Jesus? Is this genuine? And what are we to make of this?

And Peter, he's like, yes, it's genuine. I was there. I saw what happened. And this man is truly a believer in Jesus. The Holy Spirit, God himself, came into Cornelius and changed him.

[5 : 33] He's one of us. He's a brother. That was massive. Don't ever underestimate that. It was massive. I love the phrase that's used here.

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, so then God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life. They couldn't hide their inbuilt prejudice, even as they tried to praise God.

Well, I applaud them for that. It took years for them to get used to this. But that's the reality of what's happening. While this is going on, meanwhile, there was persecution in Jerusalem.

And that persecution had driven some of the believers away from Jerusalem. They had to flee. And they fled north into the region called Phoenicia, which is up the coast from Judea.

And they fled west to Cyprus. Now, I know that that involves a boat journey. That's no problem because there were plenty of boats, as there are today in that region.

[6 : 51] And Cyprus is not that far away from Judea. So the gospel spread north and it spread west. And wherever the believers fled, they took the gospel with them and they began to share the gospel.

And as they told the story of Jesus, people listened. And as people listened, they believed. And as they believed, they were converted. And they came to faith in Jesus, the Jesus that they had heard about.

And so ones and twos and fives and tens in different towns and villages along the way, they were saved. Now, look what happens.

At first, as these believers travel north, they're confining the message of the gospel to do the Jewish community.

But some of them started telling Gentiles about Jesus. And guess what happens? The Gentiles come to faith.

[7 : 58] Once they got to Antioch, which is up the coast, quite far up the coast, the Gentiles in Antioch heard the gospel and something extraordinary happened.

And not only did ones and twos come to faith, but a huge number of people came to faith. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands of people.

There was a whole crowd of people who not only wanted to know more about the gospel, but who were ready to believe and to follow Jesus.

Now, remember, following Jesus was completely radical in those days, as it is today, by the way. If you're a follower of Jesus, that is a radical position to take.

And in those early days, it involved standing on your own. You were then different from everyone else in the crowd.

[9 : 11] So when all these people all of a sudden came to faith in Antioch, what was the church going to do? This was almost like an uncontrollable situation.

The hand of the Lord, we read, was with them. And a great number of people came to believe in Jesus. Good news travels fast.

So the news traveled to Jerusalem and the church in Jerusalem got to hear about it. And once again, as they had been in the case of Cornelius, they were challenged by this.

What are we going to do? Now, the whole of chapter 11, the rest of chapter 11, it describes how that early fledgling church in Antioch developed from these very first initial days.

And I find this chapter, I believe this chapter is one of the best kept secrets in the Bible. We know all about the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. We know all about the ascension.

[10 : 11] We know all about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in chapter nine. But this chapter somehow kind of, it kind of exists under the radar.

But when you read it and when you realize what's going on, it's actually thoroughly marvelous. There is a huge number of people in Antioch who are now believers.

What's going to happen with them? Now, this was a major question. Because if the church kind of left them by themselves just to get on with it, that would be disastrous.

Because in those days, there was all kinds of weird teachings going on. There were people who made a living going from towns to villages, just spreading weird beliefs, philosophical beliefs or weird religious beliefs.

And if you were gullible enough, then you took this in and you started believing it and you went down the wrong road. Now, the church couldn't leave all these people at the mercy of weird sects and beliefs.

[11 : 18] They had to make sure that this big church that contained so many people were taught the right material that would strengthen their faith and that would reinforce what they had come to commit to.

So, here's what the church did. I want to think of three things, three needs that the church, that early fledgling church in Antioch, three marks, if you like, three requirements that they needed.

Or three features, if you like, of this early church in Antioch. The first thing that they needed was encouragement.

And that's something that's really important. And so, the church at Jerusalem sent their number one master encourager.

One of their leaders. Their best guy. A man called Barnabas. And he is the one who sent as a delegate from Jerusalem to go and visit, to see what's going on.

[12 : 45] Perhaps there was some suspicion amongst the Jerusalem believers. Was this genuine? Was this some kind of ecstatic euphoria? Was this an uncontrolled emotional response?

Was it real? But when Barnabas arrived in Antioch, it didn't take him very long before he discovered this was the real thing. These people have been impacted by God.

Their lives have been changed in great numbers. And he couldn't help but rejoicing at what he saw. This was absolutely wonderful.

But. But. But. No matter how wonderful it was, it was a huge challenge to Barnabas.

And Barnabas put into effect his greatest quality. What he is known for. Let's stop for a moment and think about Barnabas. I think Barnabas is one of the great heroes.

[13 : 48] One of the most outstanding figures of people in the Bible. We first come across him in early on in Acts, in Acts chapter 4, shortly after the day of Pentecost.

He came from Cyprus. And his real name was Joseph. Barnabas wasn't really his name. Barnabas was the name they gave him. Because it kind of fitted his character.

But the first time we read about him was in Acts chapter 4. Remember when the disciples, they kind of formed into a sort of community. Much more so than the church is today.

Or it has been any other time in history, I don't think. But it was very much more communal. And the church in Jerusalem, they had to help each other.

Part of the fellowship was meeting each other's needs. And there was significant poverty amongst Christians at that time. And so that required those who had goods and money.

[14 : 55] They had to give that for the benefit of those who didn't have. And Barnabas was one of those who had something. He had a field. And he sold it. And he brought the money. And he committed the money.

He contributed the money to the needs of the church. So that it went towards the needs of the poor. And that was part of their witness. They witnessed to the outside world as to the genuineness, the authenticity of their faith.

By their love, their practical love for one another. So that's the first thing we find out about Barnabas. Second thing we find out is his name.

His name means the son of encouragement. And lo and behold, when he gets sent to Antioch in this chapter, guess what he starts to do?

He encourages these new Christians to remain steadfast in the Christian faith. He does so by encouraging them.

[16 : 01] What does that mean? Barnabas strikes me that he was... Let me put it like this. He was the kind of guy where five minutes in his company and you felt different.

Have you ever met people like that? I've known two or three Christians like that in my lifetime. They're gifted in a particular way where they're able to just lift you.

They're able to strengthen you. They're able to just by their presence and by the way in which they interact with you. You ever met people like that?

I'm sure you have. I can think of several people I've met. And just in case... And it appears that Barnabas was like this. But just in case you sit back and you think to yourself, Oh, well, you know, I'm glad that there are some people that are gifted like that, but not me.

Think again. Is it really not you? Is there no way in which our gifts can be channeled so that we become an encouragement to others?

[17 : 14] Is it not the case that too often we think of ourselves before we think of others? Even in conversation.

Even in conversation. Where when we're speaking to someone, we draw the conversation to ourselves rather than deferring to someone else.

It's so easy. Barnabas was the kind of person who seemed to automatically think of the other person first, before himself.

That's the reason why he chose to sell his field. Because he was so concerned about the needs of others. And I think at a time like this, where I think there is going to be increased need.

Even amongst Christians, amongst the church, there is going to be increased need. People are suffering right now. This may be an opportunity. In fact, it is an opportunity for more of us to become Barnabases.

[18 : 22] And to exercise that gift of generosity towards others. And generosity exists in so many different ways.

He was the son of encouragement. We can all be sons and daughters of encouragement. The church needs people like Barnabas.

So that's the first thing that they needed. They needed the encouragement that someone like Barnabas could give them. But the second need that there was in Antioch was teaching.

These people had come from nowhere. They'd come from ignorance. They'd come from a pagan background. They knew nothing of the Jesus in whom they had come to trust.

They knew something. They knew the basics. Otherwise, who are they trusting in? They obviously knew something. But they didn't know much. And Barnabas was deeply concerned that they be taught the right material.

[19 : 32] The right knowledge. He knew the right knowledge. He knew the right knowledge. He knew the right knowledge. Which is absolutely essential to grow in the Christian life. And he knew of only one person who was able, who would be able and gifted to come amongst them and to teach them what the Christian faith was all about.

And that person was Saul of Tarsus. Now, Saul of Tarsus. I don't have time to go into his history. But he was an outstanding scholar.

A Jewish scholar who had been amazingly transformed on the road to Damascus in Acts chapter 9. But he hadn't been seen for years.

That's something that not many people know about. Actually, Acts is a condensing of the facts. Saul hadn't been seen for years.

I'm not quite sure why. But he had gone home to the place where he came from. To Tarsus. Which was another hundred miles up the road. So Barnabas took it upon himself to travel the hundred miles.

[20 : 45] And that was quite a long distance in those days. To travel the hundred miles to Tarsus. To look for Saul. Now, here's the really mysterious bit.

The way that, if you read this verse. Because the original Greek language, it tells us that he had a hard time looking for Saul. He had a hard time finding him.

And here's my question. If Saul is in his own hometown Tarsus. And if he's been there for years. As he was.

Why does Barnabas have to have. Why is it so difficult for Barnabas to find him? That's a mystery.

And it's a mystery that's taxed the brains of many biblical scholars. This verse has. It's a really enigmatic verse. Because it suggests that Barnabas did not find Saul right away.

[21 : 48] He had to go looking for him. Now, Tarsus wasn't a big place. I often think of, you know, these detective stories where a detective is looking for someone.

And he's got a photograph of him. And he goes to his hometown. And he goes around the streets. Showing people the photograph. And saying, do you know where this man lives? Or do you know where this man lives? And I often. Well, of course, there were no photographs in those days.

But I often picture Barnabas going around the streets of Tarsus and asking, do you know this man Saul? Now, it's inconceivable that they didn't know him.

Because he was from there. So why is it so difficult? Could it be that every person Barnabas asked claimed they didn't know him?

Do you know Saul? No. Do you know this man Saul? Never heard of him. Do you know Saul?

[22 : 51] No. Nothing to do with me. And the reason for that is that when you became a Christian, very often your family and your friends and your relatives disowned you.

Paul said once, I have suffered the loss of all things for the sake of Christ. And that included his family and his friends and his relatives.

Barnabas had a hard time finding Saul in his own town. But eventually he did find him. And he took him back to Antioch. And that was the beginning of Saul's re-involvement from then on in the work of the gospel.

And for a year, Saul taught the people and strengthened them. He taught them the truth of God. That there is only one God.

He taught them the truth of the Trinity that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now that's something that is, even for those of us who have studied the Bible for years, that is still something which taxes our minds.

[24 : 09] He taught them about Jesus, who Jesus was, and why it was necessary for Jesus. Many of them would never have known the Old Testament. He would have taught them about Abraham and Moses and Isaac and the prophets.

And they would have gone through the Old Testament. And they would have seen how all of the Old Testament points to the coming of Jesus. And as a result of all of that, the church was strengthened.

And guess what else happens? The church was identified all the more clearly by what they stood for.

The church was called Christians. They were called Christians for the first time. This is another milestone in the book of Acts. They were called Christians for the first time in Antioch.

That was the very beginning of the designation. And it was a derogatory term. It wasn't a respectful term. It was, well, these Christians.

[25 : 24] Very negative. Same way as it is in some parts of the world today. If you're a Christian, then you're on the margins of society. You're on the edges of lunacy and weirdness.

That's where it all begins. Christians in Antioch.

So what's happening is that the church is developing and is becoming strengthened and is becoming steadfast in their faith. But they're becoming well known for who they are.

This major section of society who believe and follow Jesus Christ. And it's obvious that they do.

It's a huge challenge, isn't it? To all of us who follow Jesus. To what extent is our faith obvious and evident to people around us?

[26 : 28] Do people know? How long would it take for someone to figure out that you're a Christian? How long do you think it would be? Of course, there's a different answer for every person depending on your circumstances.

But it's a really challenging question, isn't it? How long would it take for someone who works with you, for example, or someone who's your neighbour? Or someone who's your unbelieving friend to work out that you are a Christian?

I'm just leaving that with you. The third thing that they need, and I'm going to finish here, was to be involved in the wider church.

And this happened at the end of the chapter when there was a famine. And news of the famine came by way of a prophecy that was made by this man called Agabus who'd come from Jerusalem.

And he prophesied that there would be a famine. This was God's way of warning the church as to what was going to happen so that they would be ready for it. And it did happen.

[27 : 34] And the church was ready for it. If you were in a Bible study, here's my last challenge.

If you were in a Bible study and you were studying this passage and you read about Agabus coming down to Antioch and telling the people there was going to be a famine, and the way in which the believers in Antioch responded by giving and contributing to the needs of the wider church because many, many of their fellow Christians were going to suffer through this famine.

How do you think the Bible study would go? Well, let me tell you. Let me guess. I guess that your Bible study would be asking, does prophecy still exist in the church today?

And that would take up the entire time in the Bible study. And by the end of it, you would have no time to get on to what the Christians did to help each other.

There is a massive challenge at the end of this chapter for all of us. And it comes back to what I said at the very beginning with Barnabas. To what extent are we as Christians going to rise to the challenge of helping one another?

[29 : 01] Because it's not just the help that we give to one another, but it is the witness that there is in that help. All men, said Jesus, will know, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love one to another.

And that love has to be practical. It has to be real. It's not just saying, I love you. It is the kind of love that acts out of devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ and what he did for us.

I find this chapter such a marvellous chapter. It's so inspiring, so encouraging. And I hope that in that same spirit that we continue to live and act and witness as God's people, as those who have come to discover the truth of what Jesus has done for us.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we pray that you will continue to work in us as you work from the very beginning in the Church of Antioch. We pray that you will work within us and create within us that enthusiasm, that encouragement, that strengthening of our faith and our commitment to Jesus.

We pray that you will fill us with your spirit in Jesus' name. Amen.