

Acts 11:19-30 Antioch the next Jerusalem

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Let's open up God's word this morning to Acts 11:19

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We pick up the story once again after having read about Peter going for the first time to the Gentiles after being told by God through a vision not to consider anything unclean that God has made clean.

That was a vital key for the gospel to spread beyond the national boundaries of Israel, beyond the chosen race of people the Jews. Paul sums up this inheritance that the Jews enjoyed in Romans 9.

Rom 9:1-5

1 I am speaking the truth in Christ-I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit-2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.5 To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

The good news that salvation was now to be found in Jesus alone and was freely available to the whole world - inspired the disciples to venture out beyond their borders with the incredibly freeing, but equally as dangerous gospel message.

Acts 11:19-30

Verse 19-20

19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.**20** But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

So as mentioned the word was going out to only Jews but there were some who speaking to the Greek speaking gentiles and notice what they were preaching - the Lord Jesus.

The revelation that had slowly but surely been sinking in over the past 15-20 years was that this man was none other than God himself - the Lord Jesus.

Of course this would have sent their theology into a loop because these were Jews who

believed that there was only one God and to proclaim that this man was Lord was the equivalent to blasphemy in the site of the Jews and insurrection in the sight of the Romans who held the Caesars to be the only Lord.

So you can see that during this time the message of the Lord Jesus was a dangerous thing to be preaching and teaching about.

For our day preaching about Jesus has taking on a completely different complexion as we live in an age - when in the west, affluence, security, prosperity and happiness are the gods in our lives and we can often turn Jesus into a good luck charm that can bring us all of these things. The truth is that he does BUT they are always a by-product of our submission to him as Lord. As soon as we put any of these above him they become Lord and he becomes the means to an end.

They preached the Lord Jesus, not someone you could take or leave but someone to whom every person alive owes their love, devotion, allegiance, submission and worship.

Verse 21

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

And because they were resolute in preaching the pure message of Jesus - people believed. You remember that Jesus himself said that if he is lifted up he will draw all men unto himself.

Also notice that those who believed did something else - they turned to the Lord. That is they changed the way they lived. They followed him, they lived for him and they were prepared to die for him.

It is not enough to simply believe in Jesus, the demons believe in Jesus but that is not going to make a difference to them - we need to turn and can I say continually turn to Jesus.

Verse 22

The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Now this would have been a testing time for the apostles that stayed at Jerusalem because they were no doubt entrusted with the message but now the message was bursting at the seams and was getting out of control or out of their control.

They could have shut the thing down and criticized it and snubbed what was going on but instead we read that they sent Barnabas to take a closer look. They were open to what God was doing apart from them.

Verse 23-24

23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

And when Barnabas came what did he see? He saw the grace of God. Isn't that an interesting phrase?

We often feel the grace of God ourselves and it is a wonderful thing to experience it but to see it in others, this is a real blessing and this is exactly what happened to Barnabas, seeing the grace of God made him glad.

What exactly does the grace of God do in a person's life and how can it be seen? To me the one thing that the grace of God does in a person's life is to first and foremost fully humble it as the person comes to realize that without it he/she would be lost forever and that nothing was or is done to earn or merit it.

For the person in that place, gladness and a sense of wonder fills their lives and looking down on anyone else including themselves for not "making it" disappears completely and an extension of grace to others is the result.

I believe it would have been this that Barnabas would have seen in these people and for this he was glad.

Verse 25-26

25 So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Once again we see Barnabas whose heart was for God and his people, go looking for the one who was initially fully against the church and seeks to bring him once again, and not to Jerusalem but to what was to become the next Jerusalem - Antioch.

And it was here that another "base of operations" began as it had in Jerusalem and it was here that both of these men taught together many people for a whole year.

The gospel needs to be taught, we cannot grasp it in an instant although it changes our lives in an instant, it should occupy our minds, hearts and souls for the whole of our lives as we increasingly appreciate its beauty and wonder.

As someone has said it is not the ABC of our faith but it is the A to Z of our faith. This is why Paul writes to the Roman Christians whom he had never met with such warmth, depth and clarity about the gospel - to teach them. I believe that as we become more and more secure in our understand and appreciation of the gospel our witness to those who don't believe becomes more and more natural and less and less like a sales pitch as we come to know who we have believed and it is him that alone can turn a heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

It was also the place where the disciples were first nicknamed Christians. This was a label that was given to them by others and not by themselves. It simply means Christ Ones or Christ Followers in much the same way as the Jesus People of the late 1960's and early 70's were called Jesus Freaks because they were passionate followers of Jesus and as a result people made up a name to describe and perhaps in some cases to put down who they were.

In Antioch this new or emerging faith was gaining public attention and as a result was given a label.

In finishing off this morning I want us to ask ourselves are we just slinking our way through life like stealth fighter planes, going under the radar or is our witness causing a stir and causing others to sit up and take notice - for good or bad?

Jesus said we are in the world but not of it and I fear that we can often be in the world and so much like the world that no-one would even think twice to label us anything.

This is not intended to bring "a heavy" on us but rather as an exhortation for us to examine who we are both when we gather together as Christians and who we are when we are out there in the world.

I have found that it is much easier to be a Christian when we meet as a church than it is to be in the world. Do you find the same?

Let's ask God that we would be people that are not intimidated by the new atheists or intimidated by the apparent un-coolness of following Jesus and let's look for opportunities to connect people with God for their sake, our joy and God's glory.

Let's pray.