

† The last place (and people) you would expect

- **Least likely place (or person) to see rapid growth of the gospel? To hear, consider, believe, become disciples... where's the last place you would expect this to happen?**
- **What would it take for this to happen?**
 - **Today, lots of resources. I think any believer would say "God has to do it", and "we've got to pray".... But when it comes down to it what we really trust in- too often- is our strategy, our technology, and our personalities.**
- **In Acts 11, Luke takes us back to the aftermath of the martyrdom of Stephen- when Paul's persecution kicked into high gear and the church was scattered. As these believers fanned out across the Mediterranean, they took the gospel with them.**
- **Luke describes several places and regions these believers relocated, and one that is going to be of great significance. If you could go back to the 1st century Mediterranean world and people... what is the least likely place for the Gospel to take hold, this city would have been their answer.**
- **But even more remarkable than WHERE this explosion of the Gospel happened is HOW it happened.**
- **The story of Antioch is yet another picture of God doing what we never would have expected, in places we never would have selected, through people- in all honestly- we probably would have rejected.**
- **This city- where Jesus' disciples were first called Christians- was the ancient metropolis of ANTIOCH.... BUT BEFORE WE GO THERE... today is Sunday March 28th, PALM.. PE, TO**

† It started with persecution

- **A fascinating thing to do- if you like history- is to study how Christianity spread around the world, starting all the way back in ACTS. It happened in lots of ways, from missionary movements, to political upheaval, to the actions of individuals that God used in unexpected ways. In Acts 11 we see another force spreading the gospel. In a story that would be repeated countless times across the following centuries, the initial spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem into the broader Roman Empire STARTED WITH PERSECUTION.**

¹⁹ Now those who had 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. ²⁰ 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.

- **First, let's get an idea of this geography, just where these early disciples went. SO LET'S GO TO THE MAP. (embedded video)**
 - **Map of locations from Acts 11/ Current map/ Texas scale overlay**
 - **These locations had Jewish communities, but they were primarily Gentile- Dominated by Greek and Roman culture.**

- **TIMEFRAME is disputed on these events, but very generally, the stoning of Stephen/ Paul's persecution is around 34 AD. Then, across the next following years, these early Christian missionaries- themselves just regular people seeking new homes- traveled across north Africa and up the Mediterranean coast. By the time we get to the events in our text today, it's been 9 years since Stephens's death.**
- **These persecuted believers first shared the Gospel only to the Jewish communities they encountered, but over time, some of these believers began to purposefully take the Gospel to the Gentiles- the Greeks and Romans- as well.**
- **WE SEE GOD'S PLAN UNFOLDING HERE. While Peter is receiving his vision and preaching to Cornelius (around AD40), other disciples – completely independently- are taking the gospel to the gentiles in Antioch.**
- **SO, LETS TALK ABOUT ANTIOCH**

✠ Welcome to Antioch!

- **Ancient Antioch was a thriving commercial and cultural center and the third largest city in the Roman Empire. A center of Greco-Roman culture, the city was known for its immorality, as well as polytheistic and hedonistic religions whose worship included cultic prostitution.**
- **Antioch's estimated population was around 600,000. It's Jewish community was around 25,000, or four percent. The first disciples who arrived in Antioch were likely Jewish themselves, and would have sought out this small community.**
- **HOWEVER, this Jewish community was almost completely Hellenistic in nature (remember, it as the Hellenist Jews who fought against Stephen)- of all the possible Jewish community, this one would have been the most resistant to the message of Jesus**
- **SO, you have a city and culture almost wholly opposed to any gospel witness.**
- **AND YET, the gospel in Antioch spread like wildfire. HOW? What was it about these first Christ followers that led to the rapid growth of the church in this overwhelmingly pagan city?**

²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

- **Church- this is a truth we see throughout Acts, and all of Christian history. The church spread, the work of the Gospel grew, because GOD DID IT. He did this work THROUGH his people, but... and I know this sounds obvious, but GOD'S WORK, if it is God's work, is always the WORK OF GOD.**
- **SO, what was it about these Christ Followers that led them to be so incredibly effective in How God was working through them? LUKE continues, and he tells us....**

✠ What the Grace of God had done

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. **(Remember Barnabas? He is the one who first donated the sale of his land to the Jerusalem church, later, he is the one who befriended and advocated for Saul when he first came to Jerusalem from Damascus)**

²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

- **We see it again- who was the one working to bring about what has happening in Antioch? It was GOD. Barnabas saw what the GRACE- the goodness, the presence, the very nature- of what God had done!**
- **Luke describes Barnabas as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith... and he encouraged these new believers to stay TRUE TO THE LORD with ALL THEIR HEARTS. We will come back to that..**
- **BUT HERE'S THE QUESTION. What were the resources- what was the essential attribute and resource of Barnabas and these believers to be used by God in such a remarkable way? THEY WERE DEVOTED TO THE LORD, THEY WERE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT, DEPENDENT UPON GOD AND FULLY AVAILABLE TO HIM. They were people defined by their love and faith of Jesus Christ.**
- **We are told nothing of any other resources or skills they possessed- I mean, most of them were refugees in a hostile environment. And yet, because they were surrendered and faithful to God, through them, MANY PEOPLE in Antioch were brought to the Lord.**
- **SO, Barnabas sees all of this, all these new believers, and he thinks... these people need to be taught, disciple.... And I need HELP! But rather than sending for Peter or the other apostles from Jerusalem, he turns to a person we now welcome back to the stage.. SAUL.**

† Welcome back Saul

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ 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

- **WHY SAUL? We last saw Saul about six years earlier when he escaped from Jerusalem (with aid from Barnabas and others) and returned to his home in Tarsus. ITS SO COOL TO SEE HOW GOD IS AT WORK HERE!**
- **TARSUS, it turns out, is about 150 miles from Antioch (Eagle to DIA)... not that far.**
- **We also know that Saul is a HELLENISTIC JEW... so he would be more readily accepted (potentially) by the Jewish community of Antioch, and he was far more familiar with the customs and culture of Antioch than the Apostles in Jerusalem.**
- **But the really cool thing is that Saul comes to Antioch to help with the church... that was started by Jews escaping persecution in Jerusalem, and that persecution was led by SAUL.**
- **THIS IS SOMETHING THAT ONLY GOD COULD BE DOING... WHICH HE WAS.**
- **And so, Barnabas and Saul become a team, and for a year they disciple great numbers of people, which leads to a fascinating detail... It is here in Antioch- this pagan center of the eastern Roman Empire, that the disciples were first called CHRISTIANS.**

† Why the disciples were called Christians

The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

- **Why is this significant? What did the name mean?**
- **First, the language Luke uses indicates this was a name given to the believers by the surrounding community, not by themselves.**
- **There's a persistent teaching that the name means "Little Christs", but this is not true. It basically means OF CHRIST, FROM.... BELONGING TO CHRIST. The construction is the same as how we refer to people as belonging their home city or nationality... ColoradANS, RomANS, Itallians, AmericANS.**

- *The surrounding community looked at these Christ Followers... Who, by the way, we PROFOUNDLY COUNTERCULTURAL in contrast to the broader Antioch community... and they were essentially called “Those who are of Christ”*
- *This is so important as it demonstrates that from the word go, the most definitive characteristic of this first Gentile church was the CENTRALITY OF CHRIST... everything about what they believed, what they taught, and how they even lived proclaimed that Jesus Christ was the messiah, and their source of LIFE.*
- *One other detail, is this new name given the disciples indicates the growing diversity and multicultural nature of the church. You could no longer call describe these believers as an offshoot of Judaism. They were a mixed group, Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, Romans... and they needed a way to be identified... and so they were IDENTIFIED WITH CHRIST.*
- *Okay... As Luke wraps up this section, he gives us a fascinating detail, something so improbable it’s easy just to blow by it without really noticing... but what we see next was again SOMETHING ONLY GOD COULD DO.*

† What only God could do

²⁷During this time (**around AD 40-44 now**) some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One 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.) ²⁹The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

- *Prophets came from Jerusalem... what’s up with that? These were not prophets in the OT sense of the word- they were not writing or speaking SCRIPTURE... many scholars describe them more as particularly gifted teachers, encouragers... although in this case God uniquely uses one of them- AGABUS- to help prepare the church for a coming crisis- a severe famine that would spread over the Roman world.*
- *THIS DID HAPPEN. We know from multiple other ancient sources that a recurring famine plagued the Roman world during the reign of Emperor Claudius, with specific descriptions of the famine impacting Judea (Jerusalem) from around 44-48 AD. THEREFORE, Agabus’ prophecy, and it’s result, happened before, or very near the beginning of the famine.*
- *WHAT WAS THE RESULT? This is the truly amazing part of the story!*
- *Prior to the stoning of Stephen, if you could teleport back to this part of the world, and ask a person on the street... WHO ARE THE TWO TYPES OF PEOPLE IN THE WORLD, WHO HATE AND OPPOSE EACH OTHER. Answer? Jews and Gentiles. In Ephesians, Paul describes this opposition as a ‘dividing wall of hostility’.*
- *SO, here in Antioch, we have a Christian (I can use that word now) community made up of BOTH Jews and Gentiles, but almost certainly MOSTLY Gentiles- Greeks and Romans. And they are proactively gathering funds- from individual believers- there was no central church with it’s own resources- gathering funds AHEAD OF THE NEED- to go to help who? The JEWISH believers in Judea, who they refer to as BROTHERS AND SISTERS.*
- *Consider how God is working? Fleeing persecution, Jewish believers bring the message of LIFE to these Gentiles, who in turn raise funds to help with the physical needs of the Jewish believers back in Judea. Oh, and the chief teacher of these Antioch believers is the same person who was the chief persecutor that started this entire cycle in the first place.*

- **HOW DID THE CHURCH- the message of NEW LIFE, HOPE- penetrate the seemingly impenetrable and hostile Greco-Roman culture, and then proceed to rapidly grow and BEAR GREAT FRUIT? How did that happen?**
- **It happened because GOD DID IT, through the lives of everyday men and women who were encouraged, surrendered, faithful, and who stayed true to the Lord with all their hearts.**
- **TODAY... how will the church penetrate the increasingly- seemingly- impenetrable culture of a highly secular, if not faith-hostile culture? What do we need? Political power? Great speakers and powerful personalities? Dynamic worship leaders and musicians? Media, technology, events, and money? HEAR! God can work through all of these, but ALL OF THESE ARE IRRELEVANT unless what happens is a WORK OF GOD, through the lives of everyday men and women who are encouraged, surrendered, faithful, and stay true to the Lord with all their hearts.**

† Staying True

- **I'll leave you with this. What does it look like for you- and for us as a church- to 'stay-remain- true to the Lord with ALL OUR HEARTS?'**
- **As we go through this coming week, may that be our prayer. BECAUSE, you know what next Sunday is, don't you?**
- **Friends, if you are struggling because you are looking around our world, our own culture here in America, and you only see things that upset, discourage, anger, and instill fear... WITH ALL LOVE, YOU NEED TO check your vision. Because any thing, event, person, or circumstance that could cause us to look down in despair... THESE ALL HAVE BEEN OVERCOME, THESE ALL FADE in the miraculous, TRUE, HISTORY CHANGING AND LIFE GIVING LIGHT of what we celebrate next Sunday. BECAUSE OF EASTER.**