

39. The Lord Spread the Church to Antioch

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to understand why the Gentiles spoke with tongues the first time that they received the Holy Spirit. We also saw that we want to help our children learn to clearly explain the meaning of repentance so that others will know how to turn from their sin of unbelief and come to God through Christ. In our topic today, we are going to see that the church also began to spread to Gentiles in other areas. We will see what the Lord chose to do in the city of Antioch which was the third largest city in the Roman Empire.

Acts 11:19-21 says, “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” We saw that after Stephen was stoned to death, a great persecution arose against the church and many of the believers fled to other areas. Acts 8:4 says, “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” Three areas where the people fled were to Phoenicia (the coastal area north of Galilee), to Cyprus (a large island about 60 miles southwest of Antioch) and to Antioch (the third largest city in the Roman Empire and located more than 200 miles north of Galilee). The only cities in the Roman Empire that were larger than Antioch were Rome and Alexandria.

Here, we see that they were preaching the Word, but only to other Jews, until some of them came to the city of Antioch. In Antioch, the believers began sharing the message of the death and resurrection of Christ with the Greek-speaking people of that city. We see that the Lord chose to work in a mighty way as the believers began to share the message of the death and resurrection of Christ with Gentiles living in the city of Antioch. We read that a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Psalm 67:4-5 says, “Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy! For You shall judge the people righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah. Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You.” Truly there was joy in heaven as the Lord saw more Jews begin sharing the Word of God and the message of salvation with the Gentiles.

The leaders of the church at Jerusalem also responded when they heard what the Lord was doing in the city of Antioch. Acts 11:22-24 says, “Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.” The leaders in Jerusalem had watched Barnabas grow in his spiritual leadership and realized that he was a man who would be an effective teacher of those who were Gentiles and spoke the Greek language since Acts 4:36 says that Barnabas was a Levite from the country of Cyprus where the Greek language and culture was dominant.

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch and saw how the Lord had showed His grace to the Greeks, he rejoiced with great joy. He immediately began to encourage these new believers in their spiritual

growth. A purpose is something that is determined. This word is used of God in Ephesians 1:11 where we read, “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.” Barnabas encouraged the believers in Antioch to determine in their hearts to continue with the Lord.

We learn about three characteristics of the godly character of Barnabas. He was a good man. The word translated “good” means *that which is honorable or excellent*. We saw in chapter nine that Dorcas was full of good works. Barnabas was also a man full of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 6:3, we read, “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.” We see that the seven chosen in Acts were full of the Holy Spirit. Then, Acts 6:5 says, “And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.” In these two verses, we see that Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit and faith. These same characteristics were present in the life of Barnabas.

Acts 11:25-26 says, “Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Barnabas had introduced Saul to the leaders in the church at Jerusalem about ten years earlier. At that time, Saul was only in Jerusalem for fifteen days. Then, Acts 9:29-30 says, “And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.” Although Barnabas had probably not seen Saul during those ten years, Barnabas did not forget Saul. He knew that Paul would be an ideal partner to help these Greeks who were new believers in their spiritual growth. As a result, Barnabas left for Tarsus to try and find Saul.

The Lord led Barnabas to Saul and they returned to the city of Antioch. There they taught the new believers for an entire year. During this time, they taught a great many people, because there were many who had become followers of Christ. In fact, so many became followers of Christ and had their lives so changed by what they were learning that those who rejected Christ called them Christians. The word “Christian” was originally used as a term to mock and make fun of those who followed Christ, because it meant “little christs” or followers of Christ. Since this term was used to make fun of Christians, Peter later wrote in 1 Peter 4:16, “Yet if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.” Instead of feeling ashamed when people call us Christians, we should glorify God that our lives are so changed that the people who see us would call us “little christs”. That name is actually a real compliment when it is spoken about us, because people realize that our lives are so different.

We see that one of the ways that these new Christians changed was that they became concerned for Christians in other places. Acts 11:27-30 says, “And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the

brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.” A number of Christians came from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of these men was a man named Agabus. In Acts 21:10-11, we see that he made another important prophecy. And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ““When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”””

Agabus made an important prophecy while visiting Antioch. He said that the Holy Spirit had shown him that there would be a great famine. Ephesians 2:19-20 says, “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*.” The prophets in the Old Testament gave us the written Word of God. Before the New Testament was written, certain prophets predicted events that would happen in the near future. Both the apostles and the prophets provided the foundation upon which the church is built.

The event that Agabus prophesied was fulfilled a short time later during the reign of Claudius Caesar. He was the emperor of Rome from 41-54 A.D. In the Old Testament, one of the requirements given to prophets was that every single prophecy that a prophet prophesied had to come true. Deuteronomy 18:22 says, ““When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that *is* the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”” In the Old Testament, false prophets whose prophecies did not come true were to be put to death. Here, we see that the prophecy made by Agabus came true during the reign of Claudius Caesar.

When the disciples in Antioch heard about the coming worldwide famine, they became concerned for the Christians who lived in Jerusalem. Those Christians had sold their lands and possessions to help believers from other places learn to share the message of the death and resurrection of Christ. Now, these Christians in Antioch saw an opportunity to share with those Christians so they could buy food during the famine. We see that each person gave according to his ability. Some had more that they could share and others had less, but they all gave according to their ability. This is one of many key examples of the giving of Christians in the New Testament. They gave because their hearts were controlled by the love of Christ.

Then, the church at Antioch sent this gift to the elders at Jerusalem by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. Here, we see that the men who had helped these Christians in their spiritual growth were the ones the church selected to take their gift to Jerusalem. We also want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to give to the Lord according to their ability, because giving brings blessing to both those who give and those who receive. May the Lord richly bless you as you show your children how to give to help others.