

Acts 4:32-37: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 June 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 4 verses 32 to 37 The end of Acts chapter 4 expresses the unity of the church and also introduces us to the character of Barnabas.

The powerful unity of the early church in Jerusalem is manifested in their sharing their possessions, this is something that has already been spoken of in Acts chapter 2 verses 44 to 45 Within the ancient world it was an ideal of friendship in some quarters that people would share all their possessions.

This unity of the church, the fact that they are one heart and soul, is shown in their willingness to give to each other, to depend upon each other in this way. The apostles bear witness with great signs and wonders to the resurrection of Christ.

Their testimony to the resurrection is itself associated with an attendant witness of confirming powerful signs. We read of these in Hebrews chapter 2 verses 3 and 4 The message of the resurrection then was not just words, it was confirmed with powerful signs that accompanied the apostles' message.

The Jerusalem church's practice of having things in common would have had an immediate witnessing force in the context. They were selling property in Jerusalem and then giving the money to serve the church.

[2 : 1 7] On a more general level this was an expression of their desire to build up treasure in heaven. They were prepared to sell those things that were most tying them to the earth, and in so doing to express their commitment to something greater, the commitment of the good of the body of Christ, giving their money for that cause.

But there was also the fact that Jesus had declared that Jerusalem would be destroyed within a generation. To sell real estate in Jerusalem would be a confirmation of the prophetic witness of Christ.

You can imagine a large number of the Christians in the early church in Jerusalem did this, and it would lead to a quite significant change in the real estate market in Jerusalem. People would notice, they would notice that this group was suddenly getting rid of all their property in Jerusalem. They might wonder at the reason for this practice, and if they asked, they would find out, among other things, that Christ had declared the destruction of Jerusalem within just a few decades. Beyond Jesus' statements about Jerusalem, though, we should pay attention to his statements about wealth more generally. Jesus spoke a very great deal about wealth and the danger of wealth, the difficulty of someone who was rich entering the kingdom of God.

[3 : 3 0] He encounters the rich ruler, Zacchaeus. He talks about the unjust steward and the rich man and Lazarus. All of these stories, encounters and parables have at their heart the theme of wealth.

Jesus charges the rich ruler to sell what he has and give to the poor. Zacchaeus sells a significant portion of his property and gives to the poor. The fact that there was no one in need among them looks back to Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 4-5 and 7-8.

But there will be no poor among you, for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, if only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.

If among you one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

Deuteronomy 15 tells us on the one hand that there will always be poor among them, but on the other hand that there will not be poor among them if they are faithful to the Lord. How do we bring these two things together?

[4 : 42] Well, there will always be need, there will always be people in poverty. And yet, if Israel is generous and obeys the voice of the Lord, the poor need not be left in poverty and neediness.

There will never be a point where there are not needs to be met, but those needs can be met if they are faithful. Beyond this, having all things in common is an expression of the spiritual unity of the church, their one in heart and soul.

This unity expressed in the provision of goods to those who are in need within the church is not restricted to the book of Acts. This is something that we see elsewhere in the story of the church, nor is it something that's a practice restricted in all ways to Jerusalem.

The church is to be a place of mutual concern, where when one person suffers, all suffer, or when one rejoices, all rejoice. In this respect, it's like a family.

The Apostle Paul speaks about this dynamic in 2 Corinthians 8, verses 13-15. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.

[5 : 52] As it is written, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Paul's referring back to the manor in Exodus chapter 16 here, where everyone gathered equally and had what they need.

However now, some have more and others less. But there is an equalization through willing charity. So the same outcome occurs. Everyone has what they need. But now it's not through the initial distribution, but through the willing gifts of those to whom God has given much.

This is similar to the way that the one gift of the Spirit is represented through manifold gifts of the Spirit. God makes us participants in his giving. God provides for the poor, but he provides for the poor through providing others to give to them, as an expression of his giving.

And we are told on our part that if we give to the poor, we lend to the Lord. That as we give to the poor, we are laying up treasure in heaven. As this practice of giving is practiced between churches, it's a recognition and expression of concrete unity.

This is something that's very important for Paul. The unity of the church is not just a spiritual unity of ideas, or a unity that is very abstract. It's a unity expressed in eating together, in providing financial support for each other.

[7 : 10] In Romans chapter 15 verses 26 to 27 he writes, For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.

For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. It's important that this giving does not occur under compulsion.

It should not be done grudgingly either. People's goods are not forcefully expropriated and then given to the poor, nor is there some command from the apostles that they must do this. Rather it is done freely, as an expression of a willing heart.

Just as the tabernacle was built through the devotion of free will offerings, as people gave of their own willing hearts to the Lord, so the church is being built up as a temple with the willing gifts of the people within it.

Not through compulsion, not through coercion, but of their own free will. And the gift has two recipients. On the one hand it's given to the Lord, it's placed at the apostles' feet as his representatives, but it's also given to the poor.

[8 : 15] These gifts are not just some secular charity. They are gifts by which a new community is being formed, a new commonality, a new union in which rich and poor are brought together.

The heart of the giver is knit to the Lord, but also knit to his neighbour. This all serves as a sign of the unity of the Spirit. When the Lord has knit our hearts to our brothers and sisters, their needs will be seen as matters of our concern.

Barnabas is here introduced as a minor character. Stephen and Philip will be introduced as minor characters in chapter 6, and Saul in the stoning of Stephen at the end of chapter 7.

Each of these three characters will become major characters in time, and the same is true of Barnabas. He will later accompany Paul on his missionary travels. He also advocated for Saul when

others were dubious about his conversion, in Acts 9 verses 26 to 27.

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Christ.

[9 : 29] We also know that Barnabas was a cousin of John Mark, from Colossians chapter 4 verse 10. John Mark's family had a large house in the upper city of Jerusalem, so it's quite likely that Barnabas came from a wider family of considerable wealth and influence, and of importance within the early church.

We're informed that he was a Levite, and while Levites initially did not hold tribal territory, they did have cities and surrounding lands. However, times had changed since then, and Levites did possess land at this time in the first century.

His being a wealthy Levite would also suggest some status. Judas acquired a field through selling Christ into the hands of his enemies. Barnabas sells a field and gives their money to Christ's ministers.

He is exemplary in this respect. Whereas Judas is an example of someone who gives up the most valuable thing of all for his love of money, Barnabas is the exact opposite. And we can see in the following chapter that Barnabas is juxtaposed with Ananias and Sapphira too.

A question to consider. What more can we learn about Barnabas from other references to him in the New Testament?