

# Acts 11:19-30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 07 November 2020

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Acts chapter 11 verses 19 to 30. Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 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. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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. Now in those days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world. This took place in the days of Claudius. So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

From the end of chapter 11 of the book of Acts, the central site in the mission of the church will start to move out from Jerusalem to places like Antioch. Antioch will become the sending church for the mission of Barnabas and Saul. Disputes in Antioch will also later precipitate the calling of the Jerusalem council. Although we have just read to the gospel going to the Gentiles in the story of Cornelius, we go back to events before this to explain the movement out to places like Antioch. It was with the persecution that arose after Stephen's death that Christians scattering throughout the empire began to spread the gospel as they went. This was not a concerted, organised mission. It was just a natural outworking of events. The Lord created the impetus through the persecution, and then the church grew as it followed this unexpected wind of the Spirit. It was a particular group of early disciples that spearheaded this movement, men of Cyprus and Cyrene. It was through such men that the gospel finally arrived in Antioch.

[ 2 : 2 5 ] Prior to this point, the people who had been scattering had been speaking only to Jews. Presumably the people in question here are both Palestinian Jews and Jews of the Diaspora. Antioch was a very natural location to go if you wanted to reach Jews of the Diaspora.

Not only was it one of the top five cities of the empire, it boasted one of the highest populations of Jews outside of the land of Palestine. It is important to remember that the majority of the population of Jews lived outside of the land of Palestine. Jews made up up to 10% of the population of the Roman Empire, and they lived in many different regions of it.

By the time the gospel was spread out through people like Paul, practically every city that they would go to would already have a Jewish community set up within it. All of this really prepared the ground for the gospel to be spread. In Antioch, this new centre for Christianity outside of the land of Palestine, the gospel spread not just to the Diaspora Jews, but also to the Hellenistic community of the city. Proselytes and God-fearers similar to people like Cornelius were now being brought into the orbit of the gospel message. Not only is the gospel taking root in Gentile cities among Jewish communities, it is also being spread in those cities beyond their Jewish populations. The ministry of these Cypriots and Cyrenians receives great success, and news of their work reaches the ears of the church in Jerusalem, who send Barnabas to visit the church. Barnabas back in chapter 4 is described to us as a Levite of Cyprus. As a Cypriot, he probably knew a number of the people who had gone and formed this church in the first place. He might well have had personal reasons to want to visit, along with the official reasons for which he was sent.

The Holy Spirit leads the way in the mission of the early church, but the church is often sent to these places to witness to what the Lord is achieving. The Jerusalem church's official recognition of what God is doing in various parts of the world is an important part of the development that's taking place. As God spreads his people out in the mission of the church, he is also gathering in, joining people together in acts of mutual recognition, particularly in relationship to the source of it all, in the Jerusalem church from which the mission had first proceeded. Barnabas had previously played a mediating role in his recognition of Saul as a true convert, advocating for him to the Jerusalem church, who distrusted the truth of his conversion. In visiting the church, Barnabas is able to encourage and build them up. His presence among them connects them more closely to the life of the wider church, so that they are not just one isolated community. This is something that will be happening throughout the story of the book of Acts, as many missionary journeys serve to connect the many different churches together in a greater fabric of union. As he did back in chapter 4, Luke presents the character of Barnabas in the most glowing categories. Barnabas is a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and his ministry is extremely successful. And so he goes to Tarsus to seek Saul, in order that Saul might help him in his ministry. Barnabas had presumably heard Paul's testimony, and knew that he was a man appointed to bear Christ's name before the Gentiles.

[ 5 : 32 ] It would only seem appropriate that Saul was involved in this mission in Antioch. Tarsus, although it was Saul's birthplace and a site of significant learning, it was not a place where there was as large a Jewish community as there would be in Antioch. Although we might reasonably assume that Saul was engaged in evangelism in the city of Tarsus, he would have far more promising soil for such a ministry in the strategic city of Antioch. While the early Jesus movement referred to itself as the Way and other things like that, in Antioch they were referred to as Christians for the first time, seemingly by outsiders. In this term, their opponents might have sought to characterise them as supporters of a pretended Messiah status. Although it does not seem to be a term that Christians first used of themselves, by the time that Luke wrote the book of Acts, we should presume that it was fairly widespread. Barnabas and Saul ministered in the city of Antioch for a whole year, and even after this year was over, Antioch continued to be a base for them, strengthening the communication between the cities of Antioch and Jerusalem. During this period, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, bringing word of a famine that would afflict the whole world. This famine occurred in the days of Claudius, presumably in 45 to 46 AD.

There are several examples of prophets in the book of Acts. Prophecy was one of the ways in which the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost was manifest, and as a gift within the life of the church, it was given great significance. Prophets seemed to have played a more advisory than directive role. Later on, Agabus would foretell the fact that Paul would be captured and imprisoned in Jerusalem, and many would seek to discourage Paul from going down there. Yet Paul was free to persist in going to Jerusalem without being seen to disobey the word of the Lord in so doing. Here the message concerns a worldwide famine that would particularly afflict the people in Judea. Although described as worldwide, this is hyperbolic. The point is more that the famine is going to be comprehensively affecting the world around Jerusalem. Judea and all the places associated with it are going to be hit by this famine. Egypt, Syria, Judea and Greece are all going to feel its impact. The disciples in Antioch respond by gathering together resources to send to the Judean Christians. This gift to the Christians in Judea and Jerusalem was a way of expressing the unity of the church. Each was giving according to his ability in order to provide for the needs of another part of the church. The church was knit together in one. As men from Jerusalem had served the spiritual needs of those in Antioch, so Antioch, in Judea's time of need, would provide for their material necessities. Later in the ministry of Paul, his mission to the Gentiles involved a collection for the saints in Jerusalem as a very concrete manifestation of the unity of the church as Jew and Gentile that he proclaimed in his theology. A question to consider. How in the story of the church's growth to this point can we see that God is the one directing its growth and its movement outward?