

Sunday 5th May 2024

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[0 : 00] Everybody, do you have your Bibles open as we look at this next section of Acts. Is this me, Phil? Am I making this noise? Move it up. Like that. Did I wave my arms? Kind of better. Okay, if it gets annoying, let's just switch to this one. Is that all right? Great.

So have your Bibles open before we start. Let's just pray, shall we? Lord, we thank you. We thank you for your word. Thank you that you speak. Pray that you'd speak this morning. Lord, not with my words, but with your words. Would you encourage us and build us up, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I wonder if you ever felt really small and powerless. If you're faced with a situation and you think, what difference can I possibly make in this huge world with its systemic problems?

I think that's especially something which, if you're younger, you feel. There's such huge problems, aren't there? And at school, the invitation is, change the world. It makes you feel small sometimes. Maybe you feel that way. Maybe you feel that way even as a Christian. And you look at Bethel and you think, do you know what? I'm really glad that the church is here. That's good. I really, you know, what impact are we going to make outside those doors?

[1 : 35] I've felt like that sometimes. Even if Jesus is making us into good, clean water, we're just a tiny drop, diluted out there in a huge ocean full of all kinds of other things. Small.

If you're paying attention, then you'll see that in our passage, actually, Jesus tells us that we are part of something bigger than this world. And that he is at work through us by his saving grace. And our passage reminds us that God can use ordinary, sometimes anonymous feeling individuals like us.

It's to start churches all over the world. And churches are how he saves people. It reminds us that he's in control even in difficult circumstances and that he is bigger than the ocean that we swim in. That he's building a kingdom of good news and he's planting little tropical islands in that enormous ocean as he sends people out. Shows us, really, that God's grace turns the pain of Christians, the pain that Christians experience, into kingdom growth.

Not just growth as individuals, but growth in his family. And there's something here, too, about how God strengthens his church and how churches are born as well.

[3 : 02] And that's something that should interest us, shouldn't it? If we want Bethel to be strengthened this year, if we want to grow as a church, if we possibly even want to plant a church in the coming years.

So let's walk through this story in three sections and let's see how God's grace turns Christian pain into kingdom growth. The first section, verses 19 to 21.

Look at verse 19 with me. Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed, travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among the Jews.

I want you to just imagine for a minute how it would feel to be one of those folks. We're forced to leave your home, your town, your country, your family, some of them at least.

Certainly your friends because of your faith in the Lord Jesus. I expect you'd probably feel enormously dislocated, wouldn't you? Not just in the literal sense, but in your heart, in the emotional sense.

[4 : 08] It's your miles from home. All those friends that supported me and I supported, suddenly I'm distanced from because of my faith. Why has that happened, God?

Probably felt like a disaster. And then what's the backdrop? Well, the backdrop is Stephen's death. That tragic public lynching of an inspirational leader, which probably left a lot of the disciples with some sort of trauma.

Isn't it? You see that kind of thing happen or hear of it happening, as well as a sense of amazement. It still happens today, of course. More to Christians than anyone else, dying for their faith, forced to leave.

But it must have been so tempting to just give up at this point. Sorry, God, the cost is too high. And then they land in a massive multicultural city, that's Antioch, with 600,000 inhabitants, most likely, no church.

And they think, why am I here? What am I doing? And God, what are you doing? Verse 20.

[5 : 21] 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. And the Lord's hand was with them.

And a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. So what is God doing? He's at work in these people, isn't he? These beautiful, struggling people do just what Jesus asked us to do at the beginning of Acts.

They're his witnesses. They tell people the good news about the Lord Jesus. That's what it means to be a witness. And God's hand is at work, verse 21. And he turns, by his grace, their pain and their seeming defeat into kingdom growth and glory.

He doesn't lead them back home and give everybody there a good telling off for being mean, does he? That's not what he does. Instead, he gives them a supernatural ability in their hurt and in their difficulty to share good news with other people.

And what's the result? We read it, didn't we? The end of verse 21. A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

[6 : 37] And that's the God we follow. He's the one who can turn deep distress, painful dislocation, into a beautiful rescue. Only God can do that. And so a new church is born, isn't it?

Because God has moved people to a new place and they've told people the good news about the Lord Jesus. And that is God's pattern for growth. We go, sometimes suffering for trusting the Lord Jesus and in his grace, God goes with us and he turns that sacrifice and suffering into growth.

Came across this quote from David Powlison this week. In the hands of a loving God, sorrow and suffering become the doorways into the greatest and most indestructible joys.

And among other things, that describes the church. And that is the church from which God will launch his mission to bring good news to the whole of Europe.

So in fact, it's that church to which we trace our faith here today. Second section, verses 22 to 26.

[7 : 51] So people have come to believe, we saw that much, didn't we, in the first section, by God's grace. But here's a question, do they really belong? Russell Brand announced his baptism this week.

He says he wants to leave his old life behind. Makes us sit up and think of it, doesn't it? Oh boy. Does he really belong in the church?

I guess it's by your fruit that you know them, so we'll have to wait and see, won't we? But our starting point is that Jesus says that everybody is welcome to turn to him for new life.

And that is a great truth, isn't it? But Russell Brand shows that the reality is often not quite as simple as that, is it? It must have been a very similar feeling for the Jerusalem church when they heard news from Antioch.

What do they do? 22, beginning of the verse, news of this reached the church in Jerusalem. Now we know what they've said, because if you flick back quickly to 11, verse 18, the end of the previous section, it says that when they heard the good news had come to the Gentiles, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, so then even to the Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.

[9 : 16] But did everybody buy into that vision? Maybe not, because in verse 19, half of them are still only talking to Jews, aren't they? They're not talking to Gentiles.

And what about when the Gentiles have their own church? Church full of Russell Brands? Do they really belong?

How are the original believers going to react? Is the global family of God really a thing? Or are we actually just a local club of people who get along quite well? It's a turning point, isn't it?

Here's what they do. Verse 22, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. They sent Barnabas, the encourager, to Antioch. The man with the biggest heart in the church, is how one of the commentators describes him.

That's the one they sent. The one they probably most like to keep. That costs, doesn't it? And that's God's grace at work too. Think of all the people for whom Barnabas was a rock in the church in Jerusalem.

[10:25] Think of the culture change that was going to happen by welcoming Gentiles into the church. People who are so different and now they're part of the family. That might be painful too.

The fact that they send Barnabas shows that they're growing, doesn't it? That's a real change of mindset from the holy huddle in the upper room at the beginning of Acts. In fact, it's even a change of mindset from meeting as Jews publicly in the temple courts, isn't it?

This church now looks out and it sends Barnabas even after they've lost loads of people scattered through the persecution. Teaches us something about church planting, doesn't it?

Verse 23. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, Barnabas was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. God's grace at work is what Barnabas sees when he arrives.

And he gets Saul and he sets to work and together they disciple people for a year. Do we do that? It's a thought, isn't it? And they do that by encouraging and by teaching because how can you remain true to God in your heart unless you know who he is and what he's like?

[11:47] That's what biblical encouraging is, isn't it? It's not just affirming. It is also exhorting. It is teaching. It is instructing.

It's opening God's word. And what happens? God turns that sacrificial sending by the Jerusalem church into growth. Verse 24.

He was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. And in verse 26, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

And what's the result? The end of that verse, verse 26. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. So the result is that they find their identity now in Christ.

So much so that everybody around them gives them a nickname. Christian. Little Christ. They're not Jews or Gentiles anymore.

[12:46] They're not Palestinians or Israelis anymore. That's not what defines them. It's not their ethnicity or their culture or their nationality. It's their Jesusness that defines them.

Isn't it? And that's real growth. Is that true of us? Does our Jesusness define us? God turns the pain of sacrificial sending by the Jerusalem church and the pain of change accepting the Gentiles into the church and he turns it into growth individual, numerical.

Let's move on to our third section. I used to have a postcard up in my bedroom when I was a teenager. It looked something like this. I think it said something underneath like he's got a certain kind of charm, a certain kind of style, he's the man with the plan.

It's a bit embarrassing now that I look back on it really. Some of us plan our lives carefully, don't we? We like things like strategy and objectives and mission statements and others of us like to actually enjoy our lives.

No, that's not what I meant. No, what I mean is some of us are more spontaneous. We're kind of more led by the moment, aren't we? And we trust that things will be okay. And we need both in different ways and at different times.

[14:15] And sometimes that can lead to disagreements about what to do and how to do it. So for instance, perhaps you agree that we need to be taking steps to grow as a church. But you think we really, you know, you shouldn't be looking at recruiting until the money's in the bank because that's just not responsible.

On the other hand, maybe you're the one who thinks that real faith is all about taking risks for God. And if we could plan everything out, then there really wouldn't be room for him anymore. And frankly, why aren't we recruiting for two people?

Different, isn't it? And in this last part of the story, we have another situation over which people in the church might really disagree. Verse 27.

During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch and one of them named Agabus stood up and through the spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.

And this happened during the reign of Claudius. It's hard times coming. That's the gist of it, isn't it? And there is need in the Jerusalem church because probably when the persecution broke out, a lot

of those people were boycotted or they lost their jobs.

[15 : 25] They've got no way of supporting themselves anymore. More pain for those Christians. So here we are in Antioch. What do we do?

Well, it would have been natural, wouldn't it, to think, do you know, we're the front lines. We're the baby church. God's working here right now. Would it really be a good idea, strategic, to send resources back that way?

This is where the resources are needed, aren't they? And especially if we've just learned that there are hard times coming. Is it a good idea? It's not how God's family works, though, is it?

Verse 30, verse 29, the disciples, the disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders with Barnabas and Saul.

See, they are prudent, aren't they? Because they plan ahead. They've got information from God as to what's going to happen, and they do something with it. They plan ahead based on God's word. Food is needed, but people should only give as they're able.

[16 : 39] And yet they also act in faith, don't they? They could have kept the resources where the front line was, but instead they send it to the folks back home, even though they only started in Antioch a year before.

How can they do that? Where does that mentality come from? Well, God's family remembers that it is God who provides. That's the key. So if you look at that phrase, as each one was able, and you went back to the original language, what you would find is that it says, as each one was prospered. Do you get that? As each one was prospered. In other words, they gave according to the amount that they had been given by God. It's not our pockets that need to be deep.

It's God's. And the sacrificial attitude of the people who came to Antioch in the first place from Jerusalem has now come full circle, hasn't it?

Because the new believers in Antioch have adopted that same sacrificial attitude and are now sending resources back to Jerusalem to God's grace at work in another difficult, painful situation, turning it into kingdom growth.

[17 : 59] You might be thinking, why is this passage here? Well, it is to encourage us that God's grace turns Christian pain into kingdom growth.

See, it's his hand that was with the exiles in Antioch, wasn't it? It's his grace that Barnabas finds at work there. And it's his spirit who speaks through Barnabas and through Agabus to achieve his aims.

He is the one who will take our distress, our dislocation, the apparent defeats, and he will turn them into spring flowers, into new growth.

But I think this passage is also here to show us that moving is part of God's pattern for growth. Do you notice how much moving around there is in this passage? The exiles going to Antioch, then Barnabas being sent to Antioch, then the prophets going to Antioch, then Saul moving from Tarsus, then people going from Antioch back to Jerusalem with the gift.

This is part of how God works, isn't it? So as we consider asking somebody to move to be with us, to help us be strengthened and grow, let's pray that God would be blessing and preparing that person, sending the right person, a Barnabas.

[19 : 21] And let's pray for that person. And as we consider longer term founding a church elsewhere ourselves, angels, then let's recognize the pattern here, that it will mean sacrifice and that it will mean movement.

Is that something that God is calling you to in the future, perhaps? Just look at how God uses it by his grace. And let's remember that when we give to his family, we do so out of what he has provided to us.

so we can give with God's backing, can't we? And not feel that we must give more than we are able. But the passage is also here to make us ask this question.

Do we belong to something bigger than ourselves? Coming back to the thing that we thought about at the beginning, that feeling of weakness in the face of a huge world.

Do we belong to anything bigger than ourselves? Do you belong to anyone or anything that will last into eternity? Do you belong to the Lord Jesus?

[20 : 36] See, some of us have maybe sat in these seats for years without being called Christians like the folks here were after a year. Isn't it time that the world knows that you belong to Jesus and

that he will make sure that you belong to him forever?

God's grace turns Christian pain into kingdom growth. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you.

We thank you so much for what we've been seeing in Acts, that you are building your kingdom of good news. God's grace. And we thank you that in what looks like defeat and difficulty, your plan is still being achieved.

Your plan to bless the world with good news and your grace is being achieved. Lord, we pray that we, as part of your church, as Bethel here, will play our part.

We pray for your grace to be at work here, even in our difficulty. we pray that, as Lucy prayed, you'd be preparing the heart of the person who you will send to join us and that you'll be preparing our hearts, Lord, to do our part.

[21 : 55] Lord, we just pray for any who may not know you here, Lord. give them a vision of the kingdom of good news, of your glory and grace. Help them to know that they are invited to believe and belong and grow here.

In Jesus' name, Amen.