

# God's church grows and gives

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[ 0 : 00 ] So for the last four weeks here in church, we've been drawing lessons from the life of Barnabas, who we meet in the book of Acts.

And as we come to the second part of this description of the church in Antioch, we're going to discover that God's church is a church that both gives and grows.

What is it that connects these stories? A story from the Philippines of a church that's part of a farming community that took some of its precious rice, floated it down a river to help some other Christians downstream whose crops had been flooded.

What connects that story with the story of a girl called Saria, a 10-year-old, sending her pocket money to her Bible society so that children in her country would have the chance to learn about Jesus?

What connects those stories with the story of churches in Scotland raising money to send to Christians who were left homeless after the military coup in Myanmar?

[ 1 : 19 ] And what connects those stories with the story that we read here of a church in Turkey collecting money to send to struggling Christians in Jerusalem?

I think the collecting link in each case is that these are people who believe the good news of Jesus and that good news of Jesus then motivates them to give generously and sacrificially for the sake of others and for the kingdom.

The book of Acts, that's where we are this morning, sees Jesus continue his mission. And we've been seeing the church growing and spreading.

And we've also been seeing that Luke, at different points, pauses for a moment to take snapshots of different local churches. We've seen him do it in Jerusalem, and now we see him here focusing on the church, this young church in Antioch.

And as we consider this snapshot that Luke gives us, we see two things, I think. We see a church that's growing, as Barnabas and Saul teach about Jesus, so that believers are growing in knowledge and maturity.

[ 2 : 32 ] But we also see at the same time, don't we, the church is giving. And again, Barnabas and Saul are involved. They're helping to facilitate this generous gift to Christians experiencing famine conditions in Jerusalem.

So Jesus is continuing his mission. He's calling and he's forming healthy disciples who love Jesus, who love the church, who want good news to spread, who want Jesus' love to be shared.

And so my prayer for us today, as we gather, is that God will use the church in Antioch to teach and to encourage us today. Well, let's think, first of all, about this church that grows, to recognize that God's church grows.

Verse 25 and verse 26. Just to fill in the blanks for those of us who weren't here last week, we're thinking about this reality, that here is, again, a major leap in Jesus' mission.

The good news is now spreading across language and culture. It comes to the Greeks in Turkey and Antioch. They're turning from their idols, and now they're saying Jesus is their Lord.

[ 3 : 43 ] The church is growing rapidly. The church in Jerusalem hears about it. Barnabas is sent to encourage them, to instruct them. That's where we finished last week.

Now we're going to see what happens next. And I want us to see three things about this growing Antioch church. First of all, to see in Barnabas someone who's leading like Jesus.

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. To know anything about Jesus in the Gospels is to know that Jesus was profoundly humble.

Jesus was a servant leader who encouraged his disciples to be servant leaders. And I would suggest that Barnabas in this moment is showing great humility. So the church has been growing.

The good news of Jesus has been spreading. Barnabas has been winning people to Jesus. But he knows that what's best for the church is for him to have a colleague, a helper.

[ 4 : 51 ] And he knows that Paul, Saul, has been called, especially by Jesus, to bring good news to the Greeks, the Gentiles. He knows that Paul is a gifted preacher.

Now Barnabas, of course, could have said, now hold on a minute, the growth here, well it's all about me. I'm the leader in Antioch. He could have been concerned for his position and his standing. If someone like Saul comes, people will think more of him and less of me. He could have done that. He was proud. But he's a humble leader.

His focus is not himself. His focus is all about Jesus. He's not wanting to build his kingdom. He's wanting to see the kingdom of God grow and advance.

Barnabas' nickname means son of encouragement. And here we see him encouraging us that it's good to get help from others. It's good to enable the gifts of others to be used.

[ 6 : 00 ] He doesn't hold on to his position of leadership in pride. Another thing we certainly see as this church grows is that they grow because they're learning about Jesus.

into verse 26 again. So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. So here we get a sense of Barnabas and Saul and they have this year-long discipleship training.

And we're not given the details, but we know that the content is Jesus Christ and the way of Christ. And we know that because of the nickname that emerges for this church.

They're called Christians. That points us to the focus of the teaching, doesn't it? This is what they're all about. So Barnabas and Saul are teaching the way of Christ.

[ 7 : 05 ] That's how to make disciples. That's how to have people saved. That's how to see people grow in faith. To teach about Jesus. So no doubt Barnabas and Saul in this year would have taught about the life of Jesus.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who became a man, who walked on this earth, and who demonstrated the power of God in his miracles. They would have spoken too of Jesus' perfect obedience to the Father's will, to the Father's plan of salvation.

They would have spoken to these new believers in Antioch of the generous grace of God in sending the Lord Jesus. They would have spoken about Jesus' love for outsiders.

Jesus' love for those that other people despised. They would have spoken about the compassion of Jesus. There was a time when Jesus and his disciples were super busy.

And Jesus said, let's go to a quiet place and find some rest. When they go to the quiet place, they find a crowd of 5,000 people. And the Gospel tells us that Jesus had compassion on them.

[ 8 : 20 ] They were like sheep without a shepherd. And so he did two things. He taught them and he fed them with the miracle of the 5,000. So no doubt Barnabas and Saul spoke much of the life of the Lord Jesus to establish faith.

But they would have spoken too of the death of Jesus. His death as a sacrifice that covers the sin of his people.

the sacrifice of Jesus that atones for sin and guilt. They would have spoken of the cross as a demonstration of the justice of God.

Because the judgment that we deserve fell on the Lord Jesus. There was a transfer. And so justice was done. But they would also have spoken about the cross as the greatest demonstration of God's love that has ever been seen.

Because there is Jesus the perfect sinless Son of God dying in the place of sinners like us. So that simply by trusting in him we could be saved and have eternal life.

[ 9 : 31 ] They would have spoken too of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. That three days after his death he rose in victory. The powers of evil and darkness could not hold Jesus.

He was vindicated. His Father was pleased with his finished work. And so Jesus risen to new life now gives new life eternal life to those who trust him.

They would have spoken to this young church of the exaltation of Jesus. his return to the glory of heaven to sit at his Father's right hand that the Father had given Jesus a name above every name. Jesus is King of Kings Lord of Lords every knee should bow every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. And from this place of glory Jesus and the Father they send the Spirit so he comes to take up residence in our hearts.

And they would have spoken too of the return of Jesus. That for these believers this hope was established that Jesus would one day come again that his victory would be final and complete and eternal that death and sorrow and sin and sadness would be no more.

[10:58] That this new creation this perfectly restored world was coming. And so these young believers were disciplined in the way of Christ.

They taught for growing maturing faith. So these young Christians rescued from a pagan way of thinking and worshipping that they now understand the good news of Jesus.

They now know and worship the one true and living God and they're learning to apply the truth of Jesus to their everyday lives. Because the third thing we see about the church as it grows we see leaders who lead like Jesus and we see learning about Jesus but we also see loyalty to Jesus. Barnabas is a great name. It's a great nickname to be someone who encourages others. It's a wonderful thing. It's also wonderful to recognize end of verse 26 that the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

They didn't give themselves that name. People in the city of Antioch looking in gave them the nickname Christians and this is an excellent nickname.

[12:22] So maybe if you read the gospels you'll have heard about a group of people called the Herodians. So the Herodians they were Herod's people. They were loyal to Herod.

So when the church quickly becomes known as Christians it's a nickname saying these are Christ's people. Their loyalty belongs to Jesus.

So imagine them for a moment in the city of Antioch. How do you get a nickname like that? Well surely as a church they're always talking about Jesus the Christ.

Jesus God's promised saviour king. They identify themselves as belonging to Jesus. They're not so bothered about being Roman citizens.

That was super important before. Now what defines their identity is I belong to the Lord Jesus. Now we see them living a completely different way of life.

[13:26] They're not going to the pagan temples and offering sacrifice to pagan gods. They're not participating in pagan rituals. They're living a different way of life.

They're living the way of love. And within this city they've established themselves as a new community. Marked by their love and obedience to the Lord Jesus and their acts of love and service towards one another and to the community.

The impact in Antioch was obviously huge because they become at least in some parts the talk of the town. The church is bringing surprising people together.

So we thought about this last week that the great dividing line in the first century in this part of the world was between Jews and non-Jews, between Jews and Greeks. Well in this church Jews and Greeks are worshipping together.

they're boldly living out this new faith. When the whole city, perhaps under pressure, is declaring Caesar as our Lord, the Christians are saying, no, no, Jesus is our Lord.

[14:37] When they used to think that the way of the Roman religion was the best way, Roman religion which said what you need to do is you need to sacrifice to try and earn favour from the gods, now the Christian church is declaring Jesus the Son of God has sacrificed himself so we can freely enjoy favour from the one true and living God.

A whole new way of life. The town sees it. So the church grows, Jesus' mission continues and God is receiving glory just as it should be, the church grows.

Now three lessons for us to keep thinking about this before moving on. First of all to think about leadership. What are the positive encouragements that you and I can take from the example of Barnabas?

Think about where perhaps you exercise leadership. That may be within a family, it may be within an organisation or a community, it may be within your workplace or in church.

What does Barnabas' wisdom have to say to us? He would say to us, in whatever context, practice humility. Always act as a servant leader.

[15:57] Consider the needs of others. I think he would also say to us, remember that it's good to involve others, to equip others, to enable others to use their gifts, not to let everything fall on the shoulders of one, and not in our pride to take it all on ourselves.

We prayed for our church leaders this morning. Perhaps this week we might continue especially to pray for our church leaders to be humble servants like Barnabas.

And we can pray for one another, for wisdom to lead well in whatever context we find ourselves. What can we learn about learning for our own good?

Perhaps we've heard the phrase that nothing in the world is worth having unless it means effort. Now we understand that boys and girls, we understand this I think.

If you want to be good at anything, you want to be good at sports, or music, or art, it doesn't just happen. And it doesn't happen overnight. It takes effort.

[17:12] It takes practice. It takes training. Sometimes we forget that the same is true when it comes to the Christian faith. Christianity is a call to commit time and effort to grow and to mature in our faith and understanding.

It takes time and effort to commit to spiritual discipline. to make time each day to read God's word, to make time to pray for ourselves and others.

And if we are to be a community that learns about the way of Christ, then it certainly involves a commitment to a local church, this church or another.

And we can pray about that, that we would have the desire to learn and to let Jesus shape us. What about our loyalty?

Have you ever had that really cringeworthy experience, maybe an icebreaker, even worse than an interview, where someone says, describe yourself in three words or five words? This is the horrible on-the-spot moment.

[18:25] Well, imagine the testimony of these believers in Antioch. It was so clear that they belonged to Jesus. That's where their loyalty lie. It wasn't easy for them in Antioch.

Most people were not friendly to the Christian faith. Of course, it's not easy now to be loyal to Jesus. As we consider their life and witness, perhaps like me, you feel a sense of guilt, that it can be so easy to stay quiet instead of speaking up.

we can so easily let our love for the Lord Jesus grow cold. Again, we can pray for ourselves and for one another that we would stand firm in our faith, that we would stand up for the Lord Jesus, and that for the sake of our city, that we would be a strong and growing family of faith.

That by God's grace and by the Spirit, we might have an impact in our city, just as the church did in Antioch. So we see that God's church grows.

Now let's see that God's church gives. So this is the next development in the life of the church in Antioch. We have a chance to see more evidence of how the gospel is at work, changing their heart, changing their lives, and it leads them to good works and to generosity.

[19:59] So in verse 27 and verse 28, we're told that some prophets come from Jerusalem to Antioch, and there's this man Agabus, this prophet, who predicts a severe famine over the whole Roman empire.

Under the reign of Claudius, history backs this up, you can look in your history books, you'll find under the reign of Claudius, there were major famines recorded in Rome, in Greece, in Egypt, and in Judea as well.

A reminder, the Roman empire was massive, but so too, was the problem of famine. Bad harvests and famine were frequent. So what does the church do? Verse 29, 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 by Barnabas and Saul. The church responds with generosity. They know, because they've been well taught, that Jesus came to build a global church family.

And what family does, is family helps one another. When family works, as family should. So again, through Barnabas and through Antioch, I think Jesus would encourage us, which of us, if we're Christians, would encourage us to take our place in the kingdom of God.

[21:15] To do what we can, to give for the sake of mission, that he would promote in us open-hearted generosity. Let's think, first of all, about their missions mentality. It was Saul Paul who wrote in 1 Corinthians 12, using the church as a body image, when one part suffers, the whole body suffers.

So what we've got here at the end of chapter 11 is great need, famine in Judea. And for the church in Antioch, they feel that becomes their responsibility. This is their way to care for their Christian family.

They decide to provide help for their brothers and sisters. Family language. Remember, they have never met. They are separated by geography.

They are separated by language. They're separated by culture. They're separated by religious background. But they are, in reality, all one in Christ Jesus. And they show it through genuine sacrifice. So think about this. What does Agabus say? Agabus doesn't say, oh, by the way, a famine's coming to Judea.

[ 22 : 27 ] What does Agabus say? Agabus predicts a famine over the entire Roman world. So Antioch doesn't know, is it going to come to our door next?

So they could have stockpiled and said, well, we need to be prudent, but rather they give freely and sacrificially according to their ability. And we see this wonderful picture and pattern that faith in Jesus unites churches and prompts love in action.

Now we got to see that as we built a little bit of a connection with the church in Myanmar. Our denomination sent money to help in Manipur, so we can help globally, but also locally as well. But there's that missions mentality that where there is need, Christians in other parts, as we are able, should look to help. It's actually one of the things I love about being part of a Presbyterian church.

If you're new to our church, we are a Presbyterian church, so we are connected by structures, which means we have a support network around Scotland and in our particular Presbytery of Edinburgh and Perth.

[ 23 : 41 ] Our resources are spread. Needs are shared and prayers are offered. And it's a wonderful little pattern of a missions mentality in a local context.

Let's think too about their missions partnership, because you've got this beautiful two-way dynamic. And we see it in the journeys of Barnabas in the first place. So Barnabas, I know nothing about geography, but I'm going to move, because that's helpful, I think sometimes.

So imagine Barnabas, he comes from Jerusalem to Antioch, because he wants to strengthen the church, he wants to share the gospel with them. But then a year and a bit later, he's going to encourage the church in Jerusalem by returning with a financial gift from these new brothers and sisters formed in Antioch.

What's happened in Antioch is that Barnabas and others have come and they've shared the good news of the Lord Jesus. By the grace of God, they come to understand, if we have Jesus, we are rich, we have treasure.

And so as God's grace came to them, crossing lines of culture and language and religion, so now they want a financial gift to do the same.

[ 24 : 57 ] And so they send money back, as it were, to the mother church in Jerusalem. When we think about missions partnership, we need to understand that it's not narrow, it runs wide.

It's not restricted to the sending of money, though that's a good thing and a necessary thing. It's not restricted to sending Bible teachers, though that's a good thing and a wonderful thing.

Missions partnership includes sharing personnel, sharing finances, but also sharing ideas, learning across countries and cultures.

It involves sharing prayers across languages, countries, cultures. It involves sharing the gospel of Jesus. And because partnership runs wide, there is good news for us.

Whoever we are, whatever church we're from, every Christian can partner in the mission of God in some way. In some way we can all be involved, and we should be.

[ 26 : 04 ] So perhaps again as we think about how to apply this, we can pray. Consider, how can I be involved in the mission of God? Some ways here locally, we have a mission support fund to help raise money for a church plant in Galashiels.

There also helps a couple of missionaries, the Riannual family in Colombia. perhaps we could also pray for them. Our junior church raises money to help the church in different places.

We will meet on Wednesday to gather to pray for the church here and around the world. Lots of ways we can get, perhaps we can also go, like our Korean friends who have come to Scotland to bless us by praying for us.

We're really thankful to you for that. Let's pray and think, how can I partner? And let's think too about their missions giving. What is it that would have motivated these Christians in Turkey to support another group of Christians they'd never met before, even while the threat of famine was over their head also?

Why did they decide to give? And not just to give money. Notice in verse 30 who the gift is sent through. They send their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

[ 27 : 34 ] So they send the two main guys, their two main teachers are sent from Antioch to Jerusalem. They're really generous in their giving. Why is that? It's not because of the culture that they were living in.

The culture of the Roman Empire was very much focused on self-promotion. let's look after ourselves. So what would prompt them to make that kind of sacrifice?

And I think the only answer, the only power, the only motivation is the generosity of God. The generosity of God in sending the Lord Jesus to be the saviour for sinners, to be the saviour for the world, to be their saviour.

I think 1 Peter chapter 1 can help us in this. Peter writes to a new church of largely folks who became Christians from a pagan background, non-Jewish background, and he says this to them, you know it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from your empty way of life.

So you were rescued from following idols that couldn't help, couldn't save, that couldn't help you to know God, but you were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

[ 28 : 59 ] Now they have come to know this truth by experience, that they were saved by Jesus to belong to the true and the living God, to receive forgiveness from God, to have eternal life now and forever, to know eternal hope.

They have come to know that they were saved at great cost, not silver or gold, but in God's own Son, shedding his blood so that we might be saved.

Salvation comes freely to us, but it cost Jesus his life on the cross. So God's rescue mission, as it gripped their hearts, meant that money lost its grip on their hearts, so they were glad to give, and to give generously in response to the goodness of the gospel.

And that takes us back to where we began. God's church grows and God's church gives. They're connected. I hope we've seen the beauty of the church in Antioch.

We're not finished, we'll see some more of the church in Antioch later. But it's wonderful to see a group of Christians growing in faith and love, growing in generous giving.

[ 30 : 19 ] It's what God wants for his church. Isn't that what we want for our local church, for your local church if you're not part of Bucklew? How will that happen?

How will we become a part of this amazing story? Well it's only as the goodness of the gospel would grip our hearts too. Only as we'd come to see and to experience each day how gracious and generous God has been to us in Jesus.

Let's pray together briefly that we would want to know Jesus more deeply, that we might play our part in his kingdom and mission. Let's pray. Lord God, thank you for your work in the church in Antioch, although thousands of years ago.

Thank you for their growth in faith and obedience and for the way that they lived out their faith by giving generously and by their concern for your kingdom and your mission.

And Lord, we pray that you would apply your word to each of our hearts, that you would show us areas where we need to be transformed and renewed, that you would show us where we need to learn to grow in our faith or to grow in our generosity, that you would show us how we can play our part in your kingdom, whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, however you've gifted us.

[ 31 : 48 ] But most of all, will you show us Jesus? Will you show us our wonderful Savior? Will you show us your great grace towards us? in that Jesus, the sinless, perfect Son of God, and became sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

And we pray in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Now we'll close singing praise with a hymn, O for a thousand tongues to sing.

Just to say, please stick around after. We'll get tea and coffee immediately after the service. We'd love to get to know you better. Let's stand and let's sing as we're able.