

Grace in Action in Antioch

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Date: 02 September 2018

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to think together about what we've already thought about over the last couple of weeks as we looked at the story of Peter and Cornelius, that the gospel transforms people. The gospel crosses boundaries, crosses cultures, and brings change.

And here we're going to find Luke restating that reality in a different context. First, we had a lecturer, I remember having a lecturer a number of years ago who loved to start each of his lectures by recapping and restating what had come the previous day or the previous week.

It really had a clear focus of what he wanted us to learn as we went through the course. And in a sense, we can see Dr. Luke is doing the same thing for us here.

So he's just spent two chapters there or thereabouts in great detail telling us about how God in his providence brought this Roman soldier Cornelius and the apostle Peter together so that Cornelius' life could be changed as he heard the good news of Jesus.

And then he returns back in time a little bit to the story of what we have here of the church in Antioch. So if you look at verse 19, you see that Luke is putting his history together in a particular way.

[1 : 2 0] And it says there, now those who'd been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled, and so it goes. Stephen's persecution we first learn of in Acts chapter 8. And then the story moves away from that emphasis, but now it's coming back.

He's decided to go back in time to show another example of how when the gospel of grace comes to an individual or to a community, it brings change. And he's in particular trying to make the point that the gospel of grace is for all.

That the good news of Jesus' Savior who came to rescue us by dying for us to forgive our sins and to give us eternal life isn't just for Jewish people. It's just not for religious people.

It's for all. And so Dr. Luke shows how the gospel now moves into new territory, to Antioch. Now Antioch as a city was known in its day for being very cosmopolitan.

It was a center of trade, good access to the Mediterranean. It had people from the east. It had Greco-Roman influences. It had a big Jewish population. So it was known for its business and commerce.

[2 : 3 0] But it was also known for its moral corruption. It was a city of some 300,000 or so people. So an influential, prosperous, corrupt city.

But grace comes. Jesus comes and change comes as a result. And so what I want us to do this evening, very briefly, is to show from Luke's account here how grace is in action in Antioch.

First of all, when we see how the message is shared and believed. So verse 19, we discover that persecution in Jerusalem leads Christians to spread out.

So they travel as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

So just as we begin, here is a reminder of the providence of God, that God works sometimes in surprising ways for his own glory.

[3 : 38] The church in Jerusalem certainly wouldn't have chosen the path of persecution. But nevertheless, God works through their suffering and the gospel spreads.

And that's a principle that we see throughout the Bible. We see it back in Genesis, when Joseph says to his brothers, that you sold me as a slave. You intended evil, but God intended it for good.

He ended up in Egypt so he could save many lives. And we see it most particularly at the cross. Where at one and the same time, we can see that wicked men wanted to get rid of Jesus. So they nail him to the cross, but it was always God's foreordained plan that his death would be the means of salvation.

So God's providence can work through persecution and suffering. But as they begin to spread, some of them stay in what we might call their comfort zone.

So the message of Jesus stays within the Jewish community. But there's others who go to the Greeks. So here's this cross-cultural mission beginning to happen.

[4 : 39] And they bring the same gospel message that Peter shared with Cornelius. Cornelius. So last time we recognized that Peter brought to Cornelius the news of the perfect life of Jesus.

That he died on the cross under God's curse so that we might be set free from the curse of God. To be accepted by God. That he rose again. And that now he's Lord and King and Judge and he's coming back.

And he invited Cornelius to faith and repentance. And these men going to Antioch do the same thing. And people are becoming Christians. They're trusting. They're turning from sin.

They're turning away from their old life. They're turning to God. Now it's interesting to ask the question, who is sharing their faith? Who are the people who are bringing the gospel across cultures to Antioch?

And the answer is we don't know who they are. We don't know their names. These aren't the apostles. These are what we might call regular Christians. People like us who are sharing the gospel.

[5 : 46] A number of years ago I read a really interesting book called Evangelism in the Early Church. And it was making the point in lots of different ways that it was the regular Christians that were so influential in this spread of the gospel.

Within cities and towns and villages and across boundaries. So the women would go to the river to wash their clothes. And they'd be talking about Jesus while they were doing that.

Or they would be using their home and inviting extended family and friends to come for meals. And they'd be talking about their new faith in the Lord Jesus. And in those very natural ways the church was growing.

It's a great encouragement for us as those who don't have perhaps a huge amount of influence and standing that God chooses the weak. And the ordinary for his own glory.

As his people live on purpose that the glory of Jesus might be known. Here we see evidence that God doesn't require people who are specially called, specially trained.

[6 : 47] It's just regular people speaking about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. And it changes at least some people in this city. So the messengers on the one hand, they're obviously gripped by this amazing story of the love of Jesus for them.

And they decide with great courage to move out with that message. Facing persecution, then going to an unknown culture, to an unknown city, to share the gospel.

The people in Antioch believe and the church is born. And this is God's grace in action. As people become Christians, as people share the gospel, God is working.

We also see God's grace in action, in encouragement that is given and received. So here we find ourselves. So this morning we were thinking about the church in Jerusalem and Barnabas and Saul with the church.

And here we are back this evening with the church in Jerusalem and with Barnabas. Now Barnabas wasn't this man's real name. His real name was Joseph. Barnabas was a nickname given to him by the Christians, which means son of encouragement.

[7 : 59] It's a wonderful nickname to have. And so what I want us to see is the reason why Barnabas has been sent and to think about Barnabas' example for us.

So in verse 21 it says, The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. And then verse 22, News of this reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem.

And they sent Barnabas to Antioch. So Mother Church Jerusalem hears about this thing happening over in Antioch. And they want to send someone to find out more.

And who do they send is really significant because they send Barnabas. So their idea isn't, let's shut this thing down, but let's encourage this new church to grow.

And so Barnabas, as we discover, he spends a year looking after this young church, this church made up of people from different cultures, and he spends that time encouraging them.

[9 : 01] So I want us to spend a few minutes thinking about Barnabas' example of what gospel encouragement might look like, what it looked like for him, what it might look like for us, that we might want to follow his example.

So a few things that we see about Barnabas, the son of encouragement. First of all, we can say from his example that a gospel encourager sees and celebrates what is good.

So the beginning of verse 23, When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad. Now let's bear in mind that this is a brand new church, coming from a very cosmopolitan city, people being saved out of all kinds of backgrounds.

So it's not going to be a perfect church. It's not going to be a church without faults or weaknesses. But what we see is that Barnabas overlooks those to focus on grace, to focus on God's work in their lives.

It's the same thing that you see so often from Paul in his letters, in his introductory thanksgiving for the churches. Even to a church like Corinth, which, as you read the letter, has a lot of problems.

[10 : 14] He's still so thankful for the fact that they're trusting in the Lord Jesus. They're not perfect, but God's grace is in evidence. And Barnabas here celebrates that.

This is a heart attitude, isn't it? It's not a heart that wants to grumble first, to find fault in the first instance. It's a heart that wants to say, well done.

It wants to encourage others towards Christ likeness. So to be a gospel encourager means seeing and celebrating and choosing to focus on what's good and what's positive.

Secondly, we can say that a gospel encourager is glad wherever God is working. And again, the beginning of verse 23, it's when he arrives in Antioch and he sees the evidence of the grace of God that he's glad.

Now, he could have said, why is God working here and not back in Jerusalem? Why am I needing to move from the mother church, from the home church, all the way over here to see God's powerful grace in action at this point in time?

[11 : 18] But he doesn't. He doesn't become jealous because his concern is not for himself, for his tribe, for building up his empire. He cares for God's honor and God's glory, not building up his own kingdom.

And so he is glad to see wherever God's at work. And I think that's something that's maybe really important for us in the West. You know, we know that Christianity is sort of static or even in decline and lots of people are dismissive and we don't hear stories of lots of people coming to faith in Jesus.

And we can become despondent of something. And that's why it's great to be connected to people from other parts of the world and to hear stories that God is still working in dramatic ways. He's still working in places like North Korea and Syria and Iraq for his own glory.

And so as we hear the stories of the global church, we can be reminded and be glad that God's kingdom is growing. Another thing that we notice is that a gospel encourager directs others to keep loving Jesus.

So end of verse 23, when he's glad he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their heart. So he's spending time with them. He's walking with them.

[12 : 33] He's living life with them and he's encouraging them to persevere in their faith. He's urging them to stay devoted to the Lord Jesus. At the moment, they're young and enthusiastic.

What will they do when trial and trouble comes? He encourages them to stay devoted to the Lord Jesus. We just, this week, been helping Sebastian, our youngest, to learn how to ride a pedal bike.

And so small inclines are quite the challenge. And there was a few times yesterday where we took him out on a fairly lengthy trip. And there was a couple of times where you could see towards the top of the hill, he was beginning to sort of lose heart that he'd ever get there.

But it's amazing what the encouragement of, come on, you can do it, does for just keeping somebody going, getting them over the line. And you can see that Barnabas is doing that with the church. He's come alongside them to encourage them, to keep pointing them to Jesus, that they would keep following him.

And tied up with that, a gospel encourager has a compelling quality to their lives.

[13 : 44] Verse 24 in the NIV begins, he was a good man. But in the Greek, it said, it would say, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts, for he was a good man, or because he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

And a great number of people were brought to the Lord. So his lifestyle, his words, his character, his manner, are encouraging people to stick with Jesus, or to begin thinking about who is Jesus, or to come to faith in Jesus.

That he is a man with integrity in his words and in his lifestyle, that people obviously find attractive, that they're looking at him thinking, I want to be like him, so I want to keep following Jesus, or I want to know what makes this guy Barnabas so different.

So they're discovering Jesus for themselves. Another thing that we see from the example of Barnabas is that a gospel encourager gladly serves with others.

I love what happens in verse 25 and 26, as many people are being brought to the Lord, Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.

[15 : 04] So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. So Barnabas clearly is not somebody who's competitive or jealous for success. He's not saying, this is my work, these are my people, but rather he happily calls Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, to come and assist him to use his gifts to serve this young church.

So taken together, we see why from time to time Barnabas appears and Luke sort of highlights the character of Barnabas for us because he's got a wonderful life.

He'd be a wonderful example to follow. We would all love to have, we all need to have a Barnabas in our lives and to desire to be a Barnabas to others and to have a church where these kind of values permeate, where we're seeing the positives and not simply the negatives and learning to celebrate those things, where we are building up, not tearing down, where we're celebrating what God does in others here and in other places, where we're encouraging one another to keep going with faith, to keep following Jesus, where we're determining to have that lifestyle with the help of the Holy Spirit, where we might encourage others to think about the Christian faith because of the way we seek to live.

So where does encouragement begin? Perhaps it's as simple as thank you for your help today. Thank you for serving the church today.

There's lots of people every Sunday that are serving in lots of different ways and sometimes we can forget how important a thank you is. Perhaps it might be sending someone a quick note to say, I'm praying for you in this situation or sharing from God's word.

[16 : 56] here's what I've been learning this week about God and his character or about what Jesus has done and sharing that so that someone else might be encouraged and helped.

Asking someone practically, how can I help you in this situation that you are in? Maybe it's just by showing up and getting involved. Getting involved in choir or a community discipleship group or a women's Bible study.

It's an encouragement to the other people in the group. But what we understand from Barnabas is that the gospel of grace should make us graceful people and graceful people tend to encourage others by their lives.

So there's that nickname Barnabas, but there's another nickname that we find in this section, this time given by the people of Antioch to this young church.

End of verse 26. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. So after a year of spending time under the teaching of Barnabas and Saul, people in the city are now looking at this young church and saying, these are the Christ people because they're talking about Jesus.

[18 : 10] They're seeking to live in the ways of Jesus. Their community, their church is centered on the personal work of Jesus. I came across a story of a Bible teacher by the name of Harry Ironside who went on a mission trip to China.

And he noticed as he went from place to place, he was often introduced as Yasu Yan. And he couldn't figure out at first what this meant. And so he asked somebody and he was told that in Cantonese, Yasu, apologies for the bad pronunciation, means Jesus and Yan means man.

So as he was traveling, here was this man, Harry Ironside, being known as the Jesus man. That's a great nickname to aspire to, just as Barnabas is a great nickname to aspire to.

So it is to be a person, one of the Christ people. So what we see about this church in Antioch that they talked and lived life centered on Jesus so that the rest of the city knew about it.

And here's testimony again to grace in action. That the love of Jesus is flowing beyond their community into the rest of the city.

[19 : 25] Now the last way that we can see grace in action is in solidarity and help given. And again, this connects us with where we were this morning in Galatians chapter 2.

So we read in verse 27 and 28 of this prophet by the name of Agabus. And Agabus, led by the Spirit, predicts a severe famine and the disciples decide to send poor relief.

Notice that they decide to send poor relief back to Christians in Judea. Which again is a really lovely touch. This multicultural church up in Antioch is going to provide relief for the church in Jerusalem as it found itself in difficulty.

So here is evidence again for the success of gospel mission in Antioch. Because here are these young Christians and they're putting their faith into practice. Here is their faith coming out in love and service and not just among their own, they're crossing cultures to do so.

Here is practical expression of this fact that in Christ Jesus we are all one. The gospel has made them one. And it finds expression in their giving.

[20 : 40] I made mention in my prayers this morning of Patrick Jock who we had with us a few months ago from South Sudan. He would often talk about the church in South Sudan feeling isolated and alone because politically I guess that's where they're at and the church is small and young.

But then he said of his trip so he went on a wee trip around meeting various free church congregations and ministers he said your fellowship and your prayers remind us that we're not alone.

So in that really simple way of welcoming and praying there is that solidarity there's that sense we're not alone we're part of a bigger kingdom.

We met a few years ago when we were in the Philippines a couple of missionaries who were working with a tribal group on one of the small islands in the Philippines a tribe called the Mungyum people very poor many of them would come to the cities and they were sort of professional beggars but these missionaries were trying to get schools on the go and they were Bible teaching.

But anyway about three years ago when the last big storm hit that region of the Philippines this mountain tribe heard about the plight of another tribe down the coast that had been really badly hit and they sent some of their very scarce rice supplies down to this coastal church as a way to say to their brothers and sisters in Christ we love you and we want to help.

[22 : 19] And so we can see that the gospel takes hold in Antioch as they want to have that same kind of practical love and service. just as Paul reminded the church in Corinth when he wanted to encourage the church in Corinth to give generously to aid to bring relief in 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9 he said you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor that you through his poverty might become rich.

so there's something in the gospel there's something of that movement of Jesus from glory to humiliation and death on the cross that is intended to spark in us generosity and help when we can give it and we see that in Antioch.

So that was grace in Antioch. I guess the challenge for us is thinking about what about grace in our own lives what about grace in Edinburgh or wherever we come from because just like those first missionaries who cross cultures to go to Antioch we too are called to live lives that allow the grace of God to be felt and received by our words and our actions and so we can support and encourage one another to be doing that and that we are placed in community to encourage one another to celebrate and to seek to see more of God's grace in the lives of others and we have resources and opportunities to practically help others in Edinburgh and around the world so that grace is felt and so that God is honoured.

Let's pray together. Amen.