

# Christianity's Best Kept Secret!

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     You know, if I was to give a brief summary of the book of Acts up until chapter 11, well, I think it would take quite a bit of time, but there's so much going on.
- I mean, how do you really sum it up? And no wonder people say that the proper title of the book of Acts isn't the Acts of the Apostles, it's the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Because there's stories of all sorts of stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things under the power and influence of God working in them.
- We've got the beginnings of unsure and uncertain disciples, and they're waiting for something to happen, having been told that it would. And then they're suddenly and immediately and powerfully filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit doesn't miss any of them out.
- It says they were all filled. And then things kick off, the church multiplies, and there's many stories of people turning to the Lord. There's great increase and expansion of the church.
- It's a multi-ethnic church of Jews and Gentiles and Greeks and people from different parts, and it's expanding through Jerusalem, and then it goes out to Judea and Samaria.
- [ 1 : 0 4 ]     And there's stories of gatherings together as the church. There's stories of being scattered. There's stories of much prayer, preaching about Jesus, healings, wonders, signs and miracles, generous giving.
- There's visions. There's the raising of the dead. There's hospitality. There's persecution and martyrdom and salvation going out from Jerusalem. And now to Antioch and all much more.
- So that's just a little snippet of what's been happening. And if we were to go back a few chapters, the end of chapter 7 with the first Christian is martyred, a guy called Stephen. And we read that just after that had happened that some of the believers were scattered throughout regions of Judea and Samaria.
- Now it's gone even further. It's gone to a place called Antioch. Antioch, which is in Syria. So there's also another Antioch called Pisidia in Acts chapter 30, but this is a different one, Antioch and Syria.
- And what can we say about the city of Antioch? It's a great city. It's a thriving city. It's hustle and bustle. It's a crowded city. It's a growing city. There's lots of trade happening. Lots of people would pass through Antioch.
- [ 2 : 1 2 ]     I guess it's like a gateway city as much as we would view Inverness and the highlands as a gateway city growing and hustle and bustle. It seems busier every time you go into Inverness these days. Lots of trade happening.
- And this is the place where the name Christian is used for the very first time. And it's a nickname that was given to Christians, but it's one that's clearly stuck for about 2,000 years now.

And I guess you could see, looking throughout the years, that Christians have been given all sorts of nicknames. If we were to look back 250 years or so to the time of John Wesley and the Methodists, so that was a nickname given to John Wesley and his friends as a kind of insult that they were so methodical in how they studied the Bible and how they prayed that they were called the Methodists.

And then he said, well, all right, I'll take that one then. And they became the Methodists. And that was used as a wee digger. But in this situation, we are introduced to not only the name Christians, but to another guy who's been given a nickname.

And it's not a digger, but it's a glowing commendation that he's got a pretty good CV. And it's a gentleman that's actually called Joseph. And he's a Levite from Cyprus.

[ 3 : 23 ] And we're first introduced to him in Acts chapter 4. But he comes along in this passage, Acts chapter 11, and he's nicknamed Barnabas. And that means son of encouragement.

And what he appears in Acts chapter 4 is that he's got a field that he owns. It's with his family. And he gives it away. He sees the believers sharing their possessions.

He would have no doubt seen how God was at work among them. The incredible ways that God was moving through the apostles. And how the believers were one in heart and mind.

And how they weren't precious of their own possessions. And also, they weren't precious about the temple, about the church building, for that matter. And Barnabas would have taken note of this.

He would have perhaps also would have seen the transformation in the lives of Peter and John and others. But especially Peter and John, he would have maybe seen them or at least heard about how they were standing before the Sanhedrin.

[ 4 : 22 ] And how they preached with great boldness. And so they were able to stand with great authority and speak to the Sanhedrin with great boldness. And then they were preaching to the Pharisees and to the crowds with great unction, great anointing of the Lord.

And they would testify to the resurrection of Jesus. So Barnabas might well have seen or at least heard about this. And then about the people who have been raised from the dead. And those who have been healed.

The man who was healed at the gate called Beautiful. And countless more stories. And what we see is that all of this, collectively, that we read up to this point in Acts, it's done something in the heart of Barnabas.

It's changed him. And what we see in his life, before we even speak about himself, is that he's given a nickname for a reason. That God's grace had been so powerfully at work amongst his people that Barnabas could not be affected by it.

He had to get involved. And it wasn't out of compulsion, but it was by the sheer grace of God that was at work. I mean, I just wonder, what would it look like if our lives and our hearts would be tuned to the grace of God like Barnabas's was?

[ 5 : 35 ] And I just wonder this morning that before we get even further, that we simply say, God, tune my heart to say your grace like Barnabas. Tune my heart to speak of your grace.

Tune my heart to hear of the wonder of your grace. Because we can speak about the gift of encouragement. We can speak about the way that God works. But first it begins, doesn't it, in the human heart.

Because we find that the human heart is the central core, the central operating system, the Bible says, of the way we live. Whatever we do, the choices that we make, the things that we set our lives upon, it comes from the place of our hearts.

And if we were to go back in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 17, and the prophet describes the heart as being wicked and deceitful. And that's really what we would say is the pretty bad and gloomy and depressing news of the gospel.

But it is news that we all need to hear. Because I've been asking the question over several weeks now, why do we come to church? Why do we bother coming to church? Because there's part of that that rings true with us.

[ 6 : 40 ] That we come to be reminded that we are sinners. But not only us, but that the world is full of sin. And we only need to turn on our TV screens just to see how much sin there is and how much exposure, how much we're exposed to it.

But also we come to church primarily to not only hear the bad news of what sin is all about, but to hear about the change in heart that God comes to bring. And that it's good news, the gospel.

That God comes to change our hearts from being deceitful and deceptively wicked to being transformed and open and moldable and shapeable. And what we see in the life of Barnabas is that his heart has been radically transformed because the hearts of the apostles have been radically transformed.

And it's God at work. And this is fundamental for us because if we see God working, if we see God at work in our church, in our hearts, in our lives, in our families, in our situations, if we notice that God is doing things, maybe it's even just seeds and conversations that we're noticing that God is at work, we can see that actually God is always at work.

Now, on the one hand, God is a God who comes to rest on the Sabbath. And he says God rested on the Sabbath and he said that his creation was good. But on the other hand, God never sleeps.

[ 7 : 56 ] He never slumbers. He's always got his eyes attuned to the world to see where the hearts of humanity lies. And the psalmist writes that the Lord delights in the well-being of his servants.

And as he looked to the heart of Barnabas, the Lord delighted in the well-being of his servant Barnabas, that he was a good man, that he was an encourager.

And I wonder that if we would see God at work in our own hearts, if we would ask God to tune our hearts, ask God to examine our hearts, and into tomorrow, into the coming week, we would see, Lord, how are you at work?

How are you going to be at work? How am I going to be a blessing and be an encouragement and to see that you are always at work? So first we begin here, asking God to expand, to mould our hearts, to make our hearts, not hard, but to make them mouldable and soft.

And that we would see ultimately the heart of Jesus, that which is gentle, kind, lowly, meek, and accessible. And as we come to him and offer our hearts to Jesus, that he shapes us and moulds us and expands our hearts, expands our horizons.

[ 9 : 08 ] So this is what's happened to Barnabas, that he's seen something, he's heard of it, and he's got involved. And now here he is, this apostle, this disciple, this one who was a son of encouragement.

It's 1942, and a guy called Davis Ellis was hired as the educational director for the Allstate Insurance Company in America.

Fast forward eight years later, in 1950, his daughter got sick with hepatitis. And one morning, as he headed out the door for work, the family doctor called to let the family know that he was very concerned for her and that he was calling in a specialist, Dr. Kaiser.

So that evening, Davis Ellis returned home from work, and his wife, Helen, rushed to him, and she threw his arms around him. Dave, she said. The specialist has examined her daughter, and Dr. Cummings tells me that she's in good hands with Dr. Kaiser.

Soon after that, Dave's daughter, Joanne, she made a full recovery. And later that year, Dave was part of a program, sorry, part of a group that was working into the night to plan Allstate Insurance Company's app program for the coming year.

[ 10 : 26 ] And Dave remembered how his anxiety eased as he heard the words that your daughter is in good hands. And so he suggested, why don't we use this as a slogan, along with an illustration of a pair of hands cradling a car.

And so the slogan, you're in good hands, has been Allstate Insurance Company's slogan ever since the end of 1950. And so taking this illustration into the passage here, up until now, Acts, we might well focus our attention on people who are well-known, guys like Peter and Paul.

I mean, their stories are incredible, of Paul, the persecutor of the church, killer of Christ followers, to a devoted Christ follower himself, and how his heart was radically changed, radically transformed.

And we've got Peter, the guy who denied Christ, who came to proclaim Christ. We've also got stories of the likes of Dorcas, a disciple full of good works, acts of charity, men like Cornelius and Ananias, who have visions that led to the expansion of the gospel.

And now we read of the church being scattered, even more than it was when Stephen was martyred. And as the gospel has been shared, not only among the Jews, but to the Gentile Hellenists, we read that the Lord's hand was upon them.

[ 11 : 49 ] God's kingdom was increasing. Many were turning to the Lord. And Barnabas comes along. And as he does, we read that the apostles are in good hands. They're in good hands with a guy like Barnabas coming along.

He's sent as reinforcements to the work of God that's happening, the thriving work of God. Because he's a son of encouragement. Having seen the grace of God at work, he sees this again.

Having seen it in chapter 4, how the apostles were in one heart, one mind, they were devoted to God, they were generous, many people turning to the Lord. Here he sees it in Antioch for himself. And his heart is full.

And he's glad. And he's encouraged. And imagine you're a group of scattered Christians who are seeing this work of God happening in Antioch. And you hear, Barnabas is coming.

Barnabas is coming. And it's just like the right sprinkling of dust for the moment. And you see in response, Oh yes, Barnabas, he's such a good guy. He's a really good bloke, that guy, Barnabas.

[ 12 : 47 ] And he's coming to support us. See all of this preaching, all of this proclaiming, all the healings that we're seeing, all of the radical acts of mercy and people generously giving with their time and their talents and their money.

I mean, it's amazing, but it's full on. We've hardly got a second degree. And there's all the persecution we're seeing around us. But don't worry, Barnabas is coming. And what does Barnabas do?

He doesn't get his sword up and say, right, I'm going to take care of the persecutors. He doesn't say, I'm going to get my wallet out. Or he might have done, but we don't read that anyway, that he gets his wallet out and I'm going to just provide for all of your needs.

We read that Barnabas comes and he encourages. He sees the new converts. He sees the changed lives. He sees the sense of community being established. And he says, keep going.

Hang in there. Stay wholehearted. Keep your hearts close to the Lord. William Barclay writes of Barnabas that he's got the biggest heart in all the church.

[ 13 : 47 ] Barnabas comes to bring an encouraging word to the church. And in doing so, he's doing something that we might describe as being the best kept secret of the Christian faith. Encouragement.

Because it's something that can be really easy to do. It's something to actually be cultivated. That's what it becomes. A practice. A spiritual discipline.

That it's something that needs to be cultivated. It's something that you and I, each and every one of us, we know we can do. We know we can do it. We can bring an encouragement. But we're also aware of the culture that we live in.

Our highland, no emotion culture. Keep our hearts close to our chest. And that's a highland culture. But let's look at it for a second. Is that a biblical culture?

Is that a New Testament culture? Proverbs 12.25 says, Worry weighs a person down, but an encouraging word cheers a person up. And as I've said already, there's so much worry in our world.

[ 14 : 47 ] There's so much discouragement out there in our world. There's so much discouragement in the church. You know, nationally, you know, churches closing and all the rest. We hear that all the time.

There's so much. And there's enough to be discouraged about, to focus our hearts on, to be discouraged. But it's not the Jesus-like way. And there's a difference to being, feeling low and flat and needing a pickup, to being discouraged.

There's a difference there. There's a radical difference. And obviously, God comes near to the brokenhearted. He comes near to those who are crushed and spurted. He comes near to those who are needing his strength.

But what does Christ do to those who are in that situation? He provides us encouragement. But the Bible doesn't talk about, well, you've got the gift of discouragement. There you go. Just keep focused on being discouraged.

At the heart of the gospel, it's the heart of Christ for us. The one who comes alongside us. The one who comes to offer his encouragement to us. Where do we go when we need some encouragement?

[ 15 : 55 ] We go into the hands of Christ. Because there, he carries us and he cradles us like a mother cradles her newborn child. We look to the life of Jesus and we read about him and how he was the chief shepherd, the overseer of our souls.

How he looked to the crowds and he saw them with compassion and his heart was full of compassion like they were sheep without a shepherd. We look to him as the suffering servant who freely gave up his life so that we might be forgiven.

We look to him as the one who has victory over death and who holds us in his hands and who has defeated all the powers of sin and Satan and who has victory. And we look to him as the saviour who holds us in his hands until the day he returns.

So we look to Jesus and we look to him to be encouraged, to be strengthened, to be built up. And we do so knowing that he's given us of his Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us and that we can be people who are full of the Spirit, full of faith and that we can bring encouragement to one another by first way to Christ and receiving encouragement for ourselves.

This is something you and I need to do today just coming and saying, Lord Jesus, I open up my hands and I ask that you would bring some encouragement to my soul and help me with that to bring encouragement to someone around me.

[ 17 : 34 ] It's something you and I can all do. And so just to kind of close off our time for the remaining five minutes we have left about Barnabas. We've seen that he's a good man with a good CV and part of his bio here is that he's full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith and again, you only need to read through the book of Acts to see how the Holy Spirit fills people and the transformative and dramatic effect that it has on their lives.

And what we see about Barnabas is that as he's brought to the church in Antioch, Barnabas' character and his heart for others enables him to look all of the believers from different backgrounds, rich, poor, work class, middle class, multi-ethnic, black, white, Jews, non-Jews, Hellenists, Greeks, Gentiles, all the rest and he would look at them and he wouldn't judge them like maybe others would, like maybe even Peter would have.

If we go back to Acts chapter 10 where Peter is still adhering to some of the old Jewish customs and the Lord gives him a vision and sends Cornelius to them, what we see is that Peter's heart is then moulded and seeing that what God has made unclean is what God has made clean and what was unclean and all the rest.

But Barnabas is a guy who looks at all the different situations in the church, all the different people and he sees them with Jesus' eyes because Jesus has done something in his heart. Barnabas' character enables him to see that actually God is at work here and I'm going to get behind this and I'm going to support this.

And Barnabas' character enables this flourishing yet vulnerable group of Christians and this vulnerable church, flourishing as it was, to take heart, to get rooted in this new covenant community.

[ 19 : 20 ] But ultimately Barnabas' heart models that which is of the good shepherd, which is that of the suffering servant, modeled which is that of the model example himself, Jesus, the one who came to bring encouragement to his disciples when they were at their lowest by washing their feet, wondering, what's going on here?

Jesus, you can't have come to die, surely not, but instead what does Jesus do? He goes low and he washes their feet in an act of service and an act of encouragement when they were confused, when they were most weary.

This is the heart and character of Jesus to us. And so I'm just going to close now with a little partial remark. I know for me personally that I wouldn't naturally have the confidence to go far because I'm naturally quite a shy person.

I really am. And I found that in looking over the course of my life, that without the encouragement of those steadily speaking into my life over the years, I'd be nowhere.

And so encouragement is so important. I was down in Sandy Hill's church and Norman Atkins' church and he's coming to be our speaker again for the communions in a few weeks. I was down at his church in Glasgow.

[ 20 : 40 ] I was sharing my testimony and as I was driving into Glasgow I remarked how Costa Coffee there was bars in the window like I know in the east end of Glasgow when you see bars in the windows in Costas.

But there you go. But I came in and there was about 60 or so people there for an evening service. And there was young people, there was families, there was older people, there was a mix of folk and they were just all getting muddled in.

They were having tea together, they had taken all the chairs in their sanctuary and they had tables out and they had a time of praise led by young people and led by older people. They had an organist there who had been the organist for 50 years and he was now playing all these modern songs and there was a tear down his eye because he just saw God at work.

And it was just amazing to see people with open hearts and coming together, people of all ages sharing in the work of God. It was a real representation of this story in the book of Acts.

And then I was of course back in Stornaby for a time over the holidays just now and it was really encouraging to see people who have been encouragers to me over the years. I went to visit a lady who's been an especially good encourager.

[ 21 : 47 ] She's now in her early 80s and I just said to her that you've been such an encourager over the years and I'm so thankful to God for you. She said something to me, I'm glad I was at the door because I had to quickly turn around and wipe away a little thing.

But I think, you know what, when I came into that church as a teenager and if it wasn't for her, not just the teenagers who were there, if it wasn't for her, I don't know if I would have stuck it out. If it wasn't for the constant steady encouragement, I don't know where I would be.

And it was also encouraging to see the work in Mark's memorial again, to see signs of God's grace. they recently had their Day of Giving and they had a Day of Giving which they saw raised £52,000 for their Day of Giving and hearing about their project, their next project which is called The Barn, a new massive project for families in the community reaching out, a project that's going to cost three quarters of a million pounds but the money is already in place because God is at work and God's people are just so wonderfully open-hearted and it's so wonderful to see new people as well and to see the vision increasing of what God is doing.

And so then I want to encourage us here, I want to offer something of an encouragement to us because last night as I was kind of finishing off a little bit of prep for this morning, I went back to my very first sermon here and that sermon which of course I expect none of you to remember, just be honest, it's alright, it was on Jesus washing the disciples' feet and I said in that message, along with noting my thanks to the Reverend Ian McLean for all that he did throughout the vacancy in the church as well as noting my thanks to yourself as a congregation to the support that you'd offered my family and I, I said that the charge that I had from the Lord was to demonstrate the love of God through the way that I live my life and I noted as well that as I looked out at the congregation I saw people who were humble and devoted to God who loved Jesus and who were willing to show the love of God so that through worship, prayer and Christ-like living we try to be a welcoming caring fellowship for all age groups of this community committed to faithfully communicating the life-changing love of God

I think that's a pretty outstanding mission statement I wouldn't think of changing that for a long time I think it's a beautiful mission statement and it's who we want to be isn't it people who worship Jesus and who try to be like him or to put it a little bit more simpler in the words of Jesus by this everyone will know that you're my disciples if we love one another and you know every church needs a good number of Barnabases not just one or two but a whole swath the whole vast number of Barnabases Barnabas was a follower of Jesus who looked to encourage like Jesus did and we can all encourage those around us discouragement can come and tragically in the church there can be casualties Barnabas he had a honeymoon period in Antioch but then in Acts 15 he has a dispute with Paul and they separate that can happen but what matters most is that our hearts are in tune with God and that we encourage each other that I am in tune with God that we are all in tune with what God is saying and I think

[ 25 : 19 ] J. John sums up the gift of encouragement beautifully if I can just put the slide on the screen oh no I forgot to put it on the screen I'll rewrite the quote he says the word encouragement means to put courage into someone it's like oxygen to the soul a lot of people have gone further in their lives than they thought they could because someone thought they could encouragement is the best form of exercise we can do today and if the Christian life is a marathon then offering encouragement is not soppy it's not smoochy it's not oh see those churches that they do that it's being cold hard it's being like trust I just wonder what if we were known as a congregation as sons and daughters of encouragement what if we were known as Invergordon Church of Scotland in our community as a house of encouragement imagine that over our church proclaimed and declared a people a house of encouragement that people could come in knowing that when they leave here that they were encouraged what if we rewrote the narrative of discouragement that's prevalent in our society and that we become like

Barnabas and more like Jesus and if we do we might just see God surprise us in amazing ways just like he did at Antioch and we might just see the hand of the Lord on us and many turn to the Lord in faith let's just pray together briefly and I wonder if you feel comfortable with this that you might put your hands out in front of you as a sign that you're saying Lord into your hands I commit myself Lord Jesus help us to be encouragers to be people who bring encouragement who be people who would be people who lift one another up support one another honour one another but first Lord would you do that work in our hearts would we receive the encouragement we so desperately need from you that we are your sons and daughters that you love us with an everlasting love that you're not displeased with us that you are our father in heaven who delights and sings over us with your love with your mercy with your grace every single morning and we thank you that your grace is sufficient for every season of life your grace is sufficient for every day and Lord Jesus

I do pray that you would fill us and come and minister to us through the passion of the Holy Spirit that we would be a people who encourage one another we are people who encourage those around us in our town and our communities and that we would be known as sons and daughters of encouragement and that this would be a house of encouragement and that many people would turn to the Lord of faith and the hand of the Lord would be truly upon us so Lord Jesus we pray we ask that you would unfold us in your hands in your love that you would create us and carry us and be to us our saviour our refuge our hiding place and the one in whom we place all of our trust in his name we pray Amen Amen