

Introduction

1. Before Jesus ascended back into Heaven, He told his disciples that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and even to the remotest parts of the earth
2. We've seen that play out as the Church first began in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and then extend into Judea and Samaria, primarily with Jews
3. We then got glimpses into God's plan for gentiles and the rest of the world with the Ethiopian eunuch, the conversion of Saul, and then Peter's encounter with Cornelius
4. Today we see where those glimpses were pointing as full inclusion of gentiles in the body of Christ becomes a reality

A. Large numbers of gentiles are added to the Church in Antioch (READ 11:19-21)

1. Luke begins with a reflection back on the persecution that began with Saul back in Acts 8:1-4 (READ)
  - a. When the Christians in Jerusalem were forced out of Jerusalem, they scattered into what is referred to as the diaspora, the regions outside Jerusalem
    - 1) Some, like Phillip, went into Samaria and Judea (Acts 8:5)
    - 2) Luke tells us in 11:19 that others went north into Phoenicia (which is the coastal region along the Mediterranean Sea), Cyprus (which is a large island in the Mediterranean Sea NW of Phoenicia), and even further north to the city of Antioch (about 300 miles north of Jerusalem)
    - 3) He even mentions Cyrene in v. 20 which was almost 800 miles away along the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea (in what is now modern-day Libya)
  - b. Luke tells us in both 8:4 and 11:19 that one of the blessings of the persecution was that as they were scattered, they took the Gospel with them and preached about Jesus wherever they went
  - c. Almost all of the believers at that time were Jewish so it's not surprising that most only preached the Gospel to their fellow Jews, especially considering the paradigm we discussed over the last few weeks (e.g. it was unlawful to associate with gentiles)—apparently, they hadn't gotten the memo about the paradigm shift that happened in Caesarea
2. There were some, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who went to Antioch and began to preach the Gospel specifically to gentiles:
  - a. Many mistakenly assume that the Apostle Paul was the first to take the Gospel to the gentiles
  - b. However, we've already seen that Phillip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch
  - c. We also saw that Peter took the Gospel to not only Cornelius, but his entire family and close friends
  - d. And we see here that the first evangelistic effort to specifically reach out to gentiles began with some men from the Cyprus and Cyrene
  - e. And, the **"hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord"** (21)—this refers specifically to gentile conversions

3. One thing that's not immediately obvious in this passage is the importance of this taking place in Antioch:
  - a. There are two cities named Antioch in the Bible: Syrian Antioch and Pisidia Antioch—this one is the one located in Syria
  - b. It was the capital of the Roman province of Syria and Phoenicia and had a population of almost half a million people—this made it the third largest city in the Roman empire; only Rome, Italy, and Alexandria, Egypt, were larger
  - c. It was a major seaport trading hub with people from all different cultures and religions
  - d. The population was mostly Greek, but it had the largest population of Jews outside of Judea and a large population of God-fearing gentiles who were drawn to Judaism
  - e. It is sometimes referred to as the **“cradle of Christianity”** because of the prominent role it played in the expansion of the early Church
  - f. In fact, the Antioch church became the home base for Paul and Barnabas, with them generally starting and finishing their missionary journeys there
  - g. It's fair to say that the church at Antioch became as important as the church at Jerusalem
  
4. One take away here is that we see the Lord begin to fulfill the promise He made throughout the OT—that people from all nations, Jews and Gentiles alike, would worship before Him (Psalm 86:9): **“All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and they shall glorify Your name.”**

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| <b>B. Barnabas is sent to Antioch to encourage the new gentile believers (READ 11:22-23a)</b> |
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1. When word got back to the church in Jerusalem, they immediately dispatched Barnabas to Antioch:
  - a. This is similar to what we saw in Acts 8:
    - 1) After learning of the Samaritans coming to Christ, the Jerusalem church sent two Apostles, Peter and James, to Samaria
    - 2) In that case, the fact that they sent two apostles suggests that there was an investigative and authoritative nature to it (e.g. to determine whether it was true or legitimate), which is understandable since large numbers of Samaritans coming to Christ was unexpected
    - 3) They were also sent to pray for them and lay hands on them in a delayed baptism of the Spirit
  
  - b. Here, instead of sending apostles, they send Barnabas which suggests a different purpose:
    - 1) Peter, through his experience with Cornelius, had already reported to the church at Jerusalem that gentiles were coming to Christ
    - 2) It appears they sent Barnabas as a means to encourage the new believers
    - 3) Remember, his given name was Joseph but he was called Barnabas which meant **“Son of Encouragement”**
    - 4) We saw this first hand in how he reached out to Paul after his conversion when everyone else was afraid of him and skeptical
  
  - c. So, we shouldn't be surprised that when Barnabas arrives in Antioch and begins to encourage the new gentile believers (REREAD 23-24a):
    - 1) He witnessed first-hand **“the grace of God”**
    - 2) He **“rejoiced”**

- 3) He began to “**encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord**”—in other words, he encouraged them to remain faithful with all of their hearts
  - 4) He was the perfect man for the job because “**he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.**”
- d. We are one body in Christ: notice the care and concern the Jews at Jerusalem showed for their new gentile brothers and sisters in Christ—there will still be some struggles as we will see in future passages, but here we see them reaching out and sending someone to encourage them and help establish them in their new found faith

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| C. Barnabas recruits Saul to help disciple the believers in Antioch (READ 11:24b-26) |
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1. Twice in our passage Luke tells us that the church at Antioch experienced exceptional growth:
  - a. V. 21: “**a large number who believed turned to the Lord**”
  - b. V. 24b: “**and considerable numbers (lit. multitudes) were brought to the Lord**”
2. As a result, Barnabas needed some help so he left for Tarsus to find Saul and brought him back to Antioch:
  - a. The first question I asked was, Why Saul and not one of the other Apostles or another leader from Jerusalem
  - b. Tarsus was certainly a lot closer than Jerusalem, but there are likely some other reasons:
    - 1) First, Barnabas was intimately familiar with the facts of Saul’s conversion because he spoke with him about it (9:27) which means he was also likely aware of Saul’s commissioning by Jesus to be His witness specifically to gentiles
    - 2) Saul was also already ministering in Tarsus, a mostly gentile city similar to Antioch
    - 3) Finally, Saul was a brilliant OT scholar and it appears Barnabas’ primary purpose in bringing him back to Antioch was so they could teach the new disciples (REREAD 26)
3. This brings up something we haven’t seen yet in the book of Acts and it should remind us of our real mission as Christians and as a church:
  - a. Almost the entire focus so far has been on evangelism and winning people to Christ
  - b. Here, we see the first mention of an organized effort to mentor and disciple new believers—it doesn’t mean it wasn’t being done before this; it’s just the first time we see it
  - c. This aligns precisely with what Jesus commanded the Apostles: “**Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...**” (Matthew 28:19-20)
  - d. Jesus isn’t interested simply in conversions; He wants disciples, and ones who obey
  - e. Barnabas and Saul recognized this so they spent the next year, ministering together, mentoring and teaching “**a considerable crowd**” of believers (lit.)
4. The result, according to Luke, is that the believers in Antioch developed a reputation and were given a name: “**Christians**”:
  - a. You may be familiar with the claim that “Christian” means “Little Christs”—well, it’s not really true
    - 1) Christian is a combination of two words, “Christ” and an adjectival ending which was borrowed from Latin which means to “adhere to or belonging to”
    - 2) It literally means Christ-follower

- b. You might have noticed that Luke doesn't say they started calling themselves Christians, but that **"they were first called Christians in Antioch"**:
  - 1) In the NT, we see believers refer to themselves by a variety of terms including disciples, believers, saints, brothers and sisters, and followers of The Way—but never Christians
  - 2) There are only three instances in the NT where they are referred to as Christians—here by those outside the Church, King Agrippa in Acts 26:28, and by Peter in 1 Peter 4:16
  - 3) The fact that the label originated outside the Church by unbelievers suggests that the believers in Antioch had become not just an identifiable group but one that associated them with Jesus Christ
  - 4) What a tremendous testimony and witness!
- 5. I think the take away here is what I've already stated—Jesus isn't simply looking for converts; the Great Commission isn't just about evangelism; it's about making disciples who honor Him by obeying what He taught

D. The gentile believers in Antioch send help to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem (READ 11:27-30)

- 1. This last portion of our passage is a bit of a reversal from how it started
- 2. Our passage started with the Jews in Jerusalem reaching out to encourage the new gentile believers in Antioch
- 3. Here, we see the gentile believers now reaching out to help their Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem in a time of need
- 4. Luke mentions that the coming famine was a kingdom-wide one ("**all over the world**" likely refers to the entire Roman kingdom) which means that the inhabitants of Antioch weren't immune to what was about to come
- 5. In spite of this, as much as they were able, they sent to help the church in Jerusalem (Luke refers to the broader region, Judea, but Acts 12:25 indicates that Paul and Barnabas took the offering to the elders at Jerusalem)
- 6. One take away here is that this is the way the universal Church is supposed to operate—local churches are not islands simply surviving on their own and caring for themselves; we are all part of the body of Christ, the Universal Church—whether we are Jew or Gentile, this ethnicity or that one, this nationality or another—and we have responsibilities to one another that extend beyond the four walls of our own church