

# ALL ROADS LEAD TO ANTIOCH

ACTS 11:19-30    APRIL 15, 2020

“Meanwhile, back at the ranch” is a cliché we’ve all heard. Originally it was a subtitle shown in silent films.<sup>1</sup> It was also used in radio dramas, where scene changes had to be signaled verbally.<sup>2</sup> Later, it became a catchphrase in westerns and cowboy shows, where our heroes were carrying on with their duties and adventures, sometimes unaware of what was happening on the other side of the prairie.

In the last few chapters, some monumental things have been happening. The foremost enemy of the Church has been converted and is on his way to becoming a great Apostle, in one of the most epic origin stories of all time. The door of salvation has been flung wide to all the nations. Revival has broken out in Samaria. People are being healed and raised from the dead, angels are appearing.

Though the story Luke is telling has focused mostly on a few individuals like Peter or Philip or a bit of Saul, it’s clear that God’s work was not localized. We’ve been seeing His astounding providence on display as people from far and wide are being drawn to Him, to hear the magnificent news that Jesus Christ has made a way for man to be saved. And, what a comfort it is, to know that our God has left no corner of this world unnoticed, no stone unturned in His desire that none should perish. Tonight, as we go home to lay our heads down and get that sleep we need every day, we can be sure that God is not slumbering. He is still busy, still working, still unfolding His plan and His will, by His grace, through His people, in all sorts of ways.

Luke has made our eyes wide with what God is capable of doing through just a few, humble people. But now, in the back half of chapter 11, he gives us a “meanwhile, back at the ranch” moment, and shows that the work of the Gospel wasn’t only being accomplished by a few, but by *many* as each, *average* Christian, went moving through the world, sharing the truth of Jesus as they went.

As Luke widens the lens, we’ll see the start of a brand new, local church and how it operated. It’s not presented as a model to be mimicked, but as an exhibition and demonstration of what God can do in the lives of people who love Him, are full of His Spirit and submitted to His word.

In the context of the Book, we’ll also see that God was beginning a long and consequential work in a new place: Antioch, the capital of Syria and one of the most remarkable cities in the Roman Empire. As the Lord established a new thing in that place, we’ll see many roads, from near and far, leading to this city and to the church there. It becomes a ministry magnet.

**Acts 11:19 - <sup>19</sup>Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.**

Many commentators are quick to suggest that the dispersion of Christians from Jerusalem was a result of the Church’s failure to take up the great commission. They say God had to jump start His Bride, who had fallen into a rut. Then, looking at Luke’s pivot to focus on the story in Antioch, they say that, because the church in Jerusalem was *still* failing, God moved His base of operations up north to Syria, because, after all, the 12 in Jerusalem were a bunch of losers.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meanwhile,\\_back\\_at\\_the\\_ranch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meanwhile,_back_at_the_ranch)

<sup>2</sup> <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MeanwhileBackAtThe>

I've got a few issues with this sort of perspective. First of all, we're given no such assessment from the Lord in the Word itself. God's not shy when it comes to calling out His people. Second, church history records that the 12 *did* carry the Gospel far and wide. John to Asia. Andrew to the Scythians and Thracians. Bartholomew and Thomas to India. Peter to Bythinia, Cappadocia and Italy. Third, dividing out the Jerusalem church as a *failure* is an entirely grace-less attitude.

Instead, we might look from this perspective: God was obviously doing *many* things, not just throughout the region, but now increasingly around the Roman world. Luke, as an author, cannot tell *every* story, and he doesn't pretend to. He's leading us into part 2 of his Acts account, which will largely center on his traveling companion, the Apostle Paul. And, in doing so, he shows us how God can use *any* of us to do Kingdom work.

These Christians, on the run from persecution, are a great example of that wonderful truth. It wasn't *God* who scattered them out. Luke says, outright, it was a result of persecution. To say that it was a tool, used by God, to motivate His Church is to make Him like the abusive husband who beats his wife when he doesn't like the way she cooked the potatoes. Rather, in Job we read:

**Job 34:12 - <sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is true that God does not act wickedly and the Almighty does not pervert justice.**

Saul, before becoming a Christian, had hoped to shatter the church and sweep it into the waste bin of history. Instead, his impact caused believers to scatter like seeds everywhere they went. It reminds us that the Christian life and its Gospel work can be carried out no matter the setting. You can do the Lord's work while living large or running for your life. You and I can minister whether we feel strong or weak, whether we're in headwinds or tailwinds, because God is always the same, His truth is always sure and His Spirit is always with us. Acts, on the whole, shows us the incredible *adaptability* of the Christian life. We find it growing and bearing fruit in dungeons, on the shoreline, lost at sea, in palaces, among friends, among enemies. Wherever you're making your way, you're to do so as a Spirit-filled agent of grace.

Now, in this case, we see that these believers, who were all Jewish had dispersed through the empire, but were only speaking to Jews. We've talked about this issue at length in our previous studies, but suffice it to say that, while we don't *condone* their behavior, we can *identify* with it. For most of us it's not not easy to interact with people who are not *like* us. But, we remember that God's intention is that we be a light to the world. We're not to hide our lamp under a basket, but to let it shine, and that means sharing with those who are *not* like us.

**Acts 11:20 - <sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus.**

Such a simple choice made an incredible difference. These folks from Cyprus and Cyrene show great courage here. It would've been tough to be Jewish believers bringing the Gospel to the pagan, Gentile world. There was no knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus up here. These people were polytheists! And the Jews had been culturally trained to resist and separate from Gentiles. But here, these nameless Christians thought to themselves, "This information I have isn't just good news for a few people, it's good news for everyone."

The Gospel *is* for everyone, everywhere. Every place, every class, every strata, every ability. Kings or cripples. And these men from Cyprus and Cyrene step out into absolutely uncharted territory, to let the Greeks of Antioch in on the secret.

What did they share? They talked about *Jesus*. They talked about who He is and what He had done. That's what the good news is. The good news of the Gospel is *not* how YOU live your best life now. It's about our King, Jesus Christ.

Language scholars point out that Luke used a term here when he said "began speaking" which refers to "simple speech...the common...conversation of traveling people."<sup>3</sup> It wasn't formal or rehearsed, it was just people talking to people. As we go, let's find ways to speak casually about the Lord and His Kingdom and see whether those words might not fall on ready soil.

**Acts 11:21 - <sup>21</sup> The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.**

The Christian life is a hands on thing. God's hand on us, our hands on the plow, as we do *personal* work, engaging with actual people around us. It's a strange thing that the world is becoming, technologically, more and more *connected*, but that same technology makes it all the easier to become isolated and withdrawn, interacting not with individuals, but with screens. But, just as we wouldn't want God to automate His work in our lives, we want to be careful not to disengage from true, face to face interaction with others.

Now, here we see a great number of people not only *believing* what they're being told about Christ, but *turning to Him* in response. The Gospel requires not only intellectual agreement, but the choice to repent, turn from sin and toward God in obedience and worship. We see it happening in large numbers here, but it was happening organically. The Christians weren't trying to replicate the Samaritan Revival. They were simply living out their faith, and the Spirit yielded a great harvest.

As these Greeks became believers, we note that there was very little being "offered" to them at the church level. The ministries available were *very* simple and minimal. And yet, who among us wouldn't want to be a part of this passage? Sometimes we start to think that we need certain styles or mechanisms or segmentations for proper ministry to be done. Acts refutes that idea, wholesale.

**Acts 11:22 - <sup>22</sup> News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch.**

Why Barnabas? It turns out to be a very good choice, but it doesn't seem like the obvious one. Previously, when they had heard about a revival in Samaria, the church had sent Peter and John. We know that Nicolaus, one of the seven chosen to serve in Acts 6, was *from* Antioch. We don't know what or why, other than that the Holy Spirit was drawing Barnabas into this good work.

The leadership sent him in response to what they had heard on what looks like a short term missions trip. He wasn't going simply because he *wanted* to, but because he was under authority of the Apostles and part of a local fellowship. God gives us these connections on purpose so that we're *not* following our own whims, but part of the collective work.

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<sup>3</sup> G. Campbell Morgan *The Acts Of The Apostles*

**Acts 11:23 - <sup>23</sup>When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts,**

How can you see the grace of God? Apparently it's possible. But we know what Luke means here. It was obvious that these new Christians were full of Godly character and spiritual fruit. You could see the joy on their faces. You could see compassion in their behavior.

Isn't it an interesting thing that we show our emotions on our faces? What do our muscles have to do with anger or happiness? Yet, we can see a person 100 feet away and take stock.

The question demanded of us by verse 23 is: When people look at us, Calvary Hanford, as a group of Christians, what do they see? Is it grace? I hope so. Let's think of the most negative example possible: Westboro Baptist Church. That's the group that used to be in the news a lot more, holding vile signs at funerals, talking about how God hates people. No one, anywhere, sees the grace of God in that group, because it's not there. What about us? Is God's grace seen in us? Grace has long been one of the defining aspects of the Calvary Chapel style of ministry. As a group we want to cling to it and apply it, not just institutionally, but to our own faith individually.

Barnabas stepped into a leadership position in Antioch. It's unsurprising. He's going to be listed as an apostle in Acts 14. To this brand new group of Christians here's what his assignment was: "Remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts." That's what they needed. Not a capital campaign. Not a strategic program. Abide in Jesus. Continue in grace. Keep moving forward in your personal, spiritual purpose. The term used for "devoted" is one used of the showbread in the Temple, dedicated to the continual service of Yahweh, while in His presence. That's what this church plant needed.

Barnabas' example here shows us the significance of good leadership in the Church. Imagine if some brute had come from Jerusalem, or some man seeking prominence for himself. Think of the damage he would have done. Instead, this is what we're told about Barnabas:

**Acts 11:24 - <sup>24</sup>for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord.**

Bible students know that, eventually, we're going to get to Acts 15 where Paul and Barnabas divide and go their separate ways. But here, writing long after the fact, we see Luke, who was himself on #TeamPaul, held no grudge against Barnabas. No hard feelings.

Why were people added to the Lord? It was through grace-filled preaching. They weren't added through argument or bribery or entertainment, but through the proclamation of the Gospel. Christians and churches *do* need to have answers to arguments, we do need to be full of joy and anticipation, we should be *excited* to gather. But when we're taking a look at the methods of our ministry, we should always remember that *our* goal is grace. Numbers aren't our business, they're God's business. Our part is to abide and continue in grace and allow the Lord to give the increase.

**Acts 11:25 - <sup>25</sup>Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul,**

One commentator pointed out that, apparently, in Antioch they had a lot of evangelists, but no teachers.<sup>4</sup> At some point, Barnabas decided he needed to bring on a partner. Sending a letter wouldn't do because, apparently, no one really knew where Saul was. It had been quite a few years since he had come to Jerusalem. So, Barnabas went to find his friend and bring him. We should note that there wasn't a dry, committee formalism to the way things were done here. Barnabas didn't have to send an official request to Jerusalem. The local church, though part of the universal work, was being operated as an independent group. Unified in spirit, submitted to the same doctrine, but led particularly by the Spirit through the local leadership.

**Acts 11:26 - <sup>26</sup> and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.**

As leaders, they dedicated their time to teaching people about doctrine, about God's word, about living the Christian life. This is what happened back in Acts 2, when the Jerusalem church first began. And, Paul will later write that God's house is built upon the foundation of teaching. From a right understanding of God's word flows the necessary growth in a church.<sup>5</sup> Individually, the Christians needed to abide and continue in the Lord. Organizationally, that was accomplished as people were taught and had God's word rightly divided and explained to them.

We're told that the disciples were first called "Christians" here in Antioch. Perhaps you've heard that the word means "little Christs," but, really there's no evidence of that. The term is simply a compound which means "belonging to the party of Jesus Christ." But what a beautiful reminder, We *belong* to Christ. We're not just trailing after someone who is disinterested in us. We are His. His treasure. His friends. His beloved. The sheep of His hand.

This was evident of the believers in Antioch. It was clear they weren't just some new philosophy or sect of Judaism. They were *Christian*. Their belief system led to a visible life change. They no longer looked like Antiochenes. They were set apart. They are an inspiration in a world where, sometimes, Christians are looking more and more indistinguishable from the world around them.

**Acts 11:27-28 - <sup>27</sup> In those days some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the reign of Claudius.**

Though the Christians in Judea would be the ones hit hard by this famine, God sent prophets to Syria to sound the alarm. Why? Because these people in Antioch would be in a position to send help and because it is God's plan to make us aware of the needs of others and be a part of bringing relief. We live in such a time, right now. We know that God gives us opportunity to bear each other's burdens, to show generosity to those in need. What we've seen again and again in Acts is not that we need to figure out some scheme or one-size-fits-all approach to ministry, but to invite the Lord to lead us as to what to do in response to the needs of the world.

We note also a very important aspect of this exercise of prophecy: A person made a prophecy, claiming to have revelation from God, and then what he said *actually happened*. There are many folks today who claim to have a "prophetic" ministry. There's a very easy way to tell whether they're true or false.

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<sup>4</sup> Ivor Powell *The Amazing Acts*

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:19-21

But here we're noticing a magnetism in Antioch. People are streaming in from Africa, from the island of Cyprus. Saul is coming. Barnabas is coming. Prophets have come. God was doing something great and wonderful in this city, and though that specific work has since faded, we ask the Lord to do a new work like it, maybe in our own city.

The church, having heard the prophecy, asked: "What should we do?"

**Acts 11:29-30 - <sup>29</sup>Each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea. <sup>30</sup>They did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.**

There was a coordinated effort, but it was based on individual leading and personal sacrifice. Each Christian sought the Lord and how he or she could participate in the cumulative work of sending relief. We recognize that the Lord's is a *volunteer* army. Working together toward specific goals, on particular missions, but as soldiers we're not conscripted. Who will go? Who will give? Who will be Christ to those in need? That's the call that goes out day after day. May our answer ever be, "Here am I, Lord, send me!" Not according to the designs of man, but the leading of God the Holy Spirit.

These Gentile Christians did not withhold from their needy, Jewish brothers. What a beautiful thing. The Jews had, at the first, held back the Gospel from the Greeks, but the walls kept coming down. The Church was unified and connected. And so, when help was needed, they sent relief, according to each one's ability. And, as this church in Antioch grew, they were able to make a big difference in the lives of those in Judea. And we see how quickly the Lord was able to establish this fellowship and cause it to thrive. In verse 19, Jerusalem had sent them exiles. By verse 30, Antioch was sending back Apostles of their own. What a great work of God.

There is much going on all over the world. Meanwhile, we're here, on our ranch, the place where God has planted us. The best thing we can do, the most essential thing, is to abide in Christ and continue in the submissive study of His word. As we do, the Holy Spirit will help us, direct us, supply us and send us as He continues His wonderful work. We pray that His work in our lives and our church and our city would be dramatic and lasting, like He did in Antioch. The size and scope is His business. Ours is to continue in our devotion to Christ, operating in grace, doing what we can as He leads and thereby being a bright light in a dark world.