

# Acts 11:19-26

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## *Gentiles in Antioch Believe in Jesus*

*At the murder of Stephen years prior, a persecution against the church began. Due to the persecution, believing Jews spread out to regions like Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, initially preaching about Jesus only to Jews. However, some began preaching to Greeks in Antioch. A significant number of Greeks believed in Jesus. Hearing this, the Jerusalem church sends Barnabas to Antioch, who, seeing God at work among the Antiochians, further encourages the believers in their faith. Barnabas then seeks Saul (Paul) to join him in teaching the rapidly growing community. Paul ministers there for a year.*

Since Acts 9:32, Luke (the author of Acts) has followed the mission work of Peter as he traveled through Judea, visiting various churches, healing and raising the dead, preaching the gospel to the Gentiles for the first time, and finally returning to Jerusalem. To the Jewish believers who questioned him in Jerusalem, Peter explained that salvation had come to the Gentiles, and that no one should exclude anyone who receives the Holy Spirit through faith.

These travels were possible because there was peace in Israel for the time being, after the persecution of the church receded. The persecution began with the murder of *Stephen* the Deacon (Acts 7:59-8:1). Saul the Pharisee spearheaded the persecution, scattering believers from Jerusalem, but after he became a believer in Jesus, the persecution fizzled out (Acts 9:3-6).

Saul (later known by his Greek name Paul) returned to Jerusalem after a few years in Damascus and Arabia. But he relocated to his hometown of Tarsus to avoid a plot hatched among some Hellenistic Jews to kill him (Acts 9:30).

The peace that emerged afterwards allowed Peter to go on a circuit to check on various established churches in Judea,

“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.”

(Acts 9:31)

Now Luke reminds his reader of Stephen’s death years earlier and the resulting dispersal of believers from Jerusalem to other regions:

*So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch (v. 19).*

Luke reintroduces this event to contextualize why there were believing Jews spread so far from Jerusalem, all the way to [\*Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch\*](#). The *persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen* was a horrible thing—believers were imprisoned and some were presumably put to death—but “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love

God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). In this case the good includes a great spread of the gospel of Jesus.

The *persecution scattered* believers far from Jerusalem, which led to the gospel being preached wherever these religious refugees went, like Samaria, Cush, Ashdod, Joppa, Caesarea (8:5, 38, 40). We learn here that other refugees went to *Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch*. *Phoenicia* was a coastal region north of Israel, now modern-day Lebanon; *Cyprus*, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, still called *Cyprus* to this day; and *Antioch*, a major port city in Syria (Antakya in modern-day Turkey)—all were significant hubs in the ancient world.

*Phoenicia* is home to the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon, mentioned throughout the Old and New Testament (Ezra 3:7, 1 Kings 16:31, Mark 7:24).

The establishment of a church in *Antioch* created a foothold for believers and a place of stability to strengthen the church in the Gentile world. It would also become a strategic place from which to send out missionaries into Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. This Antiochian church would become second only to the church in Jerusalem in terms of size and influence.

The first believers who arrived in these locations after being *scattered because of the persecution* initially only shared the gospel with other Jews living in *Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch*. They were *speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone* (v. 19), as had been the status quo since Jesus returned to Heaven years before.

But just as Peter had initiated the preaching of the gospel (through the Spirit’s lead) to Gentiles in Caesarea, some of these refugee believers did the same thing, surely directed by the Spirit as well, since Luke writes that *the hand of the Lord was with them* (v. 21):

*But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus* (v. 20).

In Antioch, the Gentiles begin to believe in *the Lord Jesus* thanks to the boldness of *men of Cyprus and Cyrene* (a city in modern-day Libya), who stepped out in faith and began *preaching the Lord Jesus* to Gentiles—the *Greeks*—in Antioch.

Many of the Greeks believed: *the hand of the Lord was with* these missionaries from *Cyprus and Cyrene, and a large number* who lived in Antioch *believed and turned to the Lord* (v. 21). The reach of the gospel has significantly grown due to the *persecution* which caused believers to flee Jerusalem in all directions. Antioch is some 300 miles north of Jerusalem. It was the third greatest city in the Roman Empire at that time, after Rome and Alexandria. All along the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, from Judea to Phoenicia to Syria, believers in Jesus are spreading His good news.

The Jerusalem church learns about this *large number* of the *Greeks* in *Antioch* believing in Jesus. Not only would it have been of interest that a new church had formed in *Antioch*, with a large congregation at that, but news that *Greeks*—pagan, polytheistic *Greeks* are believing in the Jewish Messiah and building this church—would likely have astounded the Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

Gentile believers in Jesus were appearing all over the map. From the preceding section, where Jews were initially skeptical of Peter opening the door of the gospel to Gentiles, we can infer that this news of Greeks coming to faith in Jesus was something unexpected. Further, it does not appear that the Greeks becoming believers was even desirable in the minds of the disciples, even though Jesus many times spoke of the global reach of His salvation (John 3:16-17, 12:32, 46, Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:18-20). But now that it was happening, many of the Jews were reacting to the inclusion of Gentiles with joy and praises to God.

So when the *news about* the Greek believers in Antioch *reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem*, the elders *sent Barnabas off to Antioch* (v. 22). The *church at Jerusalem* is essentially the mother church, out of which the gospel is emanating. Jerusalem is a special place, then, now, and in all ages to come. It is God's holy city, from where Jesus will eventually reign in the Messianic Kingdom (Isaiah 2:1-4, 24:21-23, Matthew 25:31).

It is where Jesus died for the sins of the world and raised back to life. It is where the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples and apostles, where the first church was formed, led by Peter and James the brother of Jesus. The Jerusalem church diminished when believers scattered during Saul's Persecution (Acts 8:1), but since then it has rebuilt (Acts 9:31).

Now with the *news about Antioch*, the leaders in *Jerusalem* want to check on it, perhaps to see if the *news* is true, to build a supportive relationship between the churches, and probably to make sure that what is being taught there is in line with Jesus's teachings. The *Jerusalem* elders choose a respected man to undertake this journey: *Barnabas*.

*Barnabas* was first introduced in Acts 4 when many wealthy believers were selling property to help the poor:

“Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.”  
(Acts 4:36-37)

*Barnabas* goes on to become a great shepherd, missionary, and evangelist. He was a Levite, born of the tribe of Levi, which was set apart by God to be priests and servants of the Temple in Israel (Deuteronomy 18:1-2). However, he was also of *Cyprian birth*, meaning he was born on the island of Cyprus. He is apparently more well-traveled than some of the other Jewish believers who have lived only in Israel throughout their lives.

The fact that the Antioch church was established by some believers who had fled to Cyprus, and now were in Antioch, is probably another reason that Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, was chosen. He would have been fluent in the local languages. But the main reason he was assigned this mission is because he was highly regarded and beloved among the believers. Nicknamed “Son of Encouragement,” he walked with God by faith: *for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith* (v. 24).

*Barnabas* was also the man who helped Saul (Paul) the Apostle meet Peter and James in Jerusalem, “But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles” (Acts 9:27, Galatians 1:18-19), before Saul was sent away back to his hometown of Tarsus, because some of

the Greek-speaking Jews wanted to kill him (Acts 22:17-21). Barnabas was a connector and encourager.

*Then when Barnabas arrived in Antioch and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord (v. 23-24).*

It may be difficult for believers in the 21st century to understand how alien the idea of a church of both Gentile and Jewish believers would have been to the 1st century Jews. It did not fit in their paradigm of what was going to happen with the spread of the gospel. They viewed Jesus as a Messiah for the Jews only.

But Barnabas sees the work of God among the Greeks and accepts it. He *witnessed the grace of God*, meaning he saw with his own eyes that God's favor was on these Greeks, that they had the Holy Spirit as a seal of God's salvation from the penalty of sin. There was no denying it, just as Peter couldn't deny that the Holy Spirit and God's grace was extended to the Gentile Cornelius and his Roman friends/family (Acts 10:45-47).

The word *grace* translates the Greek word "charis" which means "favor." We can see this in Luke 2:52, where Jesus is said to have grown in favor ("charis") with God and man. God grants His favor for His own reasons. God is God. There is no standard by which He judges or can be judged; He is the standard. So when Barnabas *witnessed the grace of God* he was observing that God had chosen to give His favor to the Gentiles by adopting them into His family, and sealing them with His Spirit.

Barnabas *rejoiced* that salvation had come to the Gentiles. He was overjoyed to see more believers, whatever their ethnicity, accepted into God's family by faith. And true to his name (Barnabas, "Son of Encouragement"), *he began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord (v. 23).*

What did he *encourage* them to do? They were born again of the Spirit, newborns in the faith. Believers in Jesus were taught to expect suffering (Matthew 5:10-12), and many already had experienced severe persecution and trials, because the world is at enmity with God and His Son (John 15:18, James 4:4). Barnabas encouraged the Antiochian believers *to remain true to the Lord*, to have a *resolute heart*, to not drift away (Hebrews 2:1), to not fear rejection or death (Revelation 2:10), to live from faith to faith (Romans 1:17). That is the aim of encouragement, to take what is already occurring and sustain it. To keep going, keep running, do not give up. It means literally "to give courage." Barnabas encouraged these new Gentile believers because *he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith (v. 24).*

The writings of Paul elaborate on our need to *remain true to the Lord with a resolute heart*. In sum, however, it is our sanctification (Philippians 1:6), which is a process of being conformed to Christ's image through learning to walk in His ways. To *remain true to the Lord* is to please God by obeying Him through faith, to have a good report before Him when we stand before Him in the Judgment (Romans 4:12; 1 Corinthians 3:13-14; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 4:12-13). To follow God's ways is in our best interest in this life as well as the next. To follow God's ways is to operate within His design for humanity.

After visiting this church of Gentile and Jewish believers, Barnabas remembers *Saul* (later Paul), and seeks him out to bring him into this ministry. Barnabas knew Saul's strengths as a well-educated, intelligent Pharisee who knew the scripture backward and forward, who was called to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

The last time Luke (the author of Acts) reported on *Saul* (Paul), he had been spirited away to Tarsus for the safety of his life. We do not know what *Saul* (Paul) has been doing in this time period. Knowing what we know of his zeal and boldness in preaching the gospel throughout his ministry, it is likely *Saul* was preaching the gospel in Tarsus to the Jews there. But concerning the narrative of Acts at this point, he seems to be "in the wings" or "on the bench," so to speak, waiting to be "put in the game."

So Barnabas *left Antioch for Tarsus*, probably by boat, *to look for Saul and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch* (v. 25-26). Barnabas foresaw that *Saul* was well-suited to minister to the new believers in Antioch, which was made up predominately of *Greek* Gentiles. So Barnabas the connector sets out to collect Paul and connect him with the Gentile believers in Antioch. Undoubtedly the Spirit was leading in all this (Acts 11:12).

This ministry in Antioch becomes a successful residency for both Barnabas and Saul: *And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch* (v. 25-26).

For *an entire year* Saul (Paul) and Barnabas *met with the church* of Antioch. No specific number is given, but the size of this assembly was significant: they *taught considerable numbers* of believers. Now that these *Greek* believers were saved from the penalty of sin and death by their faith in Jesus, they needed to be *taught* how to live out that faith in their daily lives, how *to remain true to the Lord* with a *resolute heart*.

Believers are saved/delivered from the penalty of sin through simple faith in Jesus (John 3:14-15). This gives them new birth, and a new life in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul refers to this as being justified in God's sight, and insists that this justification only comes by faith (Romans 4:1-3). But believers still have their old nature, and need to learn to walk by faith and follow the leading of the Spirit rather than the flesh (Galatians 5:16-17). This is the process of being sanctified, or being saved/delivered from the power of sin, and its negative consequences in our lives.

Most of Paul's writings focus on leading believers to walk in a manner that pleases God. Paul encourages his disciples to follow Jesus in order to escape the negative consequences that come from walking in sin (Romans 1:24, 26, 28; 6:16; Galatians 6:8). We can presume that this is the same basic approach Paul and Barnabas used in training the *considerable numbers* of believers in Antioch.

This ministry in Antioch begins a missionary partnership for the early years of Saul's (Paul's) ministry. Saul (Paul) and Barnabas would preach the gospel as a team on a journey which took them through Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Galatia, planting churches throughout these regions.

The author of Acts, Luke, then gives his reader a bit of trivia: *the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch*. Up until this point, believers in Jesus had been called "followers of the

Way” or “belonging to the Way” (Acts 9:1-2). The Way of Jesus the Messiah, who called Himself, “the way” to God the Father, the only way (John 14:6). Christianity would still be called “the Way” multiple times throughout the remainder of Acts. But *in Antioch*, the *disciples* (the followers or learners) of Christ were *first called Christians* (Greek, “Christianos,” meaning “follower of Christ,” belonging to the party of Christ, or “little Christ”).

Many believe the term “Christian” was originally meant to mock those who followed the Way of Jesus Christ, since most of the New Testament writers refer to one another as “saints,” but “Christian” is used rarely. And when used it is in a seemingly derisive way, as by King Herod Agrippa II (Acts 26:28), and by Peter in encouragement not to be ashamed of the name, that it is good to suffer as a Christian rather than to suffer as an evildoer (1 Peter 4:15-16). This may be true, but there is nothing innately offensive about the term. Again, it means a follower of Christ, which is what believers are called to be, “disciples,” which means “followers” or “learners,” of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20).

Luke does not describe the term as being slanderous or insulting. For him to make special reference to where and when it originated indicates he believes it is important information, possibly due to the widespread use of the term. Luke’s aim is to be an accurate chronicler, as stated at the outset of his writings—the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles—to his friend Theophilus,

“it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”  
(Luke 1:3-4)

The term “Christian” apparently rose in popularity from this point onward and has endured to this day. Whether or not it is used as an insult depends upon the one who speaks it; but for believers, to be called a word that means “little Christ” or “follower of Christ” is a good thing—it should be our identity, as Peter wrote,

“but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.”  
(1 Peter 4:16)

The decision of some Jewish believers to preach to the Gentiles, and the Church’s positive response, is a crucial step towards fulfilling the Great Commission of reaching “all the nations” (Matthew 28:19-20). It also sets the stage for *Saul’s* (Paul’s) eventual missionary journeys that would further spread Christianity across the Roman Empire.

## **Biblical Text**

**19 So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. 22 The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent**

**Barnabas off to Antioch. 23 Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; 24 for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. 25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**