

# Acts 11:27-30

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## *The Charity of the Gentile Believers*

*Prophets from Jerusalem visit Antioch, and one named Agabus prophesies a global famine during Claudius Caesar's reign. Moved by this warning, the Antiochian disciples decide to send relief money in preparation for the famine to their Judean brethren, according to their wealth. Barnabas and Saul are entrusted to deliver these contributions to the Judean elders.*

For a year now, Saul and Barnabas have been leading and discipling the believers of the young church in Antioch, a major port city in what was then Syria (Antakya in modern-day Turkey). It is the first church largely composed of Gentile Greek believers in Jesus, with some Jewish brethren.

Luke, the author of Acts, brings our attention to visitors from [Jerusalem to Antioch](#): *Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch* (v. 27). The Bible always describes the journey out of Jerusalem as going *down*, because the city of Jerusalem is located in rocky hills in south central Judea at an elevation of roughly 2,550 feet (780 meters) above sea level. There were *some prophets* who came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, probably sailing up the Mediterranean Sea to reach their destination. This would have been about a 300-mile journey. These Jews have an important prophecy to impart to the Antiochian believers.

The New Testament describes a variety of ministry roles in the early church, including that of *prophets*. Just as in the Old Testament, *prophets* deliver messages from God. The messages usually focus on calling God's people to live righteously, according to God's (good) design. But they sometimes also predict future events, usually as part of calling people to repentance. The *prophets* play an essential part in guiding and instructing believers. These *prophets'* journey from the church in Jerusalem to the church in Antioch will help to strengthen the bonds between the two communities as well.

*One of the prophets was named Agabus. He stood up in the assembly of the Antiochian believers and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world* (v. 28).

*Agabus* appears twice in the Book of Acts, both times to give a message from God. In addition to his prophecy here, Agabus later predicted Paul's arrest in Jerusalem:

“As we were staying [in Caesarea] for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, ‘This is what the Holy Spirit says: ‘In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”  
(Acts 21:10-11)

Here in Acts 11, *Agabus's* prophecy concerns *the world*. Specifically that *there would certainly be a great famine all over the world*. A *famine* often occurs when crops fail, leading to scarcity and starvation. The *world* being referred to here likely refers to the Roman Empire at that time.

Luke tells us when this famine occurred: *And this took place in the reign of Claudius* (v. 28). Claudius was nephew to the third Caesar, Tiberius, and became Caesar (emperor) after the fourth Caesar, Caligula, was assassinated. There were several famines during *Claudius's reign* (from AD 41 to AD 54). One notable famine around AD 46 affected the region of Judea, aligning with *Agabus's* prediction.

The Antiochian believers respond to this prophecy with the same loving generosity as the Jerusalem church had in its early days. Just as the property-owning Jerusalem believers sold their land to share their money “as anyone might have need” (Acts 2:45), the Antiochians do the same:

*And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea* (v. 29).

Antioch was a wealthy city, the third largest in the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria. It stood on a river which fed into the Mediterranean Sea and was a place for commerce. Some of the Greek *disciples* were men and women of *means*, wealthy, so *in proportion* to what they had, they set aside charitable funds to send back to Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

Although this famine was prophesied to affect countries all over the *world*, we can infer from the events here that it would negatively impact Judea more severely, or that the general poverty of the Judeans might cause them to feel the famine more harshly than those of *means*, such as rich merchants in Antioch.

Josephus, the author of “Antiquities of the Jews,” a chronicle about Israel written in the first century, mentions in his history a great famine affecting Jerusalem, where many people died. Josephus’ account describes how the king and mother queen of a small Parthian-Assyrian kingdom, Adiabene, in Mesopotamia, also send charitable aid to the starving Jews of Jerusalem during this time (Antiquities of the Jews Book XX, Chapter 2.5).

This *famine* was evidently a very difficult time in the city of Jerusalem, but through God’s message given to *Agabus the prophet*, the Christians were able to prepare for it. The Antiochians gave proportionally from their own money *a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea*.

The early community of believers, whether in Antioch or Jerusalem, was characterized by a deep sense of unity and care for one another. The term *brethren* refers to those who have believed in Jesus. Jews and Gentiles are now being considered one family, through their bond in Christ.

This *contribution* of financial *relief* was sent back to Jerusalem, *sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders* (v. 30). *Saul* (Paul) returning to Jerusalem was a potentially dangerous move, since his life had been sought after by Greek-speaking Jews the last time he was there years before.

That they sent this financial contribution in the care of *Barnabas and Saul* speaks of the trust the believers in Antioch had developed for *Barnabas and Saul*. They did not appear to have any concerns that these two would help themselves, as Judas Iscariot had done (John 12:4-6). Later in Paul's ministry, it seems that some of his opponents accused him of improper motives, because Paul appointed a brother of undisputed integrity to accompany another offering he gathered to help the Jewish believers dwelling in the Roman province of Judea (2 Corinthians 8:18-21).

*Barnabas* had spent a year shepherding the church of Antioch with Saul as his fellow minister, and in addition to desiring to help the Judean brethren, might have thought it was time to take this effective preacher to *the elders* of the Jerusalem church and establish a better relationship with them. The last time *Saul* (Paul) was in Jerusalem, it was brief, and he only met Peter and James the brother of Jesus in that time (Galatians 1:18-19). Paul writes later in his letter to the Galatians that while he was in the regions of Syria (his year in Antioch),

“I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, ‘He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.’ And they were glorifying God because of me.”  
(Galatians 1:22-24)

It seems that reports of Saul's preaching alongside Barnabas in Antioch had been sent to Judea throughout that year, and his reputation became much more favorable among the Jewish Christians, who had once rightly feared him as a threat to their lives (Acts 9:1-2, 13-14, 26). At this point, many years have passed since the persecution Saul (Paul) led, and he has been out of Judea and Israel for much of that time.

Now the most recent information the believers in Judea have heard about him is how he has preached “the faith which he once tried to destroy” for a year in the large church in Antioch, where Barnabas, well-loved by all the believers in Jerusalem, has served alongside him. Saul's (Paul's) faith in Jesus is indisputable at this point, and he is clearly a changed man, a servant of the Lord's.

The Jewish believers now glorify God at the report of his ministry in Antioch. So it is time that he come back to Jerusalem and establish fellowship with *the elders*. Much of this is thanks to Barnabas, who extended friendship to him when he first returned to Jerusalem years before, and who brought him out of hiding in Tarsus to minister in Antioch with him, bolstering his reputation and giving him the opportunity to serve his calling from God as an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

### **Biblical Text**

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