

The Grace of God

Acts 11:19–30

October 14, 2001

In the face of terror, under the crushing heel of persecution, in the confusing days following the cruel martyrdom of Stephen, early Jewish followers of Jesus Christ fled across the Roman Empire. And with them, the gospel of Jesus Christ spread like wildfire. They were afraid, and at the same time they were brave. They ran for their lives, and they were bold to tell all who would listen about the Lord of life, the Creator of the world, the Redeemer of the lost, the Judge and King of the universe, the crucified and resurrected One who forgave their sin and promised them eternal life. What good news they had! And so they used even their suffering for the glory of God and for the advancement of the gospel.

At first, they were more careful about to whom they spoke. Or perhaps, they simply did not know any different. They spoke the good word to no one other than their fellow Jews. But soon, some of those early followers told the good news to people who were not Jews, to Greeks, whom the Jews regarded as Gentiles, the great mass of people from all the other nations, strangers not among the chosen people of God. What a shocking thing to do! Even while the persecution advanced, they preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to those other people because God led them to do so, because the gospel cannot be contained, because they could not keep it to themselves, because the Holy Spirit moved them, because the joy welled up within them and spilled over, and because they had a story to tell to the nations. “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord.”

How did those early followers do that? What did they know? Whom did they know? And what can they teach us yet today? For we, too, live in dangerous times. Our lives are being turned upside down. The time urge us to put everything in proper perspective. What is truly important, and what simply does not matter?

How did they do this? First of all, they exalted Jesus Christ. This is the One whom they knew. They told of the Son of God come down to earth. They told of the Lord of the heavens living among us. They told of his friendship and his teachings. They told of his grace and his commands, his self giving and his call to absolute loyalty. They told of his love and his sacrifice. They told of his new life beyond death. This is what they knew. They told the truth and the reality of Jesus Christ. They held him up for all to see. And he shined like the noon day sun into the darkness of their world and into the darkness of their lives. He does this yet today. Do you need his light in your life? Having seen the light, can you exalt him for others about you to see?

Look carefully at what happens here in Antioch. First came the preaching of the gospel, aided by the hand of the Lord, which is to say that it was God’s will that they preach and that God worked within the hearts and souls not only of those doing the preaching but also of those doing the hearing. This preaching of the gospel led to faith. The people believed in Jesus as the Christ. And this was not only the Jewish hearers. This was, specifically, the non-Jewish hearers, the Gentiles, the Greeks. They heard the gospel and they were moved to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This does not mean a mild case of interest. This does not mean admiration from a distance. They believed in him. They trusted him. They became loyal to him. They staked their lives on him. What do we hang onto today? When push comes to shove, where do we place our final allegiance? Maybe they had believed in the old Greek gods. Maybe they believed in the

Roman Empire and in its emperor. But they changed! Having heard about Jesus Christ, they believed in him. That made all the difference.

Second, believing was not the end of the matter. Believing was the beginning. It was the first step, not the final goal. And the second step was turning to the Lord. Note the order of events! It is not the case that they first turned to the Lord and then believed in him. That would make no sense. They first believed in him and then they turned to him. The turning is based on the believing. The turning presumes the believing. The turning builds upon and grows out of the believing. So it is today. We do not first ask people to repent and then to believe. How could they? We invite them to believe and then to repent. Repentance is not the starting point. Faith is the starting point. Repentance is a life long process of turning away from sin and of turning ever more fully toward God and his Christ. We are never through with repenting, at least not in this life.

Third, the work of these upstart preachers to the Gentiles got put to the test. The twelve apostles, who had stayed back in Jerusalem, heard about what was going on, and they sent out Barnabas to check on them. Were they preaching Christ, or some pale imitation? Were they sticking to the scriptures, or were they imagining something new and different? Were they telling of the God and Father of Jesus Christ? Was the gathering the work of the Holy Spirit or merely human excitement? Were they telling the truth? Were they preaching the resurrection? Did they get the facts right? Were they condoning sin, or were they encouraging new life? There were so many things that could go wrong. They had to stand the test. And the same test applies today. Are we getting it right, or not? Are we teaching the truth about Jesus? Are we in conformity with the historic teachings of the church, all the way back to Jerusalem?

When Barnabas came to Antioch, what he saw there was the grace of God! Theirs was not an empty faith. The people were not misguided believers. The church was not a mess that needed to be cleaned up. It was a new church made of strange people who were not even Jews. This made him glad. It was great. It was exciting. And we can be glad that a large company of people was added to the Lord. So we see that the normal, natural reaction to the preaching of the gospel is that people believe and the church grows. We live in strange times. For many of us, the churches of this country have been losing members for as long as we can remember. We have become numb to the losses. But that is not good. Such losses are abnormal. So we are committed afresh today to preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and to praying that the hand of the Lord will be with us so that his church may grow to the glory of God.

So, this new reality of a Greek congregation made Barnabas glad. It also made him go to Tarsus to bring back Saul, and together they embarked on a one year long crash course of intense Christian education! Can you imagine? And when they got through with those Greek believers, the followers of Jesus Christ were, for the first time in history, called "Christians," the name we gratefully bear yet today. Those must have been some kind of classes! Would we not like to have their lectures and their notes? Well, we do have the four gospels, and Paul's letters, and all the rest of the Bible. That should be enough.

Fourth, these new Christian soon learned that it was not enough to believe, to turn, and to learn. There is more to the Christian life than that. They also had to put their money where their mouths were. When they got through teaching, they took up an offering. There was a famine across the face of the earth. The poorest of the poor lived in and around Jerusalem. So these Greek disciples gave what they could to feed the hungry of another land. They sent their money back through their teachers to the elders. The poor followers of Jesus who fled Jerusalem had

shared Jesus Christ with the Greeks; it was the least the Greek Christians could do to share what money they had with their new brethren, who had once been a despised people, but who now were their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters, back in Jerusalem.

What are we to do now? How are we to live today? First, we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. And having first heard it, we continue to hear it again and again. One meal does not satisfy us for a lifetime. Neither does one hearing of the gospel. We keep eating every day. We come back to church week after week, year after year. We come back to the scripture. We listen as if our lives depended on it, which, in fact, they do.

Second, we turn to the Lord. And having first turned to the Lord, we continue to do so more and more. Again, our turning is never completed, at least not in this life. It is always possible for us to be more fully converted than we ever have been before. So, we are more and more oriented toward Christ. We turn over more and more of our lives to him. We are centered upon him more and more exclusively. We keep turning to the Lord.

Third, we study the teachings of the faith. And having first learned them, we continue to study them more and more. Even though they do not change, we do change. What we may not have heard or absorbed or understood the first time through, or the second, may speak to us afresh in new circumstances. In a world of terror, we read the Bible with new eyes. So read your Bible at home every day. And come to church and Sunday School.

Fourth, we give. We give of our money and our substance to the glory of God, for the proclamation of the gospel, and for the alleviation of human need. Next Sunday we will launch our stewardship campaign for next year. To do what we need to do next year, to build up the church of Jesus Christ, and to help the people we need to help, we need more money from more people than we have ever had before. We cannot be shy about that. We are asking everyone who has pledged for this year to make a substantially larger pledge for next year, if at all possible. And we are asking everyone who has not pledged for this year to make a substantial pledge for next year. We would like to have one-hundred percent participation. We would like to have the entire congregation do this together. Those people in Antioch should not have anything over us.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, as the goal of it all, and yet, at the same time, perhaps strangest to us, we share the good news of Jesus Christ with all those about us. With the growing reality of Islam, we face the greatest missionary challenge ever before the church. Now is the time, more than ever, to exalt Jesus Christ and to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we are grateful for the forgiveness of our sin, others will be glad to hear that good news also. If it is important to us to have meaning, direction, and purpose given to our lives, others will be eager to receive them also. If it is a saving grace to believe in him, others will want to know his name. If it is good to live in the promise of the life beyond this one, others will want to have their vision lifted, also. Why would we do this? Because God leads us to do so, because the gospel cannot be contained, because we can not keep it to ourselves, because the Holy Spirit moves us, because the joy welled up within us and spills over, and because we have a story to tell to the nations.

May God grant us grace that even we, in the face of new terror, in the confusing days following September 11, 2001, we Gentile American followers of Jesus Christ, may preach him to all people. And may God grant, yet again, that the gospel of Jesus Christ may spread like wildfire and that his church may increase.

To God and to the Lord Jesus Christ be the glory now and forever! Amen.

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